

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Charlotte Gray (2001)

Gillian Armstrong (1950-)

OVERVIEW

Director Gillian Armstrong was born in 1950 and raised in a suburb of Melbourne, Australia. While studying directing at the newly established Australian Film and Television School, she made several much-lauded short films. With Peter Weir, Armstrong was one of the first Australian directors to be recognized internationally, beginning with her first feature film, *My Brilliant Career* (1979), which competed at Cannes. Armstrong went on to make other films in Australia (including *Starstruck* [1982], *High Tide* [1987], *Oscar and Lucinda* [1997], and several documentaries) and in Hollywood (including *Mrs. Soffel* [1985] and *Little Women* [1994]). Internationally acclaimed throughout her career, Armstrong has won numerous awards in Australia and abroad.

Film *Charlotte Gray* was based on a novel of the same name by Sebastian Faulks, published in 1999. This work of historical fiction tells the story of Charlotte Gray, a British woman who goes to France to work as a secret agent during World War II and contributes to resistance efforts against the Nazi occupiers. The film traces Charlotte's experiences from the beginning of the war to her voluntary return to France after the war ends. Most of the film's dialogue is in English, including the scenes set in France.

Background Gillian Armstrong directed the film based on a screenplay by Jeremy Brock. The film was produced by Ecosse Films, among other studios. Armstrong re-teamed with actress Cate Blanchett (star of *Oscar and Lucinda*) for the title role; Michael Gambon, Billy Crudup, and Helen McCrory also starred. The film received largely negative or middling reviews from critics, though the cinematography and Blanchett's performance were generally praised.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Charlotte Gray – young British woman eager to serve in World War II
Robert Cannerly – recruiter of British secret agents
Peter Gregory – young RAF pilot
Julien Levade – young Communist and resistance fighter in Vichy France
Monsieur Levade – Julien's father; World War I veteran
Jacob and André Duguay – young Jewish boys

SYNOPSIS

A young woman named Charlotte Gray is riding a train to London sometime after the start of World War II. On the train, she converses with an older man named Robert Cannerly, revealing that she is fluent in French and eager to serve her country. He recruits her to work as a British secret agent in France. While she is in training, Charlotte has a romantic relationship with young RAF pilot Peter Gregory. Shortly before she leaves for France, Peter goes on a three-week mission and is shot down; Charlotte learns that he may be in hiding in a small French town.

Charlotte goes to France with the new cover identity of Dominique Guilbert. She is established in a little town called Lezignac, with the help of a group of Communist resistance fighters led by a young man named Julien Levade. Charlotte is brave and willing, but her eagerness to seek information about Peter from her contacts repeatedly compromises their lives and her mission. Still, she helps Julien and his comrades sabotage German operations, and she lives with Julien's father in disguise as a housekeeper tending to Monsieur Levade and the two young Jewish boys he is hiding, André and Jacob Duguay.

Eventually, Charlotte's secret contact tells her that Peter Gregory is dead. In addition, the schoolteacher of Lezignac reveals that he knows Monsieur Levade is hiding the two Jewish boys. He and

the collaborationist city administrators help German soldiers capture the boys, as well as capturing Levade himself, who turns out to have had one set of Jewish grandparents. Unable to save any of the people she has come to care about, Charlotte obeys her contact's orders to return to England. Months later, she sees Peter, alive and well, but is no longer interested in resuming their relationship. Instead, she returns to France after the war and is reunited with Julien.

SCENES

Reading French – A young woman rides in a train. An older man sits down in her compartment and introduces himself as Robert Cannerly. He engages her in conversation, observing that she is reading a book in French. In response to his questions, she says that she once lived in France, and that her name is Charlotte Gray. He observes that it is brave to live in London right now because of the war; she responds indignantly that it is their duty. He invites Charlotte to a book launch.



Launch – Charlotte and two friends attend the book launch. Cannerly finds her and obliquely discusses secret agent work with her. Charlotte also meets a handsome young RAF pilot who introduces himself as Peter Gregory; they leave the party together and begin a romantic relationship. In her flat, Charlotte and Peter discuss the war and what it means to be brave. He tells her that all his friends have died, but not because he was braver than they.



Training – Charlotte begins training for secret agent work in France. This involves training in physical fitness as well as instruction about the political situation in France. She and the others in the training are told that they will be given entirely new identities.



