

# The Truth According to Us

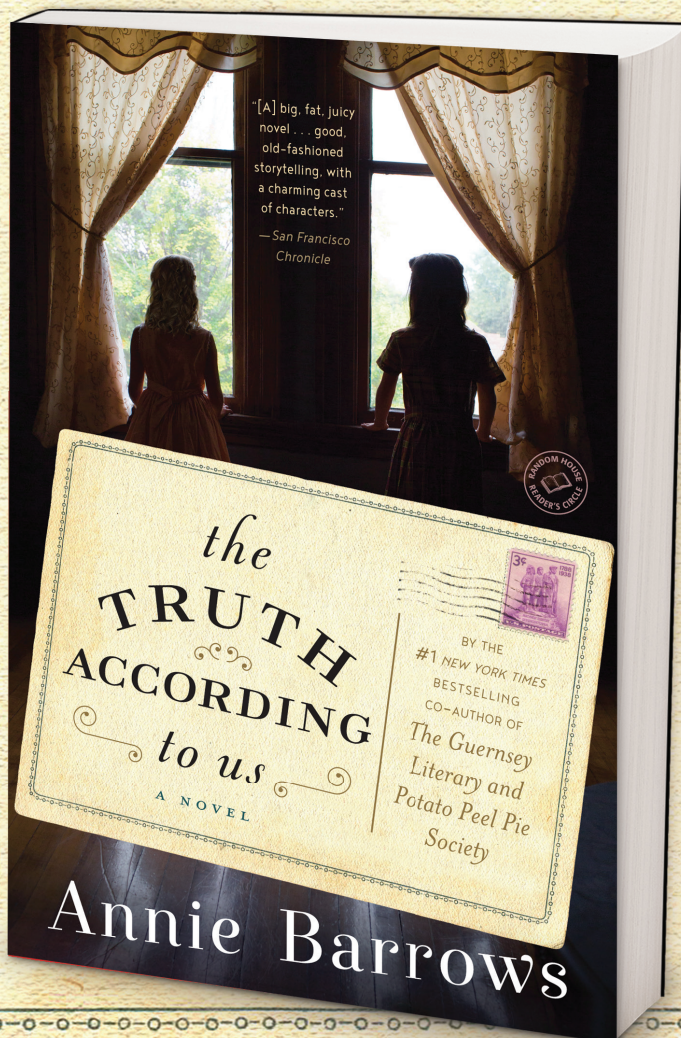
## Annie Barrows

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"It takes a brave author to make the heroine of a new novel an observant and feisty girl... like Scout Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*... But Barrows... has created a believable and touching character in Willa." —*USA Today*





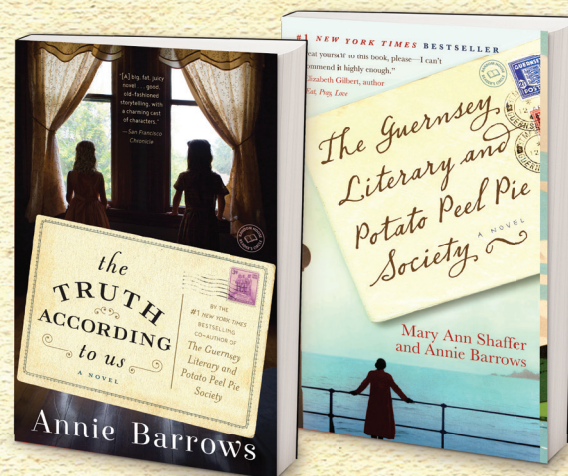
# The Road from Guernsey to Macedonia

by Annie Barrows



## WHEN MY AUNT MARY ANN SHAFFER FELL ILL AND ASKED ME TO FINISH

*The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* for her, my response was, “Why certainly, Mary Ann, I’d be glad to! No problem! Don’t give the matter another thought! I’ll take care of everything!”



That’s what I said. Of course that’s what I said. I would have done anything for Mary Ann. But here’s what I thought: This is impossible. Impossible. How am I supposed to write Mary Ann’s book? In Mary Ann’s voice? I don’t sound like Mary Ann. I don’t write like Mary Ann. And besides, I’m a children’s author—I don’t write for grownups!

I remained fully persuaded of the impossibility of the task until the first day I sat down to work on the manuscript. I wrote for two hours without taking a breath, and then I realized what I had done: I had written Mary Ann’s book in Mary Ann’s voice. And it was easy. It was simple. It was like listening to Mary Ann talk, which I had been doing all my life.

