

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society by Mary Ann Shaffer (Bloomsbury)
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The title of this novel usefully provides the prospective reader with a litmus test: if you find it whimsical in a charming sort of way, you'll love the novel; if, on the other hand, you find it rather self-consciously arch, you'd better stick to sterner stuff with more trenchant titles, like *War and Peace* or *Disgrace*.

The title is useful also in alerting the prospective reader to the fact that this is unambiguously an exemplar of the sub-genre Book Club Fiction. Like the best-selling *The Jane Austen Book Club*, this book unabashedly announces its allegiance to the growing body of novels being turned out for the pleasure (and purchase) of the growing number of book clubs all over the world. *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* is about a book club, for book clubs, and in a sense by a book club, in that the author wrote it at the behest of her own book club. It comes with commendations from Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat Pray Love* and Mavis Cheek, author of *Mrs Fytton's Country Life*, both, to judge by their titles, mainstays of the book club circuit. It was the author's only book (she died shortly after completing it), and it has been sold in thirteen countries.

This is a Book Club Book in more than name. Like others of its kind (say Salley Vickers's *Mr Golightly's Holiday* or Patricia Duncker's *Miss Webster and Chérif*), it centres on a small community of genteel social habit (though Shaffer, being American, dispenses with the courtesy titles and has all her characters call each other by their first names). Its heroine is not so young as to qualify for chick lit, but not yet beyond the liberating leap so we have come to expect from heroines of the genre. She is feisty, unconventional without being odd, and attractive without being impossibly beautiful. She is self-sufficient without being hard, and romantic without being soppy. She is, if need be, capable of proposing marriage to the man she discovers she loves. She is, in short, a post-feminist Brontë heroine.

The heroine in question, Juliet Ashton, is a thirty-two-year old writer. We meet her in 1946, in the flush of the successful launching of her book *Izzy Bickerstaff Goes to War*, a collection of columns she wrote during the war for the *Spectator*. Her publisher, with whom she has the kind of cordial relationship that is the envy of all authors, is pressing her for more, and she is casting about for a subject.

By chance she discovers the existence of the GLaPPPS, and starts corresponding with its members on Guernsey. This is, in fact, an epistolary novel, and with some ingenuity the author advances back story as well as plot by means of the letters flowing to and fro between the characters. Somewhat implausibly commissioned to write an essay for the *Times Literary Supplement* on the philosophical value of literature, Juliet hopes to glean some insights from her correspondents, all of whom were part of the eponymous literary society, formed on Guernsey during the war as a ploy to fool the occupying Germans. This incidentally enables Fowler to give us a good deal of information about the German occupation of the Channel Islands.

Juliet is so intrigued by what she learns that she decides to pay a visit to Guernsey. Here she finds, not entirely surprisingly, as rich a collection of lovable eccentrics as any author could wish for, with just enough unlovables around to liven things up around the potato

peel pie. There is also the mandatory irresistible tot, being raised by the members of the GLaPPPS.

The irresistible tot is the illegitimate daughter of one Elizabeth McKenna by Captain Christian Hellman, one of the occupying German officers. Elizabeth herself has been deported to an unknown fate by the Germans and Hellman has been killed in action. Whereas this conjunction no doubt raised a few eyebrows on wartime Guernsey, the members of the GLaPPPS are above such pettiness (they even take the odd homosexual in their stride). The general beneficence and tolerance of almost all the islanders will strike the jaundiced mainland-dweller as unusual to the point of implausibility, but Shaffer animates her cast of eccentrics with a good deal of skill.

The story is a conventional enough love story, with the heroine being torn (not very traumatically) between the dashing city suitor and the strong silent farmer, but it is given some poignancy by the wartime background, and some concreteness by the vividly realised island setting. *Pride and Prejudice* is referred to several times, and it's possible that the hero's name – Dawsey – is meant as an ironical echo of Austen's Mr Darcy, but since Dawsey has no pride and Juliet no prejudice, this may be a red herring, or at most a gesture towards the kind of wish-fulfilling romance that this novel aims to be.

All in all, there is no doubt that this will indeed prove to be a book club favourite, though intended for happy chatting rather than rigorous analysis. It contains little moral complexity or psychological subtlety, but its lively style and variety of characters make for a quick and pleasant read. *Pride and Prejudice* it's not -- but then, what is? .