

Book Club 2021

January 2021: READERS CHOICES

12 of us met on Zoom to discuss the books we had been reading this month. What a revelation! We had agreed to seek out and read books by Black authors, which has opened up a whole new library for us.

We encountered tales with historical reference: from Briton in Ancient Roman times to the attempted assassination of Bob Marley in 1976; insights into the Biafran war; the still prevalent resistance and homophobia within some cultures even today; the effects of the slave trade, both as traders and slaves; unflinching portraits of friendship in all its garbs; and the true life story of a young man growing up as the only black child in his area.

All of these books tackled a range of difficult subjects, but did not, as may have been assumed, dwell on success or failure due to race or colour. They delved sensitively, and sometimes brutally, into the realities for the characters, drawing on the richness of time, culture, relationships and beliefs.

Overarching all of the books was a richness of language, prose and poetry, and a deep dive into relationships encapsulated within the framework of their time and place of reference. Each of the books has been highly recommended by their reader, some more suitable for lock down reading than others, however! Our authors were not afraid of graphic scenes of sex, violence or drugs in some cases.

Mr Lover Man by Bernadine Evaristo: At 75 our charismatic hero debates about revealing his true homosexual nature, leaving his family and moving in with his long-time lover. Living in Hackney, his Caribbean roots still hold him back.

The Emperor's Babe by Bernadine Evaristo: Set in London in AD 211 an 11 year old girl, married off to a rich Senator then catches the eye of the visiting Emperor! Her vibrant personality punctuates this poignant and sometimes graphic, tale.

Silver Sparrow by Tayari Jones: A rich view of relationships in this enmeshed tale of a bigamist with two families. Insightful observations by the daughter of the second marriage who surreptitiously seeks to know her father's first family.

An Orchestra of Minorities by Chigozie Obiama: A Nigerian chicken farmer is the victim of a scam in this mystical tragicomedy. It has many references to the guardian Spirit and is a highly recommended but heavy read.

A Brief History of 7 Killings by Martin James: written in rich prose, with a compelling plot and a cast of thousands it is set in Jamaica's gangster land and follows up on the 7 people associated with the attempted assassination of Bob Marley.

Half of a yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: It tells the story of the Biafran war through the perspective of twin daughters and their husbands. It deals heavily with loyalty and trust. Our reader said that it made her think, but not feel.

Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire by Akala: rapper Akala (Miss Dynamite's brother), chronicling his encounters as a young black boy and shining his experiences on society of today. Fascinating and accessible.

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi: Each chapter follows a different descendant of the lead character from the Gold Coast and the effect of slavery on their lives.

Beloved by Toni Morrison: our reader said after reading this “I thought that my heritage was not connected at all with slavery This book shocked and challenged my original beliefs!” Highly recommended.

My Name is Why by Lemn Sissay: Only black boy in Lancashire, illegitimate child of an Ethiopian student in UK. Authorities override her wishes and put him into care. This book follows his attempts to find his roots. Poetic and touching.

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison: This book addresses many of the social and intellectual issues faced by African Americans in early 20th Century.

Swing Time by Zadie Smith: Explores the subtle distinction of race and class as it follows the transactional friendship of 2 very different mixed race girls in Brixton in 1980s and 90s.

Coleen Bee

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February 2021: THE MILL ON THE FLOSS by George Eliot

The Mill on the Floss was described by several members of the book group as of its time but others felt that it had much relevance to present day and society.

The novel is about the life of Maggie Tulliver and her brother, Tom who grew up at Dorlcote Mill on the River Floss at the junction of the River Ripple and, as the book group discovered in the discussion of it, so much more.

The novel is divided into two halves. A more light-hearted humorous first half which brilliantly described childhood, emotional as well as physical. Eliot critiques education and teaching, and the decisions made by the adults without very little evidence and some of the group felt that sections in the book like this were “preachy”.

The second half is a more serious, darker section dealing with humiliation, loss and the conflictual emotions of young romance. We approved of George Eliot title and felt it was apt and gave a good vision into the book. The group agreed that there were several obvious themes running throughout the book – sexism, prejudice, hypocrisy, inequality – sometimes as a trickle, and at others, as a current.

The group enjoyed George Eliot’s fascinating insight into 19th century rural, English, bourgeoisie society and life. Most felt her descriptions were vivid and unsentimental, but not too flowery. However, some felt they were tedious and overlong. The author identifies herself as the narrator and some thought this was an omnipresent feature.

We considered whether the book was a tragedy or a family saga and the group agreed it is probably more accurately described as a family tragedy. Eliot depicts the complicated interplay between all the characters in the family and the inevitability of Maggie’s tragic demise.

