

BOOK CLUB 2018

February 2018: THE SENSE OF AN ENDING by Julian Barnes

In February's Book Group meeting we explored this 2011 Man Booker prizewinning novel. We agreed that it was a worthwhile read, but some of the group failed to understand why it was so acclaimed.

The story is narrated by Tony, whose philosophical musings on time, memory and history establish an intriguing thread as he explores how incidents from his school and university days are brought back into focus 40 years later.

The title of the novel suggests closure or the tidying up of unfinished business. However, we felt that a number of key issues in the story remained unexplained and the motives of some characters were unclear. Perhaps, we surmised, this is part of Barnes' intention, to mirror the unreliability of memory and to present the difficulties in trying to substantiate what really happened in our pasts, as in history in general.

The later schooldays and university years of the narrator are set in the 1960s. Many of us enjoyed Barnes' depiction of the mixture of gaucheness and pretentiousness shown by Tony's all-male peer group at school. This is followed by his floundering excursion into the alien territory of relationships with girls.

On balance, the plot has a number of unexpected turns and Barnes is an accomplished writer.

Maggie Doherty

February 2018: THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD by John le Carré

With the recent attack on the former Russian spy Sergei Skripal, our book this month *The Spy who came in from the cold*, sounded eerily topical. Briefly, without giving too much away, the story centres around Alex Leamas a British Agent stationed in West Berlin. Karl Reimick, the last double agent in East Berlin, is shot while trying to get back to the West and Leamas is recalled to London to be questioned as to how Mundt, the Head of the East German S.S. had been able to annihilate all the operatives left in Berlin. Leamas is asked to stay in the cold for one last plan to get rid of Mundt and the plot continues...

Whilst most of the group said they would not normally choose to read a spy book, all enjoyed the story and we agreed it was well written. We were able to follow the plot, unlike some of John Le Carre novels and there was pathos with Leamas showing an ability to form a caring relationship with Liz, a naïve young woman used by Control, to assist in the subterfuge.

The book was only 222 pages long and events moved quickly. I thought the plot was very clever and would put it on my list of good reads. John Le Carre's *Smiley's People* was however, recommended as a better book.

Jean Berry

April 2018: ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE by Anthony Doerr

As ever a lively discussion and a range of opinions about this book by an American author none of us were familiar with. The book is a Pulitzer prize winner and the majority of the group thought it well written and a good read.

Set in France and Germany during WW2 it features a blind French girl and a German orphan. Both have unusual skills and gradually their lives coincide even though they do not meet until the end of the story. The boy is chosen for an elite Nazi Youth training academy, and we found the development of his character a realistic and compelling part of the book

Opinion was divided on the short chapters and some found this slowed the pace and the book might have benefitted from being shorter. One member felt there were flaws in the details of the book, even though the author had apparently spent 10 years doing his research.

Most members of the group had a very positive response to the book and would read more from this author.

Maggie Martinez

June 2018: CRANFORD by Elizabeth Gaskell

If interviewed for *Desert Island Discs*, I think it can safely be said that none of us at the Book Group would select Cranford as the book to take with us. At our group discussion, words like "bland", "tedious", "two-dimensional" and "a bit of a chore" were used. Cranford is an episodic novel - we even likened it to radio soap, something perhaps like *Mrs Dale's Diary*, but of course Mrs Dale was way before our time!

Cranford, written by Elizabeth Gaskell, mid-nineteenth century, concerns a small group of ladies, living restricted lives in a small town, on small incomes, anxious always to maintain an air of respectability. It's a witty book, but one that leaves you wondering how the formation of a local U3A group would have shaken them!

Carolyn Broadhurst

July 2018: GRAHAM GREENE

This month the Book Group had a change to the programme and instead of poetry, decided on the study of an author. Graham Greene was the choice and we each chose one of his books looking at content, style and other aspects of writing relating this to the man himself. Surprisingly, apart from two of us who chose '***The Power and the Glory***', everyone's choice was different. However, it was quickly noticeable that the central theme of Catholicism, angst, conflict and Greene's experience of politics when he worked for the Foreign Office and later being stationed for a while at Free Town, Sierra Leone had a great influence on his novels.

