



Interrogating Ellie

Julian Gray

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On the eve of World War II a naïve young woman makes a fateful decision: she will abandon her British citizenship and go to live in Nazi Austria. When her marriage breaks down and she finds herself alone in an enemy land, her passionate, restless nature drives her in a struggle for survival against the odds.

Who can she trust? And ultimately, who can she love?

Interrogating Ellie is based on a true story.

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Interrogating Ellie Details

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From Reader Review Interrogating Ellie for online ebook

Sarah says

Wow what a story! I think this is the book's greatest feature, a woman's struggle to survive and thrive in a country foreign to her and that only gets more so for her as time goes on. Knowing that it's based on true events made the narrative even more engrossing. I found myself gripped by the different hardships Ellie encountered and seeing how she rose to meet each challenge to emerge stronger on the other side.

Ellie's grit and tact for survival is something to behold. I don't think I've come across a character as deft at changing with her environment as she. She's able to adapt to whoever is in power (German, Russian, or British) and create situations which help her in survival. She's portrayed as a flawed human who does what she needs to and isn't sorry for it. While at times, these flaws almost went to the extreme of making her unlikable; overall, I found her very relatable to myself. I got to wondering what I would have done in her place.

I liked the format in which the story was told. For the most part, it's a straightforward fictional narrative telling Ellie's tale. Yet, interspersed within that narrative are snatches of her interrogation report in her struggle to re-apply for British citizenship, letters written by various parties detailing the events in the story, and various memos that also relate her overall story. These different formats give the story a depth and foundation in the events that inspired the story, making it richer and the reader more engaged.

I do, however, wish the book could have ended better. Not in the content, but with how it was written. The ending seems very choppy and sudden. Everything is wrapped up in an epilogue that contains phrases like "this happened", "they went here", and "she did that". A bunch of "told" scenes in the very end give this book an almost unfinished atmosphere as it closes on Ellie's rich story and WWII life.

With a rich story and a narrator that seems very real, this book is a gripping portrayal of one woman's struggle to survive the war years in what could be considered enemy territory despite her marriage. She shows her resourcefulness and sheer will to create a life for herself despite incredible odds. I was spellbound by her journey. The ending, however, leaves something to be desired. The reader is dropped out of the conclusion with an epilogue that just tells you what happens, not showing anything. So a great book all around until you get to the end.

Book: Book received for free from publisher via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Nicole Overmoyer says

Interrogating Ellie is Julian Gray's fictionalized account of the real life of Ellie Maurer - who becomes Ellie Bauer for the book, a British woman who lived in Austria for the duration of World War II. Gray combines Ellie's real life and the people she knew, based on her interrogation files, with other colorful characters who are drawn and adapted from other stories of Austria during the 1940s.

The fictionalization of reality in **Interrogating Ellie** does not make the reality of horrors in World War II any less.

Ellie Bauer is a woman who can't be classified, literally and figuratively. Growing up without her mother and not having any idea who her father was, she comes to adulthood searching for a family. This would seem to be why she agrees to move from Jersey to Austria with her Austrian husband and their daughter just as the Nazis come to power. To say it is a mistake would be putting it lightly.

But this is an area we don't often read about in World War II - average Austrian families and how they dealt with national pride warring with National Socialism. And Gray handles it beautifully. Ellie goes through the things during her time with the Bauer family that many women have gone through, but it's made more daunting by the Nazis.

When she's cut off from her family, she's forced to survive the war on her own in Austria. She alternates between following the rules - registering with the work and housing authorities - and breaking the rules - hosting clandestine resistance meetings while not being registered to work. It's about survival for Ellie, nothing else. She has no firm political alliances and even as she learns more about what the swastika and the men behind it mean, she carries on for herself most of all.

And it doesn't end after the war.

Ellie is forced to fight her way out of Austria to get home to some sort of life in England. She has to fight Austrians, Americans, and British for the right to keep searching for her place in the world. And she never really finds it, even when she wins - or what passes for winning.

Gray's book on World War II isn't cloak and dagger resistance movements and it isn't focused on the concentration camps. It's more like reality, reality that probably was for a lot of women in that time and in that place. That is what makes it beautiful.

Interrogating Ellie is available for purchase now.

