

BOOK CLUB 2024

January 2024: MARGARET ATWOOD

This month we met to discuss the Canadian author, Margaret Atwood, feminist, poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, environmental activist and inventor.

She has diversified into Speculative Fiction (dystopian novels), a comic book series about a superhero and a chamber opera. Initially recognised as a poet, her status gave her a platform for her novels and other ventures

We have read a range of her work, as can be seen here, covering novels, short stories and essays. Throughout her work she covers the recurring themes of Canada and its identity, feminism, speculative/sci-fi, animal rights and uses her writing as a platform for her political activism.

There was a consensus in the room that we were in the presence of a great writer who demonstrated excellence in the structure of her work; her incomparable observations of life; her edginess, quirkiness and humour.



All agreed that she drew us into her world whilst bringing her into ours. She writes magnificent prose, but doesn't waste energy, time or words on over-elaborate descriptions. She can produce the same effect with a carefully chosen word or phrase. Having shared a range of her work across her writing decades we all concluded that she is one of the great authors of our time and that her work is timeless, her themes being just as relevant today. We concluded with a fine debate on the feminism and true equality.

February 2024: THE COUNTRY GIRLS by Edna O'Brien

Whilst 'The Country Girls' only took O'Brien 3 weeks to write, it quickly became a popular novel. It was made famous by its sexual content and condemnation by the Catholic Church in Ireland. It was censored by the censorship and publicly burnt by a local parish priest. All this probably helped to promote the book and to encourage the population of Ireland to want to read it.

The book is part biographical and of Edna O'Brien's experiences of life for girls and women, growing up in Ireland at that time. It is a male dominated society and the Church has a powerful influence on attitudes and beliefs. The father held prime position in the home and the family were reliant on his ability to provide them with a decent home, living and security.

The story centres round the unlikely friendship of two girls in Ireland. Baba, the more dominant of the two, from a comfortable comparatively well off background, is confident, rebellious and determined to have freedom and fun in life. Caithleen her friend from a struggling background, with a mother who is submissive, and a father with a tendency to aggression through a reoccurring drink problem, is timid, sweet, very bright and conforming.

Baba's influence on Caithleen comes through especially when the two girls enter the Convent School. Caithleen's ability and hard work, win her a scholarship, whilst Baba, through her family's money, buys a place. Baba's rebellious nature, desire to experience fun and freedom, quickly lead to the two being expelled and as soon as they are able, going to Dublin to have a life free from the restrictions of the Church and family.

Although looking for freedom, both girls feel the need for the security of a man and are attracted to unsuitable males. Caithleen pines for 'Mr Gentleman' then Eugene; both men much older than she is and who manipulate her emotionally. Baba, has a series of relationships and sexual experiences just for fun, rather than for any love of the individual or thoughts of a long term relationship. In the end, neither female gain fulfilment in their lives.

Without exception, 'The Country Girls' was enjoyed by the Group and O'Brien's flowing style of writing, made the book an easy read. There are beautiful descriptions of the Irish countryside that are kept in short paragraphs, to allow the reader to be quickly taken back to the story. So much is contained in the book: Humour, the messages of oppression, sexual bawdiness, desires, hopes, disappointment. All the emotions helping to make the book one of our favourite reads.

April 2024: OLIVE KITTERIDGE by Elizabeth Strout

The book group had a very humorous session talking about this book even though Olive Kitteridge has quite depressing themes like murder, violent suicide, hostage taking, abuse, loneliness and more. The book is a novel-in-short stories and each short story is about a character who lives in the small town with Olive Kitteridge, the title character. The book is a winner of the Pulitzer Prize.

The group agreed that Strout depicts her characters extremely well. Olive Kitteridge, is a very interesting but, at first, not very likeable person who is forthright and opinionated. However, through the use of insightful chapters about nearly unrelated characters, Strout paints a picture of Olive that shows her many sides and her character changes over 20-30 years. At times Olive's views were insulting and so exaggerated they were laughable. She has a difficult relationship with her son and husband and is very dissatisfied with her life.

The author describes the life in a small town/community in Maine vividly; people giving an appearance of contentment but each having their own problems as described in their story. The stories have some amusing parts like eating donuts being the answer to all of life's dramas.

Strout has a detached style of writing rather like a documentary which meant that the reader was observing the scenes. This meant, for some in the group, that they were not emotionally involved. The group felt Strout showed the reader American stereotypes; gun owning, donut eating, oversized, use of therapy.

Elizabeth Strout is an author the group have read before and this is another book that the group thought enjoyable and readable; even if it does have 190 characters.

