

Book Club 2020

January 2020: READERS CHOICES

The topic for this month was Readers' Choices and there was a particularly eclectic mix of fiction and non-fiction books. As a result, the discussion ranged very widely and members were inspired to read some of the books spoken about.

Here are the Readers' Choices:-

- *Sylvia's Lovers* by Elizabeth Gaskell
- *Tombland* by CJ Sansom
- *Scarlet Nightingale* by Alan Titchmarsh
- *A Cheesemonger's Guide to the British Isles* by Ned Palmer
- *God Help the Child* by Toni Morrison
- *Reader I Married Him* Stories Inspired by Jane Eyre edited by Tracey Chevalier
- *Exposure* by Helen Dunmore
- *Seven Signs of Life* by Aoife Abbey
- *Sal* by Mick Kitson
- *84 Charing Cross Road* by Helene Hanff
- *She's Leaving Home* by Joan Bakewell

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February 2020: TRANSCRIPTION by Kate Atkinson

Although some aspects were unbelievable and the transcription itself tedious, we generally acclaimed it as a well written novel, with her recurring theme of consequence: every choice we make exacts a price later! The author maintained authenticity to details of spy exposures familiar to us. The area was also described realistically; the block of flats used is still standing. However, she took writer's license in the details of the story.

The main story is bookended by 2 short sections set in 1981, significant in it's patriotic preparations for a royal wedding: "a sacrificial virgin was being prepared.... To satisfy the need for pomp and circumstance. Union jacks draped everywhere." This paralleled the patriotism expressed in the pre-war section, on both sides.

Atkinson has a gift for presenting the mundane detail of ordinary life with wry detachment, bringing characters and places to life with this delicate humour. Significantly, she uses the details of a place or event to enrich the minor characters, while holding back on Juliette, the main character. We are led down a winding path of lies and intrigue as we discover Juliette's various assumed identities come back to haunt her. This allows some of the clues to escape the notice of the average reader and many of us failed to expose her as a duplicitous double agent until the final chapter.

It was a good read – an unapologetic novel of ideas.

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March 2020: CHANCE

A challenging month. Having read other novels by Conrad our high expectations were dashed. "Chance" sent several of us into the unfamiliar media of e-books. Facing into the technology was hard enough, but squelching through the verbose, psychological ramblings of the main protagonist set some of us into apoplexy.

Whilst most of us enjoyed the language used by Conrad, writing in his second language, most of us found the layering of two distinct narrators difficult to navigate. It appeared that the main character, Marlow, was expressing the traditionally held views of the character and role of women of the time, whilst his companion quietly challenged these premises: an early nod to women's rights. However, the views were delivered at a pedestrian pace, and encumbered by long descriptive narrative of his movements around the room. This caused many of us to either skim over large sections or fail to finish the book altogether.

Whilst some were relieved by the happy ending, others felt this contradicted the point of his philosophy. Marlow's exposition of the events of Flora's life were described by one member as those of a pompous voyeur, written in the style of a muddled melodrama. The soap-opera stylisation can be explained, however, by the fact that it was written as a serial at a time when Conrad was short of money.

Did we enjoy the book? No. Did we enjoy discussing it? Quite definitely! It was a provocative and lively discourse around a book that, although it didn't deliver the impact of some of his other novels, such as Heart of Darkness, or Lord Jim, it did inspire and motivate the group into a meaningful discussion that left us all invigorated.

This month we are each choosing a novel that has been made into a film. If you have also seen the film it would be interesting to know how well you thought it transcribed into film and what was gained, or lost, on the screen. We meet again on Tuesday 7th April.

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April 2020: BOOKS TURNED INTO FILMS

Four of us are sharing ideas about books turned into films which you can read below.

Novel: [David Copperfield by Charles Dickens](#)

Film: [The Personal History of David Copperfield](#)

It can be very reassuring to watch a film interpretation of a novel when it reflects the way in which you imagined the characters, setting and the themes explored. However, reimagined, refreshing, even outlandish interpretations can put a new spin on familiar reads. Literature and film are two different genres, but the complaint "It wasn't like that in the book" is often heard: understandably, I suppose. Nevertheless, experimentation by good film makers can stimulate ideas about a text never imagined by most readers and, of course, new audiences can be encouraged to read books once they have enjoyed a film.

