“Meissner’s prose is exquisite, and she is a stunning storyteller.”
—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

SECRETS of a CHARMED LIFE

a novel

Susan Meissner
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Discussion Questions

1. What did you enjoy most about *Secrets of a Charmed Life*? What do you think will stay with you?

2. Would you describe *Secrets of a Charmed Life* as a story about sisters or a story about mothers and daughters?

3. Discuss the secrets that the characters keep from one another. What facts does Annie hide from her daughters and why? What do Emmy and Julia not tell the men they eventually marry? What secret does Charlotte keep? How do these secrets impact the characters’ lives? Are there other secrets in the book?

4. How is this book different than other books you’ve read about World War 2?

5. Describing Emmy, the author wrote, “She stood at a crossroads, half-aware that her choice would send her down a path from which there could be no turning back. But instead of two choices, she saw only the one—because it was all she really wanted to see.” Has there ever been a time when you couldn’t see the choices open to you until much later?

6. Later in her life, Julia writes in her journal: “Fear does not start to fade until you take the step that you think you can’t.” Do you agree? What was Julia afraid of when she wrote this?

7. How similar or dissimilar were Emmy and her mother? Did Emmy have an accurate view of the kind of person her mother was?

8. Isabel tells Kendra that there are no secrets to charmed life. There is only the task of forgiving ourselves for only being able to make our own choices, and no one else’s? What do you think she meant by this?

9. What did the sketches of brides’ dresses represent to Emmy?

10. What were Emmy’s reasons for choosing to remain Isabel throughout her adult life? Would you have done the same?

11. On one level, the novel is about losing something very precious. What’s the most precious thing you’ve ever lost? What were the consequences?

12. Have you ever lived through a time of war or social chaos, even to a small degree? How does your experience compare with what Emmy and Julia went through?

*(Questions courtesy of the author.)*

An Interview With Author Susan Meissner

Posted on February 2, 2015 by Kate Motaung

How did you come up with the idea for *Secrets of a Charmed Life*?

The story began first as an image in my head of an impoverished girl on the brink of adulthood sketching wedding dresses in the tiny bedroom she shares with a younger half-sister. I could see her in my mind’s eye imagining a life far different from the one she is living. She wants a fairy tale life where love and comfort and happiness are in abundance, and for her, that charmed life begins with a wedding dress worn on that blissful day a girl’s childhood dreams come true. I decided to set her in London at the start of the war because I knew that even for a young woman not yet sixteen, war is a crucible. It is a tester of dreams and desires and determination. I knew the London Blitz was an opposition that would bring out the very best and the very worst in this girl, as war so often does.

Could you give us a summary of the plot?

Like many of my other novels, *Secrets of a Charmed Life* is historical fiction framed by a contemporary layer that links to a story in the past. An American college student named Kendra, who is studying abroad at Oxford, interviews Blitz survivor Isabel McFarland just when the elderly woman is ready to give up secrets she has kept all her life—beginning with who she really is. The story then takes the reader to England in 1940. An unprecedented war against London’s civilian population is about to take place and half a million children are evacuated to foster homes in the countryside. Fifteen-year-old Emmy Downtree and her much younger sister Julia find refuge in a charming Cotswold cottage, but Emmy’s burning ambition to return to the city and apprentice with a fashion designer pits her against Julia’s profound need for her sister’s presence. The sisters’ lives are forever changed when—acting at cross purposes—they secretly return to London on the first day of the Blitz.

Evacuees on their way out of the city.

What drew you to include in your story the evacuation of London’s children?
Prior to researching for this book, I was only minimally aware of what London’s parents did to keep their children safe during World War II. I’d long ago read C.S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia* and I knew the four children in those stories had been sent out of London into the countryside at the start of the war. But I didn’t know that for tens of thousands of children just like them that stay in the countryside lasted for the duration of the war. We’re talking five years. How difficult it must have been for the parents and their kids to be separated from each other – with just occasional visits – for half a decade, and during a time of fear, danger, and deprivation. From a storyteller’s standpoint, the emotional pull of this situation is intense. I knew I wanted to explore what this scenario might have been like for two young sisters.

