

Book Club 2019

January 2019: DAYS WITHOUT END by Sebastian Barry

For some strange reason our choice of books for the past year have mostly come under a big umbrella of 'misery, injustice and cruelty'. The stories have tended to be based on real events, such as the French revolution in the 'Tale of Two Cities', Stalin's Gulag in 'One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich', the cold war with Russia in 'The Spy who came in with the Cold'. Perhaps it's a reflection of the shocking realities that have occurred throughout history.

Days Without End, by Sebastian Barry was our book for this month and fitted comfortably into the category of suffering, misfortune and cruelty. It tells the tale of 2 young boys who come together and form a strong bond through their need to survive in poverty and homelessness. They fortunately come across a bar that needs young pretty boys to dress up as females and dance with the local lead miners. Nothing more, "They need the illusion, only the illusion of the gentler sex". When the boys' manhood begin to show on their faces, the two survive, by enlisting in the army fighting the Native Americans and then in the civil war. As Barry puts it "The only pay worse than the worse pay in America was army pay. But you were glad to get work because if you didn't work for the few dollars you starved".

Without exception we all agreed that Days without end was a good read and Sebastian Barry an excellent writer. Whilst some thought they would not enjoy the book as it was a 'Cowboy and Indian' type story, comments were that they couldn't put the book down and thoroughly enjoyed the novel. One person even read it again. The descriptions of the American countryside; the conditions and events were vivid and in many parts poetic, reflecting Barry's ability as a poet. It's a book I think we would all recommend.

Jean Berry

February 2019: THE SIEGE by Helen Dunmore

June 1941, the grey of winter is disappearing with the ice and snow. It's late Spring and the long "white nights" are encouraging people to celebrate but all is not well. Within a few pages Helen Dunmore creates a sense of foreboding which permeates the very air that the citizens of Leningrad breathe.

Can you trust your employer, what happened to your neighbour who disappeared, will there be a knock on the door in the night ? Read on a few more pages and what appears to be a slow moving lightweight novel becomes a dark compelling read. Fear begins to enhance the cold of oncoming winter as the German army lays siege to the city.

As food rations grow smaller, the weak and sick start to die and bodies lie unburied in the streets; self- preservation tests even the closest friendships. The change in relations provoked considerable discussion .Was Anna, the novel's heroine really so altruistic and saintly, was Mikail ,her father selfish in just lying in bed consuming valuable food ? The question that most exercised the group was "How would we behave in similar circumstances?"

David Dobbs

April 2019: JOHN STEINBECK

David led an interesting exploration of the writer John Steinbeck and his works. After providing a clear biographical overview of the writer, he asked us to consider whether we felt Steinbeck was a worthy recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature. He was awarded this in 1962, but it was a choice that was criticised by many at the time and since.

All members of the group felt that they had enjoyed the books that they had read and felt that Steinbeck was a gifted writer, able to capture the plight of the working class with an accomplished descriptive style, particularly

when creating a natural scene. He was determined to write and led a very chequered existence to achieve this, doing a variety of jobs and experiencing life as it's lived. Since he was critical of the government and supported the underdog we presumed that this would have riled some of those in the establishment.

We felt that he produced a very diverse canon of work in differing genres, but his depiction of women struck us as narrow, often presenting them as either seductresses or downtrodden figures!

On balance, we thought that he deserves the acclaim of being regarded as a major literary figure. One of the group described him as "The Charles Dickens of America", which gained some nods of approval.

Maggie Doherty

May 2019: THE GO BETWEEN by L P Hartley

This month we were all thoroughly charmed by L P Hartley's *The Go Between*. The story is of a young middle class boy, Leo, at the start of the new millennium, 1900. He writes his story 50 years later, as a rather repressed and insular old man, reflecting on the first half of the 20th Century and coming to terms with the devastating events of the summer of his 13th birthday, which he spent with his school chum, of a high ranking family.

Hartley writes eloquently, developing rich characters and emotive scenes of landscape and relationships, layered by the maturity of hindsight. His poignant recollections expose the huge disparities of society and chronicle events of the half century in a compelling story paralleled with DH Lawrence and JK Rowling. There are deeply rooted ethical undertones and social protocols that are flouted, resulting in crisis.

A beautifully crafted chronological story with background and conclusion in the forms of prologue and epilogue, give the events of a short hot summer in the country a sense of time and place. It is a compelling read of love, magic, myth, legacy and betrayal and for those who want it – a proper ending. A much underrated author.

