

Episode 310

Cult Following

Poppy O'Brien: When you think of cults, do you picture black-robed figures in a desecrated church? Jim Jones peddling Kool-Aid? Edward Woodward burning in a giant Wicker Man? A shady religion invented by a bad science-fiction writer? Perhaps Aleister Crowley secreted away in a castle in Scotland.

You don't usually think of World War II, do you? What would you say if I told you that during the Blitz, while most Londoners were keeping calm and carrying on, a small group of people were performing unholy rites in a Tube Station off Charing Cross Road? Sound crazy? That's just the start of it. Wait 'til you hear The Case of The Tottenham Court Cultists.

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I'm Poppy O'Brien, and this is *Cult Following*.

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[*Cult Following* theme music and credits]

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Poppy: I know listeners are eager to hear the end of our story of Satanic artifacts in the Manchester club scene, and don't worry, we'll return to DJ Mammon on next week's show. Tonight, though, we're traveling back in time to 1941, courtesy of a remarkable discovery in the Cotswolds.

Last year, I was contacted by a listener who said she had a very interesting find to share with me. It was a little while before I could follow up, but when I did I found it more than worth it. I travelled to Oxfordshire to meet with Chloe Burrows, who had discovered something

decidedly strange in her aunt's attic.

Chloe: I knew Aunt Mildred was a packrat, and I knew she had kept some things from other relatives. She was sort of the family archivist, I suppose. After she passed, we divided clearing the house among the three of us, and I pulled the short straw and got the attic. Most of it was junk—old clothes, broken lamps, you know. But there was a trunk filled with personal items that I was keen to investigate. There were stacks of letters, old photograph albums, vinyl records, like the old 78s, and what I later found out were World War II ration books. As I flipped through the photo albums, I realized these weren't Aunt Mildred's. They actually belonged to *her* aunt. I never met her, but I knew she lived through the war and had a reputation for being eccentric. She was into astrology and Tarot cards and all sorts of things. She was a real family character.

Poppy: The woman she's referring to was called Amelia Irving. She did indeed live through the war, apparently in a London boarding house that we'll talk more about later. She was something more than an eccentric character, however. I did some digging and found out that Amelia Irving was institutionalized no fewer than four times before her death in 1954. She told doctors that she had seen things during the war she could never erase from her memory, things she would never tell anyone. That might matter a little later. But for now, it's enough to know the strange discovery was not something belonging to Chloe's Great Aunt Amelia. It was something else altogether.

Chloe: It was a cache of letters. The top one was in an envelope addressed to Great Aunt Amelia, but the letter inside appeared to be meant for someone quite different. The others were

in blank envelopes. They weren't dated, so it took me some time to put them in the right order. When I did...well, it was the most extraordinary thing I'd ever read.

Poppy: The writings Chloe discovered, nine full letters and one postcard, were ostensibly written by a woman called Josephine Waters. She claimed to have been a codebreaker at Bletchley Park during the second half of 1940, and to have been dismissed from there under duress after the bombing of Hawthorne in December of that year. She claimed quite a few other things as well—that she could see and talk to the ghosts of dead people all over the city, that she was being followed by government agents, and ultimately, that she had been recruited by a strange cult dedicated to raising an ancient entity to end the war. You can find transcripts on our website, but be warned. I've read them all quite a few times now, and it's crazy stuff.

Dr. Milo Appleton: Doomsday cults come in two types.

Poppy: Dr. Milo Appleton is Professor of Sociology at Hempnell College and a recognized expert on cults.

Milo: The most common type are people who believe, or claim to believe, that the end of the world is coming and they'd better be ready for God or aliens or whatever's coming to end it all. Heaven's Gate is the probably the most famous recent example, though you can find cults of this type throughout history. The Branch Davidians, who were involved in the Waco, Texas standoff in the 80s, are another one you might remember. And the Aleph group in Japan, who were behind the gas attacks in the Tokyo subway in 1997.

But the type of cult Josephine Waters details in her letters is much rarer—a doomsday cult that is actively trying to bring about the end of the world through its own efforts. What she describes are delusions of power wrapped up in the trappings of pop culture witchcraft and cheap demonology. If I had to guess, I'd say that these letters are authentic only so far as they were written by a woman named Josie Waters. I can't imagine the spy thriller pulp fiction story she tells is true. A child sacrifice in the London Tube line is highly unlikely.

I suppose I could be wrong.

Chloe: It felt like some kind of *Weird Tales* / film noir mashup. When I first read it, I thought, “did Aunt Amelia write pulp fiction?” But I had other letters of my aunt's, and these definitely weren't her handwriting.

Poppy: But neither were they fiction. Or at least, the author of the letters was a real person. I've done some digging in the eight months since Chloe first showed me the letters, and I've been able to confirm that at least. Josephine Waters did exist, she did go to Cornell, she did join the team at Bletchley Park as a cryptologist in 1940, and she was discharged that December, though the details of her dismissal were not recorded that I could find. I can't trace her after that. Government records indicate she died in the Blitz, but it's a single line in the file with no context or additional information.

