



Priscilla: The Hidden Life of an Englishwoman in Wartime France

Nicholas Shakespeare

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A transcendent work of narrative nonfiction in the vein of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*-at once a stunning story of detection, a loving portrait of a flawed women trying to survive in terrible times, and a spellbinding slice of history

"A most strange and compelling book driven by the writer's unsparing search for truth: now an optimistic hunt for a family heroine, now a study in female wiles of survival, now a portrait of one very ordinary person's frailty in the face of terrible odds."-John le Carré

When Nicholas Shakespeare stumbled across a trunk full of his late aunt's personal belongings, he was unaware of where this discovery would take him and what he would learn about her hidden past. The glamorous, mysterious figure he remembered from his childhood was very different from the morally ambiguous young woman who emerged from the trove of love letters, journals and photographs, surrounded by suitors and living the precarious existence of a British citizen in a country controlled by the enemy.

As a young boy, Shakespeare had always believed that his aunt was a member of the Resistance and had been tortured by the Germans. The truth turned out to be far more complicated.

Priscilla: The Hidden Life of an Englishwoman in Wartime France Details

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From Reader Review Priscilla: The Hidden Life of an Englishwoman in Wartime France for online ebook

Keith Akers says

This book was touching and fascinating for me. I love stories about people who are in complicated situations that they have difficulty explaining to outsiders.

The book gives a very vivid and realistic “tour” of occupied France under the Germans in the Second World War, through the life of Nicholas Shakespeare’s (the author’s) aunt. Much of this book reads like, and is sometimes even written like, a novel. Why was Priscilla, the author wondered, so reticent about talking about what happened during the war? Was it because she was so traumatized by the events that she couldn’t speak about them, or what? Was she in the Resistance, or was she tortured?

Well, actually arguably she was tortured, since she spent several months in a detention camp which wasn’t that much better than a concentration camp. But the truth turns out to be both more mundane, more complicated, and more interesting than this answer (were it true) would suggest. Shakespeare finds documents, letters, and articles which unravel most, but perhaps not absolutely all, of the answers. Priscilla wasn’t in the resistance, but she wasn’t exactly a collaborator either. What she did do, was to survive, and in the process encounters various lovers of French, German, and Belgian extraction, and of course her husband (who turned out not to be much help). It sounds vaguely romantic when I put her experiences in these terms, but to Priscilla it was mostly just frightening.

What was also interesting is just how much Priscilla kept to herself. Key aspects of her story were concealed from everyone, including her lovers and husbands. She desperately wanted to talk to people about what happened, and tried repeatedly (without success) to write about various aspects of her experiences during the war. The public just wasn’t interested in war stories at that point; they had lived through it. One could imagine that she might have told her story to a priest via a confession, but other than that possibility, no human being during her life — not even her husbands, lovers, or close friends — heard the “good parts” of Shakespeare’s narrative. Shakespeare discovered all of this through examination of Priscilla’s letters and writings, and those of her friends, among other documents.

The question we could ask afterwards was, would this book have been better if it were just fictionalized and made into a novel? Perhaps, but in a novel it would be much more difficult to understand Priscilla’s shame and loneliness with her extraordinary story. It’s probably improper to speak of Priscilla’s attitude towards her wartime experiences as “shame,” since I don’t think she was ashamed of her actions, nor did she actually have any reason to be. But — what actually happened is just so hard to explain to outsiders, and she was never able to really find a way to express it, until this book did it for her.

Reading other Goodreads reviews of this book, a number of people criticized the book saying that it basically was insufficiently exciting. These people, I think, would have preferred a novel: hopefully, a novel with some chase scenes, buildings being blown up, and perhaps some more breathless detail with the romantic scenes. *Priscilla* reminds us that history isn’t like that; sometimes what seems obvious in hindsight was not obvious when it was still in the future, and sometimes it is difficult to recover what actually happened because of the way we “want” to remember things.

Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says

Priscilla is the kind of book that makes me wonder why I ever read fiction at all. Here is the true story of a woman who spent World War II in Nazi-occupied France, as a British passport holder and the young wife of a minor French nobleman. How she survived is the subject of the book. Author Nicholas Shakespeare never gave much thought to his aunt's past, and she never said anything about it. But after she died, he found some information about those war years that made him want to investigate further. His research took him to the archives of French, British, and American government records, police departments, friends, surviving family members of friends, libraries, and more.

The story is as much about the hunt for the story as it is about Priscilla's story itself. There's drama and love and death and murder and torture and daring escapes. I found myself alternately sympathizing with and despising Priscilla. When times are tough, and living as an enemy national in Vichy France was undeniably tough for Priscilla, you hope you will rise to the occasion and be heroic, or at least be quietly brave. You hope you don't betray your friends or lose your moral compass. But until it happens to you, you can't know. During war time, many were heroic. And those same people might have been less than heroic the very next day. Lots of people refused to talk about the war after it was over and they returned home. Maybe what they saw was too horrific to talk about. Maybe what they did was too difficult to face.

Priscilla is a heck of a story. It does drag a bit at times, and there were a few detours into subjects that I didn't find as gripping as Nicholas Shakespeare did. But overall, this was better than a novel, with all the relationships and drama, and big questions that you'd find in a novel, but as far as we can know, it really happened.

Kerry says

Priscilla

Nicholas Shakespeare set out to try and discover the truth about his aunt Priscilla and her life in Paris during the years of the German Occupation from 1940 until 1944. The result is this biography. It is an enthralling tale but is, at times, extremely difficult to follow because of the numerous personalities that drift in and out of the narrative. Because he did not have access to many of his Aunt's personal records, he had to construct his narrative by relying on sources from the many men and women who knew his aunt during this period. Some of the recollections of those whom he connects to his Aunt are tenuous to say the least, and Shakespeare expects the reader to make a leap of faith in order to accept his version of the events. I find it difficult to pin down my evaluation of his aunt as a person. His portrait of her is very fair, Shakespeare holds nothing back. On the one hand, I see Priscilla as cold, calculating, narcissistic and selfish woman and on the other, as a woman who never grew up, who spent her life searching for the love she was denied as a child. Abandoned first by her mother (a truly selfish bitch) and later by her father, (the well-known BBC commentator SPB Mais) she was bundled across the channel to spend her schooldays in Paris and was later trapped there when the Germans invaded In May 1940. However, the by-now young woman

loved her life in Paris, and was unwilling to travel back to Britain with her best friend, Gillian. Her disastrous marriage to Viscount Robert and many love affairs are examined in great detail. But it was the Shakespeare's research and narrative on the thugs and criminals who ran the Black Market in Paris during the first few years of the Occupation that I found truly fascinating. The picture he paints of this murky underworld, with its spiders web of connections to the Nazis, the Abwehr, the government in Vichy and the 'collabos' is enthralling and frightening. It is no wonder that successive French governments following the end of the war tried to destroy all record of France's collaboration with the German occupiers, preferring instead to construct an alternative narrative of the bravery of the relative few (until the Allied landings in June 1944) who joined the Resistance.

This book really dragged for the last few chapters and I almost skimmed, I was tired of Priscilla, and I didn't really care what happened to her.

Sherry Mackay says

I found this an interesting story of a flawed and seemingly empty woman who had little purpose in life. Someone who was blown about by the winds of fortune and did not seem to make anything of herself. She seems a very passive character who allowed men to do with her what they wanted. The author rounds out the character with a brief history of war-time Paris, and a look into the lives of Nazi collaborators who dealt in the black market. These were the men Priscilla ended up with due to no income or profession of her own. (A warning for all of us!). Also of course she was an enemy alien! I did feel that sadly there just simply was not enough information about her life to round out the whole story but what there is tells us of a sad and lonely woman who never succeeded in getting what she wanted- loving parents, a child of her own and income and success of her own making. The book tended to drag in the middle, and the uncaptioned photos were a bit odd as the reader has to guess who they are of.

Martha C Hopkins says

A fascinating story of WE II. Many of us hope we would have been brave in circumstances such as the German occupation of France but oftentimes it is not possible, especially if very young and alone! Very sad story and a terrible tragedy that followed one bad decision: not to leave France before the German invasion. Because I was born in 1942 I have always been fascinated by WE II about which I have no memory (and am most likely fortunate not to have those memories and worries about family in the service.) Although the author is forced to imagine much of Priscilla's I found it fascinating and recommend it.