Coleen Bee

June 2019: READERS' CHOICES

Tombland by C.J.Sansom

The latest in the Shardlake series, based on the 16th century lawyer who becomes embroiled in solving crimes and mysteries. A fascinating combination of history and crime detection.

The Underground Man by Mike Jackson

A novel written in the form of short diary extracts, based on the life of the 5th Duke of Portland, an eccentric and reclusive Victorian who owned Welbeck Abbey and created a warren of tunnels under the estate to preserve his privacy.

Apricot Jam and other stories by Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Tales exploring oppression in Stalin's Russia. Quite a challenging read, but fascinating insights into tyranny and war strategies.

The Road Home by Rose Tremain

The novel charts the struggles of Leff, an Eastern European migrant worker who arrives in London in the 1980s. The author explores, with empathy, his impressions of the city, the varied people he encounters and his struggles to survive.

Les Miserables (Abridged) by Victor Hugo

An accessible way of grasping this complex story of a 17 year war period. The trials and tribulations (and many coincidences) in the life of the main character Valjean are revealed more concisely than in the epic original.

Heroes by Stephen Fry

Stephen Fry's distinctive voice retells the myths and legends of the Greek heroes with a modern twist, wit and erudition.

The Light of Day by Eric Ambler

A beautifully written comic thriller novel, which contains memorable characters, skilfully drawn.

Disturbance by Marianne Kavanagh

A psychological thriller based on Sara who lives in a beautiful rectory, but is totally isolated from her challenging children and obnoxious husband. When Katie, a student, starts to walk the family dog, events change completely...

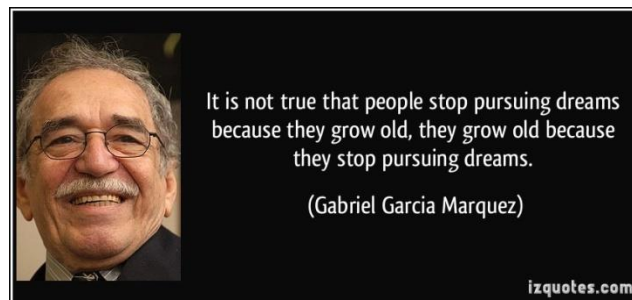
July 2019: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

As usual, we had an interesting and lively discussion, and also, as usual, opinions were divided. There were some confessions of having not finished the book, but that is OK, as at the end of the discussion some of us decided to plough on.

This best-selling classic tells the story of the Buenda family in Latin America, and chronicles the irreconcilable conflict between the desire for solitude and the need for love. Even those in the group who found the novel hard work recognised that the language was poetic and imaginative. Reactions to the book were influenced by how we had approached it, as the genre is 'magical realism', and it didn't work if you expected a conventional plot. One person felt that as the family started a new life in virgin territory, it had the sense of a creation story. We agreed that one has to let the prose flow and not worry about the plot or large list of characters. Some of us were frustrated by family members having the same names!

Two members of the group were passionate about this book, one having read it for the third time!

The great thing about a book club is that we benefit from hearing other perspectives and often decide to give a book another chance at the end of our meeting.



Maggie Martinez

August 2019: ELEANOR OLIPHANT IS COMPLETELY FINE by Gail Honeyman

With 2 new members joining us we had a table of 15 to review this month's book, 'Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine', to date Gail Honeyman's only novel. It has gained several awards and has filming rights pending, but that didn't make it a universally acclaimed book to our exacting group. The discussion was diverse and lively, though always polite, as we swayed between those who willingly suspended belief, accepting that it is a novel and not a case study, to those of us irritated by trite humour, an unbelievable character study and a gratingly happy ending.

The main character has been damaged in her early life and at 30 presents the emotional intelligence of a morphing teenager despite holding a university degree and a responsible job in finance. Most of us recognised aspects of Eleanor in our previous working lives, but we had to acknowledge her as a caricature rather than a believable character to accept the developments as they unfolded.

There were some great examples of observational humour and understated innocence of life alongside the exposition of her cruel treatment as a child. No wonder that we held such strongly differing opinions on the novel as a whole. The discussion moved into the specifics of individual characters, especially her mother (now dead) and her only friend, Raymond. Did the author want to show the best of human nature? Kindness as shown by Raymond was extreme and unconditional

whilst her early life was exposed to a complete void of kindness, making Eleanor incapable of responding to kindness - until the arrival of a cat in her life.

