

BOOK CLUB 2015

JANUARY 2015: The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry

Our numbers in the Reading Group continue to thrive and at our January meeting, 17 of us had a lively discussion about this month's book - The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry.

Although the possibility of Harold's pilgrimage; walking from Devon to Berwick on Tweed shod only in yachting shoes and the clothes he left home in, was highly improbable, almost without exception everyone enjoyed the book. Some found difficulty getting into the story but eventually warmed to Harold, as events in his life unfolded through the characters he met. Although extremely physical, the pilgrimage was as much a spiritual journey for Harold. It became a time of reflection on his relationships and sadness in his life through an unhappy childhood, disappointment with his marriage and his feelings of being an ineffectual father towards his son David.

The book gave a lighter note with the pen and ink illustrations at the beginning of each chapter, humorous episodes and the excellent map showing Harold's journey. The story also has a cheerful end which will not be revealed for those who want to read the book.

Our next meeting is on Tuesday February 3rd. We have had to change the order for our reading programme as the library are unable to get copies of the book we planned to read - Hilary Mantel's 'An Experiment in Love'. Their copies are already on loan to another reading group. The copies may be back by March, but in the meantime we have brought forward 'Readers' Choice'. The format is that before the meeting we read a book of our choice, bring it along and make a short comment saying what it was about and whether or not we would recommend it. At the end there will be opportunity for members to exchange and give away books if they so wish.

FEBRUARY 2015: Readers' Choice

This month we all brought along a book that we had read and gave an appraisal of it. Most were highly recommended – giving us ideas for future book lists. Maggi D. had read **GONE GIRL** by G. Flynn It's a thriller set in U.S.A. about a modern couple who seem blessed with good looks and successful careers. Then redundancy hits and their life style changes. The girl goes missing and her partner becomes the prime suspect. The gripping story is told from both their points of view and is very enjoyable.

Jane recommended **THE THIRTEENTH TALE** by D.Setterfield. It's a modern gothic ghost story. Very chilling and atmospheric. Well written, it has been described as "a love letter to writing".

Jean read **DIARY OF AN ORDINARY WOMAN** by M. Forster. This chatty diary, supposedly written by the niece of a 98 year old woman is written in a friendly easy style. The story touches lots of issues like poverty, child evacuation, politics (from Italy to Greenham Common) and is a pocket history of the 20th century.

Joyce enjoyed **THE POISON TREE** by E. Kelly. This very gripping book has many twists and turns. It follows the relationship of two women and gives a vivid picture of London in the 1990s. A wonderful read.

Mary had only read the start of **THE GOLDFINCH** by D. Tart. She was so impressed with it, she heartily recommends it already as a marvellous read. It's about a boy in the USA who has a close relationship with his mother. They are involved in an explosion in a gallery where his mother is killed and he is left holding a picture of a goldfinch. He stays with friends to start with and is then taken in by his family where his life is governed by adults and he is pushed from pillar to post.

Gail read **A GIRL ON A TRAIN** by P. Hawkins. This book is similar to Gone Girl but is lighter and easier to read. It's a thriller set in London which explores relationships and fantasies. It's a slow suspense which confuses truth and reality and touches on breakdowns and domestic violence.

Keith read **ON CHESIL BEACH** by I. McEwan. This was written in 1962 and tells of the breakdown of a very short marriage. The couple are from vastly different backgrounds and very repressed. Their communication is poor especially about sex. It is a short well written book.

Carolyn read **ON THE BLACK HILL** by B. Chatwin. It's a novel set in Wales that reads with a Welsh lilt. It has excellent descriptions of twin boys growing up on a farm. It deals with the social changes which take place at the beginning of the 20th Century and how the brothers relate so closely to one another.

Trish read **THE BIG SLEEP** by R. Chandler. This short, pleasant, American pulp fiction has been much copied and set the standard for this genre. With excellent descriptive passages and wry humour it is a satisfying, quick read.

