

Choral Review: The Chilbury Ladies' Choir By Jennifer Ryan

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The Chilbury Ladies' Choir is – as befits its title – a choral work, in the sense that the story is narrated by a number of different voices, single strands blending together to make a complete picture. The story unfolds through diaries, letters, telegrams, newspaper reports, and notices pinned to the notice board at the village hall.

The village of Chilbury, near the south coast of England, is fictitious; but the historical and geographical settings are real. The book opens in March 1940, soon after the beginning of the Second World War, at a time when the war seemed a long way from England, and the British people were referring to it as 'the phoney war' because nothing much seemed to be happening. This situation soon comes dramatically to an end, however, as France falls to the German invasion and Allied soldiers are evacuated from Dunkerque, always referred to by the British as 'Dunkirk'. From this point on, the story becomes much darker.

But let us go back to the beginning. The book opens with a notice pinned to the village hall notice board, in which the vicar informs the remaining villagers that since the men have all left to go to war, the choir is to close. Forthright Mrs Brampton-Boyd (usually referred to by others – much to her annoyance – as simply 'Mrs B') comments 'Just because the men have gone to war, why do we have to close the choir? And

precisely at a time when we need it most!’

This remark sets the tone for the novel: the first seeds of revolt on the part of the village women, and the importance of the choir and of music, especially at a time of anxiety and trouble.

The novel has a very varied cast of characters. Autocratic Mrs B, gentle melancholy Mrs Tilling, the Winthrop sisters Venetia and Kitty. Venetia is eighteen years old, blonde, and beautiful; Kitty is thirteen and wants to be a professional singer when she is older. Living with the Winthrop family is Silvie, a ten-year-old Jewish refugee from Czechoslovakia who is keeping a tragic secret, which will only be revealed towards the end of the novel. Other characters include Angela Quail, the vicar’s daughter and Venetia’s close friend, whom we meet through Venetia’s letters and occasional comments from other people; according to Kitty, Angela is a shameless flirt and has no morals. We are also introduced to Brigadier Winthrop, a thoroughly unpleasant character, a brute and a bully, father of Venetia and Kitty; and to the midwife, Miss Edwina Paltry, a totally unscrupulous woman who needs money and is prepared to stoop to any depths in order to get it. Together she and Brigadier Winthrop hatch an outrageous plot to give the Brigadier what he most wants: a son, to replace the son who has just been killed and to secure his home Chilbury Manor and its estate, which can only be inherited by the male line of the family.

A key character in the novel is Miss Primrose Trent, known as ‘Prim’, a music teacher from London who has moved to Chilbury to teach at the nearby university. When she learns from Kitty that the choir has been disbanded, she echoes Mrs B’s feelings, saying ‘Well, that’s no good, is it! To close down a choir. Especially at a time like this!’ Again, we see the importance of a choir, and of music, in troubled times.

The story unfolds, bringing drama, tragedy, mysteries, and

even romance. Gradually the village women begin to assert themselves, gaining realisation of their capabilities and their importance, and beginning to question why they have always allowed themselves to be dictated to by the men in their lives instead of exercising their own minds. 'Prim' re-launches the choir, now called The Chilbury Ladies' Choir, bringing together women of greatly different ages and status: the lady of the manor, the village shopkeeper, a nurse, a midwife, a secretary, two schoolgirls and the village schoolteacher: the choir is a great leveller. Together they rediscover the joy of singing together, 'pouring out our longings, our anxieties, our deepest fears.'

One village woman, Mrs Poultrice, sees her deepest fears made real when her son is killed in France. Shocked and heartbroken, she seemingly loses the power of speech and no longer speaks to anyone, but the ladies of the choir convince her to join them, in the hope that she will find some comfort in music. Prim introduces the choir to Gregorian chant 'for the mourning of the dead' and they sing it together, sitting in a circle holding hands. Mrs Tilling comments in her diary how '... singing brings us together. There we were, in our own little worlds, with our own problems, and then suddenly they seemed to dissolve, and we realized that [we are] living through this, supporting each other. That's what counts.'

