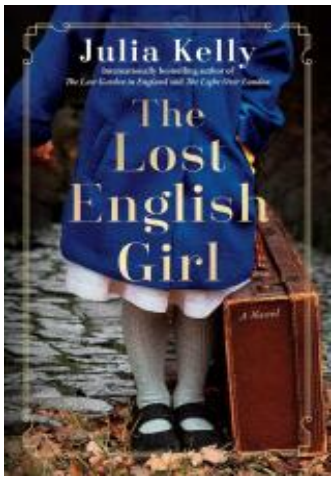
The Lost English Girl

by Julia Kelly



About the Book

The acclaimed author of the ?sweeping and beautifully written novel? (*Woman?s World*) THE LIGHT OVER LONDON weaves an epic saga of love, motherhood and betrayal set against World War II.

Liverpool, 1935: Raised in a strict Catholic family, Viv Byrne knows what?s expected of her: marry a Catholic man from her working-class neighborhood and have his children. However, when she finds herself pregnant after a fling with Joshua Levinson, a Jewish man with dreams of becoming a famous Jazz musician, Viv knows that a swift wedding is the only answer. Her only solace is that marrying Joshua will mean escaping her strict mother?s scrutiny. But when Joshua makes a life-changing choice on their wedding day, Viv is forced once again into the arms of her disapproving family.

Four years later and on the eve of World War II, Viv is faced with the impossible choice to evacuate her young daughter, Maggie, to the countryside estate of the affluent Thompson family. In New York City, Joshua gives up his failing musical career to serve in the Royal Air Force, fight for his country and try to piece together his feelings about the family, wife and daughter he left behind at 19. However, tragedy strikes when Viv learns that the countryside safe haven she sent her daughter to wasn?t immune from the horrors of war. It is only years later, with Joshua?s help, that Viv learns the secrets of their shared past and what it will take to put a family back together again.

Telling the harrowing story of England?s many evacuated children, bestselling author Julia Kelly?s THE LOST ENGLISH GIRL explores how one simple choice can change the course of a life, and what we are willing to forgive to find a way back to the ones we love and thought lost.

Discussion Guide

1. When Viv discovers that she is pregnant --- or has ?gotten herself into trouble? --- after only two dates with Joshua, they both know they must marry as soon as possible so that the child will be considered ?legitimate? --- born to a legally

married couple. Viv?s other options fill her with terror. She?d be sent away to ?one of those hospitals,? she says. ?And the other ways...I just can?t do it? (page 261). Discuss the meaning of the frightening alternatives Viv references and the expression ?getting oneself into trouble.? Why is the child?s legitimacy via marriage so important in the era in which the book is set? Discuss other customs, values and social expectations in the book that limit and trap Viv and other women of her time.

2. How might Viv?s and especially Joshua?s lives have played out if this story was set in a Nazi-occupied region of Europe during World War II?

3. Not only does Joshua immediately ?do the right thing? (page 262) by asking Viv to marry him, he promises to stand by her side as a husband and father. Then, just minutes after they?re married at the Liverpool Register Office, Joshua accepts money from Viv?s parents --- enough to get him to New York City to pursue his musical ambitions, to finally be *free* --- so long as he agrees to the Byrnes? terms that ?you will leave and never come back. You won?t write. You won?t visit. You will leave my daughter alone? (page 12). What do you make of Joshua?s decision to break his promise to Viv and forever estrange himself from her and their child after he had been so quick to offer himself as a husband and father?

4. Can you empathize with Joshua?s decision to ?snatch his freedom? (page 13) and take advantage of what could be his only chance to try to become a famous musician? What would you do if you were in Joshua?s shoes and someone offered you enough money to pursue your greatest passion and realize your lifelong dreams?

5. The surprising series of events following the wedding are written from Joshua?s point of view, and the reader is privy to his internal dialogue as he rationalizes taking the Byrnes? money: ?He knew that he was destined for so much more than the two-bedroom flat above his father?s shop? (page 10). Joshua interprets Viv?s and his family?s dismay at and objections to his decision as testimony that they don?t, and never did, believe in him or his talent. He is convinced that they are holding him back and think he will fail. ?This is my life too!? he exclaims. ?I won?t give it up.? (page 13) What does Joshua?s reaction say about him and his sense of self? If this scene was written from Viv?s point of view, what might she be thinking? What about Joshua?s father? Or Rebecca?

6. At the end of the book, Joshua?s actions take on an almost complete reversal when he chooses to sacrifice his permanent gig with a band and the chance to record an album --- the very things he?s always dreamed of --- to return to Liverpool and be a father to Maggie. Discuss the elements of Joshua?s character arc.

7. According to the Author?s Note, on the eve of World War II, Operation Pied Piper officially relocated approximately 1.5 million children and vulnerable people from England?s urban centers to the countryside to keep them safe from aerial attack. If you found yourself presented with the conundrum faced by many parents of children under the age of five (the minimum age for the government evacuation program), like Viv, what would you do? Discuss the considerations and emotions of such a decision.

8. Life during wartime is filled with sacrifices small and large, from food rationing to the separation of children from their parents. Discuss the different sacrifices that the characters in the book make, not only due to the war but due to circumstances including time, place, class, religion and duty. What sacrifices seem ?fair? vs. ?unfair? in the context of life in the 1930s and 1940s? Can some of these ?sacrifices? be positive? Discuss Viv?s job as a postie during the war.

9. What were your initial expectations about what would happen to Maggie and how she might be treated when she is

first sent to live with the Thompsons? What elements of her experience as an evacuee surprised you?

10. Discuss Viv and Maggie?s reunion. Viv is understandably furious with the Thompsons for stealing her daughter, while Maggie is understandably frightened and uncertain about leaving her comfortable life with the people she has known as Mother and Father for five years. Do you think it?s fair to empathize with the Thompsons as well as Viv?

11. Weak men are abundant in this story. Some are identified explicitly, as in the cases of Mr. Byrne and Mr. Thompson --- ?Mr. Byrne had been the epitome of a weak man? (page 334); ?Mr. Thompson was a weak man? (page 358) --- and others by their actions, such as Joshua at the beginning of the book. Discuss other male characters that prove themselves ?weak.? How do you feel about Mrs. Byrne and Mrs. Thompson when you compare them to their weak-natured husbands?

12. Discuss Father Monaghan?s character and actions. Do you believe that he thought he was doing the right thing by giving Maggie a ?respectable Catholic home? (page 354)?

13. What do you make of Moss? response to Viv when she asks him if he sought Joshua?s forgiveness after Joshua saved his life despite Moss? harsh, prejudicial treatment of him: ?The way I see it, it isn?t his responsibility to forgive me. It?s my responsibility to try to atone and one day, if I?m very lucky, he may find it in his heart to accept that? (page 331)? To what degree might this perspective have influenced Viv?s staunch resistance to forgiving Joshua for abandoning her?

14. Discuss the subject of forgiveness throughout the book. When do you think it?s fair to withhold forgiveness from someone who seeks it? Can people change?

Author Bio

Julia Kelly is the internationally bestselling author of emotional historical fiction about extraordinary women and intriguing historical whodunnit mystery novels. Her books have been translated into 13 languages. In addition to writing, she?s been an Emmy-nominated producer, journalist, marketing professional and (for one summer) a tea waitress. Julia called Los Angeles, Iowa and New York City home before settling in London with her husband.

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