Here are twenty superfluous words in order to get my KINDLE to permit me to push continue and allow me to choose SAVE!!

Bob H says

It's two stories, each one intriguing and unpredictable. Nicholas Shakespeare, the real-life author, finds that the family stories about his aunt's life in occupied France were untrue - or at least misleading, once he happens across a trunk of his aunt's effects. These hint at something darker - and illustrate the book - but turn out only the start of his epic search to find more evidence, more surviving witnesses, more (tangled) genealogy, more documentary and police records about his aunt. It's a journey that takes him through several countries, which he tells as his aunt's story unfolds.

Her story, as it turns out, is that of a woman who must survive by any means, any wiles she can exert, as she is buffeted by personal, family and world disasters. A broken family, a youth in pre-war France, a loveless marriage to a French nobleman, an abortion - all before the Nazi invasion. She misses the evacuation and has to make her way as a British national in Nazi-occupied France - tracked by police, put in a detention camp in Besancon, released mysteriously. During this period she rubs shoulders with a cast of characters out of an Alan Furst mystery, only real-life - theater and literary figures, black-marketers, German and Vichy officials.

It's not a war story but one woman's survival in murky times: the Occupation was a period, well-described here, where people lived in moral ambiguities, shortages and real danger, unable to direct events but to somehow slide through them. It's not an upbeat story but an unpredictable and interesting one, and says much about the times that the survivors apparently wanted forgotten, wanted hidden. That the author was able to retrace these places and these people, and elicit this story, is as fascinating as Priscilla's. The reader is never sure how either will end. That the author can take these murky, ambiguous events and make a coherent, and well-written, narrative says much about his skill.

Highly recommend, especially those interested in social (not military) history of the Occupation and the Second World War. Due out January 2014.

Eleanor says

I found this book dragged somewhat. I did learn something of the difficulties of life in occupied France, but in the end, this was a sad tale of a woman who wanted to be loved and seemed to spend her life looking for it in all the wrong places.

Sarah Beth says

I received an Uncorrected Proof copy of this book from HarperCollins.

Priscilla is the result of Nicholas Shakespeare's research about his mysterious aunt, who survived World War II in occupied France. As a child, Shakespeare knew his aunt as a glamorous, languorous woman who placated a demanding and possessive husband while living on his mushroom farm. She was beautiful and

enigmatic. Rumors swirled about her life in the early 1940s, yet little was known. After her death, Shakespeare decided to uncover the truth of Priscilla's experiences in World War II.

Priscilla was the result of a very unhappy marriage between Doris and Stuart Petre Brode "SPB" Mais, a famous radio personality and author. SPB and Doris' marriage did not survive Priscilla's childhood, and she grew up split between two households, feeling rejected by her father whom she adored, and ridiculed by her impatient and selfish mother. Her father quickly had a second family and two more daughters with his common-law wife, Winnie. The author is the son of one of those daughters from SPB's second union.

It seems as if Priscilla's beauty and charm made her appealing to a great many men. She had many admirers and lovers throughout her life. She met her first husband, Vicomte Robert Doynel De La Sausserie while traveling to try to obtain an abortion that resulted from her first failed love affair. Robert was impotent throughout their marriage, however, Priscilla maintained contact with him throughout her life, and seemed to see the much older Robert as the father she felt she never had.

During the war, Robert was sent to the front, leaving Priscilla on his French estate in the care of his family. However, when the Germans invaded France, the Englishwoman living in their midst quickly became a risk and Priscilla was sent alone to Paris. Priscilla was eventually sent to an internment camp at Besancon in 1940 with other non-French women rounded up from France. Conditions were horrible - hygiene was non-existent, they were forced to wear blood stained military coats that were formerly the belongings of French soldiers who died in the First World War, and she was housed in a room with 48 other women. "Her gums turned black from the diet. She lost 30 pounds and stopped menstruating. Her grim face, thin and dirt-streaked, was covered in blue marks from her bedsack and red bites" (194). Priscilla was eventually released under the guise that she was pregnant.

