

# **The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society**

by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows

## About the Book

January 1946: writer Juliet Ashton receives a letter from a stranger, a founding member of the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society. And so begins a remarkable tale of the island of Guernsey during the German occupation, and of a society as extraordinary as its name.

## Praise for the Book

“Charming.... [Heroine] Juliet finds in the letters not just inspiration for her next work, but also for her life—as readers will.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Here's who will love this book: anyone who nods in profound agreement with the statement, "Reading keeps you from going gaga." **The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society** is a delight. Tart, insightful and fun.”

— **Mary Doria Russell**, author of *The Sparrow*, *A Thread of Grace* and *Dreamers of the Day*

“A sure winner.... Elizabeth and Juliet are appealingly reminiscent of game but gutsy '40s movie heroines.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

“I've never wanted to join a club so desperately as I did while reading **The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Societ**....[The novel] is a labor of love and it shows on almost every page.”

— *Christian Science Monitor*

*Courtesy of Random House*

## About the Authors

### **Mary Ann Shaffer**

In 1976, inspired by a newfound fascination with Guernsey, Mary Ann Shaffer traveled to the island in the English Channel, only to be stranded there due to inclement weather. Waiting for a thick fog to lift so she could return to London, Shaffer read all the books in the Guernsey airport bookstore. *Jersey Under the Jack-Boot* sparked a particular interest in the German occupation of the Channel Islands.

Years later, prompted by her book club to write a novel of her own, Shaffer turned to this subject in creating the vivid world of *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. Told entirely through a series of letters -- because, Shaffer confessed, "for some bizarre reason, I thought it would be easier" -- the novel skillfully renders the characters and concerns of Juliet, Sidney, and the other residents of Guernsey who have just emerged from the horrors and hardships of the Second World War.

Born in 1934 in Martinsburg, West Virginia, Mary Ann Shaffer made a career working with books -- as an editor, librarian, and bookseller -- before her death in February 2008. She died knowing that her novel was scheduled for publication and in the good hands of her niece and coauthor, Annie Barrows.

### **Annie Barrows**

A voracious reader (but an admittedly poor speller!), Annie Barrows grew up in northern California. One of her first jobs, while she was still in school, was re-shelving books in one of her favorite haunts, the public library. She attended the University of California at Berkeley and graduated with a degree in Medieval History. After graduation, she went to work for a publisher, editing books in many different fields.

Bitten by the writing bug, Barrows received her M.F.A in Creative Writing from California's Mills College. She wrote several books on such diverse topics as fortune telling, urban legends, and opera before branching into children's literature. In June of 2006, she released *Ivy and Bean*, the first award-winning book in a series about two young girls who become best friends in spite of their differences. In 2007, she published *The Magic Half*, a standalone children's fantasy about the middle child (between two sets of twins) who travels back in time and befriends a young girl in need of her help.

In addition, Barrows and her aunt, the late Mary Ann Shaffer, collaborated on a post-WWII epistolary novel entitled *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. Conceived by Shaffer, the novel was accepted for publication shortly before Shaffer fell ill. Barrows stepped in to complete the project, and the book was published in 2008 to positive reviews.

*Barnes & Noble website, retrieved 7/13/2009 from  
<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/The-Guernsey-Literary-and-Potato-Peel-Pie-Society/Mary-Ann-Shaffer/e/9780385341004>*

## Author Interview

Annie Barrows  
2008

*The following is from a 2008 Barnes & Noble interview with Annie Barrows. Her aunt, Mary Ann Shaffer, co-author of *The Guernsey Literary....Society* died earlier in the year.*

**Q:** Can you tell us, please, what prompted Mary Ann to write her first novel, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*?

**A:** Mary Ann was visiting England in 1976, and on a whim, she decided to fly down to Guernsey. Once she was there, a terrible fog rose from the sea and enveloped the island, and all ferry and plane service was shut down. Immured in the airport for seventy-two hours, Mary Ann passed the time warming herself under the hand-dryer in the men's restroom (the one in the women's restroom was broken) and reading all the books she could find in the airport bookstore.

Apparently, in 1976, the airport was the primary outlet for local publishing, and the subject of most of their books was the German Occupation of the island during the second World War. Mary Ann was always fascinated by accounts of the war, but this episode was unknown to her. She was riveted, there under the hand-dryer, gulping down book after book. When she was finally allowed to fly out, she brought half the contents of the airport bookstore in her suitcase.

Anyone who ever met Mary Ann knew that she was a writer-it wasn't just the tales she told, it was her relish in telling them. But writing was hard for her, and she never completed the manuscripts she started. Finally, in the late '90s, a writing group was formed for the express purpose of making Mary Ann write a book. The members were my mother, who doesn't even like to write, and two of Mary Ann's dearest friends. Each dutifully wrote something, until finally it was Mary Ann's turn. There was no way out of it-so she sat down and wrote the beginning of *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*.

**Q:** At what point in the writing process were you brought in to collaborate?

**A:** In the summer of 2006, soon after *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* had been sold to Dial Press, Mary Ann's health began to fail. We kept hoping that she would feel better soon, but by the end of the summer, it was clear that the prospect of making the editorial changes on the book was going to be too much for her, and at that point, my cousin Liz called me to ask if I would take on the project. Of course, I said yes. Unlike plumbers or nurses or teachers, writers don't have very many opportunities to be useful to the people they love, and I was honored to be able to help my aunt.

