

# Caboodles Book Club Kits

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society

by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows



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## Reviews

**BookPage Reviews 2008 August** For sheer enjoyment, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* is one of the best books of the year. This quirky title brings with it a quirky novel that, if the world is fair, will appear on summer bestseller lists on both sides of the Atlantic. Looking around for new inspiration for her books in 1946, English author Juliet Ashton finds it in letters she receives from inhabitants of the Channel Island of Guernsey. They write seeking her help in literary matters, and, incidentally, telling of their remarkable history as a German possession during World War II. As an epistolary novel, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* captures the immediacy of the Guernsey Islanders' experience during the German occupation in a way that arguably could not have been expressed otherwise. Surprisingly, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* was begun by an American book editor and bookseller, Mary Ann Shaffer, who found herself fascinated by Channel Island history. After she became ill, and later died, her niece, children's book author Annie Barrows, completed the novel. Besides revealing that the British postal system is apparently much faster than our own (letters and their answers are sometimes dated the same day!), this maze of interactive letter writers sheds reflective light on each other and their literary society, which was formed spontaneously to protect Islanders from Nazi retribution. Beyond that, one learns more serious lessons, including the variant results of war on different societies. (Americans, even after the War, are seen as relatively "un-mangled by it.") Despite this book's American provenance, its wit bears all the earmarks of the sly and whimsical English take on life, which is not just colorful here, but prismatic. For some readers, grinning may be optional throughout this book. For many of us, however, despite some serious subject matter, it is unavoidable. "Reading good books ruins you for enjoying bad books," says one letter writer, so be forewarned: your level of intolerance may be lowered by this delightful, unforgettable novel. *Copyright 2008 BookPage Reviews.*

**PW Reviews 2008 April #3** The letters comprising this small charming novel begin in 1946, when single, 30-something author Juliet Ashton (nom de plume "Izzy Bickerstaff") writes to her publisher to say she is tired of covering the sunny side of war and its aftermath. When Guernsey farmer Dawsey Adams finds Juliet's name in a used book and invites articulate—and not-so-articulate—neighbors to write Juliet with their stories, the book's epistolary circle widens, putting Juliet back in the path of war stories. The occasionally contrived letters jump from incident to incident—including the formation of the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society while Guernsey was under German occupation—and person to person in a manner that feels disjointed. But Juliet's quips are so clever, the Guernsey inhabitants so enchanting and the small acts of heroism so vivid and moving that one forgives the authors (Shaffer died earlier this year) for not being able to settle on a single person or plot. Juliet finds in the letters not just inspiration for her next work, but also for her life—as will readers. (Aug.) *Copyright 2008 Reed Business Information.*

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## Author Biography

### Mary Ann Shaffer

December 12, 1934 - February 16, 2008

Mary Ann Shaffer spent her life working as an editor and in libraries and bookstores. Indeed, Shaffer lived a literary life, yet her first book was not published until shortly after her death. Late in her life, Shaffer was convinced by her book club that she should begin writing a novel. Yet, having been diagnosed with cancer, she was aware that she might not be able to complete the book before she died. Thus, Shaffer enlisted the help of her niece, Annie Barrows, an accomplished author of children's books. The resulting novel, started by Shaffer and completed by Barrows, is titled *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. Barrows discussed the collaboration with her aunt in an online *Novel Journey* interview with Ane Mulligan, noting that "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 it all my life." Barrows added: "Mary Ann and my mother always lived near each other, and their stories were the wallpaper of my life. Without noticing it, I had come to tell a story in the same way that she did, so working on the book felt very natural."

The novel is set in 1946 in Guernsey, an island just off the coast of England. World War II has just ended. During the war, Guernsey was occupied by German forces, and the residents accordingly suffered far more hardship than their mainland counterparts. In an attempt to tell the story of Guernsey's residents, London journalist Juliet Ashton begins corresponding with them. The novel is thus predominantly told in letters. The book was a cult hit with readers, gaining ground on best-seller lists predominantly via word of mouth. Critics were also impressed by the novel. J.A. Jance, writing on the *Writers Are Readers.com* Web site, called *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* "utterly charming and utterly chilling." Jance went on to declare that "this is storytelling at its best, telling the story of storytelling. Wonderful. Delightful. Difficult. All the things a good book should be."

