

Bright and dark

Stevie Davies is entranced by a bibliophilic jeu d'esprit
Stevie Davies

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A Guernsey coastal path. Photograph: Corbis

The zany title of Mary Ann Shaffer's first and, alas, last novel derives from an invented book club on the island of Guernsey in the second world war. The club is invented by the resourceful character Elizabeth McKenna, who, bumping into a German patrol after curfew with a crowd of revellers, makes the society up on the spot. In reality, the tipsy party had been consuming forbidden roast pig at Amelia Maugery's. This is less a historical novel than a bibliophilic jeu d'esprit by an ex-librarian and bookseller, posthumously published, and completed by her niece Annie Barrows.

A novel in letters about books, bibliophiles, publishers, authors and readers, it centres on an imagined post-occupation Guernsey. Juliet Ashton, the whimsical, intuitive heroine, is an up-and-coming writer. While casting about for a new subject, she hears from a Guernsey pig farmer, Adam Dawsey, who has found Juliet's name and address in a second-hand copy of Charles Lamb's essays. From this fragile contact grows a web of correspondents, who feed Juliet's obsession with wartime Guernsey and the tragicomic interwoven stories of its people.

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Madeleine Bunting's *The Model Occupation* of 1996 revealed, to uproar, the extent of Channel Island collaboration with the deportation of 2,000 British subjects to Nazi Europe. Seen in this light, Shaffer's

novel seems a version of pastoral, thronging with lovable people (or perhaps a version of piscatory, for the islanders were fishermen in a maritime world). But we remain aware that "Europe is like a hive broken open, teeming with thousands upon thousands of displaced people, all trying to get home". Exuberance is seamed with distress, and a vein of pastoral elegy centres on the lovely and exhilarating character of Elizabeth, Juliet's alter ego.

Her narrative is a weave of bright and dark, threading through the gentle humour of the islanders' stories. Elizabeth embodies a comic law of the novel: the more inventive and intuitive a person is, the more pregnant her actions will be and the greater her charm, in the deepest sense of that word. Elizabeth is a fugitive presence in the novel; she exists in the tissue of communal memory evoked by the letters.

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society commemorates beautiful spirits who pass through our midst and hunker undercover through brutal times. Shaffer's Guernsey characters step from the past radiant with eccentricity and kindly humour, a comic version of the state of grace. They are innocents who have seen and suffered, without allowing evil to penetrate the rind of decency that guards their humanity. Their world resembles Shakespeare's Ephesian or Illyrian comedies; but its territory incorporates both Elysium and Hades. "Prove true, Imagination, oh prove true," pleads Viola in *Twelfth Night* - and, sure enough, a brother is delivered from the sea.

Guernsey's dead will not return. Shaffer's writing, with its delicately offbeat, self-deprecating stylishness, is exquisitely turned, bearing a clear debt to Jane Austen. She shows, in addition, an uncanny ability to evoke period, miming its manners and mannerisms - not only in the reminders of blitzed London but also in recreating a culture that reveres books.

This is at the heart of the novel's golden comedy. The rarity of books in 1946 reminds us of an age we have lost, of stint and thrift combined with greater amplitude of time. In such a culture, hand-written letters are precious personal gifts. Each book, meeting and letter has value, commands affectionate attention, and never comes cheap.