

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KATE THOMPSON

BOOK
GROUP
KIT

THE LITTLE
WARTIME
LIBRARY

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

1. **THE LITTLE WARTIME LIBRARY** centres around the 'underground village' at Bethnal Green tube station in WW2.
How do you think you would have coped living underground, and what role would you have played in the community?
2. Why do you think the author chose to start each chapter of the novel with a quote from a real librarian? What is the effect of this?
3. Discuss the different representations of family and the idea of 'found family' in novel.
4. Clara and Ruby are best friends despite being opposites in every way. Discuss their different attitudes to survival and the ways in which they are both similar.
5. What are the different roles for women that are presented in the novel? In what way has the war directly impacted on the characters' lives?
6. Discuss the different romantic relationships seen in the novel. How do the different characters think about love in the context of the uncertainty of war? Whose situation do you most relate to?
7. *'Books were their escape into another, less punishing, world.'*
Discuss the importance of books as escapism – has society's relationship with books changed over the years?
8. Why do you think the author chose to set the prologue and the epilogue in 2020? What parallels can you identify between the themes in the novel and the present day?

THE LITTLE WARTIME LIBRARY BOOK TRAIL

Want to follow in the footsteps of Clara, Ruby, Sparrow and Mrs Chumbley? Why not go on a trip to Bethnal Green, the beating heart of the East End and uncover some incredible history, then try some of my favourite places to eat and drink.

□ FIRST STOP, THE UNDERGROUND.

If you're travelling by Tube get off at Bethnal Green underground on the Central Line. Visit the westbound platform and try to imagine the place filled with shelterers. The library was located at the very end of the westbound platform. It's hard to imagine this busy underground as a teeming shelter, filled with books and people. Where I'm standing, under the Tube sign, is where the wartime library was located.



□ STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN MEMORIAL

Ruby was haunted by the death of her big sister on a fatal crush down the steps to the Tube. This little known tragedy was one of WW2's worse civilian disasters. Directly opposite the Tube entrance stands the memorial, which a hardy little group of survivors and their relatives raised the money to erect, in order to remember the dead.



The memorial, called 'Stairway to Heaven' is designed to look like an inverted stairway. The names of the dead are etched into the wood. Search for Kate Thompson, my namesake. You can read more about her here: <https://blog.whsmith.co.uk/kate-thompson-the-chilling-moment-i-discovered-i-was-a-victim-of-a-wartime-tragedy/>

You can borrow a free audio-scape from the adjacent library, which will guide you round the memorial and tell you the story.

Find out more at: <https://stairwaytoheavenmemorial.org>

□ BETHNAL GREEN LIBRARY

A visit to this 100-year-old Carnegie Library is a must. It's located at Cambridge Heath Road, London, E2 0HL in the grounds of Bethnal Green Gardens, or Barmy Park as locals know it. It's a very short walk from the memorial.

This library is achingly beautiful. The philanthropy of Scottish businessman Andrew Carnegie provided £20,000, and the remaining £16,000 was raised by the local authority.

'The council was handing down to future generations a legacy which would enable them to obtain knowledge and sweep away misery and poverty,' said the Mayor at the opening of the library. This was a thinly veiled reference to the fact that only two years previously, an asylum stood on that site.



Bethnal 'madhouse' operated for 120 years in Bethnal Green, East London, and was notorious for its cruel treatment. Shockingly, the asylum only closed in 1920.

It was described by the *Daily Herald* on its opening as 'one of the finest libraries in the metropolis'. From the outset, Bethnal Green Library established itself as the cultural centre of the borough and by June 1924, the number of books issued had passed the million mark. The Carnegie United Kingdom Trustees expressed themselves as 'delighted'.

During the war, the library went underground and continued transforming lives. One hundred years on, it still is. Have a look inside at the beautiful parquet floors, wood panelling, stained glass and the gorgeous glass domed roof.

Feel free to share this video of me talking about the library and the Tube disaster.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqW_EMBptBo&feature=youtu.be

□ THE MUSEUM OF CHILDHOOD

The V&A Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green is another of my favourite spots in Bethnal Green. It's where I interviewed an elderly lady called Pat Spicer, who told me all about the Underground Library. It's located a short walk from the library at Cambridge Heath Rd, Bethnal Green, London E2 9PA. During the war it was a British Restaurant, serving affordable meals to Londoners. Today it's being redesigned and will open in the summer of 2023, renamed Young V&A. It promises to be packed with interactive galleries with a focus on fun, design and play. I hope they keep the gorgeous old dolls houses they used to display.