Born in Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire, Graham Greene spent an unhappy time as a boarder at Berkhamsted School where his father was Head Master. As a result of running away from school he was sent to London to stay with a psychoanalyst. He later studied at Balliol College Oxford and eventually became a journalist. Greene converted to Catholicism, largely influenced by his wife. He didn't adhere to the Religion, had several affairs becoming torn between his faith and weaknesses. He later called himself an agnostic Catholic.

We all agreed that Greene was an excellent underrated writer. His books contain powerful imagery giving a vivid picture of the surroundings and characters, making them ideal as films. The stories often reflect Greene's comment that "Human nature is not black and white, but black and grey". His characters even when they lacked moral substance, were never entirely bad and often struggled with guilt at their personal weaknesses.

I think an afternoon of Graham Greene novels provided the group with one of our liveliest and most interesting discussions. A big thank you to Trish for not only suggesting Graham Greene but for also leading a very enjoyable session.

Jean Berry

September 2018: IF NOBODY SPEAKS OF REMARKABLE THINGS by Jon McGregor

After last month's book ***The Talented Mr Ripley*** when the group were together in expressing enjoyment of the novel, this month we were back to our usual always friendly but sometimes heated, differing of opinions.

Our book ***If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*** written by Jon McGregor in 2002, was his first book and nominated for the Booker Prize. It also won the Somerset Maugham Award and Betty Trask

Prize, so something of an achievement for a first novel. The style of writing is unusual in that it is almost poetic prose in parts and any dialogue lacks quotation marks. Characters are unnamed with just a description to identify them and their house number. Something our readers found a little confusing.

Events take place in one day and in one street in Britain. Almost from the beginning the reader knows something shocking is about to happen in the street. The story continues relating events in the life of some of the people and it is not until the last few pages of the book that the tragedy occurs.

Comments varied, from 'beautiful', likening the book to a lesser 'Under Milk Wood' by Dylan Thomas and loving the poetic style of language, descriptions and character portrayal as details of their lives unfold. The not so favourable comments were that there was an overuse of simile, with events occurring like Coronation Street, or 'not their type of book'.

As for myself, I had great hopes at the beginning of the book as it started with a beautiful film-like description of city streets reminding me of my young years living in London. However, I gradually lost interest with what I felt was an over use of descriptions and similes which were a distraction from the story. Finally the tragic event at the end, which I won't disclose, was something the book didn't need. Many thanks to Maggie for leading another lively and interesting meeting.

Jean Berry

October 2018: GENRE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The subject of this month's meeting was Autobiographies. Although most of us admitted that we weren't memoir readers, we all found a book which was interesting, uplifting, amusing, heart-warming or admirable in terms of its writer's achievements. Each of our chosen books was described and quoted from, a learning experience for all of us!

The first book, **'Uncle Tungsten, Memories of a Chemical Boyhood'** by Oliver Sacks, was a brilliant read, covering Sacks' early life as an unusual child who was fascinated by metals and chemical reactions, the louder and smellier the better. At home, where he had his own laboratory, he learnt about human dissection from his surgeon mother, medical matters from his doctor father and his 'Uncle Tungsten' developed the boy's imagination and education in his tungsten filament lightbulb factory. A charming and articulate memoir.

Next was **'Unreliable Memoirs'** by Clive James, described as very funny, poignant, with a typically laconic Aussie delivery, amidst the erudite, poetic writing which he has continued to produce in spite of being informed fairly frequently that he has little time left on this Earth.

'Behind The Scenes', written by 'national treasure' Dame Judi Dench, was praised for being informative, anecdotal, the opposite of pretentious, not a literary masterpiece but showing that this actor is a lovely lady who acknowledges the influence and help of other actors, enjoys ordinary pursuits such as camping, and recognises the importance of the spirit and enthusiasm of the whole acting company. She doesn't give two hoots for prima donnas!