Peter imperiled – Peter goes on a three-week war mission. He fails to show up on the day appointed for his return; Charlotte inquires and is told that the authorities think his plane went down over France but are not sure. A couple of days later, she talks to a friend of Peter's who tells her—even though he says he should not—that Peter is hiding in a little town in France called Gillesse.



Sneaking into France – Charlotte boards a small plane and is given a small package and some directions about where to meet her French contact and how to hand the package to her. Now known as "Dominique," Charlotte parachutes into a field in France, where two small boys are playing a game. A young man appears and helps her get out of the parachute; he welcomes her and takes her to the house where she is supposed to wait for next steps. He introduces himself as Octave and tells her that he and his friends at the house are communists.



French contact arrested – The two young boys from the field wake up in the morning to find that their parents have disappeared. Octave finds them in the village, Lezignac, eating a baguette. Charlotte, meanwhile, walks through the village and enters a café, where she orders a coffee and sits down. A woman enters and sits by Charlotte. She asks whether Charlotte has "them" but says not to give them to her because she believes she was followed. The woman gets up, but Charlotte detains her to ask about Peter in Gillesse. Several gendarmes enter; the woman tells Charlotte to pass her the package. The gendarmes ask the woman for her papers, look at them, search her pockets, find the package, and then take her away.



New plan – Charlotte rushes to Octave's home, tells him what happened to the woman, and says that they have to do something to rescue her. He does not think this is possible, but he says that Charlotte needs a new cover in case she was seen; he says she can live in disguise as a housekeeper with his father and the two Jewish



boys he's hiding (the same boys who saw Charlotte land in France). In response to her question, he says that his real name is Julien.

Meeting Levade – Charlotte goes to the house of Julien's father, Levade. He welcomes her and tells her to give the Duguay boys a bath. She draws the boys a bath; they discuss between themselves whether she is the "lady from the sky" who parachuted down. Charlotte goes to the kitchen, where she discusses the boys with Levade and with Julien, who has dropped by.



English contact – Charlotte goes to her first meeting with her English contact. He tells her that a German train carrying munitions will be passing through the village at a certain time on a certain day. She asks him what happened to the woman she met in the café; he says that she is dead.



Sabotage – Julien and his comrades, along with Charlotte, set explosives along a train track at night. The German train comes by as planned and is blown up. A few soldiers manage to get off the train and have a shootout with Julien and the others. One of the French men is injured.



Debriefing – When Charlotte returns to Levade's house, he sees that she is upset. He tells her that it's always a shock the first time. He says that he was an engineer in the first world war. They discuss their lives and the reasons people engage in war.



Not leaving – Charlotte goes to the train station and buys a ticket for Gillesse. When the train arrives, though, she sees a horde of soldiers getting off and the two Duguay boys standing on the platform. She takes them back to Levade's house, telling them never to leave the house without an adult. At the house, the boys play outside with Julien while Charlotte hangs laundry. Julien comes over to Charlotte; they discuss the arrival of the German soldiers, and he tells her she did well the night before.



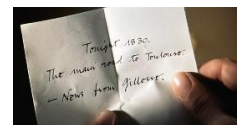
Tensions – Charlotte meets with her English contact, who gives her some information to pass on to her French contacts. She asks him about Peter; he grumbles but says he will make inquiries. That night, while Charlotte touches up her hair dye, the schoolteacher of Lezignac clandestinely watches her through her partially open curtains. She comforts the older Duguay boy when he wakes from a nightmare.



German soldiers – The citizens of Lezignac watch the German soldiers march through town. Julien approaches them, shouting the names of French people who have disappeared, saying "disappeared" after each name. A soldier points a gun at him; Charlotte tries to drag him away and then kisses him to stop him speaking. The townspeople applaud. Julien tells Charlotte that the Duguay boys' parents have been moved to Poland; he says that the mother tried to write the boys a note before being taken away but was interrupted by the guard because she took too long. Before they can finish their conversation, they are interrupted, so they agree to meet later that night.



Disasters – Back at Levade's house, Levade approaches Charlotte, handing her a note that was pushed under the door. The note says that there is news from Gillesse. Charlotte rushes away. She goes to meet her English contact to get the news. He arrives late, causing her to miss her meeting with Julien. He shows her a picture of a dead body in a pilot's uniform, telling her that it is Peter's, and he also says that it's time for her to return to Britain. Meanwhile, Julien's comrades are ambushed by German soldiers as they try to intercept a German plane; Julien, arriving late, watches them attacked and killed.



