

BOOK CLUB 2023

January 2023: **THE PROMISE** by Damon Galgut

Galgut's novel received much critical acclaim and won the 2021 Booker Prize. For once, the group felt unanimously that the praise was well deserved.

This family saga spans almost four decades in the lives of the Swart clan: white South Africans living in the Pretoria area. The "promise" of the book's title refers to a gift that was promised to Salome, the family's black maid, but only one person feels obligated to fulfil this moral duty.

As the traumatic fates of the three Swart siblings and their parents are played out in a society driven by apartheid, greed and hypocrisy, it is apparent that the story is a metaphor for the decline of white African rule.

Much of the group's discussion focused on the writer's unusual narrative stance, variously described as freeform or stream of consciousness. Although primarily written in the third person, the reader is given the perspectives of various characters and is sometimes directly addressed as a confidant of the narrator. The lack of speech marks and the authorial fluidity and omnipresence help to immerse the reader into the lives and minds of the characters.

We felt that none of the characters was particularly endearing, even Amor who chose to try to rise above the selfishness of her family, by living a life of devotion to others. For one or two of the group this created a barrier to engaging with the characters. Others felt that the Swart family was a realistic representation of the destructiveness of a despicable and divisive regime.

February 2023: **SARGASSO SEA** by Jean Rhys

Some comments from our lengthy, intense and interesting discussion of this novel.

Published in 1966, this is Jean Rhys's story of Antoinette's early life; a Creole or white West Indian, and heiress to a family of slave owners in Jamaica. Although slavery had been abolished, this novel, set in the early 19th century, shows the fear, resentment and conflict still present between Black ex-slaves and their owners. As a small child Antoinette, her mother and step-father and a couple of faithful servants are driven out of their plantation home, which is set on fire by an angry mob.

The group's awareness of this child's traumatic experiences of course shaped our discussion of the main character's reactions and personality. Our comments which follow centred on the two main characters, the second one being 'the man', as he is referred to, who is the husband in Antoinette's arranged marriage.

The novel is in 3 sections, the first part being from Antoinette's point of view as a lonely, isolated child, apart from one black friend, who turned on the 'rich heiress' as she was thought of. Also, Antoinette's mother was distant, uncaring of her daughter, all her interest and love being saved for her little boy,

There is a tense atmosphere, created partly by historical events, and also by those who surround the little girl, these adults joke with her, or watch her closely and whisper their plans for her in corners.

We felt that Rhys's themes are British white male dominance, seen in colonisation and treatment of slaves, also their power over women; the author very successfully conveys the life of this timid and silent, but also distressed and uncontrolled young woman, whose lengthy honeymoon on one of the Windward Islands is vividly depicted in Part 2, from the point of view of the husband. Some of our group felt that the couple and their servants are isolated or 'marooned' in this lonely place, its dense tropical forests and humidity creating a claustrophobic, heavy, dark, suffocating, atmosphere. The husband finds drinking bottles of rum the only respite, but this results in loud, threatening arguments with Antoinette who is equally angry. We were interested in the influence and general fear of West Indian voodoo or 'obeah' possibly

used by Antoinette's only carer, Christophine.

Some comments on the marriage were that the man was insecure, but was never told the truth about his young wife's background. The reader knows that the mother was suffering from bouts of frenzied madness. As most of us know, the book is a prequel to 'Jane Eyre' by Charlotte Bronte, and we realise that Antoinette has mental issues as well, which most of us thought not surprising considering her background.

We thought that this vivid main character evoked sympathy because she was not properly educated, not prepared for life; she is powerless but is originally attracted to her husband. The setting, the violent, tense atmosphere all combine to make Antoinette the person that she is.

As shown in Part 3, she and her husband Mr. Rochester in fact, travel to England.

Antoinette is called by her middle name and becomes Bertha, the mad first wife, confined in the attic.