It is at this point in Priscilla's tale that her story becomes suspect. She is involved with a myriad number of men for the remainder of WWII, at least one of which was a German very closely ranked to Hitler. He may have been "the prominent Nazi official believed by Gillian to have been responsible for naming and enforcing the 'Otto' list, in which the works of authors like Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf and Margaret Mitchell were proscribed and pulped as 'undesirable'" (288). In one confusing chapter, it is revealed that Priscilla, who was sleeping with the married Daniel Vernier while being friends with and using the identity of his wife Simone, fell in love with her lover Daniel's married brother-in-law, Pierre. Pierre and Priscilla both hoped to get divorced and have a daughter together, who they referred to as 'Carole.' Although remarkable, it was wartime, and Priscilla was the product of an unhappy childhood and was deeply lost and troubled, in addition to fighting for her survival. "Nothing would surprise me in the war. Absolutely nothing. It's a question of survival. You never knew who you were going to meet and you lived from day to day. I'm sure that you would have collaborated if you had wanted to live" (289).

My greatest frustration with this book were the segues into detailed biographical descriptions of minor characters, including most of Priscilla's men. The worst part about Priscilla's very active love life was that it made it difficult to keep up with as a reader, and I was somewhat confused about which man was which at times. This book may benefit from a character list, since these individuals are not as near and dear to the reader's heart as they are to the author, who has a personal, familial stake in keeping track of everyone. Also, (and this may change in the final copy of the book) I was frustrated by the inclusion of frequent French lines with no translations.

Priscilla's life seems to be one that is largely unfulfilled and deeply unhappy. An alcoholic and in poor health near the end of her life, Priscilla never achieved two of her greatest dreams: to have children of her own and to publish her writing. Additionally, Priscilla was haunted by her past, and did not confide the full extent of

her life in Occupied France to anyone. "Once, Priscilla was rereading *Candide* and noticed she was eating all the time, and realized that she had read the novella in a state of semi-starvation in Besancon. There were triggers she tried to avoid - being jostled in the Underground or anyone in uniform" (377). Although Priscilla's life seems to be entirely morally ambiguous and full of disappointments and unrealized dreams, she did survive. She left a paper trail to reveal her story, raised two step-children, and although she was never published, her story and her words are now published for the world to see.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Ali says

Review copy sent to me by Harper Collins.

Priscilla: The hidden life of an Englishwoman in wartime France –is the first non-fiction read of 2014. I was especially bad at reading non-fiction last year and have been quite picky about which non-fiction books I select to read. This turned out to be an excellent book to begin my non-fiction reading of 2014. Often in the past I have been fascinated by biographical accounts of life during WWII, so I looked forward to this book, knowing it concerned one of my favourite subjects. I wasn't disappointed; I found the book fascinating and hugely readable. Nicholas Shakespeare is a novelist (of who I confess I hadn't heard) but I am sure that it is his experience as a novelist that makes this book so engaging.

Priscilla – Nicholas Shakespeare's rather glamorous and mysterious aunt had lived for four years in a France under Nazi occupation, it was a time of which she never spoke. Nicholas had grown up under the impression that his aunt had been a member of the Resistance, that she had been tortured by the Germans. This turned out to be an inaccurate picture of what really happened during those dark years, of which few people who lived through it were prepared to speak. Nicholas Shakespeare remembered visiting Priscilla, living on a Sussex mushroom farm with her second husband Raymond during the 1950's and 1960's. She spent long hours in her bedroom, watching a television set that had been placed on an old padded bench at the end of the bed.

"I have a vivid memory of the room because at the foot of the double bed was the first television I had laid eyes on. As prosaic now as the taste of mushrooms, it was regarded, then, as the ultimate luxury to have a television set in your bedroom. The compact, bulbous screen rested on a wooden chest which had a padded top, striped black and white, and it was a special occasion as a boy to be allowed to sit and watch, sometimes with Priscilla. The earliest films I can recall were watched from my aunt's bed which, even when she was not seated beside me, had the smell of the scent that she always wore, and which I associate with the characters whose dramas I tried to follow on screen. I cannot remember anything about this scent, except that it was strong; but I asked my mother and she said that it was Caleche by Hermes."