George Eliot’s characterisation was much applauded by the group, from the hypocritical and prejudiced aunts to the heroes of the novel. She uses much humour and wit to do so. She does not stereotype the characters but there is a clear distinction between good and bad motives and actions. Most of the group cared about what happened to the characters. Maggie’s desire to be independent often clashed with her brother’s and society’s rigid and uncompromising principles and she battles with herself throughout the novel, as a child and as an adult, to do the right thing. Maggie had a heart-breaking flaw in her character; she was driven by her impetuous, generous nature.

The flood represented Maggie being overwhelmed by the norms and expectations of her family and of nineteenth century society and ultimately washed away. After much critical deliberation the group agreed the ending symbolized the tragic loss of Maggie’s imaginative, intelligent potential.

We all felt we had experienced a thoroughly interesting, informative and enjoyable discussion on a wet, dull afternoon.

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March 2021: RECOMMENDED BOOKS

This month was a blank canvas which culminated in a meeting rich in diversity. It gave us the opportunity to read books that had been recommended previously, Christmas books and the non-fiction that demands to be read! Interestingly, a few of the books focussed on a wide range of male relationships. The conversation was lively, as always, and gave rise to the tongue-in-cheek suggestion of some new U3A groups: *Grumpy Readers* and *Marvel Comics*

PREVIOUSLY RECOMMENDED

Homegoing, by Yaa Gyasi: a great novel with a strong and memorable evocation of black people's lives and experiences over the past 170 years. The plot is constructed around two sisters and their descendants for eight generations, (family tree included) from tribal life in Ghana, the horrors of slavery and later, family struggles in America. The portrayal of characters is intimate, immediate and compassionate.

Mr Loverman by Bernadine Evaristo: A fresh and relevant story which evolves with rich characterisation. It explores the life of Britain's older Caribbean community through the perspective of a 74-year-old Antiguan-Londoner and closet homosexual. The main character is flawed and selfish, but we fully empathise with him and his dilemmas as he is still trapped by his Caribbean roots and the prejudices of his local community.

NEW RECOMMENDATIONS

Hamnet, by Maggie O'Farrell: The story of a family in Stratford-upon-Avon in the 16th century. Central to the plot is the untimely death of their 11 year-old son, Hamnet, from the plague. His death is very moving and there is a very interesting section which traces the Bubonic Plague and how it arrived. These aside, the plot felt very contrived, insinuating its parallels to the life of Shakespeare.

The Burgess Boys by Elizabeth Strout: The story charts the lives of two brothers, and in part their sister. In an early scene the three children witness their father's accidental death at the careless hands of the younger brother. This incident shapes their lives. In later years, the sister's son, Zak is in trouble and the brothers return to help her. The plot is engrossing and describes male and family relationships well.

What I loved, by Siri Hustvedt: A brilliant book about relationships, spiced with a discussion of ideas. What's not to love!. The book is told by Leo, an art historian, in later life, which sometimes gives a skewed perspective. However, the plot starts with the critic being drawn into the artists' circle and the dynamics between the two families. Leo's son has an untimely death and Leo then befriends the artist's son, Mark, who is a sociopath. Running through this expose of interesting relationships are some great discussions on the American art world, including contemporary shock generation art, which is lively and informative.

Circe by Madeline Miller: A revised and accessible version of Homer's Odyssey with a twist. The infamous Circe is recast as a hero in her own right. A minor deity, she is a family misfit; not brash and forceful like her father, nor subtly seductive like her mother. When she rebels she is exiled and is free to develop her powers as a witch. Finally, she is in so much trouble she must choose either to fall in line as a minor deity of escape to humanity to follow her dreams.

Ordinary Grace by William Kent: This is a first stand-alone novel of mystery fiction by an established American author. The sensuous style, sometimes lyrical, evokes an engaging atmosphere. It is an absorbing read which focuses on a family in a small town in which there are 4 murders. The father is a Methodist minister, which does not sit well with the mother. The young son helps to bring some of the truth to light. Male relationships are depicted well with Frank's voice being convincing throughout. Jake, the younger boy, comes across as the conscience within the story, which is embroiled in the prejudices of people on the fringes of their society.

The Truth About the Harry Quebert Affair by Joel Dicker: Translated from French into 22 languages. The opening was so believable I had to look up the incident to find why I hadn't heard of it. That's good fiction! The plot is of two authors, mentor and student, who have become friends. Harry, the older man, has been arrested for the murder of a 15 year-old girl who had disappeared over 30 years ago. Her body was found buried in his garden along with a copy of his famous manuscript. Marcus sets out to prove his innocence and writes an expose. As the plot unfolds it is interwoven with quotations of literary advice. It is not an epic novel but a very enjoyable read, with well-drawn characters and many a dark secrets unearthed.

