

BOOK CLUB 2017

January 2017: DREAM POEMS

The new year heralded the first of our twice yearly poetry sessions, with the theme of *Dreams*. The afternoon began with a particular favourite for poetry lovers; 'He wishes for the cloths of heaven' by Yeats.

There followed a variety of poems evoking thoughts of childhood and fantasy as did 'Dream Fairy' by Thomas Hood. A poem about a fairy who brings dreams 'of pleasant things' to good children. 'A Dream' by William Blake, about comfort and hope after troubles. 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' by Keats the ever romantic poet, writing about 'a faery's child' inviting beauty and love, but then to be lulled to sleep and dreams thwarting all promise of happiness.

Paul thankfully brought humour to the afternoon with 'Lidl and Aldi' by Mickey McConnell, another Irish poet. A rhythmical comical poem about the temptations of the centre isle in Lidl and Aldi and how we are lured into buy things we never knew we needed! 'The Pylons' by Stephen Spender, started up a discussion on how we have got used to pylons and the same could happen with wind farms. Similarly, 'Beleaguered Cities', by Frank L. Lucas, invited a discussion on environmental issues and how, as depicted in the poem, nature will always fight back.

We had an enjoyable mixture of poems with reminiscence and personal thoughts about understanding poetry. It was a lively afternoon and a good start to the new year.

Jean Berry

March 2017: THE GREEN ROAD by Anne Enright

This novel is based on the adult members of a rural Irish family who have all gone their separate ways, leaving their neurotic and self-centred mother alone in the old family house.

Each chapter is told in the voice of one of the family and many of us, having enjoyed the first chapter, found the voice in the second chapter so different we thought it was a book of short stories. Each chapter could be a story in its own right but was bound together by family dynamics.

There was a very positive reaction to this novel, and the individual voices in each chapter kept our interest going throughout. Most of us agreed it is a great read with excellent descriptive writing and complex characters.

Members who knew this area of Ireland said it captured rural island very well. The controlling mother made one member think of King Lear and we had a lively discussion around what defines a dysfunctional family. Some of the group felt it was the best choice in a year although the enjoyment for a few was spoiled by not liking some of the characters.

Maggie Martinez

April 2017: READERS CHOICE

This month we discussed books we are currently reading or have read quite recently. As usual, there was an interesting variety.

Christine	<i>Exposure</i> by Helen Dunmore
Julie	<i>Chocolat</i> by Joanne Harris
Maggie M	<i>The Narrow Road to the Deep North</i> by Richard Flanagan
Vivien	<i>Broken Homes, Moon over Soho, Whispers Underground</i> by Ben Aaronitch
Jane	<i>The Secret Scripture</i> by Sebastian Barry
Basia	<i>The Woman in Blue</i> by Elly Griffiths
Keith	<i>The Railway Nation, Network and People</i> by Simon Bradley (non-fiction)
Carolyn	<i>Dalila</i> by Jason Donald
Paul	<i>One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich</i> by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn
Maggie D	<i>Redemption Falls</i> by Joseph O'Connor

May 2017: THE PRESIDENT'S HAT by Antoine Laurain

For the first time all the group members gave a positive response to a novel:- 'A quick, enjoyable read, light hearted, witty and pacey.' We agreed that if a book is well written it is worthwhile and one member said she was just relieved to have a book that wasn't about a troubled family.

Set in the late 80's, the novel gave us an insight into French culture- cafes, food and perfume, and was centred on President Mitterrand's lost hat and the various people who wore it. Their lives changed and it is left to the reader to say whether the hat just gave the wearers confidence, or if it had magical powers.

All of the characters were believable, including the President. We felt the book may resonate with our age group as we remember Mitterrand, who was president for 14 years. So, thank you for recommending this book Keith, as the first book to receive 100% 'tres bon'.

Maggie Martinez

June 2017: DIARY OF A NOBODY by George Grossmith

"Small minded, pretentious, upstanding, pompous, annoying, long-suffering"; just a few of the words given by members to describe the character of Charles Pooter in our book this month.

'Diary of a Nobody', a short comic novel, was originally written as a serial for Punch magazine in 1888 and later printed as a novel with illustrations drawn by the author's brother Weedon Grossmith. Charles Pooter records in his diary the daily events in his life, his wife Carrie, his son Lupin and several friends over a period of 15 months. Pooter, a London Clerk, has just moved into a 6 bedroomed house of which he is extremely proud and has aspirations to be part of middle class society. Much of the humour in the book centres round his unwarranted self-importance, many social blunders and his hilarity at his own unfunny puns.

