

BOOK CLUB 2022

February 2022: SWIMMING LESSONS by Claire Fuller

Our first meeting in 2022 was in person and well attended. The discussion was lively and thoroughly enjoyable, with interesting perspectives on Claire Fuller's *Swimming Lessons*. Most of the group enjoyed reading the book but it was uncomfortable reading.

Claire Fuller is a successful, prize-winning author.

The discussion was led using Claire Fuller's questions such as *while you were reading the book did your thoughts about what happened to Ingrid change?* It was clear that we still didn't know for sure what had happened to the main character, Ingrid – did she escape by disappearing or did she commit suicide or was it just a swimming accident?

The book is a mystery thriller however whether the author built a suspense around the story was not decided. The group felt there is a lack of plot and there is a great deal of smoke and mirrors.

There was much emotional reaction from the group to the antagonist, the husband, Gil, who is a womanizer, a sexual predator and a misogynist. The group felt he has no redeeming qualities and he never gains any empathy. His wife, Ingrid, is trapped by duty and circumstance. When she meets charismatic Gil, she is a young, impressionable student and he is 19 years older and her professor. She is totally captivated by him. They marry, have two daughters and Gil became a famous writer. We couldn't understand why Ingrid continues to love him.

This book deals with the revelations of a doomed marriage and the utterly miserable life of the wife, who is alone, miserable, and isolated. The husband's cruel behaviour slowly but surely causes their marriage to disintegrate; all of this told in the letters that Ingrid writes in 1992 right before her disappearance.

The group said it is a page turner and beautifully written; we talked about the evocative prose about the beach, the weather, the sea and the smells. Some of the group felt this didn't save the book.

Most of the group could not put the book down and will read more of Fuller's work even though the character of Gil left readers horrified, angry, frustrated. It was a dark book and maybe a good book for January.

March 2022: HUMOUR

We decided to cheer ourselves up this month by dealing with humorous books. Coleen got the meeting off to an interesting start by presenting theories explaining why we laugh, ranging from laughter as an expression of superiority to, alternatively, a spontaneous response to embarrassment. This prompted a thoughtful exchange of ideas about humour in different contexts before members' presentations of their diverse choices of books in this genre.

The satirical novel **Catch 22** by Joseph Heller, set in World War 11 has been described as One of the funniest novels of the 20th century. Both the monstrosity and ludicrousness of war are depicted.

Fry's Ties by Stephen Fry. Prompted by a lockdown clear-out by the comedian and learned celebrity, the book is a series of amusing anecdotes, but also a mine of interesting facts about ties and the customs of tie wearing.

The Thursday Murder Club by Richard Osman. This was chosen by two members of the group who had very differing opinions of it. Fans of the quiz show host turned crime writer applaud the gentle humour of his depiction of a group of care home residents cum sleuths.

Exit by Belinda Bauer. This book relates to people who want to end their lives, but the themes of ageing, loneliness, love, courage and faith are dealt with through grace and much humour, making it a black comedy.

Cold Comfort Farm by Stella Gibbons. This was recommended for the wry phrasing of the writer and her amusing depiction of a bizarre motley crew of characters.

Entangled Life by Merlin Sheldrake. Although not exactly a humorous book, we were told that there is much to amaze and delight the reader in this study of underground fungal networks and the fantastical world of, for example, slime mould. Be prepared to explode your mind.

This is Going to Hurt by Adam Kay. A popular choice as many in the group have read the book, seen the roadshow or the current TV series. Here, grim situational humour depicts survival by a gynaecologist on a NHS maternity ward.

Diary of a Provincial Lady by E. M. Delafield. A satirical diary of the life of a privileged, but struggling, middle class lady in the 1930s, The use of asides add wit and humour to this engaging first person account.

I Wanna Be Yours by John Cooper Clarke. The Bard of Salford's autobiography displays the wordsmith talents upon which his lengthy career as a performance poet has been based. Here his irreverent humour and self -deprecation are expressed in entertaining prose on his nostalgic journey through his past.

Good Omens by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman. The joint authorship of this project creates a bizarre, enthralling world, as might be expected from these writers. Intelligent wit and clever imagination permeate this parody of Just William.

