

BOOK CLUB 2016

JANUARY 2016: Venice by Peter Ackroyd

At 462 pages long and with the festive season in full swing, Venice, our book for this month, was a challenging read for even the keenest bibliophile. However, 2 zealous people did manage to complete the book and the rest of us read part way.

Because of the nature of the book, our convenor Maggie, suggested we chose an aspect of Venice we found interesting or made an impact, which we did leading to a lively discussion. The origin of the term 'Ghetto' came from Venice. Religious superstition resulted in the Venetians enclosing the Jews in a separate ghetto where through lack of space and population growth overcrowding became a problem. The area the Jews had been exiled to had been where metal was cast and the Italian word for the cast was ghetto; hence the name ghetto.

The Venetians obsession with money and acquiring wealth, created an economic system similar to today's capitalism. Initially trading in salt and maintaining control over other salt manufacturers, they became astute merchants, trading from East to West and exploiting any opportunity coming their way, making Venice one of the richest states in the world. They became an insular, secretive society, guarding the knowledge of their skills, especially glass making creating the finest glass in the world. Everything was shrouded in commerce and show. Keeping up appearances was paramount, so that frontages of buildings might look spectacular but inside would show a different picture. Poverty, corruption and the undesirable aspects of Venice secreted away.

Whilst Venice was a challenging read, with every chapter written about a different aspect of Venice from its early history to its development into today's popular tourist spot, we learnt so many new and fascinating facts about the history of Venice (too many to write about). Individuals related their own views and experience of Venice. Some brought in books written about Venice. We had a book on Ottoman Art and how Venetian art had influenced changes by making a portrait resemble the person rather than just an image. I thought it was one of our most interesting sessions and apologies for the length of this article!

Jean Berry

FEBRUARY 2016: Mr Phillips by John Lanchester

A group member recalled that a Frenchman once said "The British have sex on the brain.....and that's a very unhealthy place to have it". This quote may be apocryphal but certainly seems to reflect the fragile psyche of the eponymous hero (or perhaps anti-hero?) of our January read, Mr Phillips by John Lanchester. Members may be more familiar with the author's later work Capital, recently serialised on the BBC.

I suspect that there has never been a more animated meeting of the reading group and some strong thoughts were expressed about this novel. If I might misquote Brian Clough, at least one member reflected that this might not be the worst book they had ever read but it is certainly in the top one. Other comments ranged from "absolute rubbish" to "thought provoking", "horrid" to "unexpected" - there was not much sitting on the fence about this book.

The novel is set in the mid 1990's and is an account of Mr Phillip's travels on a blisteringly hot July day. He is a middle-aged accountant who normally commutes from suburbia to his job in London. This Monday is rather different though as Mr Phillips has been made redundant and today is the first day of his adult life when he has nowhere to go and nothing to do.

As he sets off as if for his day, it gradually becomes clear that he has not told his wife or two sons of the redundancy. He is a man of figures and statistics who cannot find words to explain his situation to his family.

He drifts through the day and we hear his observations about the scenes around him - both mundane and surreal - and also reflections on his life so far. Dominating the novel though is his constant inner commentary about sex - both real experiences and those imagined in his febrile fantasies.

It was perhaps the way that this latter aspect was expressed that literally turned many readers off. Much of the language was described as "lewd" and "crude" and with no apparent merit in terms of telling the story. Members were in agreement that some of the ideas expressed were extremely offensive to women. Many members found the book completely pointless, rambling and self-indulgent.

Some readers enjoyed it more, had persevered and found some humour in the situations Mr Phillips encountered. A few reported laughing out loud at a couple of points. However, most of the group, whilst acknowledging that there were some comedic moments, did not find the book actually funny in any way.

Initially it appeared that we would be having a very short meeting indeed as so many of the group hated the book and didn't really want to give it any more of their time. However, we delved a little further and a lively conversation ensued on what might have influenced Mr Phillips to keep the news of his redundancy a secret and what the impact of this day's encounters might have on him. Overall, a most interesting discussion from an unpromising start.

