



Britannia Mews

Margery Sharp

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Date :

ISBN : 9789997413581

Author : Margery Sharp

Format :

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, European Literature, British Literature, Sociology, Literature, 19th Century

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From Reader Review Britannia Mews for online ebook

Jana says

At first I thought this was going to be a juvenile story, but thankfully it soon morphed into a sweeping tale of Adelaide, as fiercely independent in her girlhood as she is in old age. Set in London. It encompasses 2 world wars. I loved how the Mews was always a focus. Almost a character of the book. It goes through as much change and growth as our Adelaide.

New to me author. Marjorie Sharp wrote 26 novels (!) and 3 of them were made into films, including this one (called the Forbidden Road; also Cluny Brown, the Nutmeg Tree.

I thought she was new to me. Oops! She also wrote the Rescuers.

Jennifer says

I used to love Margery Sharp children's books (The Rescuers!) but this was the first adult novel I've read of hers...and it was wonderful. I especially enjoyed the setting of the mews having lived in a London mews very close to the one mentioned in the book. It was interesting to read how the mews was such a slum and then came into fashion. But really, the star of the novel is our heroine Adelaide who develops from a slightly annoying spoiled middle class girl into a strong no-nonsense woman who lives life on her own terms.

Jane says

Every time I pick up one of Margery Sharp's books I find both things that are wonderfully familiar and things that make each book feel quite distinctive.

This particular book, that I plucked from the middle of her backlist, sets out the story of one remarkable woman and one London Street. It makes a wonderful entertainment, and, along the way, it says much about how English society changed between the reign of Queen Victoria and the Second World War.

"There had always been this quality about Britannia Mews, that to step into it from Albion Alley was like stepping into a self-contained and separate small world. No one who passed under the archway ever had any doubt as to what sort of place he was entering — in 1865, model stables; in 1880, a slum; in 1900, a respectable working class court. Thus, when an address in a mews came to imply a high degree of fashion, Britannia Mews was unmistakably smart."

Adelaide was born late in the 19th century, the only daughter of a very well to do family, she was brought up in a fashionable row of London townhouses called Albion Place, and she grew into an inquisitive and independent thinking young woman.

Her family's carriage and horses were housed nearby in Britannia Mews. There was a row of stable for the horses on one side of an alley, there was a row of coach-houses on the other, and over the coach-houses there was living accommodation for the coachmen and their families. The residents were sensible working class people, who worked hard and took a pride in their homes, but they were worlds apart from the grand residents of Albion Place.

Adelaide loved her life, her home, and her extended family; but she came to realise that she didn't want the conventional life that her mother was mapping out for her. Maybe that was why, when she found herself alone with her drawing master and he flirted with her quite outrageously, she saw a grand romance and began to plan to elope.

They were married before she learned that Henry Lambert wasn't the man she thought he was; that he was better at talking about art than creating it; that he flirted with all of his students; that he was dissolute, penniless and saw nothing wrong with living in squalid rented rooms at Britannia Mews.

The Mews had deteriorated into a slum as fewer of the residents of Albion Place thought it necessary to keep their own coach and horses.

“Adelaide was very little of a fool: she had gone into the Mews as though with her eyes open, prepared for the worst; she would have laughed as much as Henry at the idea of calling or being called on; but she had expected to be able to ignore her surroundings. They were to live in a little world of their own, in a bubble of love and hope, whose elastic, iridescent walls no squalor could penetrate. Within a week she discovered that while she could see and hear, such isolation was impossible.”

Many young women in that position would have allowed their family to rescue them from their dreadful situation, would have wept because they had made such a terrible mistake, but not Adelaide. She picked herself up; she tidied and polished and cleaned; and she did her level best to set her husband on the right track.

That was one battle she couldn't win, but fighting it changed her life, and she began to change her life. She lost her husband but she found a new love and she found herself at the centre of a rich community of characters at Britannia Mews.

That came about in an extraordinary way. Henry Lambert left behind a valuable legacy: a basket full of exquisite, hand-crafted marionettes that had been his greatest work, that had been his pride and joy. Adelaide hated them, but her new love saw wonderful possibilities.

‘To step under the archway, in 1922, was like stepping into a toy village—a very expensive toy from Hamley’s or Harrods: with a touch of the Russian Ballet about it, as though at any moment a door might fly open upon Petroushka or the Doll, for the colours of the doors, like the colours of the window-curtains, were unusually bright and varied; green, yellow, orange. Outside them stood tubs of begonias, or little clipped bushes. The five dwarf houses facing west were two-storey, with large downstairs rooms converted from old coach-houses; opposite four stables had been thrown into one to make the Puppet Theatre. The Theatre thus dominated the scene, but with a certain sobriety; its paintwork was a dark olive, the sign above the entrance a straightforward piece of lettering...People often said that the theatre made the Mews.’

