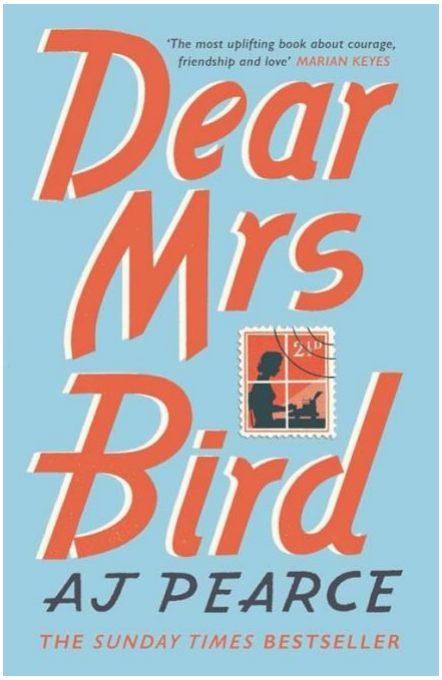
Dear Mrs Bird

by A J Pearce



“A heartwarming, witty, and moving debut set in wartime London, celebrating courage, friendship, and the resilience of ordinary women.”

This story follows Emmeline “Emmy” Lake, who dreams of becoming a War Correspondent. Instead, she lands a job as a typist for the advice columnist Henrietta Bird, who has strict rules on letters containing anything unpleasant – these are immediately to be discarded. Emmy however, cannot ignore the heartfelt pleas of women struggling with loneliness, moral dilemmas, and the hardships of wartime life, and secretly begins responding to them herself, showing compassion and courage. Alongside Emmy’s literary ambitions, she is also a volunteer in the Fire Prevention Service. The story is also about the friendship between Emmy and Bunty and their efforts to carry on with their lives in such exceptional circumstances and shines a brilliant light on the circumstances of ordinary people living their lives, bringing up families, and coping without their husbands and lovers.

Some comments from our members:

“For the most part, I found this book enjoyable and charming. There were times when the relentless jolly hockey sticks style started to grate and the story dragged towards the middle but I liked the pluck and resourcefulness of Emmy and

Bunty and the exploration of both the difficulties and opportunities for women in the Second World War."

"It is the story of the struggle to re-establish a friendship between two young women Emmy and Bunty, after Bunty's fiancé is killed and she herself badly injured. Running parallel to this is the story of Emmy's problems at the office of the woman's magazine problem page. The difficulties women faced when their men were away was well illustrated. I thought the author had researched the subject well, consulting people who had experienced the blitz. But I thought the way Bunty came to Emma's rescue rather far-fetched. Personally, I did not enjoy the book. It brought back too many war- time memories for me although I never experienced the blitz itself, I do have many very bad memories of that time when I was a child."

"The book details what I imagine it was like to live through wartime London rather well but I found the author's attempts to mimic the stilted style of writing in 40's or 50's Woman's own magazine serial unconvincing and irritating, the central theme being Emmy's silly mistake in applying for the wrong job and having to cope with her hard-hearted boss who refused to reply to the young women's cries for help in their wartime love lives. Emmy secretly takes on the burden of replying to these letters in Mrs Bird's name.

Only towards the very end did any believable action take place with everyone affected by a German bomb destroying the Café de Paris where they were celebrating Bunty and William's engagement. The severe injury of her best friend and death of William made Emmy finally face up to the reality of war."

"This is a light-hearted, chatty story written in the style of a woman's magazine story and Enid Blyton. The air raids are graphically described as life carries on… My mother lived in London and, from what she told me, this was how it was. The heroine is not afraid to stand up for herself and speaks her mind. She, her initial boyfriend and her best friend Bunty and Bunty's boyfriend all come from the same village (Emmy is jilted for someone else). She works for an ogre of a woman but gets on well with her other colleagues (Mr Collins' brother becomes a possible love interest later).

The story "jollies along" as she goes from one mishap to another, one misunderstanding to the next but all ends well. A nice, comfort story. The author's note at the end saying she was inspired by a 1939 woman's magazine gives the book more substance."

"I found this an unexpectedly good read, set in the middle of the second World War blitz. The scenario was well-researched (the Café Royale bomb did actually happen – 34 dead). The main character, a young woman with enthusiasm and ambition dreams of being a war correspondent, gets side-tracked in Fleet Street in a team supporting a single-minded, straight-laced dominant "Agony Aunt". For good measure, our heroine is also, with bombs falling all around, a fire prevention volunteer. With innocent zeal, she wants to help women in need of support coping with family and emotional constraints, contrasting with the more liberal society of today. She writes with a good sense of humour coping in these times of war.

On a personal note, my mother was doing her nursing training in central London in 1942 as a 19year old, the same age as the book's heroine. The novel has given me a little more insight into the reality of those times more than my mother would ever tell us about as children. Her generation seemed unfazed by the danger."

"I thoroughly enjoyed the book and liked the positivity despite the war raging around the characters and their strong work ethic"

Christine Wright