



YOUR BOOK CLUB RESOURCE

READING GROUP GUIDE

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Firstly, I would like to thank you so very much for choosing *The Orphan Sisters* to read.

It was many years ago that I read an article in a magazine about a mother who took her young daughter to an orphanage and left her in the playroom. When the child turned around the mother had disappeared, never to be seen again. Having three daughters of my own, I was astounded. What, I wondered, would possess a mother to do such a thing and what circumstance would prevent her from returning? The image of that little girl left alone in the orphanage haunted and bewildered me. So the seed of *The Orphan Sisters* was planted in my mind.

At that time, I was writing short stories and poems and getting lots of rejection slips. In those days there was no email, so the heavy plop of post through my mailbox meant that my latest submission had been returned and my heart sank but still I carried on. I was working then but going to writing workshops and conferences whenever I could to learn the craft of writing. I knew that one day I wanted to write a novel, but confidence had held me back as I'd left school at fifteen without any qualifications. I was fortunate to get a job in an office and to my joy, when I was eighteen, I passed the entrance exam to start nurse training. I married young and three children followed.

Family and work kept me both happy and fulfilled but my nature, in those days, was to have bouts of occasional gloom, and this is when I would withdraw and have a writing spell. I decided

to craft a story about two sisters left in an institution I named Blakely Orphanage. The setting I used was my hometown of South Shields, a seaside town in the north east of England. The timing would be during World War II, when there were lots of outside conflict. I chose to give the sisters very different personalities—as most siblings do. Etty was the feisty one and Dorothy, the elder sister, had a gentle and forgiving nature. Trevor, a man of the time, was unable to express his feelings and expected his wife to look after home and children. His saving grace was that he loved Etty and was willing to change. Billy Buckley, I decided, was to be selfish. With his good looks and rascally charm, he was the kind of man women would fall for at their peril. The war scenes were meticulously researched and the two major bombings in the story actually took place in South Shields.

Around ten years ago I wrote the first draft of *The Orphan Sisters* and entered the manuscript in the Romantic Novel Association New Writing Scheme. I was thrilled when I got a brilliant critique with lots of advice for a further draft. But my husband's health deteriorated at this time and the book was shelved. I continued to write short stories and poems and had moderate success.

Fast-forward to when I retired and my children had left home. My husband was by then in better health and we had grandchildren living nearby that kept us busy. Then one day I decided I had put the novel off long enough. At over seventy, it was now or never time!

The Orphan Sisters was published digitally in 2019 and gained momentum. To my absolute surprise and delight the book became a bestseller!

It is wonderful to get emails from readers expressing their enjoyment of the book and I thank my lucky stars that I never gave up.

I am a prime example to all those who have ambition to “never give up on your dream.”

Very best wishes, Shirley.

QUESTIONS FOR READERS

1. Did you enjoy the characters “telling” their part of the story? Did the characters help you see events from their point of view?
2. Which character did you like/dislike and why?
3. Did you think Etty’s reaction to Nellie’s interference was justified? How could Etty have handled the situation of the naming of her baby daughter differently?
4. Which sister did you think was inwardly stronger? And why?
5. Did you think Etty was too feisty for her own good?
6. Were you able to forgive Etty for her indiscretion?
7. Were you rooting for Etty and Billy or Etty and Trevor?
8. Did Etty do the right thing in lying to Dorothy about the truth of their mother?
9. Did the twist of the novel surprise you?

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