PS: the group learnt a Japanese word: Tsundoku

Pam

May 2024: DEVICES AND DESIRES (A Biography of Bess of Hardwick by Kate Hubbard)

This work of non-fiction published in 2018 was a change for us all, and divided the group's opinions and it is safe to report that the aim of this work gave us food for thought; is this a reference book or something to be read from cover to cover?

The consensus seemed to be that this is a scholarly book, well-researched and very detailed. Indeed, the details are too intricate at times and made the book weighty and over-informative for some of our group. Others enjoyed the level of exploration and range of ideas and sensed that Kate Hubbard made this a labour of love which was anchored in her love of Hardwick Hall.

We discussed Bess' attributes, life and achievements and all agreed that she was a most unusual woman of her time, as was Elizabeth I, the queen who in some ways set the scene for Bess and her aspirations. Bess was one of the richest women in England and owned vast tracts of land and many properties. She achieved all this through determination, plotting, ambition, courage, management and 4 astute marriages. She micro-managed on a tireless scale and worked up to the end of her very long life.

We examined her relationships with the queen, her husbands, her children, step-children, grandchildren and with the (mostly) male workers she employed and agreed that the author refrains from judgement and uses the evidence to describe the life of this complex woman. The

context of Bess' life is clearly described and we agreed that we should think of Bess in her setting with the constrained lives, wardships, arranged marriages, power of the monarchy and religious tensions.

It is interesting to note all the local references apart from Hardwick and the group felt that visits to the houses which remain might trigger a curiosity to return to this book.

Jackie

June 2024: THE MUSE by Jessie Burton

The novel for the June meeting provoked detailed and intense comments on this multi-layered historical novel, the themes of which include art, ambition, identity, secrecy and love.

Burton uses the time shift technique, moving alternately between the London of 1967 with hard-working Odelle and Cynthia from Jamaica searching for betterment and success, and a southern Spanish village in 1936 experiencing the fear and violence of the Spanish Civil War.

Some of us felt that the plot structure worked well, gradually unravelling the central mystery of how a beautiful painting linked and connected the 2 sets of characters in the 2 twentieth century eras and settings. We generally felt that the last part contained too many coincidences, some of us not accepting that experiences are a feature of life.

Also, several members of the group felt that parts of the novel were 'messy' for example when chunks of information were given about the nature of the Civil War and its top generals, others feeling educated about the horrors of torture and murder carried out by villagers.

The storyline is complex, suspenseful and mystifying in parts but some of our members considered it to be the result of a novel-by-numbers skill learnt at the UEA as part of their creative writing course!

In terms of characters, most of us did not 'warm' to many; others felt that the younger women were determined and forceful in these 2 male dominated societies. The so-called artist (or possibly 'muse') is a teacher plus a fighter in the Civil War; he has an affair with both Olive and her mother Sarah who is an alcoholic; Quick, the elegant art gallery administrator and friend to Odelle sadly dies of cancer revealing a surprising (unrealistic we thought) link with the 30s Spanish characters.

I could go on with many more comments; probably most of us were not impressed with some aspects of Jessie's Burton's novel, in spite of enjoying the lively discussion; however I thought it was fascinating!

Christine Smith

July 2024: AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND BIOGRAPHIES

Members of the group chose a fascinating range of autobiographies and biographies for July's meeting and there proved to be some interesting links between some of them.

General Boy: The Life of Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Browning by Richard Mead. This charts Browning's illustrious and varied career commanding Britain's airborne forces, particularly in relation to Operation Market Garden in 1944, the code name for the daring Arnhem Bridge operation.

In 1932 he married the novelist Daphne du Maurier, which linked in with another choice, **Daphne du Maurier** by Margaret Forester. This work explores her unhappy childhood, her confused gender identity and her troubled, but enduring marriage to Frederick Browning. Both books were praised as fascinating insights into the lives of two celebrated, yet troubled people.

Autobiographies by two people in the media were presented. **Give Me Ten Seconds** by John Sergeant documents his 30 years' service as BBC political broadcaster, describing with wit and acute analysis the workings of the BBC and Westminster. In contrast, Alan Davies has made his career as a comedian and through appearances on chat shows. His memoirs **Just Ignore Him**

bravely reveal a childhood of sexual, physical and mental abuse at the hands of his father. Despite his suffering, he writes with wit and creativity to reveal how comedy provided him with a means of survival.

Remembering by Sinead O'Connor also exposes the trauma of child abuse as well as maternal mental ill-health and the indelible effects on the victim. O'Connor presents through beautiful writing the paradox of her enduring love for her mother, the perpetrator of her extreme suffering.

In contrast, **Leonard Cheshire** by Richard Morris presents the life and achievements of this highly decorated RAF pilot who was awarded the Victoria Cross amongst other accolades. After the Second World War he became a philanthropist, founding the Leonard Cheshire Charity, which supports people with disabilities.