Time contributor Lev Grossman noted: "As it turns out, the writing of *Guernsey* was touched by death. The reason the book has two authors is that Shaffer died of cancer before publication, leaving Barrows, her niece, to see the book through to completion--a bittersweet ending in keeping with the dark shadows that gather in the corners of this otherwise lightsome book. It is, in the words of Lamb's friend Coleridge, a sunny pleasure dome, with caves of ice." Applauding the book in *Publishers Weekly*, a contributor stated that the "Guernsey inhabitants [are] so enchanting and the small acts of heroism so vivid and moving," that they make for a "small charming novel." *Star Tribune* reviewer Laurie Hertzell was also impressed. She stated: "Told entirely through letters, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* is a story of pluck and courage and survival, and about the way that books can bring people together. It has been quietly, mainly through word-of-mouth, been on best-seller lists for months." According to a *Kirkus Reviews* critic, "The engrossing subject matter and lively writing make this a sure winner, perhaps fodder for a TV series." Mary Ellen Quinn, writing in *Booklist*, proffered praise, finding that "readers should enjoy this literary soufflé for the most part." *Library Journal* contributor Susan Clifford Braun also gave a glowing assessment, declaring that "this marvelous debut novel, sure to have book club appeal, is highly recommended for all collections."

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*Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2010. Reproduced in Biography Resource Center. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale, 2010. <http://0-galenet.galegroup.com/librarcatalog.pima.gov/servlet/BioRC> Entry updated: 11/13/2009.*

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### Annie Barrows

Annie Barrows is the author of several children's books, many of which feature the characters of Ivy and Bean. Yet, despite the success of the series, Barrows still admits to experiencing bouts of self doubt. Indeed, in an interview with Ane Mulligan in the online Novel Journey, Barrows stated that "for me, the most harrowing aspect of writing is my utter inability to determine whether what I've written is good or vile. How can my critical faculties, so razor-sharp when it comes to muffins or pants or other people's books, melt away in the face of one of my own paragraphs?" Nevertheless, she persists to great acclaim. Her first book, *Ivy and Bean*, was published in 2006. The story opens with Ivy having recently moved onto Bean's block. Bean is an active, mischievous girl, and she does not care for Ivy, a consummate bookworm. But, when Bean finds herself in trouble, Ivy comes to the rescue, and the two are fast friends from then on. Most critics applauded the story, and they noted that it is a strong series debut. Indeed, Booklist writer Ilene Cooper noted that "the deliciousness here is in the details, with both girls drawn distinctly and with flair." She added that Bean's antics "will make readers giggle." According to School Library Journal writer Eve Ottenberg Stone, "The characters are appealing, the friendship is well portrayed ... and adventures are very much on grade level." A Kirkus Reviews contributor was also impressed, remarking that "readers are bound to embrace this spunky twosome and eagerly anticipate their continuing tales of mischief and mayhem." A Publishers Weekly critic observed that Ivy and Bean "energetically kicks off a series about two seemingly unlikely pals." The critic added: "Barrows's narrative brims with sprightly dialogue and tidily ties everything together."

In 2008, Barrows departed from her "Ivy and Bean" books to write *The Magic Half*. The story features young Miri, the often overlooked middle child in the family. Miri and her family move to a new house, and Miri befriends an older neighbor, who tells her that there is supposedly treasure buried in her new home. Miri and her siblings then set out to find it. In pursuit of the treasure, Miri accidentally travels back in time to 1935. Molly, a girl living in the house at that time is being abused, but Miri is unable to help her before she is returned to the present. Thus, Miri must find a way to help Molly from the future. Praising the story in School Library Journal, Laura Butler commented that "Barrows conjures up a delightful tale brimming with mystery, magic, and adventure that will surely enchant readers everywhere." A Kirkus Reviews writer was less impressed, however. The contributor noted that "narrative nuance and finely tuned character development are sacrificed to quick pacing and plotting," making the book "a disappointment for ["Ivy and Bean"] fans." Cooper, again writing in Booklist, was more equivocal in her assessment. She called the book "pleasing fare that adds a bit of history and a tad of mystery into the mix." A Publishers Weekly reviewer praised the "author's lively observations," and noted that "the heroine's adaptability and independent thinking endow her with the appeal of a Ramona Quimby or a Clementine."

Another of Barrows's departures from the "Ivy and Bean" series was also published in 2008. The book, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, is an adult novel that Barrows wrote with her aunt, Mary Ann Shaffer. In fact, Shaffer began the novel as an elderly woman, and she enlisted Barrows's aid before her death in 2008. Barrows discussed completing her aunt's novel with Mulligan, noting that "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 it all my life." Barrows added: "Mary Ann and my mother always lived near each other, and their stories were the wallpaper of my life. Without noticing it, I had come to tell a story in the same way that she did, so working on the book felt very natural."

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## Discussion Questions

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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"?

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Source: "The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society." Reading Group Guides the Online Community for Reading Groups. Copyright 2001-2010. Reading Group Guides. com, Web 16 Sept 2010. <[http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides\\_G/guernsey\\_literary\\_pie\\_society1.asp](http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides_G/guernsey_literary_pie_society1.asp)>.