



OUR LAST GOODBYE

Reading Group Guide

THE INSPIRATION FOR *OUR LAST GOODBYE*

(I suggest you read the book first as there are spoilers.)

First of all, I'd like to say a big thank-you for purchasing *Our Last Goodbye*. To explain where the inspiration to write the book came from, I must return to my debut novel, *The Orphan Sisters*, which took many years of polishing and drafts to become the published book it is today.

The journey to write *The Orphan Sisters* began when I read an article about a young child abandoned in an orphanage by her mother who never returned. I couldn't imagine why a mother would do such a thing and decided to explore the reason why. I became captivated by Etty, the protagonist, and followed her journey in the orphanage and later when she left and found work in a factory that made precision instruments for World War II aeroplanes.

I say I followed Etty's journey because I don't plan books, which would be the sensible thing to do. I have a vague notion from the outset where I'm heading and generally have a good idea of how the book will end, but the excitement for me is to see where the characters take me in their story. It would be easier research-wise if I did have a plan, but the heroine often decides on a different course and all the research I previously might have done is wasted. Hence, I research as I go along with the story.

It is at the factory where Etty meets May Robinson, who works in the canteen. From the outset I loved May's character. She was meant to play a cameo role in the book, a few paragraphs at most, but I discovered that although May appeared a timid character, she was strong underneath. As I wrote the narrative for the first book, I felt she deserved a more central role, and because May is so appealing, I gave in and allowed her to have her own way.

May became a central part of *The Orphan Sisters*, and after I'd written the closing sentence, I found I'd developed a soft spot for her, and it was difficult to let go.

When, finally, *The Orphan Sisters* got published, I was thrilled and sat on my laurels, as it were, enjoying the magic of the moment. I was brought sharply back to reality when my lovely editor enquired if I had any thoughts for a second book. I didn't. My insightful editor then suggested that I take a character from *The Orphan Sisters* and write about them. Without hesitation, I knew who that person would be: May Robinson.

I decided that because of May's empathetic and caring nature I'd make her a nurse. Another reason was that, in my youth, I did nurse training and so I was familiar with the profession from all those years ago.

I wanted to explore how May's character would change from the insecure, naïve individual she was into the confident young woman who knew her own mind.

Richard's character was born out of a conversation I had with a dear friend who was (he sadly died many years ago) a devout Christian. Mark (not his real name) was always interested in my writing and asked what period of time I was tackling. I told him WWII and enquired if he went to war. He explained that because of his strong belief he could never kill his fellow man, he

became a conscientious objector (a conchie). He told me he did go to war, but on the front line as a stretcher bearer. I had never had a reason to consider conscientious objectors, but one thing I did know was that Mark was no coward. That belief was reinforced when, in my research, I discovered stretcher bearers were sent out at a huge risk to their own lives.

I decided to explore the life of a conscientious objector during war time and peoples' attitudes towards him. Richard too became a favourite character of mine.

At the end of *Our Last Goodbye* I did consider having a telegram sent to say Richard was missing and then have him reappear in the final chapter to relate what happened. Then the excitement of going with him to the D-Day landings took hold of my imagination. My worry about the research I'd need for such an undertaking receded and I took myself off to the local library. I'm so glad I did because going to war gave Richard and the story more depth.

One part of the research meant getting in touch with the Royal Army Medical Corps, where a kind gentleman's explanations of medical procedures proved invaluable. I could never have written the scenes in France without his sound advice. Thank you, Mr. M. People in general are so generous with their time and sharing their expertise to answer research questions.

I endeavour to keep research as accurate as possible but sometimes I had to fabricate an event for the sake of the story, like the scene in the hospital grounds when an air raid took place as May runs past the outpatients' department.

The setting of *Our Last Goodbye* is in my hometown of South Shields in the North East of England—a lovely seaside town that unfortunately was bombed and experienced a great loss of life. The town, at that time, had a thriving shipbuilding industry situated on the River Tyne and was a target for raiders.

I no longer live in South Shields but have a familiarity with the town like one does when you grow up in a place. The Geordie people with their friendliness (stand in a bus queue and someone is bound to start up a conversation) and humour is something I tried to incorporate in the book.

I was truly sad when I finished the book and had to say goodbye to May and Richard, but I hope you'll enjoy spending time with them as much as I enjoyed writing their story.

Warmest best wishes,

Shirley

QUESTIONS FOR READERS

1. Should Etty have stayed silent about her affair with Billy? What do you think she hoped to achieve by confessing? Did she have May's welfare at heart or her own?
2. Do you think May achieved her ambition to better herself?
3. What did you think of the discipline in those days, when the matron ruled the hospital? Did you think the hospital rules were trivial? For example, having the nightdress be on show in the bedroom?
4. Should May finally, after all these years, have told Derek she was his mother? What do you think Derek would gain by being told?
5. What are your thoughts about conscientious objectors and how people treated them at the time? Were you surprised some were put in prison?
6. Do you think May was foolish to begin a relationship with Richard given all that was at stake?