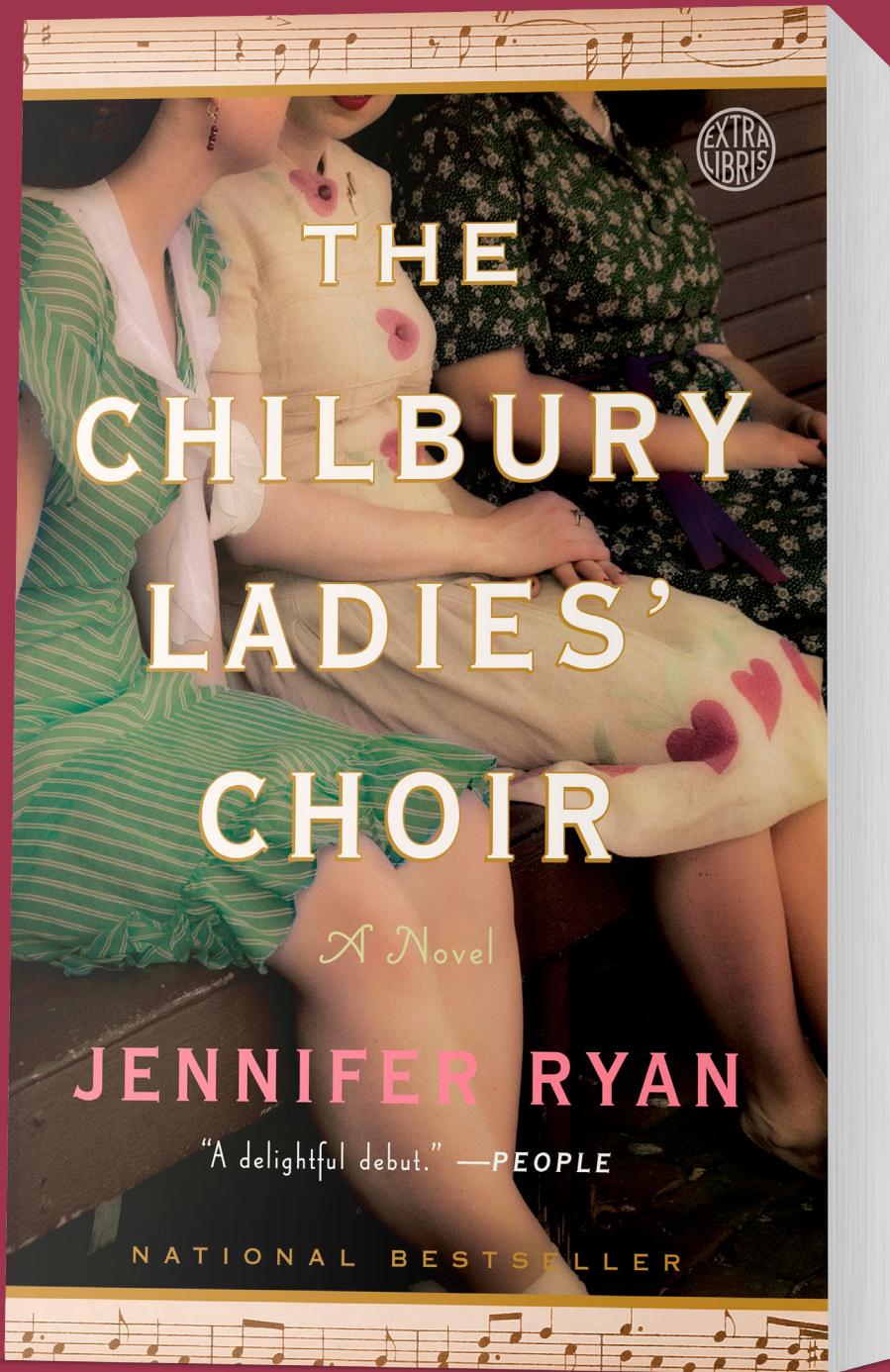


THE CHILBURY LADIES' CHOIR

Book Club Kit



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THE CHILBURY LADIES' CHOIR

Book Club Questions

1. What is the main theme of the book? Which of the characters is most changed through the course of the book?
2. Which character do you like most? Why? Which character do you dislike most? Why?
3. Which character do you most relate to? Why?
4. What was the funniest moment of the book? Why do you think it was funny?
5. Do you think that Mrs. Tilling made the right choice to help Carrington, even though it would have been illegal for her not to have handed him over to the police? A great deal has happened since the Second World War in this regard. What does that say about the society and culture in which we live?
6. In what way does Venetia alter through the course of the book? What are the biggest moments of change for her?
7. Why doesn't Mrs. Tilling hand Miss Paltry over to the police? Why is she being nice to her?
8. What does it say about the way her character has changed over the course of the book? Would you have handed her in?
9. Are there any recurrent symbols throughout the book? Why do you think they were chosen?
10. Are there any allusions to other books hidden throughout? What are they, and why are they relevant?
11. Did you feel for Venetia's dilemma after Slater left? In what ways would her choice have been easier today? Why do you think that is?
12. Tragically, we already know what will probably happen to Silvie's parents, even though none of the characters does at this point. How does that affect you when reading the book?
13. What impact did the war have on women, work, and society? How do you think women's equality has progressed since the Second World War?
14. And now, a show of hands: Did you shed a few tears while reading *The Chilbury Ladies' Choir*? Be honest now, there are some sad and very moving parts. Which did you find most heartrending, and why?

The Inspiration Behind

THE CHILBURY LADIES' CHOIR

by Jennifer Ryan

When I was growing up I had two grandmothers, one was Shakespeare Granny, who was an expert on the tragedies, and the other was Party Granny, who loved nothing better than a good knees-up with a Pink Gin. Party Granny was always telling thrilling and often racy tales of her war years in Kent, and it was these stories that formed the backdrop for Chilbury. I wanted to bring the feeling of the era to life. Women of all ages faced tragedy and hardship, but they also had opportunities for work and new personal freedoms with fathers, husbands, and sons away at the front.