Linda read **SLAVES OF SOLITUDE** by P Hamilton. Written in 1947 this book tells of life in an oppressive boarding house during the War. The tenants lead disparate lives which are affected by the conflict. It has brilliant dialogue and was highly praised by John Betjamen.

Gwyneth read **ANNA KARENINA** by Tolstoy This long, dramatic novel has many characters and is a real "tear-jerker".

Books not recommended were:

THE PARTISAN'S DAUGHTER by L de Bernieres (Too long, too much sex)

THE CASUAL VACANCY by JK Rowling (Mean spirited, arrogant writer. A long and boring book)

LIFE AFTER LIFE by K Atkinson (Too many inter-related themes)

Lyn Jenkins

MARCH 2015: And The Mountains Echoed

Our book this month was And The Mountains Echoed by Khaled Hosseini. 16 of the group attended and a lively discussion followed, with the usual differing of opinions as to why we liked or disliked the book. Compared to Khaled Hosseini's previous two books, The Kite Runner and A Thousand Splendid Suns, several people found his latest book although thankfully less harrowing, disappointing. This was mainly due to the confusing leaps in the story to different people, times and events making the book seem like a series of stories rather than one whole. Others though just enjoyed the story the relationship between the characters and the care they showed to each other. In the end we wondered whether our views had been influenced by making a comparison with Hosseini's other books and had this been his first novel we might have enjoyed it more.

Jean Berry

APRIL 2015: An Equal Music

14 members attended in April and we had a very lively discussion about An Equal Music, a novel by Vikram Seth, which included a memorable comment from one member "the worst book I have ever read". The narrator of the novel was a London-based professional violinist who resumed an affair with a pianist that had ended in unclear circumstances in Vienna ten years previously.

Too much was about the technicalities of playing and the musician's lifestyle. Several readers could not relate to that but one or two, whilst not musical, got engrossed in that side of it. Many felt annoyed with the main characters, although further discussion of the narrator's background elicited more sympathy.

Overall it was felt to be a strange book - interesting in parts, tedious in others, with some wonderful descriptions of places interspersed with poor quality writing style. Various suggestions were offered as to the meaning of the title. A few had read Seth's better-known novel *A Suitable Boy* but no enthusiasm for that either.

Joyce Smith

MAY 2015: Mr Lynch's Holiday

Our book for May was *Mr Lynch's Holiday* by Catherine O'Flynn.

It tells the story of an estranged father and son, both emigrants from their respective homelands, but for very different reasons. Meeting up in an unfinished (but largely abandoned) housing development in Spain, both are in search of a connection with themselves and each other.

Opinions varied; boring, realistic, forgettable, really funny, undemanding, relaxing read, tedious and shallow and just OK being some of the comments! We all liked the characterisation and empathised with Dermot, the lead character, but whilst we appreciated the book's humour, and it's hopeful ending, few of us would read it again. Of the 14 members present, the consensus was 11 to 3 in favour.

Rofie Clennell

JUNE 2015: POETRY READING

We each presented a poem on the theme of age: any age. Choices reflected a wide range, from a mother exploring her daughter's first week, to poets focussing on old age. Some writers lamented waning powers and lost opportunities in life, whilst others embraced the confidence and freedom from convention that maturity can bring.

We agreed with the philosophy of one writer who penned what could be a U3A slogan, "Years wrinkle the skin, but to give up enthusiasm wrinkles the soul."

Maggie Doherty

JULY 2015

An Experiment in Love by Hilary Mantel

AUGUST 2015: The Uncommon Reader

Our book this month was *The Uncommon Reader*, by the much acclaimed Alan Bennett; writer of books, theatre and television plays.

A short story, or novella, it begins with the Queen's encounter with a travelling library outside Buckingham Palace. The Queen borrows a book by Ivy Compton Burnett that awakens in her majesty a passion for reading. So much so, reading books begins to take priority over everything else in her life, much to the dismay of her equerries who are concerned that her duties as Queen are being neglected. As the Queen devours more and more books, (even hiding them under the State Carriage cushions) the characters and events in her reading affects

the Queen's attitude to her own life and those around her. Eventually she realises that she has 'no voice' and decides to take up writing.