![A little girl sits outside her bombed London home. Evacuation was strongly encouraged but not mandatory.](image)

**What were you most surprised by in your research for Secrets of a Charmed Life?**

I think many of us who were born after World War II have a limited understanding of what England suffered because there were so many other more shocking situations, like the slaughter of millions of Jews, the occupations of nations like Poland and France, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the storming at the beach at Normandy, and the Bataan Death March, to name just a few. I didn’t realize the magnitude of what London suffered until I took a closer look. The city was never occupied by Hitler’s forces but it was bombed relentlessly. Seven of Christopher Wren’s beautiful churches were destroyed, as were thousands upon thousands of homes. More than sixty thousand civilians were killed in the whole of the British Isles. Those are staggering losses. And yet the British people were and are resilient. Their rallying cry of *Keep Calm and...*
Carry On (I truly can’t stand trivializations of this motto!) is truly the hallmark of that resiliency. You can go to London’s East End now and see street after street of 1950’s-era buildings, framed by a quiet horizon of much older buildings that the war did not flatten. London, Coventry and the other bombed cities rebuilt what was destroyed and moved on. The memories of the war aren’t in the streets but in the museums, and in national cemeteries, and sometimes, if you look closely enough, in the faces of those who survived it.

**What would you especially like readers to take away from *Secrets of a Charmed Life***?

The title of this book, which I love, is meant to cause the reader to wonder if there really are secrets to living a life that has happily-ever-after written all over it. The title seems to suggest there are hidden truths to being able to have everything you’ve always wanted. But in actuality, and what I hope readers will take away, is that a happy life is not made up of what you have chased and achieved, but rather who you have poured your life into, who has poured their life into yours, and the difference you’ve made in the lives of others. Most of the dreams we pursue don’t have intrinsic worth, but people always do. It’s not a perfect world, and we can only play our own hand of cards – if you will – but if we play the hand as best we can with love for others as the motivation, I think we can rest content.

Evacuees in World War Two - the True Story

By David Prest
Last updated 2011-02-17

As bombing raids attacking Britain's cities increased during World War Two, thousands of children were uprooted from their families and sent to the safety of the countryside. Many found, however, that life away from home was no picnic.

Operation Pied Piper

The evacuation of Britain's cities at the start of World War Two was the biggest and most concentrated mass movement of people in Britain's history. In the first four days of September 1939, nearly 3,000,000 people were transported from towns and cities in danger from enemy bombers to places of safety in the countryside.

Most were schoolchildren, who had been labelled like pieces of luggage, separated from their parents and accompanied instead by a small army of guardians - 100,000 teachers. By any measure it was an astonishing event, a logistical nightmare of co-ordination and control beginning with the terse order to 'Evacuate forthwith,' issued at 11.07am on Thursday, 31 August 1939. Few realised that within a week, a quarter of the population of Britain would have a new address.

Talking to evacuees now about the events of those days in 1939 recalls painful memories that have been deeply hidden for 60 years, exposing the trauma of separation and isolation and the tensions of fear and anger. Most were unaware of where they were going, what they would be doing and all were wholly ignorant of when they would be coming back.

The fear of air attack from German bombers at the start of hostilities encouraged parents to send their children to safety. There were predictions of 4,000,000 civilian casualties in London alone, and, as early as 1922 - after the air threat from Zeppelins - Lord Balfour had spoken of 'unremitting bombardment of a kind that no other city has ever had to endure'.

The Government had stockpiled coffins, erected masses of barrage balloons and planned, at least in outline, for the mass evacuation of British cities before 1939. But it is now revealed that these plans were hopelessly flawed.
In the first place, the estimates of casualties were grossly over-exaggerated and the subsequent Government propaganda caused near panic rather than controlled movement. In addition, the man in charge of evacuation, Sir John Anderson, was a cold, inhuman character with little understanding of the emotional upheaval that might be created by evacuation.

The day of evacuation

Most evacuees have a vivid recall of events on the day of their evacuation. The images are of busy train stations, shouting officials and sobbing mothers.

In London, the schoolchildren sang 'The Lambeth Walk'. Elsewhere there were choruses of 'Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Goodbye'. For most it was 'like going on an adventure': a phrase that is still uppermost in the minds of evacuees 60 years on.

'We marched to Waterloo Station behind our head teacher carrying a banner with our school's name on it,' says James Roffey, founder of the Evacuees Reunion Association. 'We all thought it was a holiday, but the only thing we couldn't work out was why the women and girls were crying.'

For the newspapers the evacuation represented an irresistible human story. An upper-class Englishwoman, Mollie Panter-Downes, described the scene in her fortnightly piece for the New Yorker and remarked on the 'cheerful little cockneys who could hardly believe the luck that was sending them to the countryside'.

The stereotypical images were already forming in people's minds.

Parents gave instructions to their children: 'Don't complain,' 'Grin and bear it,' 'Look after your sister,' 'Write home as soon as you can.'

Broadly speaking the four-day official exodus worked surprisingly well. The real problems came in the reception areas where the Government had left arrangements for the children's arrival and care to local authorities, with little more than an injunction to do their best.