Adelaide loved it but she missed her old life. She would have loved to live in her parents' new country house, but she knew that to go home she would have to give up her independence and admit that she had taken the wrong path in life, and she could not bring herself to do that. But she couldn't quite let go of her family, they couldn't quite let go of her, and certain members of her family were drawn to the wonderful puppet theatre at Britannia Mews.

The story follows Adelaide, her family, her neighbours and her puppet theatre through the Second World War, until she is a very old lady and a younger generation is making new plans for the people and the puppets of Britannia Mews.

That story was compelling, it loses focus a little when the story moves to the next generation, but it picks up again in the war years and for a beautifully pitched final act.

This is a quieter, more serious book than many of Margery Sharp's, but there are flashes of her wonderful wit, and many moments that have lovely, emotional insight. She acknowledges some people have good reason to not like Adelaide, but I am not one of them. I loved her and I loved her story.

It works because the puppet theatre was a wonderful idea and its realisation was pitch perfect.

It works because it is populated by a wonderful array of characters, who take the story in some interesting and unexpected directions; and it is so cleverly crafted that it reads like a fascinating true story – a tale of people that lived and breathed, a chapter of London's history – that had been plucked from obscurity to delight a new generation of readers.

I am so glad that I chose this book to read to mark Margery Sharp's birthday.

Future Cat Lady says

I liked it. I didn't love it, but it was an ebook deal so I read it while i was commuting. It took me a while but it was entertaining enough.

Patsy says

Reminded me of Showboat. Both would make good costume drama series.

Jim says

This is a beautiful novel. It is now my favorite Margery Sharp work.
I must say the ending is wonderfully bitter sweet. I highly recommend it.

Susan says

Margery Sharp was a popular writer back in the 1950's; she then fell out of favor, except for her children's books, but is now experiencing a revival. I read her back when I was a teenager, and have been unable to get her books easily again until recently. This one certainly held up for a re-read after a long, long gap. Britannia Mews was built as housing for respectable servants employed in adjoining Albion Place. Adelaide Culver had no business there, although her parents lived on Albion Place. By the time Adelaide eloped with her art teacher and moved there, it had become a slum. But as her exasperated, unloving family said, Adelaide was stubborn, so unlike her prettier, biddable cousin Alice! But there Adelaide moved, and there she stayed, as over the years between Queen Victoria and the 1920's Britannia Mews was renovated and became trendy. Then one day Alice's unhappy daughter Dodo came, desperately, to see Adelaide. But even Dodo, who loved her, was never to learn the truth about Adelaide's marriage.

Ali says

Britannia Mews is the story of Adelaide Lambert – born Adelaide Culver – from childhood to very old age. Born into a prosperous Victorian family, as a child Adelaide would sneak round to the forbidden Britannia Mews tucked between the streets of conventional middle class homes. Here the coachmen from Albion Place take care of the vehicles and live with their families above the coach houses, a working men's pub sits on one corner. One end of the mews at this time is respectably working class while the other end is already beginning to slide into slumishness – it is certainly not considered a suitable place for Adelaide to spend her time.

The Culver family move house – and Adelaide and her cousins have many happy days playing in the park. As Adelaide grows up she is not often very happy at home, paying calls with her mother – who, when the time comes, will seek out the right kind of man for her to marry – is not the life she wants.

Full review: <https://heavenali.wordpress.com/2016/...>

Helen says

Britannia Mews (1946) is my fourth Margery Sharp novel and probably my favourite so far. Beginning in the 1870s and taking us through to the 1940s, it follows the story of Adelaide Culver from childhood to old age. We first meet Adelaide as a curious ten-year-old exploring Britannia Mews, a London street inhabited by servants and coachmen – a street which is considered less than respectable and off limits to middle-class children like Adelaide. Returning to the Culver's comfortable townhouse in nearby Albion Place, Adelaide has no idea that in just a few years' time Britannia Mews will be her home.

It's all cousin Alice's fault; if she hadn't been suffering from a cold and missed their drawing lesson, Adelaide would never have been left alone with their drawing master, Henry Lambert, and then he might never have told her that he loved her. But Alice does have a cold and Mr Lambert does declare his love for Adelaide – and Adelaide, despite knowing that her parents will disapprove, does agree to marry him.