I fairly recently saw "The Personal History of David Copperfield", obviously based on the novel by Charles Dickens. Many of Dickens' books lend themselves well to film treatment, having strong plots, a range of well-defined characters, interesting locations and clear themes. However, "David Copperfield", Dickens' most autobiographical work, has a less dramatic plot

than, for example, “Oliver Twist” or “Great Expectations”. Therefore, when I heard there was going to be a film version I was intrigued to see how it might be treated.

The novel follows the journey of survival and self-discovery of the main protagonist, David. The film version, directed by Armando Iannucci, based on screenplay by Simon Blackwell, shows how innovative film makers can breathe fresh life into a classic text. Two aspects of the film really stood out for me: the diverse, outstanding cast and the humour.

The actors in the film are from a wide range of backgrounds. As Mark Kermode commented, the casting is a “brilliant example of colour-blind inclusivity”. Dev Patel, of Indian heritage, plays the adult David Copperfield. He witnesses significant milestones of his own life, such as his birth and the film emphasises the strong parallel between the fortunes of Dickens and his creation, Copperfield.

In common with most of Dickens’ novels, the written version presents numerous eccentrics who prompt a wry smile in the reader. However, the humour is taken to a hilarious level in the film. The portrayal of Mr Dick by Hugh Laurie and Betsey Trotwood played by Tilda Swinton (!) are laugh out loud comic (hate that expression but couldn’t think of anything else). Overall, the casting was quite inspirational, for example, Peter Capaldi as Mr Micawber and Ben Whishaw as Uriah Heap, Paul Whitehouse as Mr Peggotty.

The film has received very mixed reviews from audiences and critics alike and, I suppose, some purists might not have approved of the casting, but I thoroughly enjoyed it and am prompted to revisit the text, which can’t be a bad thing.

Maggie Doherty

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BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA by Katherine Paterson

It's a film I watched with my granddaughter 10 years ago when she was 8. We both sobbed unashamedly! We watched the film again with her younger sister last year and still shed a tear or two. So I took the opportunity to read the book.

It's the story of a boy and girl who befriend each other in the summer. She has moved to the neighbourhood with her family and they are thrown together. He is physically adventurous and she has an awesomely creative mind. Together they build a world of fantasy which totally occupies them.

Tragedy falls and I won't spoil it.

The story is written for the teenage audience but don't be put off. It captures the imagination through evocative descriptions and the gentle unfolding of a beautiful friendship. It concludes with an empathetic insight into dealing with bereavement.

Book or film? I preferred the film, but probably because I already had the directors interpretation in my head before I read it!

Coleen Bee

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SATURDAY NIGHT AND SUNDAY MORNING by Alan Sillitoe

I haven't read it for years and had forgotten what its appeal was. It's definitely book 'of its time' when , for the working class, hard grind in a factory for low wages was the norm (although Arthur Seaton earnt good money on 'piece work' with the help of his muscles, determination, and anti-bosses 'don't let the bastards grind you down' mentality).

Alan Sillitoe (same initials ...) certainly created a memorable character in Arthur with his arrogance, rudeness, excessive drinking, violence and cavalier treatment of his lovers. Apart from the latter quality he was a recognisable and understandable young rebel of the post war era, smartly dressed and confident but unable to fulfil any ambitions he had to better himself, opportunities being very limited. The same applied to the two married women he had affairs with, who enjoyed Arthur's trips out, fun, loving sessions in bed and in the countryside. Where were their opportunities to go to F.E. College to gain qualifications and self-esteem? As for feminism/equal rights, that hadn't been invented.

However, there are dominant women, usually with timid husbands, creating humour and a detailed hefty slice of working class family life in inner city Nottingham, familiar to the author (and to lots of local readers like me!) The local accent is accurately presented , often phonetically, and sounding just like my mum's family, with 6 girls, born to Louie, living in a very small house and being ruled over by 'Arry my grandad.

The 1960 film, screenplay by the author, was very successful, 'raw, and uninhibited, no punches pulled' , making Albert Finney into a star. At the time cinema-goers thought it was sexy, shocking, violent and a welcome representation of the ordinary, real working-class world. The extracts I revisited were typical early 60s black and white movie with 'incidental music' as continual background and current pop songs in the pubs. I cannot remember whether Brenda's attempted abortion scene was in the film, but it's memorable, with Arthur lounging against a wall in her front room while she is given bottles of gin to drink in a hot bath, eventually becoming unconscious.