April 2022: KLARA AND THE SUN by Kazuo Ishiguro

Our April meeting was a lively and interesting discussion on Klara And The Sun by Kazuo Ishiguro, who wrote this shortly before the Covid lockdown brought chaos to children's education, but rings a number of alarm bells. Ishiguro said of Klara that The paradox is that you can create quite a lot of emotion when you have a voice that isn't inclined to express emotion

It is set in a dystopian world in our near future and eerily feels as if it may well be happening somewhere. The story is told through the voice of an A; a robot created to provide companionship for children who have been genetically engineered to be gifted and were educated online and therefore socially isolated.

The group were unusually unanimous in praise of the quality of the writing, although not all of us had empathy with Klara. Despite misgivings, as we began to read most of us were drawn in to believe in the character of this robot for the most part. She was naive, kind and had an uncanny belief in the deity of the Sun.

Throughout the book Ishiguro, through Klara's observations and conversation, challenged some of our human practices which caused pollution and scientific ethics but gently, more as an aside than a crusade. This made it very powerful.

Aspects of the plot were weirdly unsettling, being so close to our current reality. However, group members challenged the authenticity of some of Klara's characteristics; why she wasn't programmed to understand the science of the Sun, for instance. But the overall opinion was that the book was both enjoyable and well worth reading.

Our resident sci-fi expert has recommended that we explore these themes further in Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice*.

May 2022: CARTES POSTALES OF GREECE by Victoria Hislop

Happily our face-to-face meetings are almost back to full strength, providing a lively platform for discussion. This month we have read Victoria Hislop's highly acclaimed, Cartes Postales of Greece. As a result of her books about Greece she has been made a full citizen. Interestingly, as this book shared a number of dark folk tales of the country we weren't convinced that she did justice to promote it to tourists.

As a group we felt that the style was confusing and to some off-putting, but the majority of us felt that the diarised notebook of the central character, who only appeared in person in the final

chapter, gave a warm and welcoming view of Grecian culture. Several of the group have read other novels by the author and were disappointed in it's popularised style and Mills and Boon style ending.

We found it an interesting idea, with some delightful descriptions of the country and some dark and sometimes amusing folk tales, but felt it was akin to a travelogue or holiday read with a mish-mash of short stories for good measure. Maybe not a good choice for a book club read. I, however, enjoyed it as it gave me a warm glow of memories from my youthful travels.

Members of the group highly recommend *The Return*, *Those who are loved* and *The Sunrise*, by the same author.

June 2022: THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY by Matt Haig

Matt Haig has achieved much acclaim as a writer of books dealing with mental health, having suffered from depression himself. Many readers regard him as a source of solace. The interests of the writer come across strongly through his exploration of philosophy and frequent references to quantum physics and parallel lives, which fascinate some readers and annoy others.

The book's protagonist, a young woman named Nora Seed, is extremely unhappy with her life and the choices she has made, despite showing great potential in some areas. She attempts to commit suicide but finds herself in a fantastical library between life and death, which is managed by her school librarian, Mrs Elm. The library is stocked with books revealing how her life might have been had she made different decisions. Nora is parachuted into these lives in her search for happiness and fulfilment.

The narrative structure is highly episodic as Nora experiences lives played out in a variety of careers, circumstances and international locations. Some elements of her real or root life, some of her characteristics and some of the people she knew inhabit these lives so the reader has to jigsaw all of this together.

Inevitably, Nora realises that there is no such thing as a perfect life, but life itself is very precious and worth fighting for.

The book divided the group, as usual. The approach is unusual and most readers wanted to find out what happened to Nora. Some felt that Haig's treatment of depression was too simplistic and that the structure became repetitive. Nevertheless, the book has received many plaudits and is currently a very popular choice for Book Groups, so we have had the opportunity to develop our own judgements.

August 2022: EDUCATED by Tara Westover

Our book this month was not an easy read. It is based on the memoirs of an American woman who was brought up in a devout Mormon community in rural Idaho. At the hands of her family, Tara suffered physical violence, neglect, brainwashing and controlling behaviour. More positively, the story celebrates the importance of education, which eventually provides an escape route for Tara.