There was a shift in cultural gender norms brought about by the needs of the war; women suddenly found jobs opening up for them in the country's hour of need. Plus, there was that heady notion that each day might be your last, so you need to make the most of it. Sexual norms relaxed as people made the best of things while they could. Premarital sex, extramarital affairs, sexually transmitted diseases, and unwanted pregnancies were rife. Who knew what would happen tomorrow, so why hold back? Party Granny was also in a choir, and she told hilarious stories about how bad they were, losing a carol competition because they had colds and blocked-up noses and instead of singing "Ding Dong Merrily on High" it came out as "Dig Dog Merrily on High." She told us how choir competitions were popular during the war to "keep up spirits." Another time, one of the altos was hurt in an air raid and they went to the hospital to cheer her up with a few songs, hamming up their bad singing to make her laugh. It was so successful that the nurses took them around every ward to cheer up the whole hospital. She'd fall about laughing as she told her stories, her eyes gleaming with the memories.

My fascination with the era continued, leading me to read memoirs and diaries of women and children of the time. There's something heartwarming about the way everyone pulled together to win the war, putting aside their differences to fight the common enemy, no matter what it took. And so, when I started to think about writing a book, the seeds of *The Chilbury Ladies' Choir* had already begun to grow.

A SUMMER IN KENT

Chilbury is based on a beautiful old village in Kent, Chilham, where I once spent a glorious summer in my youth. A castle and a manor house sit prominently on the square, with beautiful Tudor tea shops around the tumbledown churchyard. My days consisted of picnics in meadows of wildflowers, or long rambles through the woodland speckled with sparkling sunlight. In the evenings, we heard the echoing hoot of barn owls as we sought a fireside nook in the White Horse pub. I stayed in an old oast house on a nearby farm, which might have been Dawkins Farm, complete with barns, stables, and even some beehives. It was the perfect picturesque haven to let the drama unfold.