The novel is far better than the film, the latter is how TV and film were then: good costumes but speech having a monotone quality. However, there's good plotting, atmosphere and setting for both, and, in the novel, the detailed way that the reader is invited to analyse Arthur's thoughts, philosophy, and often amoral beliefs.

Christine Smith

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THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN by John Fowles

I had neither read the book, nor seen the film and as both were on my long list of 'to do' things, I thought reading the book a good opportunity to achieve at least one thing.

Strangely enough the film "The French Lieutenant's Woman" was shown on Sony Cinema channel last week, so now, it's been recorded and waiting to be watched.

Back to the book, I loved the descriptions and image of Lyme Regis. The Cobb, cliffs, woods and having walked there, knew it well. Written by John Fowles, it tells the story of a Charles Smithson's obsession with the alluring and mysterious Sarah Woodruff who claims to have been deserted by the French Lieutenant. The book is well written, with good characterisation and the intrigue in the plot, kept me wanting to read more.

The author Fowles writes as narrator and inserts himself into the story at different points to give the reader a picture of Victorian England and the influence of the Class System. The double standards and hypocrisy of those who saw themselves as virtuous religious individuals, yet showed cruelty and dismissal towards those who did not fit into their view of the accepted behaviour of their Class or society. The analytical and philosophical (if that's the correct word) aspects, I found more difficult to master and parts needed to be read slowly to digest and understand, when I just wanted to read on. Perhaps a book to be studied and analysed with help from others with a better brain than myself!

I shall watch the film this weekend and hope I am not disappointed, as is often the case.

Jean Berry

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Novel: David Copperfield by Charles Dickens

Film: The Personal History of David Copperfield

I saw this film too and to begin with I was a bit shocked. Quite often what we notice in film adaptations is how much has been left out in order to simplify the story to fit a script for a 90 minute film. Well there was certainly a lot missing.

But what surprised me even more were the ways in which the film rejected the normal conventions of storytelling cinema. I was expecting a traditional BBC style costume drama. What we got was very different. In no particular order, what I remember were:

- Colour blind casting – even within the same family
- Very rapid cutting between and within scenes
- Elements of film fantasy where what we saw couldn't be true
- Continued and repeated use of techniques to remind us that that we were watching a film rather than 'reality'.

I was quite resistant initially. I know some of the director's other work and this treatment seemed to be a bit of an ego trip. Was the director (Armando Iannucci) having a bit of a laugh at the expense of his audience's expectations? Was he showing off his technical skills? Was he using shock techniques for their own sake?

After a while, however, the apparent artifice of the film made more sense and succeeded in doing three things.

First and foremost, they preserved and in some ways emphasised the literary origins of the film. All films necessarily use a different language from those of the novels on which they are based. Often in the translation, the literary origins disappear. Indeed, if they are still present (e.g. through voice overs), this might be seen as a fault, because it undermines the 'filmic' qualities of the film. Iannucci manages to have his cake and eat it because we are constantly reminded of the film's literary origins, but using film language.

Secondly the film emphasizes the autobiographical character of DC. I gather that DC is often seen as Dickens' most autobiographical work. Two of the themes that the film brought out very strongly were that Dickens was telling the story and that the plot in large part was about the inspiration, creation and development of an author.

Thirdly, the film managed to provide an original perspective. History dramas in general and (thanks largely to the BBC) Dickens' dramatizations in particular are quite common. Iannucci managed to say something new and original in a very well populated area.

I think it is also his best work so far. I enjoyed the political comedy *The Thick of It* and his more recent *The Death of Stalin*, but for me, the *David Copperfield* adaptation has more subtlety, warmth, depth and strong characterisation and (dare I say it) moral heft than his previous work.

Paul Martinez

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CAPTAIN MORELLI'S MANDOLIN by Louis de Bernières

Christine Kitchen spoke to Coleen about the film version of this book.

In brief, she would recommend the book, but not the film. She felt the best aspect of the novel was the characterisation, but that the film, conversely was let down by Nicholas Cage.