I thought when I began working on *Guernsey* that I would finish the book and my family would be glad, and then we would all go back to our regularly scheduled lives. That is not what happened. Mary Ann passed away five months before *Guernsey* was published—which will never cease to strike me as unspeakably tragic—and never saw what her book meant to millions of readers around the world. Instead, in the wake of *Guernsey*’s astonishing success, I was asked to tour around the country giving readings and talks. And as I did so, I encountered the Big Question in nearly every audience, dozens, scores, and maybe hundreds of times. The Big Question was couched in a number of different ways—some accusatory, some congratulatory—but what it really boiled down to was this: Why can’t I tell which part you wrote and which Mary Ann wrote?

This is a completely understandable question. Partly, it’s because Americans like to give people credit for their work; they want to appreciate the right person. But it’s also partly because it’s weird to have two people write indistinguishably; it opposes our ideas about the essentially individual character of art. We have an attachment to the concept of the singular artist, the irreproducible creative sensibility. After all, singularity is essential to value. So how were readers supposed to respond when they couldn’t distinguish between Mary Ann’s writing and mine?

Many responded with literary sleuthing; I received a lot of communiqués announcing that it was obvious that I had started writing on page 217 or 180 or 92. That I was responsible for the



children. That this phrase or that sounded jarring and therefore must be mine. None of the suppositions were right. It was really kind of surprising. Just by the law of averages, there should have been some correct attributions, but there weren't. Even close friends of mine who announced triumphantly that they had found irrefutable evidence of my authorship were always wrong.

At first, I was simply happy that I had done what I was supposed to do. Then, because everyone else seemed to consider it such a feat of self-camouflage, I got kind of puffed up about it. And then I began to wonder—how had I done it? How had I managed to write Mary Ann's book in Mary Ann's voice? In truth, I knew it wasn't self-camouflage, but an excavation of the past, of the many thousands of hours I had spent listening to my mother and my aunt Mary Ann talk. This led me to think about the influence of family on voice—specifically the influence of my family on my voice—and from there, I started thinking about the power of family stories to create a collective family voice, that inescapable web of associations and allusions that makes it possible for families to communicate entire volumes in just a few sentences. Or to say three words and cause the whole family to dissolve into giggles. In my family, for example, you can merely say, "Anna May," and everyone present will respond, "Puh! Her!" There's no need to add more.

The more I thought about the heritage of voice, the more I found myself thinking about how stories make families. Obviously family history—and actually, all history—is transmitted by story, but it's also created by story. The very act of telling makes the thing that will be remembered and passed on, until what has been told begins to be called the truth and, finally, it effaces fact. In one long-gone passage of *The Truth According to Us*, I described the process like this:

"...And there it went, another path backward, another long, half-hidden why, why, why. The terrible paradox that distance can only be crossed by means of infinite parsing which makes arrival an impossibility has been declared false, but it's true. It's true. The past recedes infinitely, and each fraction of knowledge serves only to illuminate its own fractional and therefore unsatisfactory nature, separating us by a new increment from comprehension. It cannot be attained, the past."

While the past—the real past—is unattainable, what is available is the manufactured past. When I was young and fact-bound, I found this deeply offensive; I wanted the Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing But the Truth. But having experienced—via *Guernsey*—the expansion of identity made possible through the family inheritance of tales and telling, I think that the treasure is the creation, the story, the lie that becomes the truth according to us.



# Truth Goes to the Movies

**YOU WANT GLAMOUR? YOU WANT EXCITEMENT? DRAMA? ROMANCE? THRILLS? CHILLS?** How about some tap-dancing? If you lived in small-town America circa 1938, chances were the only place you'd find what you were seeking was at the movie theater. That's why everyone went to the movies!

The characters in *The Truth According to Us* are no exception. Even a town as small as Macedonia boasted three movie theaters, with a thrice-weekly rotation of features. Every showing included trailers, newsreels, a cartoon, and a feature, and if, after all that, you still needed more entertainment, you could sit through the whole show again on the same ticket.

To give your book group an immersive experience in the world of *The Truth According to Us*, consider creating a 1938 film festival featuring some of the movies that make an appearance in course of the book:

## 1.

*Algiers*, starring Charles Boyer and Hedy Lamarr. *Algiers* tells the story of arch-criminal Pepe Le Moko (the source for Pepe Le Pew, by the way), who has escaped from the clutches of the French police after a massive heist and is living in luxurious exile in Algiers, until he falls for the beautiful Gaby and discovers that his haven is also his prison. Charles Boyer is the epitome of the seductive Frenchman, but the real reason to see this movie is Hedy Lamarr, who was the most gorgeous person in the entire world in 1938. *Algiers* was her American debut, and everyone went crazy over her.

## 2.

*Jezebel*, starring Bette Davis and Henry Fonda, is probably the best of the movies mentioned in *The Truth According to Us*. Bette Davis won the Academy Award for Best Actress for her role here as a willful, spoiled Louisiana belle who scandalizes society by wearing a red dress to a ball. Henry Fonda is the (theoretically) admirable, principled hero who thereafter spurns her. The role was Davis's consolation prize for not being cast as Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*.