It was this padded bench that was home to Priscilla's personal belongings, letters, journals and photographs that while certainly not answering all the questions of Priscilla's mysterious past – set her nephew on a quest to discover exactly who she was.

Priscilla was the eldest daughter of Stuart Petre Brodie Mais (1885–1975) – known as SPB – a writer and radio broadcaster whose voice in particular was well known during the war. Her relationship with her parents was often difficult – her father choosing a second family with his common law wife and their daughters (one of whom was Nicholas Shakespeare’s mother) over her, was something Priscilla was never really able to get past.

Following his aunt’s death in 1982 Nicholas Shakespeare became increasingly interested in his aunt’s mysterious past. How had she survived the Nazi occupation? – What had happened to her? Priscilla had lived in France for many years as a young girl; it had been where she met her great friend Gillian. In 1937 she met a minor French aristocrat Robert Doynel de la Sausserie on a train. She married him in December 1938, afterwards living with him in Paris as well as spending time at the family chateau in the French countryside. With the outbreak of war Robert dons the uniform he had worn during the First World War (he is a lot older than Priscilla) and leaves her with his family at Boisgrimot – the family home in the countryside.

When the occupying Nazi forces arrive in the summer of 1940 – Priscilla’s British passport puts her (and her French family) in great danger. She spends a few months interned at Besancon with other British women suffering terrible conditions and near starvation. A French doctor helped to secure her release in the early spring of 1941 – and Priscilla heads back to Paris. What happens to Priscilla between then and October 1944 when, following the allied liberation of Paris, Priscilla pulls up to the door of her friend Gillian’s Mayfair house in a taxi, was, for many years a mystery. As were some of her first words to her friend “I got out just in time.”

Using painstaking research Nicholas Shakespeare finally unravels the mystery of his aunt’s life in occupied France. His investigations lay to rest many assumptions, and misrepresentations that her friends and family had spent years repeating, Priscilla’s nephew portrays his beloved aunt as a flawed and complex woman with great honesty and affection. Nicholas Shakespeare’s pursuit of the truth is exhaustive and wonderfully detailed. This was a compelling and fascinating book and as much of a page turner as many novels.

Hannah says

A fascinating story of a captivating woman. But a warning, it will leave you wanting more; perhaps with more questions than answers.

Priscilla is an interesting woman, so obviously tortured by many of the things that happened throughout her life - some her own fault, but mostly just part of a dangerous spiral triggered by her unstable relationship with her father. And confounded by the occupation of France in WW2.

I was tempted by this book’s telling of another side of the French occupation that is usually forgotten by history: the collaborators who weren’t really collaborating, just getting by as best they could. We have heard many stories of battle and the French Resistance, most of the facts are largely familiar to anyone interested in the period. But women like Priscilla, have been written out of history and considered national embarrassments and traitors at worst, and whores by the more forgiving. But I ask: what would you have done? Gone to ground and risked your life, or done as told by the Germans? In reality, most chose the second. Unfortunately for a beautiful woman such as Priscilla, who was worse off as a British woman in occupied France, you were asked for more than you might like to give. But if it would save your life, yes is the obvious answer. The Resistance heroes are the exception, and while Priscilla’s case is a little more extreme, it is more reflective of the general population.

At times confusingly written, the book would've benefited from some serious editing to focus the story and reflect the chronology better.

Jessica Buike says

I was hoping for more intrigue, more action... but this read like a disjointed journal. It was a bit too dry, a bit too uninteresting - perhaps for the author it was interesting, delving into family history, but it just didn't make for a good read in my opinion.