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COLD MOUNTAIN by Charles Frazier

Films more often inspire me to buy the book than the other way around and it was the case with this choice. *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier. I've just re-read it. A lovely book, it is highly descriptive of the natural world and the flavour of a long ago world, and an enthralling story.

Cold Mountain, is the title of both the book and the film.

An Anthony Minghella film, he was also the executive soundtrack producer.

Set during the American Civil War the novel presents the terrible discordant reality of life in war, on the battlefield and in the rural homesteads.

As well as the characters, the story, the representation of life in the divided America of the times it is the music that keeps the story in my memory, and it added greatly to the film,

The opening scene is a battle and the loud dramatic music adds to the shock and horror of the event. Most of the music in the film is from the time of the Civil War and about rural life and tunes.

The setting is rural north Carolina and the main characters are Inman, a wounded soldier, who loves Ada, a well educated Charleston lady and daughter of a wealthy preacher Munroe, and Ruby a competent country girl well versed in the hardships of rural life, who helps Ada after her father dies unexpectedly. Inman, sickened by the carnage of the battlefield, absconds from the army and the story follows his treacherous journey home. The narrative alternates between Inman's trek and Ada and Ruby's work to resurrect a neglected farm.

The film is fairly faithful to the book, all the main events being included, some minor elements being transposed into different scenes and the atmosphere and landscape of the Carolinas are depicted beautifully. However it would be beyond the scope of the medium of film to reflect the wonderful language of Charles Frazier's storytelling.

I saw the film first so I did not have to visualise the characters or the setting and I think this contributed greatly to my enjoyment of the narrative.

I think this is a book for the reading list!

Christine Cracknell

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Novel: The Light of Day by Eric Ambler

Film: Topkap

Several years ago I listened to a story serialized on Radio 4. A rather weak willed chap had got himself involved with some high powered thieves and was desperately trying to escape so as not to be involved in the theft of some jewels.

Two scenes stuck with me, one at the end, where they escape under cover of self down confusion anthem another where our "hero" puts a bullet into the petrol tank of a car and successfully blows the lot up (a nice trick if you can do it).

Last year I took to working through the novels of Eric Ambler. These run from the 1930s to the 1960s. I then got to The Light of Day, which seemed strangely familiar. A weak and easily manipulated central character involved with the usual suave villains and the inevitably beautiful female – of it's time of course.

Then he put the bullet into the petrol tank.

His novels are well written, have interesting plots with nice twists and engaging characters.

Many of his novels were turned into screenplays and eventually films. The Light of Day became Topkapi. I believe, but it may be a false memory, that I've seen it, but I do seem remember Istanbul, jewels being cleverly stolen, Melina Mercouri and Peter Ustinov sweating.

Ambler also wrote (incomplete list):

Passage of Arms

The Mask of Dimitrios – Made into a film of the same name

Uncommon Danger – Filmed as Background to Danger

Journey Into Fear – Filmed as Journey into Fear

Maggie Doherty

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May 2020: TULIP FEVER by Deborah Moggach

A number of us participated in a *Zoom* discussion, ably led by Coleen, of the novel "Tulip Fever" by Deborah Moggach. It is set in 17th century Amsterdam when the city is flourishing in the prosperity of the Dutch Golden Age, a time well documented in paintings by Dutch Masters such as Vermeer and Rembrandt. Tulipomania has also gripped the traders, who are keen to exploit the rocketing prices of rare bulbs being cultivated to create exotic varieties of the flower. This is a fascinating period in Dutch history and has proved to be a fruitful focus for a number of writers in books such as "The Girl with the Pearl Earring" and "The Miniaturist".

In Moggach's work, a prosperous middle aged businessman, Cornelis, hires the services of a local artist, Jan, to produce a portrait of himself and his beautiful, but much younger wife, Sophia. (The writing is on the wall).

In our discussion, some felt that the writer evokes the atmosphere of Amsterdam and the lifestyle of the times extremely well. Status and wealth defined a person and women sought the protection of men to survive and prosper in life. One reader, however, felt it could have been set anywhere and lacked a sense of time and place.

The narrative is based on the dangerous love affair of the young Sophia and the painter and their very daring, (far fetched?) plan to create a life together. Most of the group felt that the development of their affair was too swift, but for a believer in love at first sight in the group, it was perfectly plausible.