Aftermath – Charlotte lies late in bed the next morning. Eventually she feeds the boys breakfast; she snaps at them. She feels terrible immediately. Julien then arrives and accuses Charlotte of selling them out to the Germans. Levade defends her, confirming that she was called away by a note the night before.



Demanding answers – Charlotte finds her English contact and tells him they need to talk. She tells him about the attack on Julien's group and asks him what happened. She implies that the British authorities wanted Julien's group to be killed because they were communists; he does not confirm or deny this.



Schoolteacher's scheme – The schoolteacher follows Charlotte as she walks. He tells her he knows that Levade is hiding the Jewish Duguay boys and will not expose them to the Germans if she will sleep with him. She looks shocked but eventually nods.



Fleeing – Levade drives Charlotte and the Duguay boys out of town. He takes them to the house of an older woman, who shows the boys to an attic bedroom. Charlotte plays a game with them there, then she leaves with Levade. Julien comes to Levade's house and eats with his father.



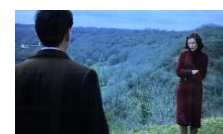
Levade captured – A group consisting of German soldiers, municipal officials, and the schoolteacher arrives at Levade's house. They question Levade about his heritage, specifically his Jewish grandparents. He mocks them. One of the municipal leaders gives a speech about the benefits of collaborating with the occupiers. Julien interrupts, identifying himself as Levade's son. He insists that his father is French, not least because he fought at Verdun. The schoolteacher pulls Julien aside and says that he knows about the Duguay boys, so Julien can either give them up or let his father be taken. Julien says to the officials that his father's grandparents were Jewish, which means that he himself is a Jew too. The officials respond that Julien is only 1/8 Jewish and thus "not a Jew," but that this father is considered a Jew and must go with them.



Boys captured – Julien and Charlotte are held in the house with a German guard. They purposely rouse the guard's ire by kissing, which causes enough of a distraction for them to hit him and then escape to go and try to save the Duguay boys. German soldiers get to the boys first, though, and take them away. Julien tracks down the schoolteacher and fatally shoots him in the head.



What next? – Julien and Charlotte meet on a hillside and discuss what to do next. He tries to convince her to run away and escape Vichy France via the Pyrenees with him. She refuses. She goes back to Levade's house and rapidly types something. She leaves the house just as German soldiers arrive. She then races to the train that is taking away Levade and the Duguay boys, and she slips the piece of paper through the window. Levade reads it to the boys; it is a kind, optimistic letter written as though it was from the boys' mother. Charlotte weeps as the train departs.



Back to France – Six months later, Charlotte is back in London working for a relief organization. She runs into Peter, learning that he is not dead after all. He wants to resume their romantic relationship, but she refuses. Charlotte later returns to France and goes to Levade's house, where she finds Julien doing repairs. They embrace and kiss, and she tells him her real name.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Charlotte Gray

Charlotte Gray is a young and idealistic woman eager to serve her country during World War II. Charlotte's idealism is matched by her bravery; she undertakes an extremely dangerous mission as a secret agent in France. However, Charlotte is preoccupied with her efforts to find her missing lover.

Idealistic – In the film's first scene, Charlotte is indignant to hear Cannerly make light of war service. She simply asks, "isn't it our duty to serve our country?" Her idealism is tested when she faces the complicated reality of service in France; she struggles to make this adjustment.

Brave – Charlotte gets through a number of extremely stressful, tricky situations in France. She manages to keep it together in the presence of police or soldiers on several occasions. Her bravery extends to participating in sabotage campaigns against the German soldiers.

Preoccupied – Charlotte's bravery is undermined by her preoccupation with tracking down Peter Gregory. More than once, she compromises an ally or a mission by stopping to ask questions about Peter. One woman actually dies because Charlotte detains her to ask about Peter, which prevents the woman from escaping the police.

Julien Levade

Julien Levade is a young man deeply committed to his work as a radical communist. In response to the Nazi occupation, he has led his communist group in contributing to the French resistance. He is extremely dedicated to this work. But Julien's activities are motivated not by abstract theories but by love for a variety of people.

Dedicated – Julien is entirely dedicated to his work as a communist and his work for the French resistance against Nazi occupation; although he technically has a job as an architect, we do not see him spend much time on it. Julien repeatedly puts his life on the line in this work.

