

# 'We will never know the true extent of Island's resistance'

By Jodie Yettram

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A NOVELIST has shared the inspiration behind her latest book which sheds light on the often-overlooked stories of female resistance during the German Occupation of Jersey.

Kate Thompson sat down with the JEP to talk about her new novel and her passion for uncovering the stories of female Islanders who are often left out of history books.

Her newest book, *The Wartime Book Club*, explores the bravery and compassion of ordinary Islanders who defied fascism through everyday acts of resistance.

"Although there were collaborators and informers, there were also incredible feats of selflessness, compassion and bravery," she said.

Kate explained that she aimed to override simplistic narratives that portray the experience of Islanders as a binary between resistance and collaboration, instead aiming to capture the complexities and nuances of individual experiences during the tumultuous period of German occupation.

"My overriding sense is that we will never know the true extent of resistance," she said.

"It might have been largely unorganised and organic, but there was a tribe of spirited men and women operating in a clandestine way to do their bit to strike back against a totalitarian regime."

Set in 1943, *The Wartime Book Club* follows librarian Grace and postwoman Bea as they navigate the challenges of living under German rule, highlighting the bravery of those who challenged fascism in the Island.



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ery of those who challenged fascism in the Island.

One such example is the heroic effort of Broad Street postmen, who intercepted incriminating letters from Islanders intending to denounce their neighbours to the German authorities.

These postmen opened and burnt incriminating letters and warned recipients of impending searches, allowing them to remove any forbidden items such as radios.

"To me this is a story of quiet resistance," Kate said.

Kate's research also uncovered the significant role of libraries in bolstering the morale of Islanders during the Occupation.

Despite facing censorship and restrictions, librarians worked tirelessly to provide intellectual freedom and escapism to their community.

She said: "It offered a solace and sanctuary and joy in those long beleaguered blacked out years and it became something of a spiritual food store."

"It is an Island story that is not usually told."

Kate's interest in the role of libraries in resistance efforts stems from her previous work, *The Little Wartime Library*, which was based on a true story of a librarian creating an underground shelter in London during the war.

Driven by her passion for storytelling, social history and historical fiction, Kate fell in love with Jersey during a visit to the Island's literary festival in 2019.

While she was "struck" by the remnants of Jersey's wartime history in its network of coastal defences, Kate said: "For me, history isn't about guns, fortifications and bunkers, it's about oral history, people."

"The most powerful reminders of the Occupation come from the people themselves."

"I love interviewing our wartime generation. When you start a conversation without knowing where it will lead, the past is no longer dusty and sealed off behind a door, but bright, fantastic and vividly real."

"If I have learnt one thing from writing historical fiction and non-fiction, it's that the past never fades, but only festers."

She said that one of her favourite anecdotes revolved around Doris Illien, who harboured an escaped prisoner of war in her home throughout the Occupation, keeping his presence hidden

even from her own family for many years.

Doris's brave acts unfolded when the man – "a handsome Frenchman" – unexpectedly appeared at her house in 1995, while her family was visiting.

The man, named Roger, said that he wanted to invite Doris to be a guest of honour at his daughter's wedding later that year.

He revealed that as a teenager, he was forced into labour by German soldiers in St Malo and later escaped to Jersey.

Despite the danger of arrest and deportation, Doris kept him safe and never spoke about her courageous deed because she said that "she didn't want to boast".

*The Wartime Library* was released earlier this year in hardback and is set to launch in paperback in August.

Kate will be attending the Festival of Words on 24 September for a book launch event at the Jersey Library.



■ Author Kate Thompson

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