For most, this was a 'laugh out loud' book especially with the antics of Pooter's son Lupin who reminds us that youngsters in the 1800's were very similar to youngsters of today. Lupin's manner of speech to Pooter and his use of modern expressions, confuses his father in much the same way as youngsters today confuse us with their txt language!

Apologies to the two who hated this book and found Charles Pooter's character and behaviour too irritating to read, but I loved it and read it twice.....

Jean Berry

August 2017: BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE MUSEUM by Kate Atkinson

August's meeting was very well attended, perhaps because members looked forward to discussing a book which most had found a very rewarding read. A number admitted that the complexity of Atkinson's narrative approach, the breadth of material covered and the cast of thousands introduced to the reader encouraged us to reread the book or approach it like a jigsaw to be solved.

The principal narrator, Ruby Lennox, explores the female line of her family, from her great grandmother Alice, who married before the First World War, to her own adulthood in the 1990s. Most of the group enjoyed Ruby's witty, observational style, which counterbalanced the lack of overt love in her childhood and the many sadnesses and losses in her story.

The back story is told through Footnotes written in the third person and we agreed that the episodes depicting the two wars added a sombre note and displayed Atkinson's ability to present critical world events with convincing detail in a very different style of writing.

Many members of the group were reminded of their own childhoods by the circumstantial detail of York in the 1950s and 60s. Atkinson presents the exclusion of children from the adult world and the cloak of secrecy drawn around so many family issues that prevailed at the time. We felt that the unravelling of the secrets in Ruby's life and her family history were very cleverly done and it reminded us that skeletons lurk in the cupboards of most families.

Maggie Doherty

October 2017: HOUSEKEEPING by Marilynne Robinson

We were a group divided today in our opinion of Marilynne Robinson's book 'Housekeeping'. Unanimous in agreeing that the book was well written but:-

"Too many long descriptive passages," "Waiting for the story to get somewhere,"

"Disappointment with the ending," "The worse book to read in the world at this time!" was echoed by some in the room. Whilst in the other corner "Lyrical," "Beautifully written," "Loved the imagery of the vast, watery, bleak landscape of northwest America," "A wonderful book".

'Housekeeping' was Marilynne Robinson's first book and won several acclamations. It received the PEN/Hemingway award for best first novel as well as being nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. It was 92 in the Guardian's 100 best books as well as in the Observer. It tells the story of 2 young girls Ruth and Lucille, abandoned by their mother when she commits suicide by drowning herself. They are then left in the care of firstly, their Grandmother who dies, then two Great Aunts who do not stay, and finally the increasingly unstable Sylvie, the dead mother's sister. Overshadowing all this is the memory of the Grandfather who dies in a train disaster and drowns in the nearby lake. All sounds very harrowing, but for me, without doubt, a beautiful book. Different points of view, is what makes for a good book group. The fact that individuals can freely and comfortably express their opinion about a book, giving reasons for their likes or dislikes is important. We all have our preferences and it certainly showed in this month's meeting.

Jean Berry

December 2017: ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN DENISOVICH by Alexander Solzenitsyn

For some of the group, this was a revisiting of a novel read many years ago. We all agreed, however, that reading the book now, from a mature perspective, afforded a better insight into this classic story of suffering and endurance under Stalin's repressive regime in Russia.

Set in a forced labour camp in the depths of a Siberian winter, the novella charts one day of Ivan's 10 year sentence. Somehow subsisting on a meagre diet of black bread and "mush", Ivan explains the brutal reality of the Gulag system, which detained and punished millions of Russians who were deemed to be threats to the State. The building projects they are assigned

are intended to help transform Russia into a more developed, industrialised nation, but the reality is that the detainees are an unskilled, reluctant workforce supplied with substandard materials, following chaotic instructions. Their main priority is survival in an inhumane system.

Ivan's unjust imprisonment mirrors that of the other "zeks". The camp could be seen as a microcosm of wider Russian oppression, in which the middle classes, landowners, intellectuals, religious groups, ethnic minorities and anyone having experience of foreigners is regarded as dangerous.

At first, the prisoners' almost stoical acceptance of their lot appears strange, but it is dangerous to criticise and they are powerless to change anything anyway.

We felt that Solzenitsyn paid tribute in the story to the endurance of the human spirit in the face of "Man's inhumanity to man", largely based on his own experience of suffering in a forced labour camp.

Rather guiltily, after our discussion we had a few festive treats and a quiz.

Maggie Doherty.