## 3.

*Love Finds Andy Hardy*, starring Mickey Rooney, Ann Rutherford, and Judy Garland is really pretty bad. I watched it so that I could faithfully copy down the dialogue I included in the book, but that's my authorial duty. You're off the hook.

## 4.

Extra-credit: *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, starring Tyrone Power, Alice Faye, and Don Ameche. This movie, based on an Irving Berlin 1911 hit song of the same name, gives us the saga of a society boy who shocks his family by taking up ragtime music—and of course finding love and fame to boot. But it's also a swell opportunity to take a look at Tyrone Power, whom, according to Minerva and Mae Romeyn, their brother Emmett would resemble, if only he would comb his hair back. I happen to know that they're right.

## Other fun 1938 movies

*You Can't Take It With You*, *Holiday*, *Adventures of Robin Hood*, *Carefree* (there's your tap-dancing!)  
Add popcorn and jujubes—and enjoy!



## Slightly Authentic Fare

Everyone knows that refreshments are central to book club happiness, for, as C. S. Lewis once put it, "Eating and reading are two pleasures that combine admirably." With this wisdom in mind, we would like to propose a few treats that will reflect the time, place, and characters of *The Truth According to Us*.

But not too much. Because it has to be acknowledged that small-town West Virginia in 1938 was not exactly a world culinary capital. There are some recipes mentioned in the pages of *Truth* that do not bear replicating for your book club, such as Jello with Canned Peas, the recipe for which I found in a 1931 booklet entitled "Want Something Different?" It's different, all right, and I will give the recipe to anyone who really desires it, but don't say I didn't warn you. Our primary goal here is tastiness and, ultimately, book club joy, not rigorous historical authenticity. Rigorous authenticity can give you a stomachache.

With this in mind, let's have something to drink. As readers of *The Truth According to Us* know, Macedonia was a dry town in a local-option state. Therefore, if you want to have a genuine 1938 alcoholic experience, you're going to have to take your hooch straight, just the way you'd get it from your local bootlegger. There will be none of those newfangled mixed drinks, and, of course, no wine. I'm happy to report that **Four Roses Bourbon Whiskey**, widely available nowadays, will satisfy all historical requirements.

For those who prefer their beverages without stick, iced tea is a good solution (actually, you can pour the hooch in the tea if you like that). Another alternative is that old southern favorite, **Coca-Cola with peanuts**. You take a handful of peanuts and drop them in a glass. Then you pour Coca-Cola on top. After you drink the Coca-Cola, you eat up the peanuts. It's pretty good. Some people replace the peanuts with a handful of potato chips. That's pretty good, too.

Now that drinks have been taken care of, we can get down to the business of food. Your book club, like *The Daughters of Macedon*, *The Rose Guild*, and *The Beacon Light Ladies Study Club*, will undoubtedly enjoy **Frozen Fruit Delight**, a dessert direct from the Romney, West Virginia, kitchen of my great-aunt's sister-in-law. I have replaced most of the canned fruit with fresh fruit and the Cool Whip with cream, and it's really quite delicious.



## Frozen Fruit Delight (serves 30!)

- ½ cup seedless grapes, halved
- 1 pint strawberries, sliced
- 5 bananas, sliced
- ½ pound chopped nuts (walnuts, pecans, or almonds)
- 20-ounce can crushed pineapple in syrup, drained, with syrup reserved
- 1 quart whipping cream, whipped
- ¾ cup sugar
- 3 tablespoons cornstarch
- A pinch of salt
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten

Cook pineapple syrup with sugar, cornstarch, salt, lemon juice, and beaten eggs in a double boiler over medium-low heat until thick, like custard. Cool to room temperature. Add fruit. Fold in whipped cream and nuts. Pour into Pyrex dishes (you'll have enough for one 9" x 13" and one 8" x 8" dish. Freeze 4 to 5 hours (overnight is better). Cut into squares and serve.

## Fried Apples (serves 8)

You may wish to serve your book group something savory. If you do, you're more or less out of luck, because the predominant flavor in southern-ish cooking of the era was sweet. Even main dishes were often served with sweet garnishes. For example, readers will recall that fried apples were featured in Layla Beck's very first dinner in Macedonia. Like Jottie Romeyn, you can serve your fried apples with ham or pork, but a more snackable idea is to pair them with cornbread.

- 8 Granny Smith apples (can be peeled or unpeeled)
- 3 tablespoons butter (if you want to be really historically accurate, use bacon grease)
- ½ cup brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 2-3 tablespoons water

Core the apples and slice into uniform wedges. Melt the butter in a heavy skillet over medium-low heat. Add sliced apples, cinnamon, and 2 tablespoons water. Sauté, stirring frequently, for 15 to 20 minutes, or until apples are glazed with syrup and tender. Add more water if they become dry.