The result can only be described as a typically British wartime shamble. Hundreds of children arrived in the wrong area with insufficient rations. And, more worryingly, there were not enough homes in which to put them.

Twelve months earlier, the Government had surveyed available housing, but what they had not taken into account was the extent to which middle-class and well-to-do families would be making their own private arrangements. Consequently, those households who had previously offered to take in evacuees were now full.
Keeping control of the whole thing became a joyless task. 'The trains were coming in thick and fast,' says Geoffrey Barfoot who had been seconded from the town hall to act as a billeting officer in Weston Super Mare. 'It was soon obvious that we just didn't have the bed space.'

I'll Take that One

As a result of the mismatches, selection was made according to rudimentary principles. Billeting officers simply lined the children up against a wall or on a stage in the village hall, and invited potential hosts to take their pick. Thus the phrase 'I'll take that one' became etched on the memory of our evacuees.

Steve Davis, a clinical psychologist specialising in the study of war trauma, says this was the first of many moments that caused upset and humiliation for the evacuees and put their welfare under serious threat. 'It was little more than a paedophile's charter', says Davis, whose work involves counselling former evacuees.

For him the current anniversary marks a watershed. 'Surveys show that childhood memories lie dormant for a period of around 60 years and now they are returning to haunt people in a big way.'

Understandably perhaps, those with only good evacuations cherish their memories, and are irritated by those who seem only to recall the gloomier side. The unhappiness of others somehow besmirches their own idyllic picture.

However, contrasting experiences have stayed with the evacuees and what is left can only be described as the best of times and the worst of times.

Rita Glenister, from North London, stayed with a working-class family in Somerset and was treated like a member of the family, given love and affection and secured friendships to last a lifetime. Norma Reeve, from a lowly background in the East End, was taken in by a titled lady with servants and a butler who served Norma her meals.

Little things, like going to the pictures, learning to bake bread, walks in the woods and the generosity of those who took evacuated children into their homes, have remained constant in the minds of evacuees. For many it was a life-enhancing, mind-broadening experience, leaving them with memories they treasure to this day.

Others, however, were beaten, mistreated and abused by families who didn't want them and didn't care about them. The painful experience of John Abbot, evacuated from Bristol, reflects the darker side. His rations were stolen by his host family, who enjoyed good food whilst John was given a diet of nothing more than mashed potatoes.
He was horsewhipped for speaking out and, with a bruised and bleeding body, was eventually taken in by the police. Then there was Terri McNeil who was locked in a birdcage and left with a chunk of bread and a bowl of water.

Of course, it would be wrong to suppose that evacuation under the government scheme was one long misery for most of those involved. Clearly it was only a minority that were ill-treated, but it did happen. The present writer spoke directly to nearly 450 ex-evacuees, and of these 12 per cent say they suffered some sort of mental, physical or specifically sexual abuse, as defined by the children’s welfare organisations of today. Naturally, and sadly, deep scars lie just below the surface for that minority.

Daily Mirror’s coverage

Saturday, 2 September 1939

No hitch on great adventure

Evacuation of schoolchildren from London went without a hitch. The children, smiling and cheerful, left their parents and entrained for unknown destinations in the spirit of going on a great adventure.

'I wish all our passengers were as easy to manage,' a railway official said. ‘The children were very well behaved.’

At Waterloo, 80 per cent of the normal travellers saw nothing of the schoolchildren. After Earl de la Warr, President of the Board of Education, had toured a number of schools in West London, he said, 'If the arrangements at the other end for receiving the children are as good as at this end, it bodes well for the scheme.'

Waiting rooms, turned into first-aid posts at various stations for the children, were rarely if ever used.

First school to start

Earliest school to start evacuation was Myrdle Street School, Commercial Road, E. Two hundred children, aged from three to 13, assembled before dawn. Each child carried a gas mask, food and change of clothing and bore three labels. 'Don't suck or eat your labels,' the head teacher, Miss DL Herbert, told them.

Freda Skrzypee, nine, who arrived with her parents and brother from Danzig on Sunday was among them. She speaks no English, but has a companion in Ruth Rosenzweig, Jewish
refugee from Berlin. 'The Germans have taken away our nationality,' she said, 'But I am happy here.'

While waiting to be taken away - they did not know where they were going, except 'to the country for a holiday' - the children had community singing. As dawn was breaking the children marched to Aldgate Metropolitan Station, where they entrained.

At the Ben Johnson School, Mile End, E, mothers were allowed into the playground where 300 boys and girls said a bright 'cheerio' to their mothers. Then Mr HC Cawsey told the parents: 'Your children will be safe. Remember Mr Morrison's message and smile!'