Radical – It is important to Julien's identity that he is a communist. He is protective of his comrades. Only minutes after he meets Charlotte, he makes sure she knows that they are communists, expecting her to disapprove.

Loving – Julien is deeply attached to people. He comes to love and care for the Duguay boys, as well as for Charlotte and for his comrades in the communist movement. His relationship with his father is complicated, but ultimately he proudly identifies himself as his son. Julien tries to sacrifice himself for the Duguay boys.

THEMES

Politics

War Perhaps the most prominent theme in *Charlotte Gray* is war—not *battle*, but the infusion of war into the lives of all people in the countries involved. The film's very first scene features a discussion between Charlotte and Robert Cannerly about what citizens owe their countries in wartime. Charlotte insists that it is every citizen's duty to work and make sacrifices for their country. However, Charlotte's idea of wartime duty is fairly simplistic; as soon as she actually goes to France to work as a secret agent, she discovers that the reality is more complicated. For all her high-flown language about selflessness, Charlotte is preoccupied with her worries about Peter Gregory and repeatedly compromises her missions by stopping to ask people questions about him. Meanwhile, she engages in violent acts of sabotage against German soldiers, which she finds distressing even though she does not regret what she has done. War is portrayed in the film as involving violence, death, and poverty (near the end of the film we briefly see Charlotte working for a relief organization in London).

Illustrative moment: After her first sabotage mission against German soldiers in Lezignac, Charlotte returns to Levade's house visibly shaken. Levade immediately understands that she is reeling from being involved in causing destruction and death to other people, albeit people working for the enemy. He tells her that it is always difficult at first, and he explains that he served in World War I as an engineer. Charlotte is clearly comforted to learn that Levade has firsthand understanding of her distress.

Intrigue Charlotte's work for the war effort takes the form not of battle but of intrigue. Her recruitment by Robert Cannerly happens almost before she is aware of it. During their first meeting, Cannerly learns two things about her that make him interested in her as a secret agent: she speaks French, and she expresses passionate feelings about patriotism and duty. He does not necessarily learn anything that makes her cut out for *intrigue* in particular, however, and Charlotte struggles with the work she is given. After she arrives in France, Charlotte attempts to carry out her tasks but frequently compromises her anonymity by asking for information about Peter Gregory. Her work is cloak-and-dagger, involving clandestine meetings with her English contact and the passing of information to Julien and other members of the French resistance. Charlotte keeps her promise not to reveal her real name to anyone during the war: it is only after the war ends that she returns to France and tells Julien her name. Ultimately, though, Charlotte is not particularly good at intrigue, and even her better efforts cannot forestall tragedies like the capture of Levade and the Duguay boys.

Illustrative moment: Charlotte enters a café, where she orders a coffee and sits down. A woman enters and sits by Charlotte. She asks whether Charlotte has "them" but says not to give them to her because she believes she was followed. The woman gets up, but Charlotte detains her to ask about Peter in Gillesse. Several gendarmes enter; the woman tells Charlotte to pass her the package. The gendarmes ask the woman for her papers, look at them, search her pockets, find the package, and then take her away. Charlotte is free but shaken.

Psychology

Love Romantic and familial love are major themes of *Charlotte Gray*. The former drives the plot. Charlotte meets Peter Gregory early in the film and is immediately wrapped up in her relationship with him, which is both sexual and confiding. After Peter disappears and she learns that his plane went down in France, she insists on being posted in France to do her secret agent work. She then proceeds to make repeated bad decisions in order to get more information about him; despite her speech to Robert Cannerly about the necessity of self-sacrifice during wartime, she frequently subordinates her professional duties to her inquiries about Peter. When her English contact tells her that Peter is dead, she is devastated. However, Charlotte's romantic allegiances shift over the course of her time in France; when the war is over, she rejects Peter and goes back to France to be with Julien. Meanwhile, familial love has been portrayed in the difficult relationship between Julien and his father. The two men struggle to connect, but ultimately, when Monsieur Levade is being interrogated by Vichy and German officials, Julien proudly calls himself his son and defends him. Charlotte, finally, develops a quasi-parental love for the Duguay boys, expressed in the form of everyday care for them.