There was much lively discussion of this novel, which some of us felt affected the enjoyment of Jane Eyre. It was a hard book, emotionally, to read, we thought. although certainly memorable. I think it confirms what Ford Madox Ford thought about Jean Rhys's literature, that it conveys passion very well, and in an excellent style.

Christine Smith

April 2023: PROSPERO'S CELL by Lawrence Durrell

Lawrence Durrell was born in India in 1912 and although returning to England for education, never achieved much. He started writing poetry at the age of 15 then published his first book in 1935 (aged 23). With Nancy, his first wife (of four), he moved to Corfu in 1937. While on Corfu, he kept notes of their life and various characters they met. These notes, which carried on until the start of the Second World War, were used as the basis for Prospero's Cell which was written just after the end of the War.

Lawrence became a prolific author, writing in a wide range of books including poetry, novels and travel. His first novel, the Black Book was not published in Britain until 1973 as it was considered pornographic. Prospero's Cell was published in 1945.

Lawrence encouraged his family to move to Corfu, however very little appears in the book about them. In 1954 his brother, Gerald, published his own story of the family in Corfu as My Family and Other Animals. Lawrence appears in this book, along with several of the other characters. There is, however, no mention of Nancy.

Prospero's Cell is considered a beautiful tribute to the island and its people, recording a simple, idyllic life which was destroyed by the War. Some critics feel it is a mish-mash diary with no chronological order, using lofty language. It has been suggested that it is typically Durrell – lush to the point of over ripeness.

Among the group there were varied opinions but most struggled with the book, finding language difficult and feeling he was self-indulgent or arrogant. Despite this it was felt that there were some entertaining and humorous interludes as well as interesting philosophical discussions.. Some of the descriptive writing is very good and we felt this was an example of his writing style still developing.

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Other books discussed:

- **Doctor Faustus by Thomas Mann**

This is a reworking of the Faust myth with a backdrop of the Second World War. It's an interesting read but written in a heavy style which makes it hard work. Despite that, it's worth reading but take your time over it.

- **White Eagles over Serbia by Lawrence Durrell**

A novel about a secret agent in Serbia in 1954. It is somewhat in the style of James Bond or the Thirty Nine Steps. Although completely different to Prospero's Cell, it does contain some beautiful descriptions of the Serbian countryside.

- **Blonde Roots by Bernadine Evaristo**

This is a book based in the 18th and 19th Century yet referring to various modern inventions. It is about a reversal of the slave trade where Europe is in the southern hemisphere and Africa the northern hemisphere. Although well written, it was felt to be confusing.

- **Dickens and Prince by Nick Hornby**

An unusual slim non-fiction book, it is a comparison of two very well known people who initially would seem to have little in common. Although different in many ways, they did have a lot in common with exceptional talents that could be considered genius. This was felt to be a fascinating book.

May 2023: ENGLISH PASTORAL by James Rebanks

This month we focused on a non-fiction work which generated a lively discussion.

English Pastoral by James Rebanks chronicles changes in farming practices in general and, in particular, the Cumbrian fells over three generations of the same family.

Rebanks expresses his love of the British countryside, whilst also presenting a powerful polemic against the ecological and economic problems created by the move towards industrial scale farming and the overuse of chemicals on the land.

Divided into three sections, the first part describes with nostalgia how Rebanks' grandfather farmed his land along more traditional lines 40 years ago. The middle section charts the move towards industrial scale, more chemically-based farming in the UK and abroad, in pursuit of bumper harvests and cheap food. Rebanks rails against the resulting destruction of habitats, the pollution of land and rivers, the deterioration in practices relating to livestock rearing and the rejection of the natural cycles of traditional, rotational farming.

His father's experiences at this time portray a farming community in crisis.

In the last section, the writer does not offer simple solutions, but he explains how he has worked with ecologists and land experts and taken advice about how to run his own farm in more sustainable and natural ways. He admits that, like many farmers, he has to have another income to maintain his farm using more environmentally friendly methods, but he is committed to trying to find solutions.

The book is a salutary tale about how little the general public know, or care, about how food is produced and the pressures farmers are under to run their farms in ways they often see as totally inappropriate.