The characterisation lacked depth, although some in the discussion felt that the minor characters were more interesting and convincing and the foreshadowing of their mishaps created tension and humour.

To some extent, this was a good lockdown read, as everyone wanted to finish reading it and all had an opinion. The use of the present tense added immediacy to the events and the very short chapters, focusing on the perspective of one character created a pacy narrative.

It was great to catch sight of other group members again and to be reminded that, whatever the circumstances, there will always be a healthy divergence of opinion.

In a change to the published schedule, next month's meeting will focus on Readers' Choices, again via Zoom or based on emailed responses.

Maggie Doherty

MORE REVIEWS

Whilst some of us met on Zoom to share our views on Deborah Moggach's "Tulip Fever" other members of the club gave sent in reviews of their reading. I hope that these snippets give you a flavour of the wide reading interests of the group, but also that among the list there may be a recommendation that opens up a new author or genre for you as well.

Andy enjoyed reading Kate Atkinson's "Big Sky", the first of her Jackson Brodie novels. He recommends this gripping novel and intends to read more in the series. We look forward to hearing how he gets on.

Jean has read "The Return of Captain John Emmett" by Elizabeth Speller. On the return of Laurence Bartram after WWI he is asked, as an amateur, to investigate the suspect suicide of his old friend, John Emmett. The investigation takes twists and turns through some horrific and unjust aspects of the war. Jean found the book harrowing in parts but was still compelled to read through to the conclusion – no spoilers!

Basia has read copiously in lockdown, but highly recommends "The Trick to Time" by Kit De Waal. It is a beautifully written and exquisitely crafted story of love, grief and the quiet courage to survive great loss. The childhood joy of playing on a Wexford beach; the move to Birmingham with a new job; meeting the love of her life and a sudden tragic loss. Decades later Mona seeks happiness before it is too late..... This is a love story to take on the classics.

Keith has put us all to shame and apart from ploughing religiously through Simenon's short and sweet Maigret novels (all 75 novels have been reissued by Penguin) alongside the entertaining Camilleri detective stories (35 stories) he has also read The Jupiter Myth by Lyndsey Davis. It is set around 70 AD and follow the exploits of a fictitious detective but influenced by real characters of the time. This series has 20 books.

Heimat is a graphical novel by Nora Kung of her search for her family's history in Hesse and also German communities in the USA. It is deeply moving and should not be dismissed as childish because it is graphic format. The illustrations are excellent and support a substantial text. Phew Keith! When do you eat?

Unusually for her, Carolyn has read a biography, “Step by Step, The Life in my Journeys” by Simon Reeve. He is known for his empathy and open-minded attitudes, which seem to have been born from a mixed-up and miserable childhood and come across clearly in the second half of the book, which describes his early travels.

I hope I leave you on the edge of your seat and have inspired some of you to pick up one of the books reviewed. My name is already on a waiting list! Keep your reviews coming.

Coleen Bee

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June 2020: ZOOM MEETING

The beautiful sunshine throughout May did not distract members of the Book Group from their lockdown reading in preparation for our June meeting. Those who could tear themselves away from the searing heat joined a Zoom meeting to share views on recent reads.

Some had read our scheduled book *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* by French writer Muriel Barbery, which has really divided opinion amongst critics and readers alike. Written from two points of view alternatively, from that of an apparently dowdy, uneducated female concierge and then a highly bright 12 year old girl from a privileged background, the novel explores how appearances can be very deceiving. The writer weaves philosophical debate into the narrative, which could fascinate some readers, whilst irritating others.

A number of the books centred upon strong female protagonists trapped by or rebelling against the strictures and mores of the societies or times they lived in.

Her Self Surprised by Joyce Carey is part of a trilogy based on Sara Monday, a complex character with a bewildering life journey. The reader found the voice of this narrator compelling.

The Pastor's Wife by Elizabeth Vin Arnim was strongly recommended, particularly for the writer's ironic style. Set in Edwardian times, the narrative follows the struggle of Ingeborg to escape the repression she suffers at the hands of her father. Despite her inexperience, she manages to escape to Europe, where she attempts to find love and liberation.

