

Book Review: The Underground Library
By Jennifer Ryan

When we think about World War II our minds quickly focus on the attack on Pearl Harbor, the horror of the Holocaust, and the atomic blasts that brought Japan to its knees. But there are many lesser-known events and stories that shaped the war's outcome.

“The Underground Library” by Jennifer Ryan chronicles one of those stories.

In late summer 1940, the Blitz – Nazi Germany's unrelenting bombing of London and its surroundings – had just begun. Juliet Lansdown, a 26-year-old from Upper Beeding, a small village on England's southern coast, has just accepted the position of deputy librarian at London's very prestigious Bethnal Green Library. A rarity for a woman to hold such a ‘lofty’ position.

Juliet quickly connects with the two other main characters in this work of historical fiction: Katie Upwood, an intern working at the library for the summer before beginning her university career; and Sofie Baumann, a 19-year-old Jewish refugee sent to England by her father and sister Rachel on a domestic service visa to escape the growing attacks on Jews in her hometown of Berlin.

Juliet faces the challenge of breathing life back into the slumbering library.

Sofie, longing to be reunited with family, suffers under abominable treatment from the man she works for.

Katie finds herself harboring a life-changing secret with no one to turn to.

As the nightly bombs rain down on London, eventually destroying much of the library, Juliet relocates many of the books to the local Underground station where residents shelter nightly. In doing so, she fosters a friendship with Sofie and Katie, as well as other members of the community, during the city's darkest of times.

“The Underground Library” is based on the true story of the Bethnal Green secret underground library. The main characters – Juliet, Katie and Sofie – are fictitious, but so well detailed that it’s easy to feel for and care about them. The narrative flows smoothly, with chapters alternating the perspectives of the three women as they battle through the challenges that life and war have thrown at them.

The ending is just a bit hokey, but still satisfying enough for me to give the book 4.5 stars, and enthusiastically recommend its reading. I don’t think you’ll be disappointed.