



Nella Last's Peace: The Post-War Diaries Of Housewife 49

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Nella Last's War established a housewife and mother from Barrow-in-Furness as one of the most powerful and moving voices of the Second World War, and inspired the award-winning television drama Housewife, 49. In this next instalment of her unique diaries, Nella Last describes how ordinary people re-built their lives after the war was over.

While the Allies' victory was a cause for hope and celebration, much privation and anxiety remained. 'The only peace is that there are no active hostilities,' Nella wrote, 'but the corrosion of the war years is eating deeper into civilisation.' In her sensitive and playful account of daily life in the austerity years, written like her diaries for the Mass Observation project, Nella Last captures the thoughts and feelings of post-war Britain.

'If the historians could see clearly enough, this could well be called the age of frustration...after all, for ordinary people, it's the little things that count, whether for good or ill.' Nella Last

Nella Last's Peace: The Post-War Diaries Of Housewife 49 Details

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The Library Lady says

This is a sad coda to Nella's story. Having been so busy and active and useful during the war, Nella's life was a hard slog in the post war years.

I am giving this a lower rating not because of that, but because of the poor editing. While the first book allowed readers to hear Nella's voice with few editorial comments, here the editors constantly break into the diaries with comments, and instead of giving us the diaries, they give us quotations and leave out large chunks. Perhaps they had to cut things for space, but it makes the book sadly disjointed.

Kathleen Hagen says

Nella Last's Peace, by Robert and Patricia Malcolmson, Narrated by Carole Boyd, Produced by BBC Audio Books, downloaded from audible.com.

Nella Last's War introduced us to a housewife and mother from Barrow-in-Furness, who began a journal in 1939 for the Mass Observation Project—a research project collecting information on people's daily lives. Unlike most of the diarists, Nella kept her diary sending in weekly accounts from 1939 to 1966. She had always wanted to be a writer, and in these journals, edited parts of her full journal which takes volumes and which is in a museum with no one having read all of it, she gives us a unique and moving picture of England at this time. In this next installment of her edited journals, Nella Last describes how ordinary people rebuilt their lives after the war was over. While the Allies' victory was a cause for hope and celebration, much anxiety remained. Nella tells us that, while the war years were difficult, there was camaraderie and purpose in helping each other out, providing services both for the men at war and for people at home. But in this journal, covering the years 1946 through 1948, she tells how the country now seems steeped in depression as does Nella seem to be herself. We learn how the volunteer services necessary and provided by women during the war are no longer necessary and are closed down. So the women go back home, but now with a taste for doing things outside of the home. The men come home and can't find jobs. She finds her husband difficult to live with because he is still so tied to his mother who Nella has never liked. Carole Boyd is the perfect narrator for the three edited journals from Nella Last's writings. She reads them with an intimacy that makes you feel as if you're in Nella's living room having a good gossip with her.

Elizabeth says

Fascinating insight into post war England.

Anna says

I read it for research, but enjoyed it as much as a novel. She was a diarist during and after WWII and was a very accessible and perceptive writer. It follows Nella Last's War. Both are brilliant

Josie says

[Audiobook version]

The feel of this was quite different to *Nella Last's War*. Stylistically, there was a lot more editing -- although as the editors point out, Nella Last wrote millions of words in her lifetime, so they had to prune quite heavily. Scenes are introduced with a sentence (e.g. "Nella loved visiting the Lake District with her husband" followed by a passage from her diary, detailing a day out at the Lakes) and although I understand why this was necessary, it did create a feeling of distance.

Emotionally, this chapter of Nella's life was a lot bleaker. Without the impetus of her war work to give her life purpose and enjoyment, Nella seemed wearier and more depressed. She talks about her nerves bothering her, and there's a poignant scene in a grocer's shop where she observes the queue of women in a little strip of mirror above the products. One mouth, she notes, is particularly down-turned, and she wonders who this miserable woman is... before realising it is, of course, herself.

There's also the story of a new friend of Nella's, a young woman called Jessie who, at 34, is considered old for a first-time mother. She develops post-natal depression after her baby girl is born (not that it's ever referred to as PND) and her husband eventually takes her to what Nella describes as a "mental home". Jessie undergoes electroconvulsive shock therapy and returns home after three months, and is reunited with her daughter, who had been cared for by her mother. Maybe it's silly of me to have felt so affected by this story, given that it happened nearly seventy years ago, but I was genuinely anxious to know how things turned out for Jessie and her baby, given the none too happy endings for a lot of women with mental illness back then.

Despite the grim realities of life after the war -- rationing continued for years, of course, and the nation was nearly bankrupt and struggling to rebuild itself -- there were moments of hope, of love and happiness. I particularly loved the narrator -- her warm voice was comforting to listen to and I felt as if I were an old friend being taken into her confidences.

I did think this ended rather suddenly, and without any real sense of tying up endings. But apart from feeling slightly confused as I fumbled around trying to find the next CD, this didn't bother me too much, as I have *Nella Last in the 1950s* lined up and ready to go.