Ben Macintyre's **Agent Zigzag** portrays the exploits of a far less honourable, but fascinating, character, Eddie Chapman. He was a double agent, working for both Nazi Germany and M15. Former conman and criminal, Chapman was well equipped to thrive in the world of espionage and philandering.

Tony Benn by Jad Adams is an encyclopaedic biography of one of the UK's most controversial politicians. Born into a privileged and politically active family, Benn inherited his father's peerage, which at the time prevented him from continuing to serve as Labour MP. Adams explores Benn's tenacity in campaigning to overcome this restriction and his challenges to other aspects of the British Constitution.

Two further autobiographies also dealt with people who fought for what they wanted in life, but these were women. Vera Brittain's **Testament of Youth** recounts her experiences during the First World War as she resists the expectations that society and her family have of her, considering her gender and social position. Working as a nurse, nursing both German and British soldiers Brittain developed pacifist beliefs. The deaths of her fiancé, close friends and her brother cemented these feelings.

Manifesto: On Never Giving Up by Bernardine Evaristo deals with the struggles of a 21st Century mixed race woman from a humble background and her aspirations to forge a career in the Arts. After decades of writing and scraping a living, she jointly won the Booker Prize in 2019 for her novel **Girl, Woman, Other**. She shared the honour with Margaret Atwood, the renowned author.

Completing the selection is **George 111** by Andrew Roberts. Praised as a well researched and well written biography the author aims to debunk some of the stereotypes of the king's character and reign. Most commonly known for his mental illness and losing America, Roberts paints a wider, more sympathetic portrait of an often astute monarch.

All members of the group prepared excellent accounts of their books and some admitted that although this would not usually be their genre of choice they enjoyed the topic.

Maggie

August 2024: LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY by Bonnie Garmus

In a significant departure from our tradition of divergent opinions, all members of the group enjoyed this book.

Garmus' focus is on sexual inequality and misogyny, explored through the experiences of Elizabeth Gott, a research chemist in 1950s/60s America. Despite the depiction of sexual abuse and professional sabotage by predatory males, the novel is vibrant, quirky and very amusing. For our age group it refreshed our memories of the sexism of the era whilst also chiming in with the more recent "Me Too" movement.

Forced to follow an alternative career, Zott achieves national fame by presenting a very alternative afternoon TV cookery programme that educates housewives not only in the chemistry of food preparation, but also encourages them to break free from society's expectations of them.

Supported by her very precocious three year old daughter, Madeline, their human-like dog, Six-Thirty, and an unconventional “family” of friends, Zott fights to be taken seriously as a ground-breaking scientist. She is eccentric, unconventional and refuses to accept the fate that others seem to have determined for her.

Bonnie Garmus’ first published book is well written, perceptive and witty, despite its serious message. The group hope that another novel will swiftly follow this one.

November 2024: THE ROAD TO LITTLE DIBBLING by Bill Bryson

This book is a sequel to, ‘Notes from a Small Island’ written some 20 years earlier, in which Bryson, a renowned author and American journalist takes another satirical trip around Britain.

The group had a lively discussion and it was generally agreed that the book was crammed with historical facts and detail about the places he visited. Bryson’s humour had some people laughing out loud, whilst others, especially those who had read his previous book, ‘Notes from a small island’ found his humour more akin to that of ‘grumpy old man,’ with derisory rather than witty observations.

It was felt that the South Coast and East Anglia received great attention but that he neglected the opportunity to visit many northern towns and cities. It was even suggested that the book might be better titled, ‘Little England,’ as only a total of 10 out of the 380 pages were dedicated to Wales and Scotland.

His knowledge and research of facts about certain places such as Stonehenge inspired some of the group to plan a second visit, whilst some found the churning out of so many facts, both distracting and irritating.

It was suggested that Bryson may have missed opportunities to comment on social change in and decline in Britain, such as when he observes empty high streets and the number of charity shops; observations that we can all identify with; but instead makes stereotypical comments on individual characters, in a cynical rather than satirical, ‘grumpy old man,’ style of observation.

The group found that Bryson’s comparisons between Britain and ‘his’ America very interesting, such as the excellence of some universities in Britain with relatively small revenue in comparison to the mind blowing revenue generated by Universities in America by their football teams. Likewise, he compares an ingenuity in British culture, whereby people both live in and visit and enjoy areas of natural beauty such as the Peak District, to the commercialism of such public areas in America.

There was an interesting discussion about the time of the writing of the book. If the book had been written only five or so years after 2015, about how much more material Bryson would have had to write about, and what his quick wit and humour could have made of social and political events in Britain such Brexit, Trump, Boris, and the pandemic...

...now that would be ‘some’ travel Log...

Do we think there could be a sequel?

Eileen