

Wars and Moments in Time: A Brief Look at the Historical Scope of the Maisie Dobbs Series

By Jacqueline Winspear

When I realized I was going to write a series (rather than just one novel), after some thought I knew I wanted to create not only an arc to each story, but an arc to the overall series. I wanted to take a female character who is only three years older than the century, from just before the Great War (1914-1918) began, to the end of WW2. The Maisie Dobbs of my imagining was very much a member of the “spirited” cadre of women in Britain who earned a measure of independence during WW1 when they were the first generation of women in modern times to go to war in significant numbers.

I wanted to weave history with mystery to create the story of Maisie Dobbs and her fellow characters, and I wanted to move the series through time. Using mystery, the powerful archetypal journey through chaos to resolution, I was able to immerse myself – and readers – in some of the most significant historical landmarks of the Twentieth Century, along with aspects of the impact those events had on ordinary people.

Maisie Dobbs: 1) Introduces the social strata in Edwardian England pre-WW1; 2) Women’s educational opportunities in early 1900s; 3) Medical care in WW1; 4) The plight of soldiers with profound facial wounds, shell-shock.

Birds of a Feather: 1) Societal pressures to encourage enlistment; 2) Drug use among returning soldiers; 3) Continuing shell-shock (PTSD) and its impact on those who served – women as well as men; 4) The role of women in post-WW1 Britain – the two million “surplus” women for whom there would never be a husband or children, but who changed attitudes as never before.

Pardonable Lies: 1) The “missing” of war; 2) The prevalence of so-called psychics as the bereaved try to contact dead soldiers; 3) Military intelligence in WW1; 4) Same sex relationships; 5) Abused children; 6) The loss of the mother.

Messenger of Truth: 1) Wartime/Battlefield artists in WW1; 2) The Depression of the 1920s/30s; 3) Conscientious objectors.

An Incomplete Revenge: 1) Country life in the early 1930s, 2) Attitudes toward traveling “gypsy” folk; 3) Hop-picking and Londoners working in the county of Kent – again, societal attitudes between different groups.

Among The Mad: 1) Treatment of mental illness in women in 1930’s; 2) Lingering PTSD in veterans; 3) Terrorism.

Mapping of Love and Death: 1) America in WW1; 2) The role of battlefield mapmakers; 3) The missing of WW1 and the ongoing uncovering of remains; 4) Love and War; 5) The passing of those held dear.

A Lesson In Secrets: 1) The rise of the Nazi party in early 1930s Britain, 2) Women and education, 3) The role of the Secret Service, 4) German agents in Britain.

Elegy for Eddie: 1) Undercover preparations for WW2; 2) Working class London; 3) The plight of unwed mothers; 4) Attitudes toward children challenged by disability.

Leaving Everything Most Loved: 1) Indian “Ayahs” (carers of wealthy ex-pat’s children) cast aside in 1930s London; 2) Indian soldiers in WW1; 3) Interracial marriage in early 1900s Britain; 4) The impact of leaving dearly-held connections to depart overseas.

A Dangerous Place: 1) Gibraltar, center of political power during the Spanish Civil War; 2) The Sephardic Jewish community in Gibraltar; 3) Hitler’s bombing of Spanish targets on behalf of Franco (a “test run” for the bombing of Britain during WW2); 4) Britain’s role in bringing Franco to power and the international interests of other countries in Spain’s mineral wealth.

Journey To Munich: 1) Munich in pre-WW2 Germany; 2) The role of British and American intelligence; 3) The rise of Dachau as a prison camp for socialists, publishers, free thinkers – and in time the Jewish population of Munich. 4) Rearguard action against the Nazis in pre-war Germany.

In This Grave Hour: 1) Outbreak of WW2 in London; 2) Belgian refugees; 3) The evacuation of children from Britain’s cities.

To Die But Once: 1) Evacuation of Dunkirk; 2) “Reserved” occupations in wartime; 3) Youth apprenticeships.

The American Agent: 1) The American “warcasters” in WW2 London (Edward R. Murrow et al); 2) Hitler’s first “Blitzkrieg” on wartime Britain; 3) Women ambulance drivers during the bombings.

The Consequences of Fear: 2) Boy message runners in wartime Britain’s cities; 2) The Free French intelligence operation; 3) The Special Operations Executive; 3) The announcement of the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the USA entering the war.

A Sunlit Weapon: 1) Black American soldiers entering WW2 Britain – a country with no segregation and a centuries-old history of immigration. Troops from across the then Empire were already situated in Britain, as they were in WW1; 2) Women ferry pilots in WW2; 3) Fighter pilots in WW2; 4) Visit to Britain of Eleanor Roosevelt. 5) German agents operating in Wartime Britain. 5) The “America First” movement.

The Comfort of Ghosts: 1) End of WW2; 2) Secret role of children in resistance roles; 3) Home grown Nazi Sympathizers; 4) Early 20th century women’s medical care; 5) early to mid-20th century laws on adoption; 6) Britain’s role in developing weapons of nuclear war

What Would Maisie Do?: A collection of readers’ favorite passages from the Maisie Dobbs’ series, together with comments from the author and pages for personal reflection.