Gail Mitchell

MARCH 2016: Readers' Choices

The Spring Madness of Mr Sermon by R.F. Delderfield

Human Traces by Sebastian Faulks

The Behaviour of Moths by Poppy Adams

The Soldier's Return by Melvyn Bragg

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

The Girl in the Red Coat by Kate Hamer

A God in Ruins by Kate Atkinson

Rustication by Charles Palliser

Lamentation by C.J. Sansom

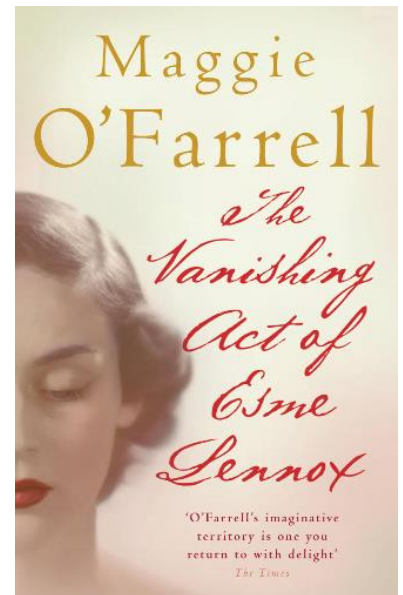
The Return by Victoria Hislop

Do no harm – stories of life, death and surgery by Henry Marsh

April 2016: The Vanishing Act Of Esme Lennox by Maggie O'Farrell

Fourteen avid readers met at Carlton Fire Station for a lively discussion of Maggie O'Farrell's 4th novel describing a family's 'skeleton in the cupboard', Esme. An unconventional young woman from a straight laced family, Esme had spent her childhood in India, in the days of the British Raj. One morning in Edinburgh, Iris Lockhart receives a phone call asking her to retrieve her great aunt from an asylum that is closing down. Esme has been incarcerated for 60 years.

Adjectives used to describe this novel were; fascinating, sad, gripping, complex and confusing. Our discussion centred on whether we felt the story was plausible, and most agreed that it was. This led to favourable comparisons with modern day life, and that Esme's plight was partly a result of her having had a modern outlook that was regarded as unacceptable in repressed, middle-class 30's Britain.



Those who found the plot confusing criticised the author's device of giving us the two main characters' stories in fragments from the past. The sub-plot of Iris's life was used to illustrate the change in social circumstances and gender roles, but wasn't regarded as gripping. There was a general agreement that Esme showed too little reaction to modern life. The majority of us would recommend this book, describing it as a page turner with a dramatic ending.

Maggie Martinez

MAY 2016: The Rainbow by D.H. Lawrence

An interesting meeting this month. D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* was generally regarded as disappointing, wordy and "of its time". Several of the group reported reading it when younger and found that it no longer matched their memory of it. It opened promisingly, but soon got bogged down as Lawrence launched into wordy, but cleverly written flights of fancy, for example, use of repeated words to give punch to descriptions.

There was a lot of discussion about his intentions. Was he a lone voice trying to break away from earlier styles to promote a more psychological approach to characters? Unfortunately, his repeated words seemed to turn into repeated sections and many of the group failed to finish the story.

Keith Sherratt

JUNE 2016: Poetry Reading

The focus of the meeting was on members' choices of poetry on the theme of **Place**. As usual, a wide variety of poets was represented, ranging from classic to contemporary writers and styles encompassing traditional rhyme and metre to free verse.

A number of further themes emerged: the natural world versus the man made, the restorative powers of nature and the association of places with strongly held memories.

We agreed that reading and exploring poetry in a group encourages the sharing of personal thoughts and feelings.

Maggie Doherty

JULY 2016: *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* by Neil Gaiman

The Ocean at the End of the Lane by Neil Gaiman was voted 'Book of the Year' by British National Book Awards and given wonderful acclamation by critics such as "Brilliant", "I will buy copies for my family as gifts. I will gush about it to strangers", etc.

By and large however, our members thought differently! A few really enjoyed the book loving the fantasy and imagination running through the story, whilst others were indifferent; finding confusion between what was fantasy and what was reality. The book begins with the unnamed protagonist revisiting his childhood home because of a funeral. He then returns to the home of the Hemstocks, a place he visited in his childhood. The story takes a sudden turn going back to his boyhood and a series of personal disappointments; no one turning up to his birthday party, his cat being run over, his loneliness and so on.



The reader is then taken into a fantasy of experiences; his friendship with a little girl Lettie who sacrifices herself to save him from his wicked child minder Ursula Monkton and eventually 'hunger birds' who begin to eat his world and eventually most of his heart. A short, easy to read novel, but for most of us disappointing in that the fantasy went too far and the ending left us dissatisfied.

