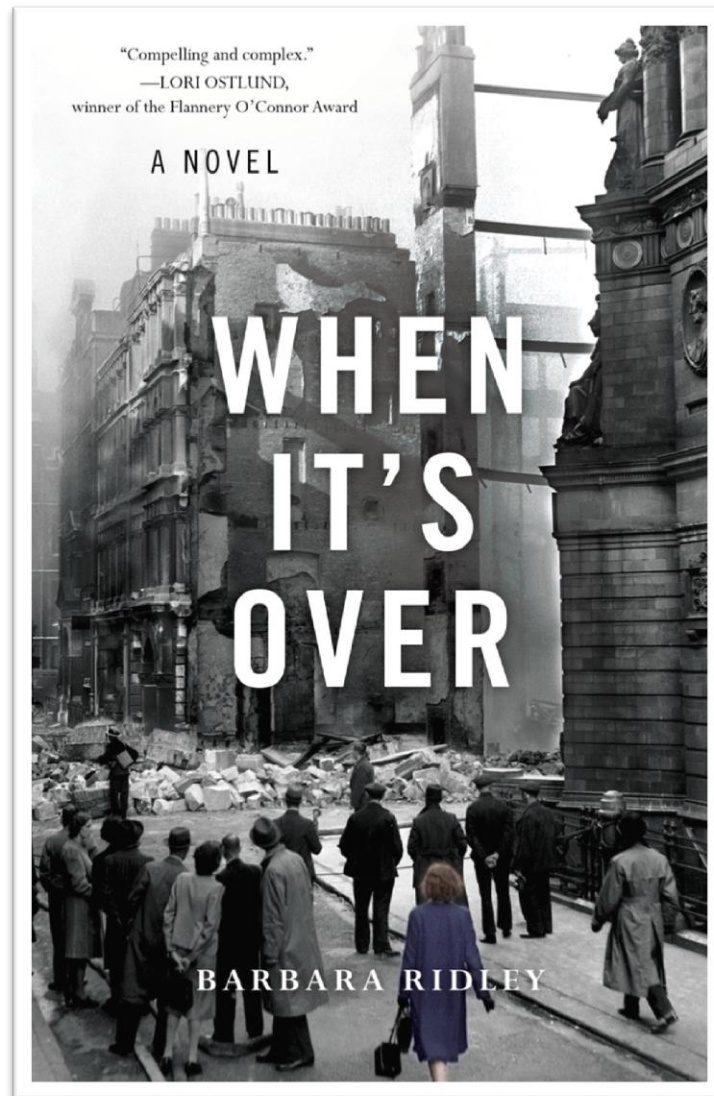


Reading Group Guide

WHEN IT'S OVER

By Barbara Ridley



ISBN 978-1-63152-296-3, Trade paperback, \$16.95, 356 pages, Fiction/First Novel
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This novel is based on the author's mother's life and on her father's surviving letters. How does this affect your reading of the novel?
2. This novel is about politics, but it is Lena's story, and her involvement in political events is less intense than that of other characters. Would you consider this a political novel? What is a political novel?
3. Did you know that Churchill was ousted in the 1945 election? If this is a surprise, why do you think you had not known this? What else did you learn in reading this novel?
4. Do you read novels to learn about history? If so, what do you expect authors to do in terms of accuracy?
5. Lena's relationship with her father is fraught with tension, given his abusive personality. Did you expect the war to change their relationship more than it did?
6. Although initially welcome in the village, Lena, Otto, and the others are soon considered suspicious. Do you think that the lives of refugees—any refugees—are different now?
7. The refugees are all Socialists surviving with the help of The Lady of the Manor and her family—and they all become friends. Please discuss.
8. What role does chance play in this novel?
9. Why do you think Lena spoke so little of her past life to her daughter?
10. The title of the book is "When It's Over." Do you think this refers only to the war being over? What other battles are being fought? Are they "over" by the end of the novel?

Speaking with BARBARA RIDLEY



1. What inspired your novel?

I was inspired to write this novel after the death of my mother in 2002. A friend of mine, a woman I had known for over 40 years, asked me how it was exactly that my mother had ended up living in England, so I started to tell her—and she said: that is an amazing story! And I realized, yes it is, and I didn't want that story to die with her death. I had always known the outline of what happened to my mother and her family during World War II, but there were a lot of gaps. I certainly didn't understand many of the details, and my mother never discussed the emotional impact of what she went through. So I thought, well I love fiction, I'll make up what I don't know, I'll write a novel.

2. Was it hard to separate yourself from the story, since it is based on your mother's life?

The protagonist, Lena, is modeled on my mother, and many of the details of my mother's story are included in the novel. But I knew nothing really about what she *felt* about her experiences. To create my character of Lena I had to create a passionate, young woman who fell in love and had hopes and fears—and I had to imagine all this. So for me, Lena assumed an identity, an existence quite separate from my mother.

3. You also based your novel on your father's letters. What did his letters tell you?

Well, initially when I came upon the letters, I hoped they would contain some juicy details about my parent's romance! But in spite of the fact that they were written to one of his closest friends, they were almost entirely devoid of any personal stuff, and didn't mention my mother at all. Instead, they offered a fascinating insight into the political climate of the last two years of the war. My father had a sharp intellect and keen sense of history; he went on to publish over 20 books, mostly historical biographies. His war-time letters gave me a unique perspective on the political struggles leading up to the general election at the end of the war.