**Q:** Much of the story takes place on the Channel Island of Guernsey. What inspired this unusual setting?

**A:** The setting was a function of the history -- the Channel Islands were the only British land

occupied by Germany during the Second World War, which makes their war story unique. Even apart from the war, Guernsey has its own interesting past as an amalgam of French and English culture. They manage to have British laws and French food, which was Voltaire's vision of a perfect society. Luckily, in addition to its history and culture, it's a beautiful island as well, with winding streets, lush fields, dramatic cliffs, and -- since the war -- a lot of empty German fortifications overgrown with wildflowers.

**Q:** Why did Mary Ann choose to tell her story in a series of letters?

**A:** Mary Ann once told me that she chose the epistolary form because she thought it would be easier than narrative. Most writers would find that crazy, but I know what she meant: Writing in all those different voices was a blast. It's like playing 20 different roles, each with his or her own voltage and excitement. Furthermore, Mary Ann and I both adore reading other people's letters -- there's something a little bit forbidden and completely satisfying about it.

**Q:** What was it like to work with your aunt on the book? Did you discover any surprises in the course of collaborating?

**A:** I didn't actually talk to Mary Ann much while I was working on the book, because she wasn't well. Before I began, I was a little worried about my ability to carry through with Mary Ann's voice, but once I sat down and started writing, I realized that hers was a voice and a style that I knew from the inside out -- because I had been hearing them all my life. Mary Ann and my mother always lived near each other, and their stories were the wallpaper of my life. Some of these stories are embedded in the book, and some of the characters are direct descendents of people I know (that's as much as I'll say).

I was surprised to find that my all-time favorite childhood game, Dead Bride, made an appearance in the book. Unlike Kit, we never played it with a laundry hamper. We made our tombs out of blocks.

**Q:** You are primarily a writer of children's books. What, if anything, was different about writing for an adult audience?

**A:** Kissing! No, no, what's truly different is the acreage -- when you write for children, you have to keep the story tight. You can't meander off into a subplot for the sheer joy of it; everything has to pertain. Writing for adults is deliciously unfettered -- you can linger on a character, you can follow an idea, you can use phonetically impossible words like phlegm if you want to (though why would you?).

**Q:** You and Mary Ann share a background in books and publishing, and this novel has been described as "a celebration of the written word in all its guises." How do you view reading, and what role has literature played in your aunt's life and in your own?

**A:** Mary Ann and I have this common background in libraries, bookstores, and publishing precisely because we really never did anything other than read in our entire lives. To be honest,

working in any profession other than a book-related one would be impossible; books seem to be our only area of expertise.

**Q:** Is there anything else you'd like our readers to know about you, Mary Ann, or this wonderful novel?

**A:** I would like everyone to know that I have actually made and consumed a Potato-Peel Pie. I want lots of credit for this, because it tasted like paste.

*Barnes & Noble website, retrieved 7/13/2009 from  
<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/The-Guernsey-Literary-and-Potato-Peel-Pie-Society/Mary-Ann-Shaffer/e/9780385341004>*

## Discussion Questions

1. What was it like to read a novel composed entirely of letters? What do letters offer that no other form of writing (not even emails) can convey?
2. What makes Sidney and Sophie ideal friends for Juliet? What common ground do they share? Who has been a similar advocate in your life?
3. Dawsey first wrote to Juliet because books, on Charles Lamb or otherwise, were so difficult to obtain on Guernsey in the aftermath of the war. What differences did you note between bookselling in the novel and bookselling in your world? What makes book lovers unique, across all generations?
4. What were your first impressions of Dawsey? How was he different from the other men Juliet had known?
5. Discuss the poets, novelists, biographers, and other writers who capture the hearts of the members of the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society. What does a reader's taste in books say about his or her personality? Whose lives were changed the most by membership in the society?
6. Juliet occasionally receives mean-spirited correspondence from strangers, accusing both Elizabeth and Juliet of being immoral. What accounts for their judgmental ways?
7. In what ways were Juliet and Elizabeth kindred spirits? What did Elizabeth's spontaneous invention of the society, as well as her brave final act, say about her approach to life?
8. Numerous Guernsey residents give Juliet access to their private memories of the occupation. Which voices were most memorable for you? What was the effect of reading a variety of responses to a shared tragedy?
9. Kit and Juliet complete each other in many ways. What did they need from each other? What qualities make Juliet an unconventional, excellent mother?
10. How did Remy's presence enhance the lives of those on Guernsey? Through her survival, what recollections, hopes, and lessons also survived?
11. Juliet rejects marriage proposals from a man who is a stereotypical "great catch." How would you have handled Juliet's romantic entanglement? What truly makes someone a "great catch"?

12. What was the effect of reading a novel about an author's experiences with writing, editing, and getting published? Did this enhance the book's realism, though Juliet's experience is a bit different from that of debut novelist Mary Ann Shaffer and her niece, children's book author Annie Barrows?
13. What historical facts about life in England during World War II were you especially surprised to discover? What traits, such as remarkable stamina, are captured in a detail such as potato peel pie? In what ways does fiction provide a means for more fully understanding a non-fiction truth?
14. Which of the members of the Society is your favorite? Whose literary opinions are most like your own?
15. Do you agree with Isola that "reading good books ruins you for enjoying bad ones"?

*Courtesy of Random House*