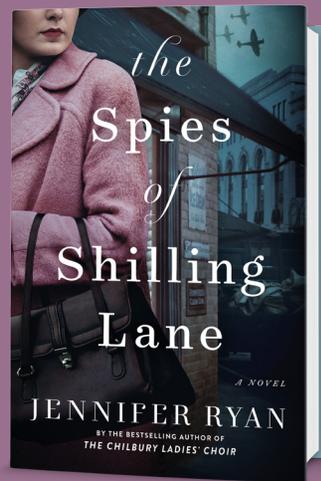


the Spies
of Shilling Lane
Book Club Kit



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Book Club Questions

- 1 How is a woman's life different today, compared to in the 1930s and '40s, in terms of her personal relationships and marriage?
- 2 Why do you think the war contributed to looser sexual mores among women, especially among those like Betty, who moved to London to work?
- 3 Betty believes that Mrs. Braithwaite has become more thoughtful, and Mr. Norris more daring, as a result of spending time together. How do you think this happened? Do you think it is common for people to affect one another this way?
- 4 The book is a story about a mother and a daughter coming back together after years of misunderstanding. Do you think that the mother-daughter relationship is an inherently complicated one?
- 5 Do you think that Mrs. Braithwaite should have told Betty about her secret a long time ago?
- 6 Mr. Norris was very strict about his routine, yet by the end, he felt his insistence on structure had resulted in life passing him by. How important is routine to you?
- 7 Death and destruction were never far away during the war. How do you think this affected the people who were living through it? How does the omnipresence of death make people think differently about their lives?
- 8 Mrs. Braithwaite's character evolves dramatically over the course of the novel. In your view, what was the most marked change? What was the most important? How about Mr. Norris? What was his most crucial change?
- 9 Mrs. Braithwaite is constantly revising the standards by which she judges the success of her life, cycling through status, family, kind deeds, joy, and love. Which of these measures do you think are the most important?

The Inspiration Behind

THE SPIES OF SHILLING LANE

A few years ago, a reclusive ninety-nine-year-old woman died in a sleepy London suburb. Below the floorboards of a secret attic annex, her family found a semiautomatic Sten gun, ammunition, and espionage paraphernalia. It was headline news: She was an MI5 operative during and after the Second World War. Her name was Eileen Burgoyne.

As a World War II aficionado, I was always aware of the roles women played in espionage, especially in mainland Europe as part of the Special Operations Executive. But it wasn't until Eileen Burgoyne's past was dug up that I realized how women were used by MI5. They dealt with threats from within the UK, including enemy spies, people of German and Italian origin, and fifth columnists who supported the Nazis, planning to take down the country from the inside. In the UK's National Archives, recently declassified files uncover some of the exploits of MI5, although they sketch only the bare bones of missions. Everything else, including details about the men and women who worked there, remains hidden.

The war was a special time for women, especially those who worked in espionage. Prior to the war, women were limited to jobs as domestic servants, shop assistants, nurses, and teachers, and most were expected to give up working if they got married. But with all the men away, women were encouraged to step into their shoes. Secretarial and administrative work became more of a woman's terrain, and a lucky few passed from there into heftier roles. Many of the women spies entered MI5 as translators and then quietly sidestepped into their espionage roles. As the war progressed, the war machine grew, and as the women demonstrated their abilities, greater numbers were employed in this male-dominated world.

Divorce was disastrous for a woman in that era. My own grandmother was divorced shortly after the war and was ejected from the Mother's Union group, where she was an active member. Like Mrs. Braithwaite, her husband left her,

but unlike Mrs. Braithwaite, my grandmother was very much in love with her husband, doubling her grief. At a time when she needed support and strength from friends and community, they shirked and derided her. Undeterred, she started a new local Women's Institute group and headed it for many years. But the knock of the divorce never left her.

Mrs. Braithwaite was inspired by my grandmother's Aunt Agatha, whom I knew only as a bombastic old lady who was obsessed with class and status. The difference between Aunt Agatha and my warm, cuddly grandma could not have been more pronounced. I have always been intrigued by the differences between the generations, how one generation's beliefs can be at complete odds with those of the next.

In Britain at the time of the Second World War, this couldn't have been more true. The First World War, followed by women's suffrage, the modernist era, and the downward turn of the British Empire, led to very different outlooks from mother to daughter. Gone were the Victorian strictures, and in their place, with the outset of another war, a new, practical woman was stepping up to join the fight.

It was this dispute that I wanted to portray between Mrs. Braithwaite and Betty. Our frustration with the generation of women before us, our mothers, and our lack of understanding of those who follow, our daughters, is one we all feel from time to time. In order to embrace the other, we need to talk, to share our experiences, and to come with an open heart full of love.

Key Characters

Mrs. Braithwaite

A force to be reckoned with, Mrs. Braithwaite storms through life as if she owns it, knocking aside anyone foolish enough to stand in her way. Brought up with the strictest of Victorian values by her authoritarian aunt, Mrs. Braithwaite lives as if she is a lady, oblivious to the reality that she resides in a small house and struggles to make ends meet. To her annoyance, her twenty-year-old daughter, Betty, moved to London at the start of the war, taking up war work instead of getting married. She's far too much of a bluestocking for Mrs. Braithwaite's tastes.