□ BOOKSHOPS IN EAST LONDON

Two of my favourite bookshops in East London are Brick Lane Bookshop (166 Brick Lane) and Newham Bookshop (743-745 Barking Road London E13 9ER)



□ EAST END MARKETS

Brick Lane's historic market is worth experiencing for the people watching alone. Hunt for a bargain within the bric-a-brac at this bustling East End market, bursting full of antiques, stunning fabrics and kitsch collectables. This historic street is a famous focal point for the Bangladeshi community (and rammed full of amazing curry houses) And in the past it's been a home to French Huguenot and Jewish immigrants.



Open on Sundays 10am to 3pm. If you happen to spot a Pearly Queen, odds on it will be my friend Doreen Golding who is there every Sunday in her buttons, collecting for charity. Stop for a chat and drop a few coins in her bucket. It will make her day.

Nearby is Petticoat Lane Market at Middlesex Street, London. E1 7JF. This iconic market has a rich history in textiles. This began in the 1750's when the Huguenots fled from persecution in France

and settled in the East End. Eastern European Jews (likewise fleeing oppression) took the tradition on in the late 18th and early 20th centuries.



A little confusingly, Petticoat Lane itself does not exist anymore. The Victorians felt the reference to undergarments was too racy and changed the name to Middlesex Street. That's where the main part of the market can be found along with stalls on surrounding streets. Behind the fashion, textile and leather goods stalls you can also discover Asian and African fabric shops.

If you're there on a Sunday, make sure to pay a visit to Columbia Road flower market. Columbia Road overflows with bucketfuls of beautiful flowers every Sunday. From 8am-3pm, market traders line the narrow street selling flowers, houseplants, herbs, bulbs and shrubs.

□ EAST END NOSH

It's hungry work pacing the streets of the East End. Stop and refuel at some of my favourite places to eat.

E Pellicci's café, 332 Bethnal Green Road is a vintage Art Deco workers' café offering the full English breakfast and Italian classics since 1900. It's a real family affair. Nev and Anna who run the café will always give you a warm welcome. Watching these two banter back and forth with their regulars is like watching an opera in full flow. The food is incredible (the hand cut chips to die for) and if you're lucky you'll spot a famous face.



If pie 'n mash is more your thing head to legendary G. Kelly 526 Roman Rd, Old Ford, London E3 5ES. Another iconic food spot, this humble café has been serving east end favourite, pie, mash and parsley liquor since the 1920s. Before the arrival of Eel and Pie shops, pies were sold by itinerant pie-men and eels by street sellers of pea soup and hot eels. The first pie shops were seen in London in the middle of the nineteenth century. It still remains proper working class food today. Lovely served with big dollop of mash, drowning in parsley liquor and eaten the east end way, with a fork and spoon.



Or how about a salt-beef beigel from Brick Lane Beigel Bake? My mouth is watering as I write this thinking of their tasty salt beef, carved as you wait from a slab kept warm in the front window, and piled into a freshly baked beigel, served with a big fiery dollop of mustard and sliced gerkins. Eaten warm straight from the brown paper bag it truly is the food of the gods. And don't forget to take home a slice of apple strudel for afters! 159 Brick Lane.



If you prefer something sweet then you must head to family run Jewish bakers, Rinkoff's Bakery at 79 Vallance Road, Bethnal Green. Synonymous with the East End, Rinkoff has been selling its beignets and breads to East Enders for over 100 years. Try their mouth-watering crodoughs (a croissant-doughnut combo) and for something different the kids will love, their rainbow coloured beignets.



□ SECRET ALLEYS...

Find Clara's home along Sugar Loaf Walk, which still stands today in Bethnal Green. When it was built in the 17th century it was considered an ideal area for the gentry to live. By the time of WW2 it was somewhat more run down and bomb-battered.

The origins of the name of the alley date from a house built on the site sometime before 1687, called The Sugar Loaf. It's likely the owner made their fortune importing sugar from the Caribbean. It's a really atmospheric place to walk along.





THE LITTLE WARTIME LIBRARY

BREAD & BUTTER PUDDING



Bread and butter pudding is an east end staple. I love it, especially when it's served warm and washed down with a strong cup of tea.