*I received a copy of **Interrogating Ellie** through NetGalley and cloiff books in exchange for an honest & original review.*

Liz Ackroyd says

I read this beautifully-researched and detailed novel within a day, keen to find out what would happen to Ellie as she lived her complicated life under adverse and shifting conditions. Following a lonely upbringing in Jersey, she married an Austrian national and naively agreed to move with him and their small daughter to Austria in 1938, when her husband was lured home by the expectation of a better life and job prospects under the Nazi regime. Ellie, however, found herself mired in conflict, broken promises, intrigue and separation against a wider background of international warfare. With bombings in Vienna and other dangers forcing changes of job and living quarters, and where the eventual 'peace' in 1945 under the Allies was not always an improvement, British-born Ellie constantly had to negotiate new relationships, whilst unsure whom she could really trust. She was also, with some justification, suspected of reinventing herself to fit her circumstances; this seemed very realistic, given the setting and her determination to survive. This vividly-realised depiction of Ellie's life in war-torn Austria made me want to read more on the subject: I heartily recommend the book and the further information on the associated website.

Beth says

I received a copy of this book in return for an honest review

I found this equal parts frustrating and interesting. I tend to enjoy World War II stories, but I found Ellie's extreme obliviousness to war hard to believe. She moved from Jersey with her husband and toddler, while pregnant, to Austria...freshly occupied Austria...on the advice of his parents that he would get a good job... Guess what, he didn't get a good job, he got a job in another area forcing prisoners to build a dam. Ellie and the toddler were left with his parents-the term monster-in-law would apply here. Ellie went through a lot and definitely had mental health issues. Due to the time period, attitudes, and knowledge she never received the help that she required and was instead judged for things out of her control. This book showcased the extreme hypocrisy of men at that time. She was looked down on for being a divorced woman trying to survive during war, while the men could be married or rapists and it wasn't a big deal.

Rowena Simpson says

Ellie makes a decision as a young wife and mother, that propels her life towards a series of heart-rending relationships.

Ellie believed her husband would 'magic her into a different life'.

That life, set in Austria during WW11, turned out to be a greater challenge than anything she could have imagined.

This is an amazing story, which gets under the skin, with its insightful account of domestic daily life in worn-torn Austria.

The characters are credible and sensitively drawn. Through the letters sent between the central characters, the emotional and physical suffering inflicted on the people is exposed. This is an account of domestic and political unrest. The reader soon becomes wrapped in Ellie's turmoil, suspicions and disappointments.

Now hooked, the reader feels compelled to find out how much more Ellie can cope with and still survive. Will she find security and a safe place to live with her children?

Knowing this based on a true events, which are incredible in themselves, increases the book's impact and poignancy.

This story is thought provoking...long after closing the book.

S A says

I was totally involved/immersed in the story and characters and found it very difficult to put it down every night. The fact that it is based on your mother's life makes it very moving and meaningful.

It is a fitting tribute to her great spirit and will to survive those awful times.

Squeaky says

I've gone back to the reviews for this book a few times, wondering if its "me". It could be, but although the storyline was interesting... the way the sentence structure and word choices... were extremely confusing. I checked if this was translated from another language- it was not. The sentence structure was awkward, with plenty of commas, and run-ons. Poor word choices that you could easily supplant a better word, so the reader is not derailed in their thinking.

(Whole paragraph is one long sentence)

"No, you could saw what you wanted in favour of the Party, and there was a lot you could say in its favour, chiefly that it had made us all a lot stronger and more positive about the future, and that it was a relief that someone was finally prepared to do something about that Jews and the Gypsy's and other unspeakable types, but if there was one thing where she parted company with them it was over the way they had tried to undermine Christian teachings, persuading people to leave the Church and cease to pay their dues, which she had heard was becoming more and more common, even in this town..."

"Some local schoolboys had got hold of a copy, she had heard, and had to be punished by their teacher. At any rate, she knew times were changing and that new thinking was coming in, but she for one wasn't going along with it, for reasons she had already explained"

"The housing office was located in the town hall on the main road through town, above the tangle of streets that led down to the lake, an ancient white building with black turrets pointing up to the sky like a witch's castle out of a fairy tale."

I might try again, because my opinion seems to be the minority, but I think the writing is adolescent, choppy thoughts, poor word choice, love of commas. DNF

Charlotte Seale says

Interrogating Ellie is a poignant and compelling story of a young woman trapped in Austria during WW2. The main character, Ellie, was a real person, and the author has clearly indicated in his introduction what additions are fictional.

The language is straightforward and unadorned, with short, precise sentences. This gives a clarity and lack of ambiguity, and the book reads like a biography in the style of a thriller. The author intersperses the story with quotes from the actual interrogation that Ellie had undergone, and with letters between various characters, which anchors the narrative in reality.