A factual book was also chosen, which also centred upon female repression, *Unorthodox* by Deborah Feldman, published in 2012. In her memoir, Feldman exposes the pressures and frustrations of being raised in a highly religious, paternalistic, cult-like Jewish community in Brooklyn NY. The reader found the account fascinating, but was dissatisfied with apparent inconsistencies in the story.

On a different theme, one reader has enjoyed reading a trilogy by Jonathan Coe. She focussed on *Middle England*, the third book. It traces the experiences of three longstanding friends, from political events in 2010 up to the Brexit referendum and its aftermath. The reader preferred the first novel in the series, *The Rotters' Club*, but recommends the trilogy.

The popular writer, Ian McEwan, was chosen by one reader, who spoke very positively about *Nutshell*, which is a take on *Hamlet*, written from the point of view of an unborn child. The “foetal” narrator provides amusing comments on life outside his cocooned existence and the plot of his mother and her lover to murder his father.

Group members were invited to email book recommendations and *The Swan Thieves* by Elizabeth Kostova was highly recommended. It is set in modern America but ranges back to 19th century France and the Impressionist era. It is an intriguing mix of historical novel and psychological study.

I hope this selection has helped to give our members some new reading ideas.

Maggie Doherty

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August 2020: DETECTIVE FICTION

This month's theme for our Zoom meeting was the popular genre of Detective Fiction and choices ranged from well-known writers to some on the fringe of the genre.

A strong recommendation was the ever popular PD James and, in particular, her novel "Death in Holy Orders", which is set in a monastery and features Adam Dalgleish as investigator. The reader enjoys the way that the complicated plots in James' books unravel very slowly, but remain "unputdownable".

Another established sleuth, Inspector Morse, tackles the challenges of discovering the story behind the dismembered body that is fished out of the Oxford Canal in Colin Dexter's book "The Riddle of the Third Mile". This book was praised for the intricacy of the narrative and the clever red herrings presented by the writer.

The third choice was "Long Lost" by the American crime fiction writer Harlan Coben. The reader found the wide-ranging plot interesting as it encompassed terrorism, a variety of locations and stolen embryos, but she felt that, on balance the books were rather "unpleasant".

A less familiar choice was "The Locker Room" a hard-hitting work by Swedish writers Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahloo based upon an investigation by Martin Beck. According to the reader, the book defies some of the conventions of detective fiction, presenting a left wing hero and highlighting the increased trend of militarisation in the police force.

The reader who recommended Ross McDonald favoured his racy, fast paced style, as in "The Goodbye Look" written in 1969 and featuring detective Lew Archer, hired to track down a missing daughter. However, she commented that the books were more geared towards men, presenting stereotypical roles.

"The Big Sleep" written by Raymond Chandler was the next choice. It is the first book to feature the famous detective Philip Marlowe. The reader loved the twisting plot and some of the clever one-liners, but wondered if the writer intended the style to be as funny as she found it to be and was irritated by an abundance of similes.

The elderly investigators, Bryant and May feature in "The Ten Second Staircase" by Christopher Fowler. The reader enjoyed their quirkiness and non-PC approach in a bizarre case in which an artist is murdered and displayed as part of one of their own art installations. Although some of the background detail was tiresome to the reader, she enjoyed information relating to the background of London.

The next reader quite enjoyed Martina Cole's "Get Even", which is set in the gangland of London's East End. It is a tale of evil people, mostly alpha males, aggression and violence. Women are portrayed as outwardly innocent, but behind these facades ...

Although the title "The Vinyl Detective" suggests this series fits firmly in this genre, Andrew Cartmel's books are about a vinyl record dealer who unwillingly becomes embroiled in crime, death and complex plots. People seek him out to track down rare, historically important records, but others are also interested in these prizes. The style is very engaging and there is lots of humour, despite the dangers encountered.

One member of the group read “The Motion of the Body” by Lionel Shriver instead of detective fiction and thoroughly recommended it. Set in America, it is based on a long married couple whose obsession with fitness creates conflict in their relationship. The reader enjoyed the sardonic style and dry sarcasm.

We didn’t have time to explore characteristics of the detective fiction genre, as planned, but perhaps our selection illustrates something of its variety and popularity.