Illustrative moment: After she learns that the Duguay boys are about to be sent away on a train by Nazi forces, she rushes to write them a letter in which she impersonates their mother. She lingers in Levade's house to write this letter even as German soldiers approach. She races to the train and manages to shove the letter into it just in time for them to receive it.

Loss In wartime, loss is the norm. During one of their conversations early in the film, Peter and Charlotte discuss bravery; Peter insists that he is not brave but instead simply keeps pushing on now that a huge number of his friends and comrades have been killed. Soon after this, Charlotte faces the "loss" of Peter in a couple of forms. First, he is sent away on a mission in France and goes missing. Some time later, her English contact tells her that Peter is dead, showing her an unclear photograph of an RAF pilot's body. Charlotte believes this news and is devastated; she goes to bed in her clothes and sleeps late the next morning, finally roused by the Duguay boys asking for their breakfast. She then snaps at them. Clearly the loss is substantial for her. However, when she discovers months later that Peter is alive and

wants to resume their relationship, she turns him down. The initial intensity of the loss does not necessarily mean that she later wishes to overturn it. Meanwhile, Julien suffers the loss of his comrades when German soldiers kill them, and the Duguay boys are dealing throughout the film with their parents' disappearance.

Illustrative moment: Julien responds to the killing of his comrades with sadness and anger. Thinking that Charlotte sold them out, he goes to Levade's house and accuses Charlotte, even pointing a gun at her. He is shouting and crying as he explains what happened.

Adventure Charlotte's story is undoubtedly one of adventure. As soon as she arrives in France, she is frequently in danger and is performing high-stakes work. She arrives in France in the dead of night via airplane and parachute! Much of the movie is the stuff of spy fiction: Charlotte is given a fake identity, meets in dark alleys with nameless contacts, has run-ins with the authorities, and is involved in acts of violent sabotage. Charlotte starts out as an ordinary person confronting these extraordinary circumstances. She does not seem to derive much enjoyment from the adventurous nature of her activities, which makes sense given that her motivations were to serve her country and find Peter, rather than to serve her own ego or a sense of restlessness. Moreover, her actions are dangerous and emotionally painful. The film creates the impression that adventure may not be all it is cracked up to be.

Illustrative moment: Charlotte joins Julien and his comrades in setting explosives along a train track at night. The German train comes by as planned and is blown up. A few soldiers manage to get off the train and have a shootout with Julien and the others. One of the French men is injured. Charlotte is visibly agitated by this episode and happy to be consoled by Levade when she returns to the house.

Maturation Charlotte matures a great deal over the course of the film, even though she is too old for it to be a "coming of age" story *per se*. She starts out as a somewhat naïve idealist, chiding Robert Cannerly for making light of wartime duty and delivering a speech about the importance of patriotic self-sacrifice. In her conversations with Peter Gregory, too, she reveals some naïveté in interpreting his wartime service as clear evidence of extraordinary bravery. Peter insists that he is no braver than anyone else and simply doing what circumstances have forced him to do. When she gets to France herself, Charlotte is much less self-sacrificing than her initial speech would lead the viewer to expect, given that she frequently endangers her colleagues and the resistance mission by interrupting to ask for information about Peter. After she is told of Peter's death and spends time working in France with Julien and others, however, Charlotte's understanding deepens. She shifts her focus to smaller goals close at hand like writing the letter to the Duguay boys in the person of their mother. By the time the war is over, she is doing unglamorous relief work in London and rejects the opportunity to resume her relationship with Peter.

Illustrative moment: A particularly unpleasant episode in Charlotte's loss of idealism is her interaction with the Lezignac schoolteacher. At one point, he follows Charlotte as she walks. He tells her he knows that Levade is hiding the Jewish Duguay boys and will not expose them to the Germans if she will sleep with him. He points a gun at her. She looks shocked but eventually nods. The situation does not end up playing out as planned, but emotional damage has been done already.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Were you surprised when Charlotte rejected the opportunity to resume her relationship with Peter Gregory? Why or why not?
2. *Charlotte Gray* follows the once-common convention of having anglophone actors speaking English even when ostensibly the characters would be speaking French. This is less common now than it was when the film was released. To what extent did this bother you or affect your experience of watching the film?
3. Charlotte frequently makes mistakes in her work as a secret agent. Did you find yourself judging Charlotte, or relating to her as an ordinary person, or reacting in some other way?
4. What did you think of the film's indirect portrayal of the Holocaust?