

The Marmalade Diaries: The True Story of an Odd Couple

Ben Aitken

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Ben Aitken's *The Marmalade Diaries*, is about becoming housemates with a much older stranger during Britain's second Covid-19 lockdown.

Aitken met Winnie in October of 2020. Winnie's children were concerned about their eighty-five-year-old mother's insistence on living alone in Windy Ridge, her Victorian home in London. In exchange for providing "a bit of security" and doing various "odd jobs," they invited Aitken to move into the apartment on Windy Ridge's top floor. Soon after their agreement was reached, however, Britain declared another shutdown, and Winnie and Aitken became more sequestered with each other than expected. They found themselves with time to observe the home's yard and garden, with its daffodils, primroses, and a busy birdhouse getting "more traffic than the port of Dover."

The book is written in journal form. It details Aitken's developing relationship with Winnie, who grew up during the turmoil of World War II. Stoic and self-reliant, she's also captured as intelligent and sharp-witted. Though her son, Arthur—with cerebral palsy and living in a nearby care facility—held her devotion, Aitken recalls that Winnie also admitted that the recent death of her husband left her feeling lost and "unhinged."

Aitken is developed in contrast to his housemate. He was born in the 1980s, and writes of himself wryly, as a "snowflake" millennial. In interactions with Winnie, he is tolerant and perceptive, helping to soften her more stubborn tendencies. Thus, though Winnie could be critical, she became fond of (and rather dependent upon) her new housemate. He was even included in the preparation of a batch of her homemade marmalade, watching Seville oranges and sugar bubble together in a vast "pot of cartoonish dimensions."

The Marmalade Diaries is a delightful pandemic journal—filled with camaraderie, quirkiness, claustrophobia, and a memorable bridging of generations.

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