On a positive note, Rebanks represents those whose love of the land is coupled with an intelligent, practical determination to lessen the ecological destruction of food production and land management.

June 2023: THE BLUE BEDSPREAD by Raj Kamal Jha

This is a debut novel set in Calcutta and it received great acclaim when it was published in the late 1990s. The novel was selected to be on the Jubilee list which celebrates works from the Commonwealth and the reviews are without exception positive and generous in their praise.

Our group did acknowledge aspects of the writing and agreed that the lyrical descriptions, sense of place and eye for detail were strengths. Certain scenes were depicted with a sense of immediacy and emotion, and we felt closer to the cruelty and gravity of Indian society through this author's eyes.

We generally felt that we could not wholeheartedly concur with the critics' opinions as the story told left us baffled, confused and disturbed. We felt that we were left with many more questions than answers and the thread which could have held the piece together – the bedspread of the title – did not work. The narrator's memories came to us piecemeal and among them were some beautiful and poignant moments but unfortunately the doubts we had about which memories were true and which were fabricated caused us to reject the plausibility of the plot. It may be worth reading more novels from this author for us to fully see his worth.

July 2023: READERS' CHOICES

July's meeting was based on Readers' Choices and, as usual, a wide variety of recommendations added yet more volumes to our tottering piles of "books to read".

The detective genre was covered by *The Messenger of Athens* by Anne Zouroudi and the classic *Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins. Both of these very different books were enjoyed.

A Gentleman in Moscow by Amor Towles and *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah are books of historical fiction, set in times of conflict, which test the courage of the main characters. *A Thousand Moons* by Sebastian Barry shares these characteristics, being set in the US shortly after the end of the Civil War.

American fiction was represented by Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. The male protagonists in the books harbour secrets about their lifestyles which conflict with the mores of the time.

Contemporary female fiction choices in the selection were *On Beauty* by Sadie Smith, *The Library Suicides* by Fflur Dafydd and *Mr Loverman* by Bernadine Evaristo. These are three very different books, but all present memorable, strong characters, with complex plots.

Two non-fiction books completed Readers' Choices, *In Why You Should Read Children's Fiction Even Though You Are Old And Wise*, Katherine Rundell wittily analyses the power and range of children's writing. In contrast, *The Accidental Duchess* by the Duchess of Rutland provides a fascinating insight into her life and the challenges of maintaining Belvoir Castle.

August 2023: CATCH 22 by Joseph Heller

August's meeting reminded us how a book that receives a mixed reception by the group can spark a very stimulating discussion.

Heller's novel, published in 1961, is regarded by some as one of the most significant 20th century works of literature. It is a dark satire of the absurdity of life and the paradoxes of human nature within the context of war. Some of the group appreciated Heller's sardonic humour, often ironically expressed through the shocking disregard for human life shown by those in command of American air crew in World War II, or those wishing to profiteer from the conflict.

Others found the depiction of how man is depraved by war too bleak and unrelenting to be a source of amusement. The consensus was that Heller's narrative style, portraying events in a fragmentary, sometimes circular, non-chronological order was unconventional and open to a number of interpretations.

For some of the group this was a first reading of this modern classic, others had read, or tried to read it, as young adults. For one of the group it was a welcome return to a favourite book. Whatever our reading experience of it, we agreed that *Catch 22* initiates much debate.

September 2023: HAMNET by Maggie O'Farrell

Maggie O'Farrell has taken a scant bit of history and woven it into a speculative tapestry of immense beauty. Her lyrical use of language and her impressive prose is rich and elaborate.

It is a story of marriage and grief of what life was like in the 16th century in England in the time of the Black Death. Anne Hathaway/Agnes, Shakespeare's wife is front and centre in this novel. With little knowledge to build on, starved for love as a child after her mother's death, Agnes makes friends with nature - the animals and the forest become her companions . The plot alternates between Agnes's youth, courtship and pregnancies with the time when tragedy strikes in 1596.