Flight Behaviour by Barbara Kingsolver: I read it because I really enjoyed her epic novel, Poisonwood Bible. Sadly, it falls short of the standard and I found it very long and unwieldy for the actual content.

NON-FICTION:

The Case for the Green New Deal by Ann Pettifor: Ann Pettifor is a leading economist, involved in the review of the write off of our WWII debt and has a fresh approach to monetary systems. She explains the deal in clear layman terms in one section of the book. The rest of the book is devoted to more general economic matters. She advocates that we take back the power from the financiers, who yield far too much power over our lives, she claims.

The Long Life of Trees by Fiona Stafford: Fiona is Professor of English at Oxford. She also had a Radio 3 series on The Meaning of Trees. Her credentials provide us with a very informative and readable look at trees. Each chapter focuses on a separate species, native British but also some from faraway lands. Her writing is evocative, describing some Silver Birches as 'a group of zebras in a swamp'. Also interspersed with humour, she states that 'the largest olive I have seen was green and floating in a glass of gin and tonic.' All of this leads to an enjoyable read of an informative book.

This month we will all be reading **Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain by Barney Norris** and hope that others in the group may want to join in our discussion on Tuesday 6th April. We will send a link out for the meeting nearer the time, but if anybody is interested at giving it a try and would like a little practice please contact me and I will be happy to talk you through it.

For those who like to plan ahead, we will be reading **Birdcage walk by Helen Dunmore** in May.

I hope you all enjoy your new freedoms in the weeks to come, but still have time for many happy reading hours.

Coleen

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April 2021: FIVE RIVERS MET ON A WOODED PLAIN by Barney Norris

Unfortunately, the debut novel by Barney Norris was not applauded by the Book Group members who participated in the latest Zoom meeting, despite the plaudits it received from many critics.

Set in modern day Salisbury, the story is based upon the first person accounts of five contrasting characters whose lives become connected by a chance event, reflecting the convergence of five rivers on Salisbury Plain. Norris attempts to create an individual style and form to reflect the age, social class and personality of each narrator.

Our Book Group members are generally a tolerant bunch and we like to look for positives, but the almost unanimous verdict of those at the meeting was that the book was contrived and unconvincing. The “voices” of the characters did not ring true and, overall, the themes of isolation, regret, loss and grief were felt to be depressing and repetitive. The structure of the story eventually cohered, like a jigsaw.

The writer, Barney Norris, forged his artistic career in the theatre and this novel, based on the monologues of five disparate characters, was likened to a five act play by one member of the group, perhaps reflecting the writer’s true genre.

Interestingly, feedback from some members not at the meeting suggested that they had enjoyed the book and its well crafted style, experiencing a sense of involvement with the moving personal stories of the characters. Diversity of opinion is always welcome in our responses to what we read.

Maggie Doherty

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May 2021: BIRDCAGE WALK BY Helen Dunmore

We had all looked forward to this novel, Helen Dunmore’s last before her untimely death, as we have already read a number of her earlier books with relish.

Birdcage walk seemed to sit between historical novel and thriller, reflecting as it did upon life in England during the French Revolution through the opposing voices of the political radicals of the main character’s family and her husband’s more moderate views. Entwined with this were the undercurrents of his past and the potential danger to Lizzie increasing in intensity as the story unfolded.

Helen Dunmore writes beautifully, rich in the description of the everyday aspects of the times and the view of the varying relationships that Lizzie held with each of the other characters. Some of the scenes were vivid, especially the visit to the vaults and her treacherous journey to the clearing at the top of the gorge.

However, the consensus view of the group was that we felt disappointed by the novel, which opened with a scene that bore only a tentative connection to the story, but according to her afterword, was important to her:

"I wanted to write about people whose voices have not echoed through time and whose struggles and passions have been hidden from history.... I am writing about the ways in which the individual vanishes from historical record..... women's lives in particular remain largely unrecorded."

Whilst we felt that she remained true to this we considered her long and repetitive descriptions of the details of daily routines was costly to the quality of the novel, seeming to insert huge passages that bore little or no relevance to the plot.

So, whilst there was much to commend within the book, we were generally disappointed in the novel.

Coleen Bee

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June 2021: HISTORICAL FICTION

This genre, which was the basis of our June meeting, prompted a wide response from the group, with a number of strong recommendations. For the first time, we met in a member's garden and enjoyed a beautiful sunny afternoon, both catching up and discussing what we had read.