Tara's father was the dominating figure in the family and also in the local community, whose members chose not to interfere with the abuse and neglect of which they must have been aware. As a little girl, Tara is a talented singer and she is drawn to acting and it seems that her mother is willing to help her develop her talents and gain a taste of the world outside the home. However, once her father sees Tara on stage in an outfit he judges as immodest and provocative, she is banned from mixing with her peers. Since she is home schooled, like most of her six siblings, Tara is once more trapped at home, working in the family scrap business and supporting her mother's homeopathic work.

As a fundamentalist Mormon, Tara's father is obsessed with the imminent end of the world when only those of his faith will be saved. He is also described as bipolar, which manifests itself in bizarre behaviour and irrational decisions which lead to great danger and extreme physical

suffering for his children. Conventional medical care and hospitals are spurned by the family so some of them are permanently damaged by this neglect.

Tara's mother does not defend or support her and her brother Shawn develops into a more extreme, violent version of their father, Tara being the target.

The turning point in Tara's life seemed to be when she recognised a different truth from the indoctrination of Mormonism and understood that the brutality of her home was not normal.

Against all the odds, Tara eventually attended a Mormon college, then Cambridge then Harvard and she has carved out a successful academic career for herself. This almost unbelievable progression into an alien world was achieved through great sacrifices and dedication, including estrangement from most of her family and with the support of those who recognised her potential. She also benefitted from counselling.

The narrator describes her experiences in an almost detached, documentary style, trying to concentrate on the facts.

All of the group found the book a compelling, but distressing read. It is a testament to human survival and the transformative power of education.

September 2022: HOME GOING by Yaa Gyasi

An extra table was needed for the large group of readers that met at the Fire Station to discuss this month's choice - 'Home Going' - an award winning novel by a young Ghanaian-American author.

This debut work was variously described as enlightening, challenging, clever, brave, and horrifying by members although not everyone was impressed with this undeniably complicated tale.

It is an account of the descendants of two half sisters born during the early 18th century in what is now known as Ghana. Effia's family remain in Ghana whilst Esi is captured, enslaved and transported to America.

The narrative records the experiences of eight generations - harrowing in the main but moments of tenderness too - with short chapters exploring aspects of the families' personal lives set within the broader setting of historical events. The reader sees how the injustices of the past, whether rooted in American slavery or African colonialism, build on each other to affect the future. Importantly, the writer shows us that this history is not simply a matter of white privilege/black oppression but also involved the complicity of African peoples in the capture and exploitation of neighbouring villagers and hence selling humans for the slave trade. It is this aspect that prompted one member to call the novel brave.

Many members of our group found the book moving and emotional. However others found it rather unengaging which might be to do with the disjointed structure and multiple characters - the family 'tree' included within the book was essential to facilitate understanding.

In summary we had a most interesting discussion of a complex novel constructed around distressing historical themes and personal stories. In the end we could not categorise it into any particular genre but the novel certainly added to the diversity of our chosen reading this year.

October 2022: THE ESSEX SERPENT by Sarah Perry

The group's discussions were animated and varied, covering many aspects of this novel, and the majority view was generally a positive one but not without some misgivings.

The title was considered and it was felt to be apt as the serpent is a central character in itself and the source of important themes which run through the book. Sarah Perry explained in her comments on her writing that she came upon the idea for her novel when her husband told her about a tale of a monstrous serpent sighted in 1669 near the village of Henham on the Mount. The descriptions of her serpent differ, however, from those given in the pamphlet her husband had read. For Perry the local legend became a catalyst and guided her story which she set in

1893. She felt that the serpent's return was made possible by the debates around fossils and palaeontology, science and religion and superstition and rationality. The reading group felt that the plot was plausible because of the hysteria which can be created by a close-knit, isolated village whose inhabitants are fearful of God's retribution.

The Victorian setting is less convincing in its accuracy or authenticity and readers felt that it actually gives Perry licence to introduce modern issues, such as class inequality, poverty, feminism, protection of the environment and sexual freedom. There are discords in some of the language, dialogue and characterisation but the flavour of Victorian times is present and is reminiscent of works of Dickens or Hardy.

It was generally agreed that the main characters are well-depicted and the group found interest in them and what happens to them. A number of the group admitted to preferring the plot advancing through the characters' actions rather than through the descriptions which are at times too long. Nevertheless, a number of us were not invested or involved in the characters and found it frustrating when the outcomes of their sub-plots are rounded off too neatly.