So I went in the other direction and tried tracking down her family in the United States. Her parents passed away many years ago, and there were no siblings, but I did find adoption records that show that the son referred to in the letters did in fact exist. Thad Emerson was born in 1927 and was adopted by a family, the Emersons, in upstate New York. He sadly died of

tuberculosis in 1940, soon after his mother moved to England. It doesn't appear likely that he ever knew of her existence. So dead end there.

But there were still two other avenues to explore. The final letter had been sent to Amelia Irving at the boarding house, and it had the address on the envelope. So I put on my walking shoes, and headed to Bayswater.

The trip was disappointing. The position of the site seems in line with what the letters described—ten minutes from the Tube, a garden, even the hedgerow across the street was still there. But no house. There was no disturbance of the ground, no old foundations, no traces of anything ever having been built there. And no oak tree, which I would have expected to at least leave a large stump. It looked like a little park in the middle of the street, houses on either side, nothing but an unbroken patch of grass.

I spoke with the woman next door, but she said she had only lived there since 2012 and had no idea what had been there before.

Curiouser and curiouser.

There was one lead left. Josie tells us that the final ritual, which supposedly involved human sacrifice, was held in a side tunnel just inside the Tube line at Tottenham Court Road. I'm going down there, and taking you with me, when *Cult Following* returns!

[Theme music; Dashlane ad]

Poppy (quieter, a little out of breath; she is not in the studio any longer): Okay. I'm in the Tube line at Tottenham Court Road. It's a little after 1 a.m., so there's no trains to worry about. And I've got permission, so no need to call the authorities. There's a Transport worker waiting at

the opening of the tunnel, so I just need to shout if I come upon some eldritch beast. I've got my little recorder and a torch, and I'm moving down the tunnel, a little more than six meters in. So far there's nothing on either side but cables and dirt. I'm going to shut this off to preserve the battery. I'll be back if there's anything worth telling you about.

[The click of the recorder off, and then after a pause, back on again]

Oh my god, it's here! There's a little side tunnel, less than four feet wide, like a crack in the wall. It's on the left as you go in, and I can see how Josie might have mistaken it for a service tunnel. It doesn't look man-made enough for that, though. I'm going in.

Okay. It's as she said—too narrow to extend my arms, very dark as you'd imagine, and more than a little claustrophobic. She says it only a couple of hundred yards, so I'll give it that long.

The letters say that a child was brought down these tunnels to be sacrificed, and that seven members of the cult, including Josephine Waters and a man calling himself Ramsey Whateley-Campbell, assembled here to carry that out. If it succeeded it would summon a being they called "the Oldest," who would assumedly destroy the world. And even though the state of the world may make us wish they had succeeded, all signs point to failure.

Oh, here we are. Right on cue, the bigger room.

Hmm...Josie speculated this could have been an abandoned expansion, but I think it's definitely a naturally-occurring cave. It's not large, though after that tunnel it feels like a palace. A little damp. I don't know if you can hear it, but there is water dripping somewhere in here. It looks well and truly untouched—I would expect graffiti or empty beer cans, even in a place like

this, but there's not...oh wait. Here's something.

[She picks something up from the cave floor; a moment while she examines it]

It's a knife. A large knife like you'd find in a kitchen, rusty and chipped, clearly old. And yes, there does appear to be something wrapped around the handle, something like twine, though most of that has deteriorated.

Wow. So either I'm the butt of an extremely elaborate joke, or the letters are true. I have to say, this is more than a little creepy. I'm looking for anything else; the light is only really showing me...

[She screams]

I'm sorry. I wasn't quite prepared for... There is a pile of bones here, near the center of the space. Old, broken, and blackened like they've been burned, but definitely bones. I wouldn't say for certain they were human if not for several...skulls...which are pretty unmistakable. They are blackened as well, in fact the whole area looks like a fire has swept through it at some point. But it's all very old, lots of...splinters and...

Oh my god. I've found it! I wish...I wish you could all see this. I'm going to try and describe it as I see it. Lying under one of the skulls is what appears to be a small, leather-bound book. The cover is damaged, but it looks surprisingly intact.

[the sound of pages being turned]

Okay, it's very hard to see much holding the torch like this, but it appears that most of

this is readable, and that it's exactly as described in the letters—different color inks, weird symbols and gibberish writing. This is extraordinary, I can't wait to get this back to...

Hello?

[Whispering]: Did you hear that?

Hello? Is someone there?

[Whispering]: I thought something moved at the other end of the room. I'm going to...

[Clear sound of movement]

[Louder]: I'm not alone! There's someone waiting for me just up the tunnel. If you think you can...**[softer]** oh. You're just a child! How did you get all the way down here? Oh dear you must be freezing. Here let me...god, what's happened to your throat? Oh my god!

[Clatter, click]

[Palimpsest theme music; credits]

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