4. Some people may not know that Churchill lost the election in 1945. What caused his stunning defeat?

When Churchill took over in 1940, he formed a Coalition Government, and the normal schedule of elections was put on hold. This was at a time when Britain was completely isolated in the fight against the Nazis, under threat of invasion, with the rest of Europe having fallen, and the U.S. not yet in the war. To survive, the government instituted extraordinary control over every facet of the economy: war production, food distribution, rationing, employment. The war became the first conflict that affected everyone, all civilians, and victory depended on everyone pitching in. It became known as “the people’s war.” By 1945, the cities were in ruins, everything had to be rebuilt, and there was a sentiment that everyone deserved a fair share in the future. When Churchill dissolved the Coalition Government and called the election in July 1945, Labour ran on a platform of creating the National Health Service, public housing, free education, and other building blocks of the welfare state. They said: the government could run a planned economy for the war effort why not for peacetime? Churchill was loved and respected as a war-time leader, but he was a staunch conservative and totally opposed these ideas. He lost in the largest landslide in British history.

5. Given that you had first-hand accounts of life during WWII, what research did you have to do?

I did a ton of research, much of it as I was writing, digging into whatever background information I needed for each chapter or section. I read a lot of books, both fiction and non-fiction, and found incredibly useful stuff online, especially the BBC People’s War Archives, created between 2003 and 2006, recording the personal recollections of ordinary people from all walks of life. I did on-the-ground research in Prague, Paris and London, visiting all the locations that I used as settings in the novel. I also did research into specific issues at the British Airways Museum at Heathrow airport, the National Gallery in London, and the archives of Mass Observation housed at Sussex University, my alma mater.

6. What did you find the hardest part of writing? The most pleasurable?

The hardest part for me is trying to get started with a new chapter or section, staring at the blank page, trying to get into the groove, or getting over a hump where I feel “stuck.” It can sometimes

take me a while to get a breakthrough. I've learned not to panic when that happens, to trust that it will come eventually. The most pleasurable is when it suddenly, magically, falls into place. With writing this novel, I loved it when I felt like I had successfully weaved little anecdotes I remembered my mother telling me into the arc of the story.

7. As you prepare for publication, what are your hopes? What do you hope people will take away, after reading?

I would like this novel to be read and enjoyed by as many people as possible! I think it's a great story with wonderful characters, and many of my early readers have told me they learned a lot about the historical period which they found interesting and thought-provoking. I hope it will offer a fresh perspective on the lives of war refugees in general, and how ordinary people are affected by major geo-political events.

8. Some themes in your novel resonate with life today, but your novel was written over a twelve year period. What about the novel do you think illuminates our current lives?

It wasn't until I was in the final stage of editing that I realized the world was facing another refugee crisis on a scale not seen since World War II. When I started the novel, I just thought it was an interesting story, without considering that it might have direct relevance today. But in 2015, I saw the first group of Syrian refugees being welcomed by Germans as they arrived in Munich—and I thought how poignant my mother would have found that scene. The plight of today's refugees dominates the news; technology allows us, half a world away, to see images of children drowned on a beach or sitting shell-shocked in an ambulance. But the conflicts seem complex, the numbers of people seeking refuge seem overwhelming, and perhaps the antagonism and fears exploited by some politicians seem understandable on some level. When we look back on World War II, everything seems much simpler, black and white, with good guys and bad guys; we know that people needed to flee, and that terrible things happened to those who stayed behind. But in fact, refugees back then faced huge obstacles and prejudice and even internment in some cases. So I hope people will reflect on this, and understand that refugees always deserve support.

It's also interesting that populist ideology and income inequality have come into focus again now, as they did in the 1930's and 1940's. We are facing many of the same issues today, and the struggle between idealism vs. political realism still resonates.

9. As a writer of historical fiction, where must one be accurate and where can one create fiction?

I worked very hard to ensure that all my historical details are correct, and that I wasn't using objects or words that would not have existed at the time. I incorporated a lot of real historical events and tried to keep the timeline accurate. I think this is very important to give the novel authenticity. You want the reader to have complete confidence in you as a narrator and not be thrown out of the story by questioning the reality you create. But against this backdrop, you create a fictional world with your characters and their struggles and conflicts.

10. What advice would you share with other writers trying to get published?

Well, it's very hard to break into the world of publishing today. Some people get lucky and/or have tremendous talent and get discovered, but it's hard. Try traditional publishing, by all means, but also be open to all the alternative avenues that are available now if that doesn't work out.

11. Prior to retiring, your career was as a nurse. Did your work in the medical field inform your writing?

That's an interesting question. I think as a nurse, you have to be able to listen, to be open to seeing your patient's point of view, and not imposing your own interpretation. So perhaps years of practice with that helped me write scenes from different points of view in my fiction!

12. Is writing now a second career?

It's certainly taking up a lot of my time! I seem to be as busy now as I was when working.

13. What has been the greatest surprise to you about the publication process?

How much work is involved in the editing, the cover design, the final proof-reading, not to mention all the pre-publication promotion and outreach. It's a whole separate process from the writing itself, and all new to me. So I've had a steep learning curve.

14. Are you at work on anything new?

Yes, I am working on another novel—completely different, set in contemporary California, and very much based on my years of clinical experience. It's about a young woman having to reinvent herself after a spinal cord injury. I'm always tinkering away at a few short stories and creative non-fiction pieces. I am really happy when I can take a break from all the pre-publication work and get back into writing new material.