It is not known why Hamnet died. His burial is listed but not the cause of death. Perhaps to enhance Agnes's predominance, to give her a greater role in this novel, O' Farrell does not name Shakespeare as such. He is father, brother, husband , son or playwright - not diminished, or dismissed but never named.

When Hamnet dies, Agnes's grief consumes her. The author's ability to transport us through this family's pain, to portray these agonies in such a masterful and evocative way is brilliant. Some of our readers were reduced to tears on more than one occasion. A few of our members thought the book was too 'description' heavy . By the second half, they were ready to give up, but I'm glad they didn't !. Also

O' Farrell's use of the third person present tense brings on immediacy and modernity to her material but that can be a little strange.

Would it have been a better book if there was no connection to Shakespeare?

Was that a distraction ? Was it a marketing ploy?

It was suggested that the book was in two halves - up to the time of Hamnet's death and then the aftermath which some found depressing and full of woe. Some muted that it would make a good play - in fact it is showing at the Garrick Theatre in London.

Shame we don't live nearer.

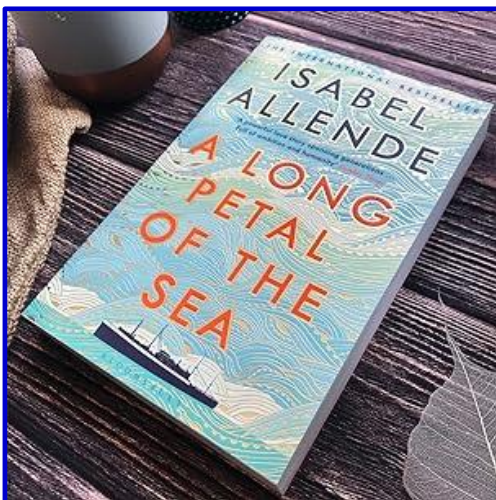
October 2023

BOOK: A Long Petal of the Sea

AUTHOR: Isabel Allende

REPORT: Christine Kitchen

The book is fictional but based around the events of the Spanish Civil War and its consequences.



The story revolves around various characters whose lives were completely changed and how they, as refugees, dealt with displacement, betrayal and relationships in very challenging circumstances.

The group had mixed feelings about the lack of emotion and anger from the characters but agreed that they were well portrayed and interest in the story was maintained.

Inevitably, the plight of the refugees was discussed. It was stressed in the book how the refugees had enriched the societies they moved to and more generally it was agreed that in desperate situations people do pull together.

We thought there were gaps in the story e.g.' narrowness of society portrayed, lack of emotion and historical

information but it was agreed it would have made for a very long read. On the whole it was an interesting and informative read.

November 2023: THOMAS HARDY

This month, the Book Group chose to look at the writings of Thomas Hardy. He lived 1840 - 1928, and ground his roots in Dorset - Wessex in the novels, focusing largely on the lives of country folk.

He trained as an architect, and became a prolific writer - novels, short stories, poems. We talked about "The Trumpet Major", "The Mayor of Casterbridge", "The Woodlanders", "Return of the Native" and "The Well-Beloved".

Many of his short stories were felt to be abbreviations of the novels with the same subject matter. One of his most appreciated stories was "The withered arm". There was greater enthusiasm in the Group for his poetry, with its romantic idealism. We talked about "Thunderstorm in town", "She to him" and "Lyonnaise", and the Hardy classic "The Voice".

There were mixed feelings in the Group for Thomas Hardy - his writings are often bleak, melancholy, with gloomy endings. We wondered if he is still read in schools - we thought, probably not.

December 2023: WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING by Delia Owens

Only eight of us met and the room was divided. Most were enchanted by the book, storyline, character study, description of the natural world of the marshland and the poetry and imagery of the book.

A couple of our group felt that the story was too far-fetched and were, on this occasion, unable to suspend belief. The discussion was lively and enjoyable.

We finished the meeting with refreshments and a quiz. Well done to Paul and Jean, our winning team.