The Songs of Chilbury

Choosing the music for this book was one of my favorite tasks, and I'd spend hours sifting through my mind for precisely the right piece to match each scene. Luckily, I studied music, and performed most of these hymns and songs in a choir. What a joy it was to bring them all back to life!

- ♪ Holy, Holy, Holy
- ♪ The Lord's My Shepherd
- ♪ Be Thou My Vision
- ♪ Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring
- ♪ Lacrimosa:
from Mozart's Requiem

- ♪ Ave Maria
- ♪ Jerusalem
- ♪ Come Down, O Love Divine
- ♪ Abide with Me
- ♪ Amazing Grace

SONGS FOR THE SINGING SHOW

- ♪ Blue Moon
- ♪ Summertime
- ♪ Somewhere Over the Rainbow
- ♪ There'll Always Be an England
- ♪ Run Rabbit Run
- ♪ Knees Up Mother Brown
- ♪ The World Will Sing Again
- ♪ We're Gonna Hang Out the Washing
on the Siegfried Line

OTHER SONGS

- ♪ Can't Get Away to Marry
You Today, My Wife Won't
Let Me!
- ♪ Keep Young and Beautiful
- ♪ Puttin' on the Ritz
- ♪ Kiss Me Goodnight, Sergeant Major
- ♪ It's a Long Way to Tipperary
- ♪ Cheek to Cheek

MY GRANDMOTHER'S

Wartime Recipes

Rationing began to trickle in during 1940, and by 1941, when the U-boats were sinking any merchant ships coming anywhere close, there was a feeling that the Nazis were trying to starve everyone out.

My grandmother, ready to battle any culinary challenge, created her own handwritten recipe book, and here are a few of the more intriguing dishes that came out of the Second World War.

Homity Pie

This delicious pie was supposedly created by land girls—the young women who went to work on the farms after all the men had left for war. They'd bake it during the evening to take out to the fields for the next day.

My grandmother's parents lived next door and had a good vegetable garden that kept them well stocked for these veggie favorites. They also had chickens, which provided extra eggs and an occasional chicken to roast. My uncle, who was six or seven, helped out on a milk round and was presented with an extra pint of milk every day, and also admits to stealing brambly apples, illegally fishing, and even poaching rabbits. But the family's real luck lay in having an uncle with a farm, where frequent visits could mean a brace of pheasants, or even a duck or two.

Pastry made with 6 ounces flour and 3 ounces margarine, butter, or lard
4 large potatoes
2 large leeks
Butter or margarine
Handful of spinach, chopped
Parsley and thyme
1 egg
4 ounces mature cheddar, grated
Salt and pepper

1. Make the pastry dough by rubbing fat into the flour and then binding together with a little water.
2. Roll the pastry dough and place in a greased 8" pie dish, and half-bake it in a 390°F. oven for 10 minutes.
3. Cube the potatoes and boil until cooked through; drain.
4. Chop the leeks and fry in butter or margarine, adding spinach, parsley, and thyme.
5. Add the cooked potatoes to the leeks mixture with a whisked egg, 2 ounces of the grated cheese, and salt and pepper to taste.
6. Put the mixture into the pie dish on top of the pastry, then top with the remaining 2 ounces of cheese.
7. Cook in the oven at 425°F. until the top is browned.

Nothing Patties

Author's note: My grandmother's mother spent her early life in colonial India, and as a result, my grandmother was brought up on curry. She made exquisite Indian food throughout her life, all based on her mother's recipes from India. Her "patties" were especially popular at parties, and here is one of my personal favorites, which she called "nothing patties," as they didn't contain any meat.