The member of the group who read **'Just Me'** by Sheila Hancock was struck by her energy and variety of pursuits and interests. This sometimes resulted in her writing style being rather jerky, but the book covered Sheila's effort to cope with John Thaw's death, also her acting, life with John, being a Quaker and going to Germany to lay the ghost of her German-hating upbringing. She comes across as honest, lively and brilliant at people-watching. Well worth a read.

'The Crooked Seed' by Anchee Min shows the after-effects of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. This was fascinating as it covers the survival of a woman who is similar in age to our particular reader, but who suffers severe physical and mental deprivation. The quick-witted, determined writer managed to leave China for the USA. In Chicago she lives on her wits, working in several jobs, getting into college, having two relationships with Chinese men, having a child, becoming a successful writer. The book is full of angst, but shows the author's indomitable spirit. A memorable, poignant book.

Another book about a woman's struggles with different cultures, and in this case, religions, is **'I daren't call him father'** by Bilquis Sheikh. The writer is a Pakistani Muslim who becomes a Christian. She is forced to examine her relationship with God, she flees to Canada but manages to

return to her native country. It is a good read because of the intense religious faith of the writer which is revealed.

'Maggie and Me' by Damian Barr takes its title from Margaret Thatcher's influence of the writer's family and class. It is about the human spirit; Barr's family were poor but happy, hating Thatcher and her policies. This book is a page-turner: Barr is gay, he is abused by his mother's boyfriend, he joins every society and group he can, trying to get away from his family. A good sense of humour, realism and objectivity on the part of the writer makes this an interesting read.

'An Autobiography' by Agatha Christie was actually not so good. Various interesting biographies had been read but this, from the mouth of the lady herself, was not enjoyable and not finished by this book group member! Christie was very selective with her content and lots of facts were omitted!

Our next reader suggested that you cannot take autobiography at face value as it's subjective and can be 'show-offy'. However, he did enjoy **'Bad Blood'** by Lorna Sage. It has an interesting scenario; a young couple plus their baby at university. It is well written, very polished, literary, philosophical, also humorous.

Finally, the memoir I read is called **'Five Minutes of Amazing'**, written by Chris Graham, assisted by Wendy Holden. This man, a fit, sporty, strong soldier who served in Iraq, was diagnosed, at the age of 38, with a rare form of genetic, early onset dementia. His father had died of it in his forties and Chris's older brother was in the last stages of it, aged 43. Instead of going home and planning how to cope, Chris did a 16,000 mile bike ride across Canada, then south, east and north through the USA. This was to raise money and awareness for Alzheimer's research. Each chapter is part of his 'Dementia Diary' and describes each leg of his journey. The style is lively, poetic, full of Mancunian humour and the writer's skill, determination and positivity and shine through, in spite of several huge problems on the long journey. An uplifting read.

I imagine we will all be tackling more examples of this particular genre in future!

Christine Smith

November 2018: A TALE OF TWO CITIES by Charles Dickens

This month we visited an old friend from school days; Charles Dickens. He is recognised as one of our greatest writers and a master of descriptions and social satire.

A Tale of Two Cities, has few characters, but is a powerful historical story set in London and Paris, before and during the French Revolution. As a synopsis of part of the book, Dickens relates the poverty of the masses and how their lives were being strained by taxes "the tax for the state, the tax for the church, the tax for the lord, tax local and tax general, were to be paid here and to be paid there, according to solemn inscriptions in the little village, until the wonder was, that there was any village left unswallowed." Not only was there exploitation of the peasants, they were held in contempt, by many of the Aristocrats who considered and treated them as worthless.

One in particular was the Marquis St Evremonde, who while speeding in his coach through the village, runs over and kills a child. He shows no pity and throws a coin at the father Gaspard, as compensation for the child's life. In retaliation, the father hides under the coach and murders the Marquis. He is later caught and hung by the local well in view of the villagers. The undercurrent of anger against the ruling class and the years of injustices spent upon the peasants, sparks off the French Revolution. The following years of sending anyone and everyone connected to Aristocracy to 'Madame Guillotine' demonstrated how the oppressed can become the oppressors.

Whilst there was some criticism of the novel, considering it lacked strong characters and contained cloying sentimentality, most enjoyed the book and recognised the skill of Dickens as a writer.