## Spanish Cream (serves 8)

And now, it's time for dessert! To harken once again to Layla's first dinner in Macedonia, our dessert of record will be Spanish Cream, a simple yet strangely pleasant concoction that has no discernible relation to Spain (but is, oddly, much beloved in New Zealand). Gussy it up with fresh fruit, if you like.

- 1 envelope (1/4 oz.) unflavored gelatin
- 2 ½ cups whole milk
- ½ cup sugar
- 3 eggs, separated
- A pinch of salt
- 1 ½ teaspoons vanilla

Dissolve gelatin in milk for about 5 minutes. Place in a double boiler over simmering water and stir in sugar until dissolved. Beat egg yolks until light and blend in a bit of the hot mixture (to keep from curdling during next step). Add egg yolk mixture to gelatin mixture and stir constantly until thickened. Stir in vanilla and then cool until the mixture mounds slightly when dropped from a spoon. Beat the egg whites until stiff. Fold the cooked mixture into the egg whites. Pour into individual dessert bowls, a dessert mold, or a pie pan and refrigerate until set, approximately 4 to 6 hours.



## Discussion Questions

1. Early in *The Truth According to Us*, Willa resolves to acquire the virtues of “ferocity and devotion.” Do you agree that these are actually virtues? Which of the characters in *Truth* possesses them? Do you know anyone who does?
2. Much of *The Truth According to Us* revolves around events that occurred when Jottie, Felix, Vause, and Sol were children and teenagers. Do you think the author believes that character is essentially unchanging from childhood to adulthood? Do you agree? How have you changed from your childhood self?
3. *The Truth According to Us* is set in a small town where everyone seems to know everyone else. Have you ever lived in a situation like that? Would you find living in Macedonia appealing or stifling? With our multiple forms of instantaneous communication, it could be said that the entire world has become a small town. Do you agree? Do you think we live in a more or less anonymous world now?
4. Felix Romeyn is undoubtedly a flawed character. Sol McKubin is, by most standards, a far more honorable person. And yet Jottie speaks of “her growing certainty that if Sol had been in Felix’s place, he would, after a time, have come to believe that what he told her was the truth.” Do you agree? If so, which man is more honorable?
5. Of all the characters in *The Truth According to Us*, Layla Beck may be the one who changes the most. In her final letter to her father, she says she has learned that “ignoring the past is the act of a fool.” What is she referring to? Discuss how the lessons she has learned are revealed in the differences between her relationship with Felix and that with Emmett.
6. While *The Truth According to Us* is not an epistolary novel, there are many letters from Layla’s various correspondences woven throughout the narrative. How did these letters contribute to your understanding of her character, and to the story as a whole? Are there any letters that really stand out in your memory? Why do you think that is?
7. Is Felix a good father? Why or why not?
8. Author Annie Barrows has said, with regard to setting her novel in 1938, “The Second World War looms so large in our perception of our individual selves—and even larger in our perception of America’s identity—that it takes a massive feat of imagination to remove it, or block it out, even very temporarily. To catch a glimpse of a small town in America, not ‘before the War,’ or even ‘before people realized war was inevitable,’ but without the inevitability—well, it’s nearly impossible.” Discuss the historical events that have marked your time. Do you think that we, like the characters in *The Truth According to Us*, are facing a major pivot point in our national identity? What do you predict it to be?



## Discussion Questions

9. At one point, Willa's Uncle Emmett advises her "Don't ask questions if you're not going to like the answers." He clarifies that she should ask herself whether the answer could endanger something that's precious to her, and if so, refrain from asking. Willa ignores his advice entirely, but would it have been better—for her and everyone else—if she had listened? Have you ever regretted your own curiosity?
10. The possibility of knowing the truth about the past is a central preoccupation of *The Truth According to Us*. Layla says that "if history were defined as only those stories that could be absolutely verified, we'd have no history at all." Do you agree? Do you think Layla still believes this at the end of the summer?
11. Of all the characters in *The Truth According to Us*, with whom do you most identify and why?
12. The sisterly bond between Jottie, Mae, and Minerva is intimate and powerful, with Mae and Minerva choosing to live under the same roof during the week, away from their husbands, because "the two of them can't stand to be apart...they found out they were miserable without each other." In contrast, the relationship between the two Romeyn brothers is tense. What do you think of this distinction? How does the presence of strong feminine companionship impact this story? How does this model of loyalty and devotion affect the relationship between young Willa and Bird?
13. *The Truth According to Us* is broken up into multiple different perspectives, blending young and old voices with epistolary fragments and flashbacks. How do these varied viewpoints contribute to characterization and development in the story? How do they deepen our connection to these characters?