Their marriage takes place on the day the rest of the Culver family move away to a lovely new house in the countryside. Adelaide, meanwhile, is moving into Mr Lambert's rooms above a coach house in Britannia Mews. Estranged from her family, living in what is rapidly becoming a slum and finding that her new husband is not quite the person she thought he was, married life proves to be very challenging for Adelaide. When she finally has the opportunity to escape from Britannia Mews, however, she must decide whether she really wants to leave the street that has become her home.

Britannia Mews is very different from the other books I've read by Margery Sharp – *The Nutmeg Tree*, *The Flowering Thorn* and *Cluny Brown*. All three of those are lovely novels but they are much lighter in tone and, although *Britannia Mews* is not entirely without its moments of wit and humour, in general this is a darker and more serious story. I don't want to give the impression that it's a depressing one, though, because it isn't. Yes, Adelaide's life is difficult, at least at first, but it's her own life – she has made her own choices and had to live with them, made her own mistakes and had to find her own solutions. Unlike her cousin Alice, who represents the ideal of what a Victorian woman should be, Adelaide is unconventional, independent and, by the time the twentieth century arrives, an inspiration to the younger generation.

One woman in particular who belongs to the younger generation is Dorothy – Dodo – Baker, daughter of Adelaide's cousin Alice. Like Adelaide before her, Dodo feels stifled by the middle-class circles in which her parents move and she knows she wants something different out of life. *Britannia Mews*, which by the

1920s has become a lively and fashionable address, is, for Dodo as well as for Adelaide, a symbol of freedom and the opportunity to be who you want to be. The second half of the novel is very much Dodo's story rather than Adelaide's; it took me a while to adjust to the change of heroine but once I did I found Dodo just as interesting to read about. I enjoyed watching her get to know the Lamberts and waiting to see whether she would uncover the secret they had kept hidden for so many years.

Of course, the most important character of all is Britannia Mews itself, a street which seems to cast a spell over those who live there, pulling them back every time they might think about leaving. I loved reading about the changing nature of the street over the years and the people who inhabited it at various times in its history. I was also fascinated by the descriptions of the Puppet Theatre which Adelaide opens in one of the old coach-houses and the magnificent hand-made puppets created by Henry Lambert.

A great book, and now I'm looking forward to reading more by Margery Sharp.

Angie says

Thanks to my sister-in-law, Deb, for the loan of this one. It's not likely that I would have found it on my own, but it's a charming...I'm looking for the right description, and the best I'm managing is that it's a charming coming of age story...it actually takes us from childhood to old age with the lead character. Anyway, I say "coming of age" because it's a story about growing up, finding out what real love is, and discovering what matters. It's almost epic in its span of time and generation, but can a 350 page book be epic? I have to knock one star off because, though I think it was important to follow our lead character into old age, her niece takes center stage for the last 1/3, and the book loses something, as the niece is rather lame. Even though the last 3rd of the book is a bit blah, I found in Britannia Mews a perceptive look at human nature, a lovely and subtle romance, a masterful use of setting, and an interesting glimpse into the social strata in London from before the turn of the century to World War II.

Kilian Metcalf says

This delightful story, written in 1946, is as fresh and entertaining today as when it was written. The life story of Adelaide Culver is intertwined with the progress of the Mews from horse stable to fashionable address from Victorian times to post-war Britain. Through it all, fiercely independent Adelaide makes her own way, from young girl to elderly woman without fear or favor of anyone.

Margery Sharp is a treasure.

Katharine Holden says

Ugly novel with cardboard characters and the shallowest of plots. The writing is as dull and heavy as lead.

Katrina says

This wasn't quite what I expected it to be so I was a wee bit disappointed with it.

<https://piningforthewest.co.uk/2018/0...>

Christine Sinclair says

Excellent story about headstrong Adelaide Culver, and the life-long impact of the rash decision she made in her youth. Well-written and engrossing, with many great character studies. Definitely a good read. I'll be on the lookout for "The Forbidden Street," the screen version of the novel.

Mimi says

Held my interest

I really enjoyed this book. I thought the characters were all well done. It was an interesting story set in a different time and place but I felt like I was there.

notgettingenough says

I love the way blogs continue to survive the onslaught of mega-umbrella-sites. In this case, I'm thinking of Margery Sharp Day, initiated several years ago by the blog Beyond Eden Rock, and picked up by lots of readers who maintain their own blogs. Each has their own community of followers and commentators.

This year Jane, for the day she put into the calendar, read *Britannia Mews* and as chance would have it, I picked up a copy (along with several other Sharps) just a couple of days later. I put it at the top of the pile.