Gail Amendt says

I was so happy to return to Nella Last's wonderful diary that she kept for the Mass Observation project. This is the second volume of her posthumously published diaries, and covers the years immediately after the end of WWII. The war years had seen Nella blossom, as she cast off the restrictions of her repressive marriage and immersed herself in volunteer work for the war effort. The post-war years were gloomy for Nella. She missed her volunteer work, struggled in her marriage, faced rationing even more severe than during the war, and frequently suffered from ill-health and depression. She worried about her sons, as unemployment was high after the war, and young men were having a difficult time transitioning from wartime service to post-war careers. The world political situation also worried her, as nations struggled to rebuild after the war, the Cold War began, and the threat of nuclear war loomed. Her analysis of these situations is very astute, revealing a remarkable intelligence. While there have been countless books written about the war, there has been much less written about the immediate post-war years, and Nella's detailed first-hand account of life in

her small town in Northern England is fascinating. It amazes me the sheer volume that she wrote, obviously finding her writing therapeutic. She had always aspired to be a writer, musing that in some future reincarnation she might write books. My one complaint is with the editing. The diaries have been edited for clarity and flow, which is fine, but large sections of her writing are skipped over and summarized by the editors. I do understand the reason at times, but they have done this with some significant events that I would much rather hear in Nella's own words, as these summaries do not allow us to see her reactions and emotions. There was much less of this heavy-handed editing in the first book, which I think allowed the reader to connect more personally with this remarkable woman. I look forward to reading the final volume, and hope that the editors allow Nella to tell her own story.

Pat says

I found this view into another person's life quite fascinating. We hear so much about the years during World War II and how people were effected. This diary of the years following the war's end give another view. The relief and joy with the armistice were short-lived. Day-to-day realities left a lot to be desired. Nella was a very good writer. As a girl, she had wanted to write and the Mass Observation Project finally gave her the opportunity. All her readers (then, now, and forever) benefit.

Piara Strange says

It was wonderful to pick up from where I left off at the end of Nella Last's War - VJ Day August 14th, 1945 - when I opened the pages of Nella Last's Peace. There was something very comforting about the continuation, so I didn't feel as if I'd missed any of Nella's little world and life in Barrow and the goings on with her family and friends.

You can expect more of the same wonderful prose (expertly edited) and humourous, gossipy, emotive and reflective insights, observations, thoughts, feelings and interactions as Nella shares her life with us. The war might well be over, but the fight to establish a positioning in the new world and the battle for housewives to provide for their families despite rationing, rages on. Life is still hard and Nella often reflects on the camaraderie of the war years and how it kept them all going.

What I love about Nella's writing is that she is brutally honest in her diary entries and she seems ultra sensitive to the happenings of everyday life.

Two beautiful quotes to illustrate this:

"We are all in the melting pot of history, and that's always hurting. The best part of history is to read it out of books when things get more in focus..."

"It's so ghastly to think that people who fight, endure and suffer are not the ones to begin wars, and are so helpless to stop them. Only if people's minds and hearts could unite and change, only if we all could unite in a single purpose of personal responsibility to each other, to life in general, towards people we know exist but never see, to teach little children the beauty of peace and concord, how to agree with each other, share things - and laugh - can simple forthright peace come."

When I got to the end, I felt like I'd lost an old friend, a very dear, wise old friend. So imagine my delight when I discovered there's a third and final installment of Nella's diary entries written through the 1950s.

Guess what I've just ordered on Amazon...

Graceann says

Nella Last would have been the first to tell you that she was just an "ordinary woman." I beg to differ. The life that her time put her in might have been filled with how to find a "nice bit of fish" in order to feed herself and her husband, and how to tend to her home in between power cuts, but her ability to express her feelings, thoughts and wishes can only be described as extraordinary.

Mrs. Last wrote diaries for the Mass Observation programme that started just before the Second World War and continued on into the 1950s. She wrote for M.O. and for herself, though it's hard to imagine that when you read the brilliant prose that presents itself as part of her everyday life. She comments on the troubles of the soldiers coming home, and of the wives who are getting reacquainted with these strangers coming back to them after five years. She discusses her own marital disharmony and her occasional outbursts in which she tells those who are taking advantage of her just where to get off. She tells riveting stories of being called to assist when the chimney next door catches fire or the niece of a friend has a breakdown. She writes all of this for herself, but it reads as if it were meant, from the moment it left her pen, for publication. She could have had no idea that that's what was going to happen.

Amusingly, she refers to her writing at one point, saying, in effect, that if she'd gone a different route, she'd have ended up writing a few books by 1947. Here I am in 2015, reading the second of two books revolving entirely around her M.O. diaries. I hope that she's aware of and pleased by that.

Katrina says

I love Nella's writing and the glimpse into the past. I'm really looking forward to reading Nella Last's 1950s and being in her company again.

Rachel says

Gentle reading. It's taken me a long time to read as I'd dip in and out of it every so often, rather than read in one sitting.

Page 208 has beautiful descriptions - Nella at her best.

The book ended rather abruptly. I'm not keen on the choice of last entry.