Jean Berry

AUGUST 2016: *The Little Red Chairs* by Edna O'Brien

As ever, a really interesting discussion with a range of responses to this highly acclaimed book by octogenarian Edna O'Brien, writing after a gap of many years. We always start the discussion by having a round of brief reactions to the chosen book, and views ranged from: - fascinating, heroic, failure, disappointing but, all agreed, well written. In general members found that the book had too many characters and was fragmented, but, that nearly all of us wanted to finish it, even though we agreed that plot devices were hard to credit at times.

Those of us who'd read 'Country Girls' in our younger days recognised the west of Ireland and the rural charm, but the idea of having the character based on Radovan Karadzic dropped into that setting was indeed brave! Like unrepentant war criminal Karadzic, the character, Vlad, spent a decade in the guise of a faith healer. Yes, truth stranger than fiction. Some of the passages are violent and harrowing, difficult to read. Part of the narrative is based on the lives of refugees in London that we found realistic and humbling. The book ends with the war crime trials at The Hague with an unrepentant 'Vlad'.

SEPTEMBER 2016: *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen

This less popular Jane Austen novel stimulated an interesting discussion at the September meeting. Although we felt that the heroine, Fanny Price, has less sparkle and vivacity than some of Austen's other female protagonists, we found that the writer dealt expertly with serious issues of morality through the character.

The social satire in *Mansfield Park* lacks the humour and wit of other Austen novels, but we felt the author provided a broader perspective of contemporary life and most of us felt fully engaged in the machinations of the plot. We agreed that rereading classics at different stages in our lives often leads us to revise our opinions of the texts.

Maggie Doherty

OCTOBER 2016: Readers' Choices

Headlong by Michael Frayn

Maggie M.

Long Song by Andrea Levy

Maggie M

Brooklyn by Colm Toibin

Christine

The Running Hare by John Lewis-Stempel

Christine

Year of Wonder by Geraldine Brooks

Lyn

Elizabeth is Missing by Emma Healey

Jen

The Lake House by Kate Moreton

Jane

Sweet Caress by William Boyd

Carolyn

The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula Le Guin

Pamela

Mrs Robinson's Disgrace by Kate Summerscale

Keith

Ride a Cock Horse by Raymond Kennedy

Keith

Make Me by Lee Child

Trish

On the Black Hill by Bruce Chatwin

Gwyneth

Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café
by Fannie Flagg

Barbara

Care of Wooden Floors by Will Wiles

Jean

Behind the Scenes at the Museum
by Kate Atkinson

Maggie D "Oops it's on the list!"

NOVEMBER 2016: Talking to the Dead by Helen Dunmore

What diverse opinions there were about this book. It was strong – it was weak – it was both!

This provoked discussion about which sister was "the baddie", about sibling rivalry and the importance of dolls.....The book centred around family relationships, depression, neglect, death and sex.

Some thought the novel "mercifully short" and others found it well written and intriguing. There were "two whole pages" describing cooking a salmon which some thought interesting and others boring. We mostly agreed that the characters were "not nice" and that it wasn't a psychological thriller as indicated in the blurb.

Those who had read *The Siege* by the same author thought it a much better novel, so perhaps that might be one for the group to read and argue about another time.

Lyn Jenkins

DECEMBER 2016: Breakfast at Tiffany's by Truman Capote

This novella stimulated very divergent responses from the group. Some of those who had seen the classic film felt it to be disappointing, whilst others preferred the gritty, outspokenness of the Holly Golightly of the book to Audrey Hepburn's gentler screen character.

We almost all agreed that Capote is an excellent writer, depicting character, location and dialogue with skill and wit. Sometimes the characterisation was felt to verge on caricature, but that can befit the economy of the novella genre.

We discussed how Holly is manipulative and exploits those who fall under her spell. Some saw her as a damaged victim of an abused upbringing; others found her foul mouth and racist attitudes hard to stomach. As usual, we agreed that our meetings encourage us to read and explore books we might not otherwise consider.

A festive fuddle curtailed our deliberations, followed by a fiercely fought literary quiz (excuse the alliteration), in which participants exhibited their bookish knowledge admirably.

Maggie Doherty