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| 1 large onion | Butter, margarine, or vegetable oil for mashing and frying |
| 1 tsp turmeric powder | |
| 1 tsp cumin powder | 3–4 potatoes |
| 1 tsp coriander powder | Cooked and chopped vegetables |
| 1 tsp chili powder | (carrots, cabbage, parsnip, swede, beans, peas, green lentils) |
| A few cloves | |
| Salt and pepper | 1 egg (or powdered egg during the war) |

1. Chop and fry the onion in butter or margarine, add the spices and salt and pepper.
2. Peel, chop, and boil potatoes, then mash with a little butter or margarine.
3. Put all the ingredients in a bowl and blend.
4. Make patties with your hands.
5. Place in a hot frying pan and fry until browned on each side.

Pink Gin

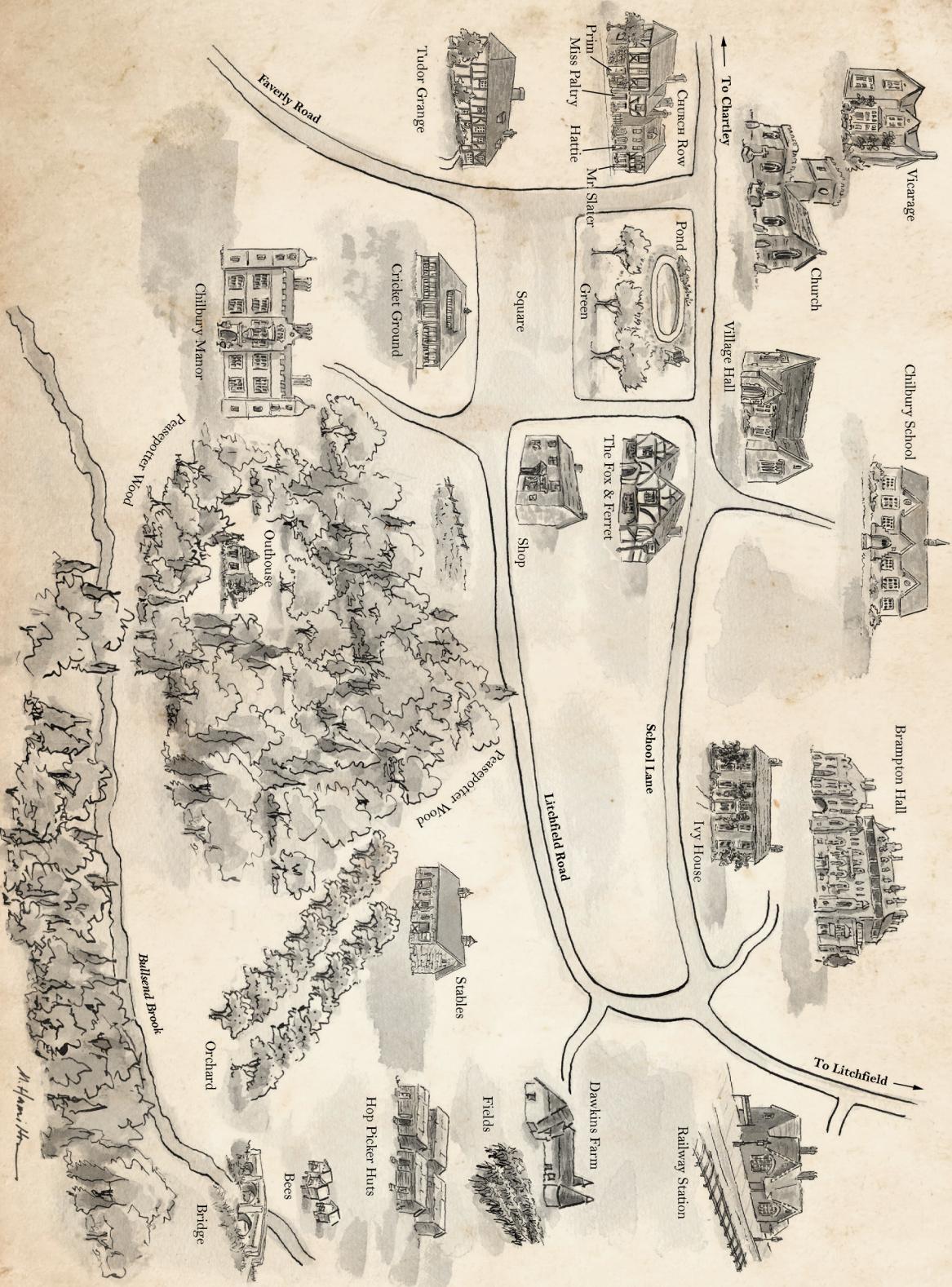
Author's note: My grandmother's favorite tipple, the Pink Gin, is a traditionally naval concoction that makes the consumption of Angostura bitters—used for seasickness—more convivial. Since my grandfather was a naval commander, she probably concluded that drinking Pink Gin showed support for his role, I suspect. However, by the time I was old enough to ask, she told me that everyone drank it throughout the war, as Angostura bitters were easy to come by, unlike tonic water. In any case, it looked rather fancy, didn't it!