Silvie the refugee child is reminded of sitting shiva, the Jewish mourning ritual, when her grandfather died, and of the Kaddish mourning chant. She sings the chant for Kitty, who writes it down; Silvie thinks that maybe they could sing it for poor Mrs Poultrice. The author reminds us here of the immense power of music, a universal language which by tapping into our common humanity can overcome all differences of culture, religion, nationality. In another extract from her diary, Kitty describes singing the 'Lacrimosa' from Mozart's Requiem as feeling like drowning in 'a massive ocean of sorrow' until emerging at the end, survivors, stronger than

before.

Jennifer Ryan brings vividly to life the very real fear of invasion felt by the people living near the south coast of England at this time. We the readers, seventy-five years later, know of course that this never happened; England was not invaded. But at the time, it was a very real threat and Ms Ryan makes us feel the anguish felt by the villagers. Mrs Tilling writes in her diary, '[I fear] that we will ... lose our country, our culture, our freedom, our very selves ... and there will be nothing left. We will be hollow skeletons ...' At the same time, the author counterbalances this fear by introducing a vein of comedy as the village women come together to discuss how they will repulse an invasion, should it happen. Improvised weapons include a table lamp, a fire poker, and a three-tiered silver cake stand! Mrs Tilling has an old air rifle which belonged to her husband (although she has no idea how to use it) and Mrs Quail the vicar's wife claims to be proficient in the use of a kitchen knife. The ladies are certainly not lacking in courage.

Tragedy strikes the village when a bomb is dropped by a passing aeroplane, causing death and destruction. At the ensuing funeral, since there are no men available to carry the coffin, the Chilbury Ladies' Choir, in a stunningly dramatic and moving scene, themselves carry the coffin of one of their beloved members, singing 'Abide With Me' as they process down the aisle of the church from the door to the altar, their voices 'a soaring white dove in the everlasting tumult of war.'