I found the episode which covered the period after WW2 had ended, particularly fascinating and very convincing. Ellie was trying to survive in Austria-a defeated and occupied country. This section had a real flavour of authenticity. It seems obvious that many citizens (including Ellie) had little or no interest in politics- and why should they? Their daily struggle for food and shelter was over-riding: a perspective lacking in contemporary teaching of history. The background research is thorough and detailed, and the information on the book's website is excellent. The genre of this book is similar to that of a historical novel. I can highly recommend this book, and look forward to the author's next one with anticipation.

Alison says

This was such a joy to read because the authors words just flowed from page to page. The story (based on true events) was gripping and I found it difficult to stop reading.

This is one womans resilience to survive in a country to which she doesn't belong, in a time when her own country and this are at war, and thwarted by bureaucracy at every turn. Very sad indeed.

R. Honey says

Jersey Girl slogs through WW II in Austria.....
Then more difficulties.

Debbie Trammell says

Good book

Such a very interesting book. I did not realize you were writing about your mother till the end. Ellie it seemed had a hard life and I believe very misunderstood. After Marie was born she apparently suffered from post partum depression that was not addressed. She had to do a lot just to survive, as a woman in her own. I will recommend this book@!

Mike Robbins says

I should start with a disclaimer: I know Julian Gray. It is a pen-name, and with good reason, because this extraordinary book – although written as a novel – is substantially true.

Interrogating Ellie is both well-researched and extremely readable. It is the story of Eloise, or Ellie, Picot (not her real name). She was born in St Helier, in the Channel Islands, in 1916. She and her brother were the illegitimate children of a teenage mother, who had been banished to Birmingham by her family. Eloise remained in Jersey. She was brought up by foster-parents, and eventually found a job as a waitress at a local hotel. In 1934 she met a fellow hotel-worker, and in 1938, having just had their first child, they moved to his home town in Austria and moved in with his family. Ellie took Austrian (actually by now Reich) citizenship. Before long, her marriage broke down, and the family kept her baby daughters. Eloise Picot was 25, alone, with no means of support, in a country of which she was nominally a national but which was actually at war with her own. But she had two things on her side – she was attractive, and she was not a fool. For the next seven years, through the war and the post-war occupation, she would live on her wits.

Ellie did – after some difficulty – return to Britain (although not to Jersey) in 1948, and in the 1950s she remarried and settled in the south of England. She had several more children, of which Gray was one. He and his siblings knew the bare bones of her life-story, and also that they had half-sisters in Austria, but Ellie did

not talk about the war, except to blurt out the odd fact. She died in 1973, and the story of her life in wartime Vienna might have been forgotten had her eldest British daughter not chanced to be on the website of the Public Records Office in Kew, south-west London, in 2013. She knew that Ellie had had to reapply for British citizenship after the war, and decided to check if there was a file on her mother. There was, and she was taken aback by its contents.

In response to her application, Ellie had been interviewed by the British Field Security Service (FSS) in Klagenfurt. They established that, after some twists and turns, she had gone to ground in Vienna and remained there for the rest of the war. Exactly what she had done there was not clear. The FSS transcripts, however, were damning, suggesting among other things that she had slept her way to survival. An internal Home Office memo stated that: “This woman is of bad character ... I submit that we refuse to grant a renaturalisation certificate.” It was refused. However, in a curious and very English compromise, the Home Office stated that her bad character was not sufficient to bar her from being granted a visa.

So what had Ellie been up to in wartime Vienna that so upset the FSS? Using their reports on Ellie (parts of which are still redacted), Gray has pieced together the story of a hand-to-mouth life. Best not to give too much away; suffice to say that Ellie learned how to handle herself, and got through the war, although not without trouble. And although she may have used (but not abused) men, she also had a genuine gift for friendship, if Gray’s account is to be believed. It is a gripping story, and Gray has written it very well. I found myself on the edge of my seat as I read it, and totally forgot that I was reading a real person’s story; it reads more like a thriller. It helps that Gray’s style is simple and unsensational. This is a tight, clean account.

How much is true? It mostly fits the facts Gray has – from the FSS transcripts, and from his own enquiries in Austria in 2014. However, he has invented or changed some things in order to construct a narrative. Thus he has Ellie in a relationship with one Mayer, an Austrian Wehrmacht officer who is part of the anti-Nazi underground. In fact, Mayer is based on a man called Carl Szokoll, who was real enough, and was in Vienna at the time; but there is no reason to believe they met. (There is also no proof they didn’t.) In real life, Ellie and her Austrian husband had not two but three daughters before they split. A friend killed in an air raid, a Dutchwoman, was also a real person and in this case Ellie did know her, but in real life she didn’t die that way. Is all this all right?