Lori says

I was a goodreads first reads winner of the book "Priscilla: the Hidden Life of an Englishwoman in Wartime France". This is written by Nicholas Shakespeare, the nephew of Priscilla. After his aunt's death Nicholas goes through artifacts in his aunt's attic. He is surprised to find pictures and letters from his aunt describing her years in France during World War 2 and the Holocaust. His aunt had never talked of those years. Now through the letters he discovered he found his aunt went through some horrible times. She writes of what she did to survive. I try to understand that during such horrific times what people will do to survive. His aunt did what she had to do some may not approve some of her choices. But I think that "who knows what I would do to save my life" some parts of this book kind of dragged and were harder to get through. I have a copy that was an uncorrected proof. So the pictures are kind of blurry and no captions saying who is in the picture. Anyone interested in historical non fiction may find this book of interest.

Kati says

I received this ARC as a Goodreads First Reads win. This had the potential to be a pretty darned good biography, but the author was very unfocused in his execution of the narrative. I do understand that the author was rebuilding the story from letters, diaries, and even police reports, but he spent as much time telling us about the subject's friends, family and acquaintances, as he did about the subject herself. Entire chapters were focused solely on Priscilla's dad, sisters, Mom, Mom's boyfriends, Dad's common-law wife, best friend, several of the best friend's lovers, and Priscilla's many lovers. I do understand that given Priscilla's reticence to talk about her experiences during WW2, that the author has had to rebuild Priscilla's story from the stories of those around her who WOULD talk, but I didn't care to read the in depth details about the visits of Priscilla's best friend & lover to Parisian brothels, and the acts that were witnessed. I didn't see where these type of scenes added to the narrative of Priscilla's life. I'm not prude, I certainly appreciate a well written romance, but I don't see the appeal of reading the explicit details of a liaison between a prostitute and her customer, as witnessed by a second party.

The other aspect of this book that actually bothered me were the times that the author would make a claim that he didn't understand his aunt's, Priscilla's, dislike for a person or a scene, while telling the details of his Aunt's life. For example, he says that Priscilla had a strong dislike for her Mom's boyfriend, which "nobody understood" then proceeds to tell us that the boyfriend tried to rape Priscilla. For me, there's no doubt as to why Priscilla would dislike that guy. Also regarding Priscilla's dislike of men in uniform, being approached by police officers, etc, all of which must have been terrifying in the light of her experiences in Paris during WW2.

Third.... The author views his aunt from a sympathetic point of view, being somewhat upset that few people who were allegedly imprisoned don't remember Priscilla at all, and that his Aunt's story didn't more fully interest those outside his family. I'm under the impression that the author feels his aunt should have been held in such high esteem as various well known actress Hedy Lamar or Couture creatrix Coco Chanel. Fact of the matter remains, there were thousands of people in Paris, Priscilla was only one woman dealing with a cruel period of history, and was neither considerably better nor considerably worse than her fellow female citizens, and thus wouldn't stand out, nor be an exceptional example.

Throughout the book I DID feel sympathy for Priscilla and the hand she'd been dealt in having crummy, self-centered parents, and in the end, her lack of peace with herself and the struggles she faced in Paris during that time, or the lack of empathy she faced from her husband when it was obvious that Priscilla needed some emotional support particularly in her need for a spiritual advisor.

I wish I could give this biography more than 2 stars, but given the lack of focus and the definite cognitive dissonance moments, I just couldn't give this book more than 2 stars. I AM giving it 2 stars, rather than 1, because of the sympathy I felt for Priscilla and the lack of compassion she felt through her life. I guess I feel like she deserves some sympathy posthumously, since she couldn't get it in life.

Deborah says

The premise of this book I found to be very fascinating. Priscilla's nephew Nicholas Shakespeare is both novelist and a biographer. He is aware that biographical truth does not lie only in the facts: there is also the mysterious life to pin down. He discovers his aunt's stash of letters and unmarked photographs that sparked his hunt for the identities of her lovers and associates, which helped him, create this book. He dryly wrote an interesting novel. It is slow and at times reads like a history book.

This is another book that demonstrates what people do to stay alive during a war. Perhaps the struggle for survival is rarely as noble as comfortable peacetime generations might wish it to be. Maybe Shakespeare was more shocked into this story because he believed his aunt had spent the war in terrified hiding in occupied France, and most of the time incarcerated in a concentration camp. Therefore, her letters led him on a detective course for the truth, one that we did not have to follow. There are far better books out there on the same subject.