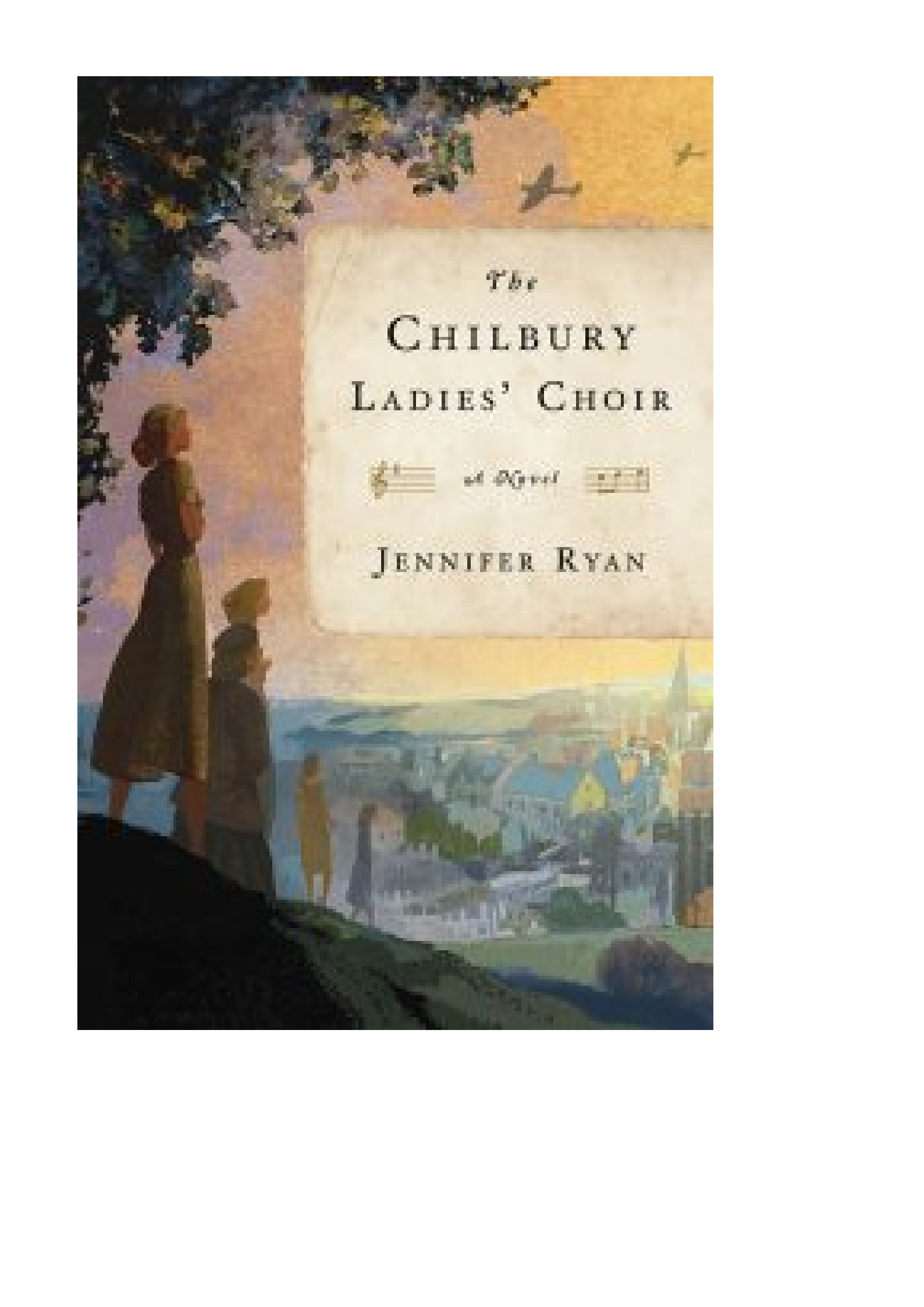
Two things set this novel apart from other similar books. First, its authenticity: it is vivid and immediate, hardly surprising when one realises that it was the real-life memories of Ms Ryan's grandmother, and her stories of her life in wartime, that inspired the book. And second, running through the narrative like a thread of silver through a tapestry, the Choir itself: the place of refuge and

companionship, the place where the women find the strength to carry on despite the tragedies and difficulties which beset them; the place where they come together to share their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears, and to express these feelings through music. A disparate group of women united in their hearts and minds as only music can unite, uplifted by its power.

It is left to Prim to sum up the real significance of music:

'Music takes us out of ourselves, away from our worries and tragedies, helps us look into a different world, a bigger picture. All those cadences and beautiful chord changes, every one of them makes you feel a different splendour of life.'

Jennifer Ryan grew up in the county of Kent, in south-east England; she now lives in Washington D.C. in the United States with her husband and two children. She has dedicated this book to her grandmother and to 'the women of the Home Front', who were her inspiration.



THE
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 *et seq.* 

JENNIFER RYAN



GILLIAN FORLIVESI HEYWOOD was born near Manchester, England. She received an Honours Degree in Italian Studies from the University of Reading. She has lived in Italy for many years, first in Milan, where she taught English at one of the city's most prestigious universities, and then in Rimini on the Adriatic Riviera. She is married and has a son and a daughter, twin grandchildren, and two very spoiled cats! She has always worked as a translator, while continuing to teach English, mainly to professional people; at one time she had her own language school. She still enjoys translating and works mainly in the fields of history (especially local history) and art, being frequently commissioned to translate visitor information materials for art exhibitions. In her spare time she enjoys singing in an amateur choir (a hobby she shares with her husband), going to the theatre and concerts, reading and sewing, and taking long walks in the country or by the sea. She is also an active member and former Vice-President of her local University of the Third Age. She enjoys travelling and is always ready to pack a bag and go! Email: new.linguist@yahoo.it

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