A measure of Plymouth Gin (Plymouth Gin being sweeter and less dry than London Gin)

A dash of Angostura bitters
Water and ice to taste

THE VILLAGE OF CHILBURY

KENT, ENGLAND, CIRCA 1940



A LOOK INSIDE

The Village of Chilbury

Vicarage: A delightful eighteenth-century house where the Vicar and Mrs. Quail live, strewn with Mrs. Quail's favorite wisteria, sending wafts of perfumed loveliness over the pretty front lawn. Inside, Mrs. Quail's decorative taste prevails, with plenty of tasseled curtains and floral wallpaper, and a profusion of plump rose-colored velveteen cushions.

Church: An old stone church has been standing, and tilting very slightly, since the fifteenth century. It has been freezing inside ever since, even at the height of summer. There is a rumor that the ghost of a highwayman haunts the main apse every night, hunting down the Curate who handed him in.

Chilbury School: Set up in 1862 to teach young locals to read and write, the main classroom still contains four rows of wooden desks facing a small blackboard. Hattie has worked as a teacher here for just over a year, before which the class was taught by Mrs. Poultice.

Brampton Hall: This is a sprawling red Gothic-style mansion built a few generations ago by the original Mr. Brampton, a trader who got rich in India. Now they're a big local family, with Mrs. B. determined to make them even bigger. She lives here with Henry, when he's not flying Spitfires. Her husband, the current Mr. Brampton-Boyd, prefers to live in India, far from his somewhat busy wife.

Ivy House: Through the ivy- and rose-covered garden lies picturesque Ivy House. Mrs. Tilling lives here with David Tilling, when he's not fighting at the front. Her deceased husband, Dr. Tilling, was a veterinary surgeon, and there's a residual sense that Ivy House is a place for all lost and hurt creatures to come and find care.

Village Hall: The communal hall is the meeting place for the Women's Voluntary Service (or WVS as everyone calls it these days), led by the forceful Mrs. B. However, it is also the meeting place for the men in the Chilbury Defense Volunteers (CDV), led by the domineering Brigadier. Let's hope they don't try to meet at the same time.

Church Row: A quaint terrace of Tudor cottages, built in the sixteenth century, the old blackened beams askance with the wear of time. Each one has its own character, like the souls who reside within.

Prim's House: The glow of gold strikes you as you walk into the small hallway, a series of little things—satin boxes and artifacts from India and the Far East, covering every surface. The sitting room contains more, while the back room is filled with musical instruments of every type, awaiting an invisible orchestra.

Miss Paltry's House: Spartan and gray, Miss Paltry has rented the house from a Mr. G. H. Pennington of Litchfield for a number of years, without changing a single thing. The smell of cat wafts around the place, as well as a sense that Miss Paltry, for all her medical expertise, is not necessarily a friend of housecleaning.