Overall, the book, even by those amongst us with Republican leanings, was favourable. Sympathy was felt for the Queen, with the restraints put upon her. She could never behave as a natural human, having to surround herself with an aura of mystique and majesty. It was a book that we felt was more enjoyable if read in one session. With only 121 pages and easy to read, this was manageable. The reason being that, to use the Queen's vernacular "One didn't feel inclined to return to the book if only part of the story had been read."

Our convenor Maggie, led us onto thinking about our own reasons for reading and we discussed what books we might recommend to the Queen. Saturday Night and Sunday Morning was seen as a good choice as an introduction to Nottingham in the 60's and working class lives. We also discussed abilities with writing and how confident any of us were with writing. General opinion was that reading was far easier and writing a difficult skill, especially good writing.

Jean Berry

SEPTEMBER 2015: READERS CHOICE

The focus of the September meeting was Reader's Choice, for which we all prepared a short presentation of a book we had chosen.

The fourteen books represented a wide range of writers, including the classical writer Charlotte Bronte, contemporary established writers Iris Murdoch and Kasuo Ishiguro and historical writer Victoria Hislop. Different genres were discussed, including detective fiction and romance. We left the meeting feeling that time is too short to read everything that sparks our interest, but we will try our best.....

Maggie Doherty

OCTOBER 2015: Black Swan Green

Our book for October was Black Swan Green written by David Mitchell, author of Cloud Atlas. The story based on the author's own experiences is told through the eyes of 13 year old Jason Taylor. Living in a sleepy village in Worcestershire, he takes us through one eventful year of his life. Jason is a sensitive boy, writes poetry for the Parish magazine and constantly tries to find ways of hiding his stammer. The story is related through chapters of events during that year: his interest in the Falklands War, Mrs Thatcher, relationships within his family and people he meets. The most poignant aspect being the bullying he receives from other boys and his way of coping.

Thoughts about the book ranged from real enjoyment and being able to relate to the bullying from their own children's experiences of school; feeling sorry for Jason and warming to his sensitivity, to giving up on the novel. Reading about the experiences of a 13 year old did not appeal to some, considering it would be more appreciated by a younger reader or someone growing up in the 70's and 80's. On the whole though, the majority enjoyed the book and even those with negative feelings found aspects of the writing amusing. It brought about a discussion on bullying and memories evoked by the author, of a time without modern digital gadgets along with the music and food in the 70's and 80's – Findus Ham 'n Cheese Pancakes and Angel Delight!

Jean Berry

NOVEMBER 2015: The Miniaturist

Our book this month was the very successful, internationally published debut novel, *The Miniaturist* by Jesse Burton. It is set in Amsterdam in 1686 and the book was inspired by Petronella Oortman's doll's house which is now in the Rijksmuseum. We had a lively meeting with readers ranging from those thoroughly enjoying the book; to those who hated it, "a crime against literature"; and to those who were frustrated by it. *The Miniaturist* has out sold 50 shades of Grey and there was much hype about it last year so lots of us were looking forward to reading it.

We all agreed it was a page turner. The book begins with the heroine, 18 year old Nella, having agreed to an arranged marriage with a wealthy merchant arriving at his grand house in Amsterdam. He gives his young bride a doll's house as a distraction. Most of us wanted the story about the miniaturist to be developed and wanted to know whether it was all in the imagination of Nella or just superstitions of the time. We agreed that the author had set the scene in Amsterdam vividly. It was exceedingly well researched.

Most of us cared about the characters to the point that some of us wanted a sequel. We came to the conclusion that Nella, was a 21st century heroine. She viewed the world through eyes that were older than her years and experience but some thought that perhaps this was what made the book a best seller.

There were lots of themes running through the book like bigotry, greed, jealousy and inequalities; all 21st century themes too. The setting of Amsterdam is enthralling but most of us didn't find the book lived up to the marketing hype. There was much that was frustrating and we were left wanting more about most of the elements. However as one member of the group said "it was a good read".

Pamela Ede Cooper