Maggie Doherty

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August 2020: INEQUALITY AND THE 1PER CENT by Danny Dorling

I started this during lockdown and I picked it up again last week. I know you are all reading TMIAB and this is far from being humorous but Dorling does write in a relaxed easy manner and some small parts are amusing in its style. This book is an encyclopaedia of statistics and facts and analysis. I found it shocking and surprising. However, if I look at homelessness and food banks and growing poverty in England, I am surprised I am surprised.

A single super-rich person in the UK's Ultra-High Net Worth Individuals (a new term for me) could, if he or she wished, take all the rough sleepers off the streets of Nottingham overnight, using a tiny proportion of their ready cash. So why don't they? Dorling would say they have succumbed to greed; (as this is book group) they have become Scrooge-like; constantly finding ways of obtaining more money and ways to keep it and not to pay tax on it. Their motivation is to accumulate more wealth and then stash it away. For what I asked myself; a rainy day?

What I did find very interesting is that since the financial crisis, an enormous gap in the wealth of the 0.01% and the rest of the 1% has occurred. Plus, the 99% of the population has become more equal. A statistic from Inequality is that CEO salaries have risen year on year since 2008. If minimum wage went up at the same rate then it would be £20+ ph! The 1% are taking huge salary increases and that affects the salaries of the workers. 0.01% have had huge increases in dividends whilst the company workers' salaries and wages have stagnated. Dorling's main theme is that we cannot afford to let this continue.

Dorling illustrates using facts, data and reports how the 1% has a dramatic impact on our (the 99%) potential, our life expectancy, our education, our mental health. He asks can we afford them? He shows the hypocrisy of inflicting student loans, where this generation of HE students will end up paying 49% tax on their income when the 1% would say this is not tenable for the super-rich.

The book highlights the psychological points of view about this inequality. The 99% allow this to continue because we think “the 1 % deserve it; the 1% are better than us; the 1% should be in positions of power in our government and civil service” and so on. Danny Dorling's opinion is that the 1% think this too but the other way around – I deserve it; I am better than them; I should be in a position of power.

The let-down for me is that the author doesn't come up with any way to change this. Inequality explains how the 1% never come into contact with the 99% from birth to death – top private schools, career through family connections, etc so have this mindset but says we have to somehow change their mindset as well as our own.

Is the book biased? It would be difficult for the 1% to read. It is hard for a member of the 99% to read about how the costs of this vast inequality in our society hurts us, our environment and even, Danny Dorling would argue hurts the 1% themselves.

Inequality and the 1% made me angry and upset and increased my weary feelings caused by Covid and the economic situation, rather like parts of a Dickensian novel would do.

Maggie Doherty

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September 2020: **THREE MEN IN A BOAT** by Jerome K Jerome

In 2014 Three Men in a Boat, written in 1889 by Jerome K Jerome, was voted the Guardian's 25th best novel in the Guardian 100, referring to it as a comic gem. It was billed as a comic romp along the river Thames and we were charged with the assertion that comedy in literature is not always taken seriously enough. It has been read as a classic at schools and viewed on the big screen as well as TV serialisation.

The group of us who met on Zoom after reading it, however, were of mixed opinions. Some enjoyed the descriptions of the area, in fact I had followed the route during my college years. It seemed to work as a travelogue for a few of the group. Others found them long, tedious and imposed as a distraction from the three arrogant young men and their dog.

Initially, the novel, as was common at the time, was serialised in a magazine and the tone and length of the chapters fits well with this. Jerome did not intend it to be funny and was perplexed at its success. But it has achieved international acclaim and been translated into many languages. As a couple of us failed to connect with the book enough to finish it and another of our group chose to listen as she rode her bike, we were confused by this, especially as it seemed to poke fun at some of the standards of the day. But maybe that was its very appeal, mocking his first audience.

We also cannot leave a review of this novel without commenting on the prejudices prevalent throughout; class, sex and racism were all widely present in a raw and ugly state, bathed in flippant japery. Maybe that is why we felt that this 'classic' had not stood the test of time; its lasting strength to be deconstructed as a study of the prejudices of the times.

Other books read by the group that we would like to recommend are:

- **The Green Road** by Anne Enright; her 6th novel and concerns the lives of the Madigan family from 1980 to present day.
- **The Familiars** debut novel by Stacy Hills; set during the persecution of the Pendle witches in rural Lancashire in 17th Century, entwining real, documented characters into a flight of fancy.
- **The Tree of Man** by Patrick White; a look a group of inarticulate indigenous characters in Australia who are brought to life through the eyes of the author.
- **The Heart's Invisible Furies** by John Boyne (author of the Boy in the Striped Pyjamas; a novel about the search for a sense of self in the Republic of Ireland.

