

JENNY LECOAT

BASED ON AN INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY
OF COURAGE AND HOPE IN WWII

THE GIRL FROM

the

CHANNEL

ISLANDS



A NOVEL

“An unforgettable tale of friendship, love, courage and survival. I loved every word.”

— *New York Times* bestselling author KELLY RIMMER

Discussion Guide

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



- 1) Hedy is based on a real person, but her life bears a resemblance to the realities of some people's present-day lives. What parallels can you draw between Occupied Jersey and some regions of the world today? Or between Hedy's life as a refugee and a displaced person?
- 2) What are your thoughts on the friendship between Hedy and Anton?
- 3) Hedy's friends and community risked their own lives to protect her. Even if we aren't living in a country at war or an extreme situation, what responsibilities do we have to each other as neighbors and citizens? What does doing the right thing look like in your life?
- 4) What are some ways that ordinary people can stand up to injustice in the present day?
- 5) Kurt and Hedy shared a powerful relationship in an incredibly stressful situation. What other books (or movies, or TV shows) can you think of in which love flourishes under impossible circumstances?
- 6) What aspects of Hedy's story might you be able to relate to?
- 7) Kurt is a man who realizes he's fighting on the wrong side of the war, for a leader whose actions he cannot accept. How do you feel about his decisions? What would you have done in his place? How easy do you think it is to fight against injustice in a position like Kurt's?
- 8) What did you make of Dorothea? Of her relationship with Hedy?
- 9) What was the most exciting part of the story for you?
- 10) What are your thoughts on the novel's ending?

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Q&A WITH JENNY LECOAT

It's a bit of a cliché to ask a writer what her inspiration was, but in this case, the book is inspired by a true story. Can you tell the readers more about it?

The story is based on documented history. The real Hedy arrived in Jersey in 1938, having fled the Nazis in her native Austria, only to find herself trapped once more by the Channel Island invasion of 1940. We know that despite being racially classified as Jewish, she found work with the German authorities and, despite the risks, exploited that position to help her community. At some point she began a relationship with a German officer named Kurt, and when Hedy was forced into hiding with local woman Dorothea, Kurt visited and supplied food, at tremendous personal risk.

How did you find out about Hedy's story?

A local historian, who researched the story in order to procure a posthumous Yad Vashem Righteous Among the Nations award for Dorothea, sent me some news links in 2016. These showed a plaque being unveiled outside the house where the women lived, and also revealed some old newspaper clippings. The story is also mentioned in several Occupation history books.

Were any of the other characters based on real people?

Hedy, Kurt, Dorothea and Anton were all real people, although only basic facts about them during these years are known, so how they met and how the relationships between them came about is fictionalized in the novel. The Jersey politicians Orange and Le Quesne are also real historical figures.

What's your family's connection to the story?

I was born in Jersey to an island family. Both sides of the family were involved in what might be termed "resistance activity" during the Occupation years. My paternal grandfather made illegal crystal radio sets, and my mother's family hid two Russian slave workers who had been captured to build Hitler's Atlantic wall defenses, but who escaped from their camps. My great aunt Louisa sheltered a young man she called "Bill" for two years in her own home, but was betrayed. Consequently several of the family were arrested, Louisa was deported to the camps and died at Ravensbrück. Her brother Harold was the only British survivor of Belsen.

What were some of the unexpected realities of living under Occupation?

The loss of liberty and fear of arrest for trivial offences must have been horrifying enough, but the confiscation of radios in 1942, cutting the population off from real news, and the near starvation as the war progressed were the worst aspects for many.



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The Channel Islands were the only part of Britain to be Occupied during WWII. Younger readers or those unfamiliar with this part of the war may be wondering why Britain allowed them to be captured. Why did it happen?

In 1940 the Allies had been pushed back by Hitler's forces, and the evacuation of Dunkirk had occurred just weeks earlier. Britain was in no position to defend the Channel Islands, which, although part of the British Isles, are geographically far closer to France. Britain withdrew its military from the islands to save manpower and resources, but did not inform the enemy they had done so, which caused the Germans to bomb what they assumed to be a defended territory.

Hitler was fanatical about his acquisition of the islands, which were not only a useful strategic gain but, as a British territory, a morale boost for the Third Reich, whose generals assumed the conquest of the British mainland was a simple next step.

What was it like growing up on Jersey? Can you tell us more about island life? How is it different from growing up in more central UK? What is it like to visit the Channel Islands in the present day—do they see a lot of tourism, and if so, is any of that tourism related to their WWII history?

Jersey, although the largest of the Channel Islands, is only nine by five miles. As France and England can only be reached by boat or plane, it was expensive to travel, and it often felt restrictive growing up there, especially as a teenager. But it is a profoundly beautiful island with beaches that rival any in Europe, and that is where I spent most of my childhood summers. In the '60s and '70s the islands were flooded with tourists every July and August; tourism is quieter now, but the island still attracts visitors who come for the scenery, food and history. The island's Occupation past has become a major part of its cultural draw, with the abandoned bunkers and War Tunnels Museum attracting thousands every year.

You have a background in many different areas, including screenwriting. How does writing a film differ from writing a novel? How did it prepare you for writing a novel?

It's a vastly different format and the transition wasn't easy. Film is a very collaborative process, with much of the final work done by others—the director, designer, actors. A novel is entirely the work of the author, including descriptions and characters' thought processes. But screenwriters get used to structuring a story carefully, over three acts, and I found that a useful transferable skill. Never commit to a word until you know your direction of travel!

Here's another question writers always get asked! What's next for you?

I'm undecided as yet. But I'm considering another book set in Jersey, perhaps in a different period.