We explored how the genre of historical fiction obviously raises our awareness of past events, providing insights into the lives and motivations of those who moulded history. As a fictional genre, however, a more common focus is on how the lives of more ordinary people are affected by the machinations of those in power, historical events and the impact on their lives. We are reminded of the universal nature of mankind, but also how attitudes can change.

A list of books read and some reviews are below.

Maggie Doherty

Earthly Joys by Philippa Gregory and its sequel Virgin Earth

The first traces the professional life of John Tradescant, whose unique skills in collecting, raising and nurturing plants make him an invaluable servant to King Charles I. He is equally in thrall to the Duke of Buckingham, the most powerful man in England, and every certainty upon which Tradescant has based his life is challenged as his personal world is turned upside down and all around him the country slides towards civil war.

The sequel centres around John Tradescant the Younger who has inherited his father's collection of plants along with his ability to nurture them. He flees from the chaos of civil war and travels to the Royalist colony of Virginia in America where he learns to love and respect the native people and their way of life. In the new world and the old, the established order is breaking down and for the Tradescants this means consolidating their reputations as the greatest gardeners in the country.

Both novels are typical of their author and she brings fact and fiction together to make for compelling reading.

Revelation by C.J. Sansom

Following the theme of the other historical novels it is about terrible ways of murdering people -

the stuff of nightmares. However the story is intriguing and a good detective novel so have enjoyed it.

The most disappointing thing for me with historical novels is that they show people do not learn. Awful things are still being done in the world, with the poor and vulnerable suffering the most; as they always have done. Politicians alter tactics as society changes, but the greed for control, money is still there and not just politicians.

***Jack the Ripper - Case Closed* by Gyles Brandreth** takes the well documented case which was never solved and looks at it through the eyes of two famous authors of the time.

Oscar Wilde and Arthur Conan Doyle were friends and in this book they use the skills of Sherlock Holmes to work through the various suspects until they have solved the case. It is based a few years after the events, so doesn't look at the murders in close detail. The final twist at the end of the book closes the case in a tidy manner.

The book is well structured and combines the techniques of the two leading characters to create an interesting story with various events, seemingly unconnected, which are keys to the final solution. I found this a very enjoyable read and felt it was a little different to many other crime fiction books about the Victorian era. It certainly looked at the Ripper murders from a different angle - it may help that I have read several factual books about the murders.

***Blood Runs Thicker* by Sarah Hawskworth**

Set in 1144 in the Cotswolds the book centres on the murder of a vicious lord of the manor and the investigation into it by the Under Sheriff of Worcestershire. Very revealing about the lifestyle of the time, the cruelty of many and the treatment of women. A difficult read in terms of some of the content, but well recommended.

***The Siege of Krishnapur* by JG Farrell**

The winner of the 1973 Booker Prize, this is set in a fictional Indian town during the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and written from the perspective of the British residents, experiencing a reversal of power. The absurdity of the British class system is satirised through grim humour and the atmosphere of the time is very well portrayed.

***The Luck of Barry Lydon* by William Makepeace Thackeray**

Published in 1844, but set during the Seven Years' War, the novel is based upon the life of a young man who is born into a genteel but impoverished Irish family. He is a passionate hothead, determined to raise his status by whatever means. Initially he could appear to be a likeable rogue, but he turns out to be a hateful cheat through the writer's skilful characterisation. A rollicking plot set in highly eventful historical times.

***Voss* by Patrick White**

The Australian writer's novel is inspired by the life of an actual character, Ludwig Leichhardt, a nineteenth century German explorer. Voss sets out on an expedition from the colony of New South Wales, collecting a motley crew of convicts, Aborigines and adventurers. It is a compelling story of struggles against adversity and hardship and reveals aspects of Australian society not often explored in fiction. Women's struggles in society are revealed through the character of Laura, an associate of Voss'.

***The Mirror and the Light* by Hilary Mantel**

The long awaited third part of the trilogy based on the life of Thomas Cromwell, the novel charts the four and a half years between the death of Ann Boleyn and the death of Cromwell. Although the outcome of events is well known, Mantel captures the interest of the reader and immerses

them into the story, through Cromwell's perspective. A very long and detailed work, but worth the effort.

***The Silent Death* by Volker Kutscher**

This is the second volume in the Babylon Berlin series, which follows the investigations of Detective Inspector Gereon Rath. Set in Weimar Republic Berlin in 1930, the book attempts to describe what the German city was like during this troubled and turbulent time. The investigation in this book is centred upon a series of murders in the movie world in which the rise of sound films or talkies threatens to oust the supremacy of silent film as an art form. A good read.

Further recommendations:-

Revolutionary Road by Richard Yates

When the Emperor was Divine, by Julia Otsuka.