Daily Mirror; part two

Saturday, 2 September 1939

And they did smile

A teacher cheerily told a father: 'We'll be back in a week. The weather's glorious for a nice holiday.'

Organisation was so good that a quarter of an hour after the assembly the children were ready to move.

Not one of the 250 children was late at Mandeville Street School, Lower Clapton. Once inside their buses they talked happily with their parents through the windows. 'Got your comics, Bert?' shouted a fond father. Bert had them all right, with his gas mask.

The evacuation went off with remarkable smoothness.

Within eleven minutes after the arrival by District Railway at Wimbledon, 500 children from Merton Road School (Southfields) and Wandsworth School were in a main line train station on their way to an undisclosed destination.

It was a brave little regiment, marching in step, which left Ashburnham School, Lots Road, Chelsea, for Walham Green Station where they entrained for Wimbledon. One thousand children are being evacuated from the Chelsea area.

The dexterity with which the children were shepherded through crowds of morning workers at Waterloo Station was a perfect piece of organisation. Police wearing armlets and LCC school officials saw that an avenue to their platform was kept entirely free for the children.

Little tots smiled gleefully and boys whistled and exchanged jokes. One boy, carrying a kitbag over his shoulder in true military style, kept humming to himself as he marched along.
'Cheer up. Your children are going to have a happy holiday and don't worry.' With these words of cheer Miss Violet Horseburgh, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, comforted mothers outside the Vauxhall Central School, Lawn Lane, South Lambeth Road.

One little boy at Ealing Broadway Station, where 50,000 children entrained, had a bucket and spade with him. To cheer him up his mother had told him that he was going to the seaside. Actually, she did not know his destination.

Ten thousand children left New Cross Gate Southern Station.

Mr E Kingston of Vansittart Road, New Cross, who saw two of his children leave on the train said, 'It is the only sensible thing to do. I am not worrying.'

Hospital evacuation too, went off smoothly. Along the blue-windowed corridors of Saint Thomas's Hospital, past the carriage which Florence Nightingale used in the Crimea, teams of medical students wheeled patients (who still require medical treatment but are not seriously ill) in their beds to two centres, where they were transferred to stretchers.

Two fathers arrived and carried their newly born babies from the wards to the ambulance. Bernard Cooke (of Cornwall Street, Victoria), proud father of Patrick Joseph, who weighed 9lb, 14oz at his birth a week ago, said:

'I am sorry to lose my wife and boy. It's my first baby, you know, but I think it's wiser that they should go away.'

The bed patients - 70 in number - were evacuated from Charing Cross Hospital in an hour. 'Goodbye, nurse. I'll see you soon,' called one of the younger women. 'Of course you will. You will be back next week,' was the nurse's rejoinder. Many babies were among the first batch of patients removed from Guy's hospital.

Daily Mirror: part three

Saturday, 2 September 1939

Evacuation plans going smoothly

Great progress has been made with the first part of the Government's evacuation arrangements in England, says a statement issued by the Minister of Health. The statement goes on: 'The railways, road transport organisations, local authorities and teachers and the voluntary workers in the reception areas are all playing their part splendidly.'

'Evacuation will continue. The time that it will take to complete will vary in different areas.'
'Evacuation of school children will continue in areas where it is not already completed.'

'This will be followed by evacuation of young children accompanied by their mothers or by some other responsible person, expectant mothers, blind and any cripples who have received instructions that they will be moved.'

'By this time all these persons in these special classes in the different areas ought to have been informed by their local authorities where to assemble and the day and time at which to be there.'

'If any of you in these classes are in doubt you should at once make inquiries at your local council office.'

'Arrangements for the first day were limited to those areas for which transport plans have been previously worked out. It has already been possible to extend the arrangements to a few other areas.'

'Evacuation form Grimsby and Cleethorpes will continue on Saturday and Sunday. Evacuation form Derby will take place on Saturday and Sunday; from Coventry on Sunday and Monday.'

'All persons included in the Government evacuation scheme who are in receipt of State pensions or allowances should take their pension and allowance books with them, even if the book has just expired.'

'They will be able to draw their pensions and allowances from the nearest Post Office if they present the book.'

'Pensioners who at present get their books from a pension officer and not a Post Office, should get from the Post Office in the new area the address of the local Pensions Officer.'

As a further precautionary measure the Minister of Health has sent instructions to hospitals in the casualty organisation to send home all patients who are fit to be sent home. Similar arrangements have been made in Scotland.

Orders for the transfer of stretcher cases from inner to outer hospitals were issued yesterday.

About the author

David Prest was the producer of 'Evacuation: The True Story', BBC Radio 4's major five-part series presented by Charles Wheeler.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/britain_wwtwo/evacuees_01.shtml