Hattie's House: The delicious smell of homemade chicken and vegetable soup greets you as you step into the cozy yet practical little house. Blue and cream walls and wooden floors scrubbed and polished until they gleam give the place a feeling of warmth and love, like Hattie herself, bustling out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron to welcome you in.

Mr. Slater's House: Although he hasn't lived here for more than a few months, Mr. Slater has transformed the living area into an artist's studio, complete with a giant wooden easel and tubes of paint of all colors. The old window facing the field behind lets in a red and pink sunset, shining around the warm ochre and maroon interior.

Tudor Grange: This elegant Tudor mansion house, with two drawing rooms and servants' quarters, has been on the property market for a few months. The splendid beamed exterior bespeaks its heritage: it was built in 1603, additions and updates in 1769 and 1909. For more information, please telephone Mr. Tallant of Tallant & Short Property Agents, on Litchfield 274.

Village Green: Back in the medieval era, the green would have been created as a common space for villagers to graze cows, the pond being used as a water hole. But since then, Chilbury's Green has become so much more: a place where villagers meet and chat, and the site of the annual May Day celebrations, replete with a maypole strewn with a hundred pink, blue, and yellow streamers.

Village Pond: Many young boys, no doubt including poor David Tilling and the brute Edmund Winthrop, will have pondered at some point exactly how deep the indigo-mirrored pond goes down. Could one be lost in its depths? Or maybe swim to a different world? The ducks always sit on the southern bank; bread crumbs from Mrs. Tilling have become more sparse since rationing began.

The Fox & Ferret: In the medieval era, Richard II urged pubs to put up signs outside, and since the population was mostly illiterate, this was often a painting depicting something easy to remember, such as the Fox & Ferret. This old place has plenty of nooks and crannies for hatching a plan or making a secret tryst.

Shop: Now that food is being rationed, Mrs. Gibbs's village shop has become all important. You have to register with a shop so that they can be allocated enough food for the number of people they serve. Bacon, sugar, and butter are already rationed, and there's talk that they'll extend that to include meat, eggs, cheese, milk, soap, and—don't panic!—tea.

Cricket Ground: The sport of both the idle rich from Chilbury Manor and the lowly farmhands from Dawkins Farm, cricket brings everyone together. The big match of the year is the Chilbury vs. Chartley, the neighboring village. For this, the ladies of the village turn out to watch in all their finery; if there were a competition for the most glamorous hats, Chilbury would most certainly win.

Chilbury Manor: The big house of the village, Chilbury Manor is a grand, Georgian hall filled with antiques, antiquities, and blue-gray velvet drapes and finery. Since the sixteenth century, the manor has housed the lord of the surrounding area, the ancient Winthrop family. In good eras, they better the village with prestige and riches, and in bad, they pall the inhabitants in hate and loathing.

Peasepotter Wood: Magnificent beech trees mix with holly, firs, and elms across acres of tightly packed woodland, coursing down to the copse around the babbling Bullsend Brook. Kitty's favorite places are the Chestnut Patch, full of broad-trunked giants, and the Pixie Ring, a spot where fallen tree trunks create a secret meeting place where magical things happen.

Outhouse: Deep in the thickest part of the wood lies a broken-down old stone barn, covered in ivy and moss and full of nettles. No one knows how long it's been there, but it's believed to have been built by a woodsman who lived there until his life was gently oozed from his body one midwinter night by the woodland fairies, trying desperately to preserve their wood.

Bees: First brought to the farm by a cousin from Sussex—you must never pay money for bees: they must be a gift—the beehives have been here for over a century. Whenever there is a death in the family, someone must tell the bees, so the tradition goes, or the bees will flee the hives and wreak their revenge.

Bridge: The old rickety bridge needs to be fixed, but since the young men of the village went to war, the farm has been short of farmhands. It gently collapses a little more every day, easing itself slowly into Bullsend Brook as if returning to the earth, re-creating the landscape as if it had never existed in the first place.