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August 2021: EXCELLENT WOMEN by Barbara Pym

Published in 1952 and set at that time.

Almost all of the group had not read any Barbara Pym and most are really pleased that they have now - the benefits of being a member of a book group and the obligation to try something that one might not have considered before. Whilst one member did report being indifferent to the writing style and content, another enjoyed Pym's writing so much that she has now acquired three other novels!

Those participating in the Zoom meeting were in agreement that this was a 'good read' with much to enjoy in Pym's form and wit. It was felt that the title is appropriate and captures the essence of the novel which centres particularly on the lives of unmarried, somewhat genteel (not wealthy but not poor either) women who live by unwritten rules of (good) behaviour in post-war London.

The story is character rather than plot driven featuring a range of male and female characters who piqued the readers' interest. Pym creates an atmosphere of the early 50's although it was felt that the book lacked much detail of the times- although some of the fine detail is hilarious (e.g. Mildred being stalked by Everard Bone whilst wearing an old cotton dress, no stockings and with "Cardinal Newman and a loaf" in her string bag!

Some readers found the every-day, 'small' lives of most of the female characters to be rather depressing despite the comedy, particularly in respect of the narrowness of Mildred's life and her seeming acceptance of its mundanity. One member commented that though she seemed very intelligent and wasn't without resources, Mildred had little drive to change things. We never really concluded why this was - nature? nurture? lack of role models - despite coming into contact with other, accomplished women?

Whilst the lives of most of the women characters were depicted as stoical and accepting of their role in life, the men were described as 'creeps' whose own 'acceptance' seemed to be that their needs would always come before those of women.

Overall, whilst this is a relatively short novel, Zooming members seemed to find much to enjoy, leading to a lively and interesting discussion - and, I suspect, thankful that we all came to

adulthood a generation later where excellence may have different, more interesting connotations.

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September 2021: THE ASHES OF LONDON by Andrew Taylor

The book group met this month at the Fire Station to discuss *The Ashes of London* by Andrew Taylor which all of us thought was unpredictable and enjoyable. The book is set during and just after the Great Fire of 1666. St. Paul's Cathedral is engulfed in flames and reduced to ruins. This is a major setting for the book and the descriptions of London and the fire were excellent and dense.

The story is told from two points of view; James Marwood, the investigator, and a young woman called Cat Lovett. Both have fathers who were regicides and involved in conspiracy. The author manages to impart the traumatic effect of the killing of Charles I and the intrigue of the times as well as dealing with father-child relationships well. We all felt that the author caught the times authentically using 'real' characters in the background eg Sir Christopher Wren. There were no glaring anachronisms.

Ashes of London is a crime novel but there was little suspense. We all kept on reading what is a long book. One reason for this was the author's easy writing style. Also, the perspectives swap every chapter or so and the group thought this hooked the reader, kept the story moving and enhanced interest. The book has an intricate plot and a huge group of characters.

It was difficult to empathise with the main characters because of the actions of the female and the blandness of the male, however, the characterisation of the cameos in the book were very well drawn.

Taylor ties up the ends to the complex plot but had left obvious links to sequels and a couple of us had read the next novel.

December 2021: THE SEA, THE SEA by Iris Murdoch

Coleen opened the meeting with a brief biography of Iris Murdoch, which revealed the author's impressive academic achievements and the breadth of her writing, which received many accolades during her lifetime. "*The Sea, The Sea*" was awarded the Booker Prize in 1978 and in our discussion we considered whether we rated it as a deserving winner.

Most of those present at the meeting felt that the writer of the fictional memoir, the theatrical director and actor, Charles Arrowby, maintained our interest whilst infuriating us, as Murdoch must have intended. He is pompous, self centred and has a strange obsession with his former girlfriend, Hartley. Murdoch satirises Charles and his troupe of "theatrical darlings", their eccentricities, fallings out and fluid relationships.

Wishing to escape his successful career as renowned theatrical director and actor, to live closer to nature and the sea, Charles is nevertheless sought out by a series of larger than life visitors. He also creates his own tragi-comedy in his pursuit of Harley's affections.

The unpredictable sea provides a powerful backdrop to the human action and we felt that Murdoch's descriptive writing was often at its best in depicting this aspect of nature. Charles' philosophical musings also pay homage to her interest in this field.

Coleen suggested that Iris Murdoch's readers tend to be polarised in their views of her achievement and there certainly was a wide range of opinion, both at the meeting and in comments contributed by those who did not attend.

Despite being very long and somewhat repetitive, most readers felt compelled to reach the denouement and felt that Murdoch's writing was worthy of recognition at the time.