It's almost entirely lacking the often acerbic humor of her books, presumably because it was written just after WWII. Instead, there is a story which might almost be a metaphor for the stubbornness without which the UK could not have stood against Hitler, stubbornness without which it is impossible to think of how the world might look now. Adelaide, the chief protagonist, is a young woman with no future she can bear to look towards. She is deprived in the late nineteenth century of the higher education her undeserving brother is permitted. She watches her cousin fall into the sensible marriage that is her only real future and while that is happening, a revolution takes place in her life.

Her painting instructor makes love to her and she instantly is transformed by it. She believes she is in love and nothing - NOTHING - is going to take that away from her. After secret assignations, she announces to her family that she is going to marry this man and elopes with him because it is that or nothing. They go to live in what is at that point, the slum of Britannia Mews. She soon discovers that he is an alcoholic wastrel. Her life is ruined. And yet she displays all the stiff upper lip of the English in WWII. She has made her bed and although it has been made clear to her than she (but not the scoundrel husband) can come 'home' whenever she likes, that is not an option in her mind. When he dies it is still not an option.

After a while she becomes involved with a married man (whose wife is in India and wants nothing to do with him). They live together unmarried for the rest of their lives. That doesn't mean life becomes easy for Adelaide, it isn't. But she remains strong and stubborn. Most importantly she relishes being in control; she'd rather a hard life like that, than an easy life as the doormat of family. Independence is everything to her.

This is clearly no conventional kowtowing-to-the-morals-of-the-time storyline. Adelaide has a niece whom she eventually meets and takes under her wing. The niece - and really, this is a long time after Adelaide's young adulthood - has exactly the same experiences. The utter meaningless of her life insofar as it would be perform marriage and the running of a house, a loveless union, but no doubt a civilised and practical one. She breaks off her engagement, leaves home, and in a state of profound confusion ends up in the Mews. I don't know if these things sound trivial these days, but there is no doubt that they are brave and far from trivial acts at the time.

So here we have Adelaide, an eloper, living 'in sin' for decades with a married man who takes his wife's name and Dodo her niece living a fulfilling single life - the implication being this will never change, when the book ends. The book sees the women who behave in the 'right' way feeling as if they are losing out to the women who eschew their duty. How unfair! Both Adelaide and Dodo fail to give the filial love which is the only important thing women can do with their lives. Yet it is these two women who carry the book morally. They are true to themselves; though there are moments made to tempt them, they never seriously waver. Sharp makes it quite clear that the women who stay at home and keep house and raise children are not the good women in this story. I thought this was interesting for the period - but maybe that reflects no more than my ignorance.

rest here: <https://alittleteaalittlechat.wordpress...>

Beth Greenwood says

Really delightful. I think the Downton Abbey comparison is pretty apt - lots of fascinating characters, slightly soapy twists, and a long and winding time span. I thought the writing was absolutely perfect, with a great balance of description and dialogue and humor. For me the last third fell a bit flat because I just didn't care as much about Dodo as I had about the other characters. The stakes in her story didn't feel as high, and her innocence was irritating instead of interesting. Still, I loved Adelaide and Gilbert and Alice and even the assorted parents and spouses and siblings. I also thought it was a fascinating picture of how close in time different eras actually are - how someone could span the Victorian period and the twenties and WWII all in one lifetime. I'm looking forward to reading more from Sharp!

Ewfischer says

I couldn't exactly put it down, but it would have a limited audience among the people I know. My mother would have loved it.

Darcy says

Sometimes I thought the plot rambled a bit and some characters were introduced and dropped without advancing the plot. However, the more I read, the more I realized that this novel was written as if it were a nonfiction account of one interesting woman whose life spanned Victorian England, through the outrageous 20's, and into World War II in London. Now, I see that I expect everything I read to have a tidy little plot with a distinct beginning and end. Life is so not like that—so many parts of what we do are really just totally uninteresting. Anyway, writing this book that way was clever, but a lot of it seemed fairly pointless until I understood the technique. However, it was interesting how things that happened and people's perspectives

were presented without commentary, like was that a good thing or bad thing overall? It made you think for yourself much more than modern novels do.

Gabi Coatsworth says

This was an enjoyable read, but not as tautly written as *Cluny Brown*, the last Margery Sharp I read. Tracing the story of a woman born in the Victorian era through the Second World War, it covers a lot of ground. Sharp's heroines tend to have an independent streak, and Adelaide is no exception. She also has the knack of making the most of whatever life hands her. If you like historical family sagas with unpredictable heroines, you'll enjoy this.