Stables: Once a thriving stable packed with horses for showing, jumping, and hunting, it now houses only a few older horses, such as the beautiful Amadeus, now past his best. Long were the days when Venetia would show him all over Kent. Today, only little Silvie pays him due homage, creeping into his stable and saddling him up to gallop across the hills as if her life depended on it.

Dawkins Farm: The old farmhouse has a thatched roof made from straw and rushes that have to be reaffixed or mended from time to time. On one side is an oast house, a conical-rooved building with a white pointed tip, used for drying the hops for beer. On the other side is the farmyard, complete with sheepdogs, barn cats, and the occasional hen pecking away at any stray grains.

Railway Station: Rail travel is limited now that the war is on, so you can only get the train to London if you have a war meeting, as is the case with Brigadier Winthrop, or if you have important business with the Women's Voluntary Service, as is the case with Mrs. B. Funny how she always makes sure she gets all the good jobs.

Hop-Picker Huts: Even though there's a war on, the hop pickers are still coming down from the poor parts of London to pick hops every summer. These days there are less men, more women, and a lot more children, like Tom, whose parents are too busy to look after them. The huts are sparse metal sheds, but everyone always has fun during the hop-picking season.

Orchard: Each spring, the cherry trees burst into a delicate pink bloom, sending showers of soft petals cascading over the countryside with every light breeze. The trees, lined up and down the hillside, bear red and black cherries well into the autumn as the leaves turn yellow, then the brightest of reds, before fluttering back to the earth.

A CONVERSATION WITH

Jennifer Ryan

Q. *The Chilbury Ladies' Choir* is your debut novel. Can you tell us a bit about your inspiration and how it came to be?

A. When I was growing up, I had two grandmothers: one was Shakespeare Granny, who liked to dissect tragedies, and the other was Party Granny, who loved nothing better than a good knees up with a Pink Gin. Party Granny was always telling thrilling and often racy tales of her war years in Kent, and it was these stories that formed the backdrop for Chilbury. I wanted to bring the feeling of the era to life. Women of all ages faced tragedy and hardship, but they also had opportunities for work, and new personal freedoms with fathers, husbands, and sons away at the front.

There was a shift in cultural gender norms brought about by the needs of the war; women suddenly found jobs opening up for them in the country's hour of need. Plus, there was that heady notion that each day might be your last, so you need to make the most of it. Sexual norms relaxed as people made the best of things while they could. Premarital sex, extramarital affairs, sexually transmitted diseases, and unwanted pregnancies were rife. Who knew what would happen tomorrow, so why hold back?

Party Granny was also in a choir, and she told hilarious stories about how bad they were, losing a carol competition because they had colds and blocked-up noses and instead of singing "Ding Dong Merrily on High," it came out as "Dig Dog Merrily on High." She told us how choir competitions were popular during the war to "keep up spirits." And so the beginning of *The Chilbury Ladies' Choir* evolved.

Q. The women of Chilbury are each very different and unique in their own ways. How did you go about writing for an ensemble cast and developing each distinct voice?

A. The very first character was Mrs. Tilling, the middle-aged widow whose only son goes to war. As a mother myself, I wanted to investigate how she must have felt as he walked down the front path. How difficult it must have been to watch him go when he might not make it home. Mrs. Tilling's character is at the heart of the book, demonstrating how women of the era had been brought up to be quiet and submissive, and the war gave them a chance to speak their own minds. The choir in many ways is a metaphor for the women finding their voices.

The other women and girls were created around her, forming a group of different ages, social classes, and personalities in order to fully flesh out how they responded to the war. Venetia, the beauty of the village, is based on my grandmother's friend Letty, who took full advantage of the relaxed morals of the era, always playing the boys off against each other and landing herself in trouble. You know there's mischief when Venetia's around!

Silvie, the ten-year-old Jewish evacuee from Prague, is based on the children rescued by Nicholas Winton, a British banker, during 1938 and 1939. A friend had told him about the plight of the Jews in Prague, and he organized a way to bring Jewish children to the UK to be looked after by British families until the end of the war. He saved 669 lives in all, many of their parents, sadly, perishing in the Holocaust.