Coleen Bee

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October 2020: **ALIAS GRACE** by Margaret Atwood

In our October Zoom meeting Coleen ably led an enthusiastic discussion about Margaret Atwood's novel Alias Grace. Based on an actual person, Grace Marks, who was convicted of murder in Canada in 1843, the book differs in some respects from the author's usual works, in terms of setting and style.

Grace was tried as an accomplice to labourer James McDermot, who was found guilty of murdering their employer, Thomas Kinnear. The housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery was also killed. McDermot was hanged, Grace was sent to prison.

Grace achieved widespread fame and notoriety within and beyond Canada at the time. People were shocked that a beautiful 16 year old girl, working as a maid, could become embroiled in

brutal murders. The fact that the couple, allegedly lovers, escaped to America before their capture, added to the sensationalism of the case.

Contemporary opinion was divided as to Grace's guilt and involvement in the crimes. This is Atwood's primary focus in the novel. The plot follows a burgeoning psychiatrist's interviews with Grace to probe her account and her memories of what really happened. In our meeting we applauded Atwood's interweaving of a multiplicity of narrative perspectives and primary source material, which present Grace varyingly as innocent victim, manipulative actress, someone suffering from insanity, split personality disorder or even possessed by a spirit.

The protagonist speaks with a compelling and tantalising voice and we agreed that the writer's descriptive style is masterful in portraying character and atmosphere.

Readers familiar with Atwood's writing commented upon how the novel reflects her interest in the treatment of women. The gender inequalities of nineteenth century Canada, its society's double standards and the powerlessness of women are strong themes. We also commented upon the exploration of psychiatry as an emergent scientific study and the interest in phrenology, spiritualism and séances as a means of trying to understand the workings of the human mind.

The consensus of the group was that *Alias Grace* is a very absorbing book and there was a suggestion that its complexity rewards a rereading. Like the quilt motif used throughout the book, the story cleverly combines contrasting pieces of information.

The Blind Assassin by Margaret Atwood was also strongly recommended.

Maggie Doherty

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December 2020: MACHINES LIKE ME by Ian McEwan

Some group members are fans of the very varied works of Ian McEwan and this book had a favourable reception from most, although there were some strong notes of dissent.

As the title hints, the novel is about Artificial Intelligence. Interestingly, it is set at the time of the Falklands War in 1982, but McEwan changes the events of history so that Argentina wins the conflict, leading to the resignation of Margaret Thatcher. (Some readers applauded this political outcome). The main protagonist, Charlie, is a feckless, financially challenged thirty something who blows his inheritance on Adam, one of a small number of robots designed as companions or domestic home helps for their owners. Along with his new girlfriend, Miranda, Charlie experiences the effect on his life of living with a highly sentient, sophisticated, physically attractive machine. However, one reader likened Adam's limited emotional intelligence to that of a person on the autistic spectrum, which was interesting.

In McEwan's "counterfactual history", Alan Turing has survived his post war victimisation and risen to be a prominent figure in technology.

The group wondered how to classify the book: was it science fiction/faction? A devotee of the science fiction genre felt that "Machines Like Me" did not sit well within the genre and could recommend far better books on AI. Some others were puzzled by undeveloped or inconsistent aspects of the narrative, such as the adoption subplot.

Positive aspects of the book were felt to be the interesting love triangle between Charlie, Miranda and Adam, the depiction of the era and the reasons why this particular robot experiment failed. According to Turing, in the novel, the artificial minds could not cope with the complexities and inconsistencies of life, like humans can, and this led to "machine sadness", which resulted in self destruction in some of the robots.

However, the story ends with a warning that man will eventually make machines that will surpass and outlive humans, once we teach them how to lie and accept the social untruths that are a part of our everyday existence.

Recommended books on this topic;

- I, Robot by Isaac Asimov
- Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep by Philip K Dick
- Ancillary Justice by Anne Lecke
- Consider Phlebus by Ian M Banks

Maggie Doherty