Like others I'd like more of Nella's diaries. Possibly some of her last years to see how they both fared near the end of their lives.

Veronica says

I've already raved about Nella Last's War. By the end of that book I felt I knew Nella and longed to meet her. So this selection from her post-war diaries made me sad, as if I was reading a letter from a friend going through a bad patch. In November 1946:

I stood amongst the women waiting to be served. Well dressed or otherwise, they all had one thing in common -- a kind of look in their eyes and compressed-looking mouths, as if they had closed them tightly at times to keep back sharp words of irritation. I was covertly watching their faces through a little strip of mirror, rather badly lit, and one mouth looked particularly set. I looked again at the bit of chin that showed above a row of tinned pears, feeling pity as I thought, "You *do* look repressed and irritable" ... I recognised it for my own mouth, and wondered, "Do I often look like that?"

In January 1948, she wrote:

I thought of the greetings of other years, even war years, at Hospital Supply. We set our faces against drabness and clinging to old customs of happier days was one little gesture, even in the darkest days. I sighed as I thought the so-called peace was robbing us of things that war never did. I often look back on the war years personally and think of the exhilaration that filled my veins like potent wine, carrying me over rough places ... giving me courage to do whatever came along.

Nella lives a sadly limited life after the war, struggling with rationing and queues, dealing with bouts of ill-health (probably stress-related), an emotionally dependent husband, and demanding in-laws. She desperately needs to feel useful, and with her sons gone out into the world often feels frustrated and lost. Despite the difficulties she is still able to show her warm heart and generosity to others in trying circumstances. I'm sure the literally millions of words she wrote over the years, often late at night in bed, must have helped to keep her sane, even though she shared them only with Mass Observation. That was probably one reason why she had little sense of her talent:

Of all gifts I crave, that of "expression" would be my dearest wish. ... If I could put it all in written language and sequence, I could write books, I'm sure. Maybe I'll get my wish in some future reincarnation!"

So she got her wish, but I wish she'd lived to see the pleasure her words would give to others. She is a superb, compassionate and perceptive writer, surely one of the greatest British diarists of the 20th century.

There seems to have been more editorial intervention in this book than in the previous one (different editors) with more determination to highlight specific themes; I felt this was a bit of a shame, as they skipped some episodes I'd like to have read, such as Nella's visit to her son in Belfast to see her longed-for first grandchild, and probably also made Nella's life with her husband sound more miserable than it actually was.

Natasha says

During WWII Great Britain formed an organization, called Mass Observation, to help monitor the average citizen's response to the war. They put ads in newspapers that asked people to submit diary entries on a regular basis. Nella Last, 49 years old at the time, started writing a diary for this group.

Years later her diary entries were found and compiled into several books. This is one of them. There was a movie, Housewife, 49, based on her experiences during the war (based on the book Nella Last's War), and this book is based on her peacetime diaries.

Simply put, her writing is beautiful, as well as her transformation from a woman trapped in a marriage to a very stern man, to a woman who finds self-actualization through volunteer work. She gains a sense of purpose and love of life, while she continued to pride in her home and family life.

I was surprised by how difficult life in Britain continued to be after the war was over. Rationing was still enforced, housing was scarce and there was very little work for men returning from the war. Also surprising was the bitter attitude toward American and the sense that "she didn't suffer the hardship we did and should help more."

I love books full of domestic life and this one is full of them. Wonderful.

Jennifer says

It's hard to assess this book on it's own as opposed to comparing it to Nella Last's War (which I loved). This was a great continuation of Nella's story - the difficult times post war, the challenges with her husband and with life in general. In some ways, these post war years were harder on Nella than the war itself. During the war she was busy and needed outside the home. She built relationships with other women and the soldiers that came into the canteen, she ran the Red Cross efforts and the charity shop. Everyone was rallying together for a common cause - all saying that everything will be better when the war ends. But after the war there was even more shortages, more rationing, more economizing and much less of a rallying spirit. It's also interesting to read some of her thoughts about America and the resentment that was probably common in Britain at that time that we didn't get into the war soon enough and then didn't have any of the shortages to deal with after. Reading this next installment of Nella's story was like reconnecting with an old friend. Definitely a must read for anyone who enjoyed her war time diaries but not one to read as a stand alone book.

Philippa says

A truly fascinating account of life in postwar Britain. After the hardship of war, peacetime was not all that people thought it would be. Nella's observations of her daily life, and her family and neighbours, reveal there was just as much upheaval and trauma in the aftermath of the hostilities. Soldiers return home and find their families to be strangers, one young neighbour suffers what would now be diagnosed as PND after the birth of her first child and gets bundled off to an asylum, Nella's son returns from the war and decides to emigrate to Australia, and everyday activities like buying food and clothes remain epic challenges. But had I not known

the years she was writing in, so many of her observations about society, human nature, politics and, sadly, even racism, could have been written today. It makes you wonder how far we have really come. Despite this, her writing is playful and sensitive, and I found it utterly compelling to read. Sad at times, but still witty, detailed and touching.