Q. Do you have a favorite character?

A. My favorite character has to be Miss Paltry, the scheming yet incompetent midwife who agrees to swap the Brigadier's baby girl with a boy so that he can inherit the family fortune. She came directly from a short story I wrote about a decade ago, where she played a similar role. Her rambunctious humor and her way of describing the village women are hysterical, saying of Mrs. Tilling, "she is so excruciatingly well-meaning, it makes me want to plunge her face into a barrel of ale to perk her up a bit." She has a flair for metaphor, and I loved creating phrases like, "The day was cold as a slap round the face with a fresh-caught cod."

Q. Do you see any of yourself in your characters?

A. The character who I feel closest to would probably be Kitty, the thirteen-year-old daughter of the tyrannical Brigadier. I think I was a little like her when I was that age, and it was easy for me to access how she might think or feel about any given situation. I had a lot of fun with her, as she just says whatever she thinks, even if it's self-absorbed, whimsical, or outrageous. And, of course, she is terribly wrong about so many things. She steps out of traditional narrative to write her diary with side headings and her wonderful lists, such as a list of the colors she associates with each person in the village, or what she thinks happens to people when they die. Many readers' favorite part of the book is when she spies on her sister seducing a handsome young man, and her take on it is hilarious. Such a fun character to write.

Q. Music is a major component of the novel. Why did you choose to unite the women through the formation of a choir?

A. It happened very quickly and organically. I began writing the first few journal entries of Mrs. Tilling, during which she became upset about the choir closing down. It was as if she, as a woman, was not worthy to be heard. It summed up everything she'd been thinking: that she'd always been told to smile and keep her opinions to herself, when deep down inside she was desperate to speak her mind. Why couldn't the women's voices be heard? The choir quickly gained pace with the arrival of Prim, and soon it became the central premise of the book, its soul.

As an enthusiastic choir member, I know too well that wonderful feeling of camaraderie that happens when singing together: it's as if the world suddenly lights up around you with an almost transcendent well-being. A few years ago, I edited a book by renowned cellist David Teie about how music affects the emotions, and so I know how music has that emotional pull. It was a joy to re-create those moments when music can truly change a person's world.

Q. By profession, you're a nonfiction book editor. What inspired you to turn to writing fiction?

A. I loved editing nonfiction, especially narrative nonfiction and memoirs. One day about five years ago, as I was rewriting the stark and beautiful memoir of a statesman in Afghanistan, I suddenly knew that I had more in me: more metaphor, more intrigue, more inspiration for life. It was time that I wrote a book rather than simply editing them. Immediately, as if the thought had already been there in my subconscious, I knew exactly what I would write about: women in the Second World War. For many years I've had a passion for reading memoirs from the war, and along with my grandmother's stories, these formed the backdrop to my longing to uncover women's changing lives throughout the war. To bring their stories back to life.

Q. What do you hope readers of *The Chilbury Ladies' Choir* will take away from their reading of the novel?

A. The message that I want readers to take away with them is that we, too, can find the strength to challenge the status quo and change the way we respond to things that come at us, wherever we are in our lives. Sometimes it's our own patterns of behavior and beliefs that are holding us back, and fear of moving away from the safety of the norm. We need to free the spirit; find the strength, resolve, and courage to take on the world and make it a better place.

A good friend of mine was diagnosed with cancer a few years ago, and thankfully has made it through. But since that first phone call, the way she saw her life changed. Instead of seeing a thousand tomorrows, she suddenly became struck how little she'd paid attention to it. How very precious life is. We need to actively choose how we want to live rather than just let it wash over us.

The war, the deaths, the fear, forced the Chilbury ladies to look at their own lives in such a way. It made them live life for the day, to dance and sing and fall in love. But it also changed their way of thinking about who was in charge of their lives, and they made the decision to follow their own paths.