I think it is. There is little here that could *not* have happened, and Gray is clear about what he knows, and what he has had to invent; he explains all on the website he has set up for the book. In any case, like all good books (and this is a very good book), *Interrogating Ellie* is about more than the story it relates. As Gray has said on the website: “When I first read the file that delivered the British government’s verdict on my mother’s moral character, it upset me ... But as I say in the book, I realised I had to just try to understand what led up to those judgements. ... I do still wonder, though, about the people who wrote those judgements in the file ... What were their lives like, I wonder?”

It is a fair question. Ellie was one step away from forced labour or a concentration camp. She may have slept with those who could protect her, but there is no evidence that she hurt them, or anyone else. Today, more than ever, one could wonder about the lives of those who grant or withhold the right to remain; and how they would fare were they to seek it.

Adarsh says

Interrogating Ellie is an evocative, gripping and beautifully written story which gives a voice to the lives to

ordinary people in the midst of political conflict and social upheaval in war torn Austria during World War 11. The central character, Elise Bauer shows a spirit of survival and great moral courage as she experiences the first years of her marriage, its breakdown and subsequent life trajectory as a young English migrant woman from Jersey in the channel Islands. Early on in the novel the reader finds out that when Ellie was expecting her second child she accompanies her Austrian husband, Michael Bauer with their eighteen month old daughter Anna at the promise of a better life in his home town, Zell am See.

Based on a true story, the novel spans war and peace time, using historical facts, personal testimony, letters and official documents to provide the detail and depth to this moving and very well researched narrative. Issues of love, loss of trust, separation, and betrayal, provide the common threads that bind the reader to the twists and turns of a complex and uncompromising script of the life of Ellie to the point when she is interrogated following her application to be repatriated to England after the war had ended. At its most tense moments the only escape from some of the misery that Ellie faced was through the insights provided by reflection and empathy of what it might have been like to live through this historical time.

Ian Potts says

I really enjoyed this book. Excellent first novel. Based on a true story that spans the Channel Isles and war torn Vienna. There are two searches in play: the protagonist who is trying to survive and find her way through the chaos of war and back to her English roots, and the writers story as he searches to understand what his mother went through during these desperate years.

Carol says

An enthralling wartime story of a woman displaced by life events and also a study in relationships. A masterly piece of work, this fictionalised true story of the eponymous Ellie is a book with two layers. The first, more obvious one, is the narration of a tale of circumstance. A story that richly shows how the smallest of decisions and the tiniest of life's twists and turns can have major implications. How an ordinary person can slip into different and often less than desirable situations through a simple domino-ing of events that could have happened more or less to any one of us had we been in similar circumstances. Indeed at times I felt a strong empathy with Ellie precisely because I imagined that I might have done similarly in some situations had I been in her shoes. The second layer is a tale of consequences, and of how a person's life experiences can shape their own personality, character and life situation, and then that of their children. This layer is compellingly introduced in the first few pages, therefore sensitising the reader in their journey through the remainder of the book. The adolescent Ellie is herself a product of unfortunate experiences. Some aspects of her character that were criticised by her interrogator at the start of the book and then later might nowadays have been treated more sympathetically as reactions to trauma, abuse and other events. The author, Ellie's son, has handled these aspects, and indeed the more questionable and colourful of Ellie's actions and behaviours, with sensitivity yet honesty, so that I waivered throughout between empathy and disapproval – an achievement of the author since no-one should be considered in black and white.

In terms of writing style, the author has managed something very well paced and never boring and I found myself wondering what the next chapter might hold, between reads. The beginning of each chapter gives the reader both an immediate sense of Ellie's movement through place and time, and the feeling that there is lots of interest to follow. My interest was further sustained by the author's successful deployment of different writing techniques to break up the narrative and avoid monotony. Thus there were for example excerpts from

correspondence that were used to move the story along and also served to remind the reader that this story is based on facts. The fictional elements of the narrative added depth to the story and the whole was well researched.

Despite being so well crafted, the book makes little use of descriptive prose. Thus for example, sentences describing the mountains of Austria are sufficiently illustrative for you to understand exactly how they might look, but they are brief and used simply to place you in the spot rather than to evoke emotion. This worked for me and it kept the story moving along nicely, but it may not suit all readers. I also agree with another reviewer that the epilogue is in parts less well-crafted than the rest, though it is nonetheless satisfactory and honest.

I can just see this being snapped up for a film, it has all the right elements and is absolutely jam packed with happenings. It's a strong first novel and I look forward to the next from this author.