Out of the many themes in the book the exploration of love and friendship focussed the group's attention and the fact that characters reveal themselves in a specific relationship to one or more others. Almost all of them experience unrequited love and have to make do with a second - best version.

It was felt that Sarah Perry is a good writer and she draws out the tension of the novel in her descriptions of the menacing creature and the evocation of the Essex marshlands, which are gothic at times. The passages of surgical procedures are fascinating and detailed. Other aspects are not so successful and some of us felt that there is sentimentality and caricature which spoil the credibility of the plot.

November 2022: THE SALT PATH by Raynor Winn

We had a vibrant discussion around this book and the issues it raised. It charts the journey of a middle aged couple, Moth and Raynor, who lose every last penny in a court case and having to leave their home and business behind decide to become homeless travellers to walk the South Cornwall coastal path with little more than a tent, cheap sleeping bags and the weekly dole money. This is compounded by Moth being diagnosed with a degenerative disease.

There was a prism of reactions to the book, which was based on their true story, ranging from total admiration of the couple to disappointment in the way she tried to contrive some of the events into what then became an unbelievable novel.

All agreed that the descriptions of the journey and the areas they travelled through were beautifully written. However, it was transcribed from a journal she kept at that time and was devoid of any sentimentality. In fact, some of the group felt that they didn't get to know the characters relationship very well and that people they met had little or no definition.

Others argued that their relationship was exposed by their understanding of and kindnesses to each other. In reality, to embark on and complete such a journey, with little to distract them from each other is a testament to the strength and endurance of their relationship.

Throughout the book there were a number of social references to attitudes towards the homeless and they have since used some of the proceeds of the book towards assisting the homeless.

Most found their story inspiring and that the book ended on a note of hope. A couple who were off the grid and sorted themselves out in their own bubble.

This was Raynor Winn's first novel and she has since published **The Wild Silence** and **Landlines** which members of the group highly recommend.

December 2022: *READERS CHOICES*

CLOUD CUCKOO LAND by Anthony Doerr.

A Challenge to finish! Five Character's lives and legacies are described through six centuries starting in Constantinople, ending in 2346. Rich fantasy stories, adapted from ancient texts Recommended with some reservations.

THE WHEREABOUTS OF ENEAS McNUTTY by Sebastian Barry.

An Irish Poet Laureate Barry wistfully describes E M's attachment to Sligo through decades of imposed exile. A very Irish book said today's reader.

SHOULD WE STAY OR SHOULD WE GO by Lionel Shriver.

Irreverent, Dark and Scarry. A couple in mid-fifties decide there will be no point in living after they reach eighty. Whilst referencing contemporary issues Shriver, hilarious and soberly by turns, describes twelve ways their lives could end.

THE MAGICIAN by Colm Toibin.

A semibiographical account of the German writer Thomas Mann. Whilst achieving status and riches his six children were ignored by him in favour of his obsession with his homosexuality. One of whom wrote a letter to him repudiating in devastating language their father.

PEACH BLOSSOM SPRING by Melissa Fu.

A tale of a Chinese family who fled China for the USA. Dramatic accounts of war and surviving Nature's assaults. A family scroll goes with them on the journey playing a large part in the family's life.

DANCE OF THE HAPPY SHADES by Alice Munro.

Part of a collection of short stories DHS is only ten pages and sensitively describes the gradual decline of a Music teacher as well as the transcendent performance of a not obviously talented pupil.

THE BIRDCAGE by Eve Chase.

Three half-sisters and their father holiday in Cornwall. There is an incident at the time of a solar eclipse. None of them return. Twenty years later the father requests a meeting where the incident is analysed as well as the effect it has had on them and their relationships in the intervening period.

BORN A CRIME by Trevor Noah.

A mixed-race child in South African Apartheid who rises above his role as the product of an illegal conception to become an established American TV host/comedian. He makes powerful and funny social statements without rancour.

ON CHAPEL SANDS by Laura Cumming.

A memoir. In 1929 a three year old girl disappears from the beach at Chapel St Leonards, three days later she is found. It is fifty years before she discovers what happened. Her daughter Laura Cumming, an Art Critic, unravels the mystery with some meditative thoughts on how we choose to look at events, or not.