This recipe has been shared by East Ender Babs Clark, who used to sleep down at Bethnal Green Underground. A lump of this, wrapped in brown paper, kept her going during many a night underground sheltering from the bombs.

BABS RECIPE:

Babs bread pudding

An old aunt showed me how to make this. She used to prepare in a big old tin basin in the scullery. No need to weigh anything. Just use up all the old stale bread you've got to hand. Soak the bread in water then squeeze out the excess and then use it to line the basin. Then chuck in a chunk of about half a pound of margarine, sultanas, mixed spice, as much sugar as you can spare, and two eggs. Cook it on a really low heat for a few hours. My aunt's used to last for days and she sent all us kids to school with a lump of it wrapped in brown paper.

Top tip.

Librarian Donna Byrne from Havering Libraries adds a glug of whiskey to give it a kick.

THE LITTLE WARTIME LIBRARY

MAKE YOUR OWN VINTAGE PINNY...

There's a saying about women from the East End, that many 'fell out the cradle with a needle and thread.' The East End has always been the heartland of the rag trade. Like so many women before her, my friend Sarah from Bow, East London, is a talented seamstress. She runs Olive Road, a fabric shop named after the street her grandparents lived on for 60 years. Most self-respecting East End women would never been seen without their pinny on.

Sarah has kindly given readers a free pattern for a Millie Vintage pinny she usually sells on Etsy, so you can try and have a go yourself. Just click the link for instructions.

Good luck.

<https://bit.ly/LWLVintagePinnyInstructions>





THE LITTLE WARTIME LIBRARY

READING LIST



For many in wartime, reading was the ultimate escape. Books were time machines, whisking women away from the crash and the horror of the war.

If you really want to immerse yourself in the time period, these are the most borrowed library books of 1942, many of which I featured in *The Little Wartime Library*.

Gone with the Wind by Margaret Mitchell
For Whom the Bell Tolls by Ernest Hemingway
How Green Was My Valley by Richard Llewellyn
Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen
Scum of the Earth by Arthur Koestler
Herries Chronicles by Hugh Walpole
Three Musketeers by Alexandre Dumas
Finnegans Wake by James Joyce
The Stars Looked Down by A.J. Cronin
Rebecca by Daphne Du Maurier
This Above All by Eric Knight
The Power and the Glory by Graham Greene
Love on the Dole by Walter Greenwood
Northbridge Rectory by Angela Thirkell
Evil Under the Sun by Agatha Christie

It's worth noting how many of the books in this list provide a social commentary on society and the war and how many were turned into popular Hollywood films.

With the war seemingly unrelenting, women wanted escapism with a strong conquering heroine. This would explain the success of the first ever bodice ripper. It wasn't published in the United Kingdom until shortly after the war, but when *Forever Amber* by Kathleen Winsor came out in America in 1944, it was a publishing sensation.

Set in the 17th century during the bubonic plague and the Great Fire of London, its heroine Amber ruthlessly uses her sexuality to scheme and manipulate her way through Restoration London. Fourteen US states banned the book as pornography, with one attorney general citing seventy references to sexual intercourse, thirty-nine illegitimate pregnancies, seven abortions, and ten descriptions of women undressing in front of men. Needless to say it flew off the bookshelves selling over one hundred thousand copies in its first week of release and going on to sell over three million copies. It's pretty mild by today's standards, but as subversive, irrepressible protagonists go, Amber is right up there. I loved it.

WANT A BOOK TO READ WITH THE KIDS?

Try *The Family From One End Street*, by Eve Garnett. It's the story of everyday life in the big, happy Ruggles family who live in the small town of Otwell. Father is a dustman and Mother a washerwoman. Then there's all the children - practical Lily Rose, clever Kate, mischievous twins James and John, followed by Jo, who loves films, little Peg and finally baby William.

A truly classic book awarded the Carnegie Medal as the best children's book of 1937. It's wry, tongue-in-cheek and rammed full of adventures. My 10-year-old son loved it.

I do hope these recommendations, questions, videos, photos and recipes help you to get the best out of The Little Wartime Library. If you try any of the above please do tag me at:

www.katethompsonmedia.co.uk
www.facebook.com/KateThompsonAuthor/
instagram - [kate.thompson1974](https://www.instagram.com/kate.thompson1974)
Twitter - [@katethompson380](https://twitter.com/katethompson380)
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And do get in touch if you'd like me to join one of your book club meetings. I love chatting to readers about *The Little Wartime Library*, or any of my books.

Kate
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