Her recent divorce has set her on her back foot. Even though her husband was unfaithful for years and divorced her for another woman, she is still mocked and derided by the community while he gets away scot-free. Evicted from her position as head of the local Women's Voluntary Service, she asks herself the big question: How should she measure the success of her life?

Betty Braithwaite

Twenty years old and brimming with education, energy, and straight-forward common sense, Betty Braithwaite left for London as soon as war was on the horizon. Young, unmarried women were encouraged to leave home to take the jobs of men who had left for the war. Betty made sure she was among them. Brave, fast-thinking, and quick-to-learn, Betty couldn't wait to make a difference to the war, especially as her mother, Mrs. Braithwaite, had not allowed her to go to university as it was too expensive—as far as her mother was concerned, Betty should be thinking of marriage.

But Betty is more ambitious, difficult as it is for a woman. She is used to men running the show and takes it for granted that they won't have her analytical skills, let alone her tenacity and resourcefulness. The war will present her with unprecedented opportunities, but will she live up to her own expectations?

Mr. Norris

A dedicated and painstaking accountant, Mr. Norris has reached his fifties without marrying—instead he is wedded to his job, his meticulous house, and his punctilious routine. A small, slim man, graying and balding, he is quietly intellectual, reading up on scientific advances, philosophy, and Freud in his spare time.

After Cambridge, he moved to London to work in a law firm in the city. He bought a generously proportioned Edwardian house on Shilling Lane in South London, a place he keeps fastidiously clean and tidy. Since the war began, however, he has been forced to give up his free bedrooms to three young women who have come to London for war work. With their chaotic presence, in addition to the almost nightly bombs coming down over London, he is struggling to keep his routine, his calm, and his life intact.

Cassandra

A blonde-haired beauty, Cassandra is the ultimate party girl. She is one of the young women living in Mr. Norris's house on Shilling Lane, although she's seen only late at night, after parties and dances. Always dressed to the nines and sporting glimmering red lipstick and thick black mascara, she sashays as if she's on a catwalk, her shapely figure enhanced by her dresses and high-heeled shoes.

Mrs. Braithwaite finds her rude and uncouth, yet Cassandra seems amused by the older woman's disgust. Mr. Norris is nervous around Cassandra—she is secretive and uncompromising, as if she doesn't care about anything or anyone. When she moved in, Mr. Norris gave her the large master bedroom, moving his own belongings into the sparse attic room above.

Key Characters

Blanche Braithwaite

A teacher in a school for younger children, Blanche is a happy soul. She loves to sing more than anything else in the world and always has a tune in her heart. The children adore her, especially when she teaches them new songs. Who wouldn't love a teacher with so much joy?

She isn't a relative of Mrs. Braithwaite's, although she is only a few years older than Betty. Living in a small, suburban home with her mother, she has decided to stay in London through the Blitz in order to help her poor young students. Many of them were evacuated at the beginning of the war, but one by one, more than half of them have returned—just in time for the Nazis to begin bombing the bits out of the city.

Mrs. Metcalf

Mrs. Metcalf is Mrs. Braithwaite's neighbor and former friend. After Mrs. Braithwaite's divorce, Mrs. Metcalf used her downfall to depose her as the head of the village Women's Voluntary Service. In so doing, she brought Mrs. Braithwaite's reputation down further, spreading the rumor that it was Mrs. Braithwaite's bullishness that had prompted her husband to find solace elsewhere.

She is the mother of two perfect children. Her daughter Patience is suitably married and has already produced three perfect grandchildren, a victory that she lords over Mrs. Braithwaite, whose only child, Betty, is more interested in books than marriage.

Anthony Metcalf

Mrs. Metcalf's son, Anthony, grew up as Betty Braithwaite's neighborhood friend. A clever boy, Anthony and Betty were in the same grammar school until he went to university. According to Betty, he is smug, annoying, and always wants to win, although because they are such old friends, she tends to forgive him. After all, they have a lot in common: an interest in mathematics, physics, and chemistry, as well as their shared hometown.

Although he bragged that he had been chosen for "special government war work"—ubiquitous code for cypher breaking in Bletchley Park—they passed him over, much to his infuriation. He returned to his university, which had been evacuated to a quiet outpost in the far west of England. Every so often, however, he can be found in or near London.

Baxter

Baxter grew up in a country manor in the north of England, where he enjoyed cavorting around the expansive grounds until he was sent to one of the nation's better boarding schools, close to London. Upon graduation, he went to Oxford, where he studied philosophy and dabbled in the art of lovemaking. In his final year, a man with a briefcase and thick glasses came to see him. He offered Baxter a job in Britain's burgeoning secret service, MI5.

Baxter makes an excellent spy. He is resourceful, slick, and charming. Within weeks of the war's start, he is sent on a new mission: Gain the trust of Nazi sympathizers and ultimately become their leader.