Whilst some aligned this novel with Bridget Jones Diary, the consensus was that this book held more substance than Chick Lit but certainly fell short of some of the quality literature we have read earlier in the year.

This month we are each choosing a book / books from Virago publications and will each give a synopsis of our selection. Happy reading.

Coleen Bee

September 2019: VIRAGO

This month we departed from the normal format to focus on books from the publishing house Virago. Coleen led a fascinating meeting, which was enriched by her research and structured questioning. Founded in 1973, Virago was the first mass-marketing publisher to present women writers centre stage, to champion their talents and provide a voice for their interests, experiences and concerns. Some of the books published were rediscovered classics, whilst others were contemporary works, often voicing ideas about cultural changes in the 1970s and beyond, for example, feminism and sexual politics.

Members of the book group had been given a free hand to talk about any Virago book of their choice. Acclaimed writers such as Margaret Atwood, Sarah Waters and Antonia White featured in the selection, but choices such as Storm Jameson and Willa Cather showed how Virago gave a platform to writers who might otherwise have been marginalised.

To conclude our discussion, we debated whether the books we had read would have such a profound impact on young people today, particularly women, and concluded that some of them were definitely locked into a former era. Also, we remarked on the quite narrow social class of the writers we had chosen and wondered if books published more recently by Virago might offer more diversity.

Despite this, we agreed that there is still a place in the 21st century for a publisher with such focused aims, dedicated to women writers.

Virago Choices:

Sarah Waters	Tipping the Velvet
Mary McCarthy	The Group
Willa Cather	O! Pioneers
Storm Jameson	Women against Men
Sara Maitland	Brittle Joys
Margaret Atwood	Dancing Girls
Antonia White	The Sugar House
Margaret Atwood	The Edible Woman
Sarah Waters	Affinity
Margaret Atwood	Bluebeard's Egg
Elizabeth Taylor	Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont
Marilynne Robinson	Gilead
Angela Carter	Fireworks

Maggie Doherty

November 2019: THE SCAPEGOAT

Daphne Du Maurier's 11th novel, led to our liveliest discussion yet! There were some in our group who found it a well-written, intriguing page-turner filled with beautiful descriptions of the French countryside and a series of traps for the unwilling scapegoat. Others were disenchanted by an Agatha Christie-esque chick lit that was implausible and over-egged. Who wouldn't want to be a fly on the wall during that debate!

Those for it asked us to think of it as a modern Shakespearean play or an opera, both have unbelievable plots set in ridiculous timescales, but we suspend our belief and enjoy the artistry and fairy-tale.

Those against felt irritated by the unbelievable turn of events and the caricatures depicted.

It is set in rural France where an English professor of French history and culture, John, meets his physical double, Jean, a French duke. Both are dissatisfied with their lot, of their own making, but are the yin and yang of each other. The Duke arranges for them to change places and the bulk of the story, set in the space of a week, exposes the character of both through John's discovery of himself, as seen through the eyes of Jean's family.

There were no fence-sitters in this discussion, which was interesting, inciteful and passionate but always respectful.

A couple in the group preferred it to the more famous, *Rebecca* and one who dared anyone reading it to believe it. Nobody had their opinions reversed during the discussion, but everybody had plenty of opportunity to explore and air their views. By having both sides discussed so eloquently we were all able to evaluate our own opinions.

Coleen Bee

November 2019: THE GIRL ON THE STAIRS by Louise Welsh

Although the majority of the group felt they would not recommend this book to other readers, we found much to discuss and query about the characters and plot.

We classified the novel as a gothic/psychological thriller with elements of horror and agreed that the establishment of a strong sense of location in a seedy area of Berlin was a positive aspect of Welsh's writing. An English woman, Jane, six months pregnant, has moved to the city to be with her partner, Petra. Isolated in an unfamiliar city, with scant grasp of the language, Jane feels abandoned in a chic, but rather sterile apartment, whilst the demands of Petra's high-flying career force her to work long hours and to travel. Jane becomes convinced that a young girl in the next apartment is in a highly dangerous position so she makes it her mission to try to protect her. In her quest, Jane provokes a range of characters, all with their own dark secrets and the denouement is dramatic, to say the least!

Although the plot was quite compelling, most of us found none of the characters likeable and the behaviour of Jane, particularly considering her vulnerability, struck us as irrational or immature.

In the opinion of some of the group, Welsh crowded too many issues into the book and created stereotypes instead of fully fleshed characters. There was a more positive response to the book from the men in the group, which was interesting.

Maggie Doherty