

BOOK CLUB 2025

January 2025: THE SILENT PATIENT by Alex Michaelides

This book, written by a Greek Cypriot who's read a lot of Agatha Christie, disappointed many of us in the group and made some of us very cross.

Theo, a psychotherapist, sets out to discover why clinic in-patient Alyssia has not spoken since the night her husband Gabriel was brutally murdered in their house.

Who killed him and why?

She's a beautiful, famous artist who's had a traumatic childhood, Gabriel a busy fashion photographer whereas Theo has childhood trauma and issues of his own. We learn more through Theo's narrative, and helpfully Alyssia has kept a diary. Much of the narrative takes place in a mental health clinic where the staff and practices were felt to be poorly represented.

It made a nice change from a detective-led mystery but we found little depth to the dysfunctional characters. The writer tossed everything in - the odd false premise, rather a lot of red herrings, a wonky plot, and an astonishing twist. This led to a fairly unanimous chorus of agh! For us there wasn't enough that was good in the book to make up for the shortcomings.

Hugely popular in America we think it may be an easy pool-side read for those good at suspending reality.

Sue Warren

February 2025: TRANSLATED BOOKS

Book Group this month was based upon a book we had read which was translated from a different language. This led to very interesting discussions on the reason for choice as well as the book.

Japanese fiction is experiencing an extraordinary boom at the moment. The first was **Banana Yoshimoto** *Dead End Memories*. This is a book of five short stories about young women overcoming personal tragedy. It is quite surreal. *Butter* by **Asako Yuzuki** is a satirical, socially conscious crime novel based upon true stories of women on death row in Japan. It was felt to be misogynistic and sexist.

Our other reviews covered writers from several different countries. *The Home of the Gentry* **Ivan Turgenev** (Russia) was a challenging and atmospheric love story with an insight into another world and time. **Orphan Panuk's** *My Name is Red* (Turkey) was a detective story set in Istanbul. Also, it looks at the tensions between east and west cultures.

A German classic *The Lost Honour of Katarina Blum* by **Heinrich Boll** looked at the negative power of the media. *Letters from my Windmill* by **Alphonse Daudet** was a set of short stories set in Provence in 1860s; some were bleak and others amusing.

Journey without a Ticket was read because the story was similar to our reviewer's own history. It describes an idyllic childhood in Poland that becomes horrific under occupation. The author **Krystyna Kawecka** now lives in Nottingham.

A few of us reviewed books of our own choice: *Conclave* by **Robert Harris** that the popular film was based upon. Do you read the book before watching the film or the other way round? *Our Hidden Lives* by **Simon Garfield** was a set of diary entries of 1940's/50's by 'ordinary' British people which told of the hardships of the time. **Kate Atkinson's** latest Jackson Brodie novel *Death at the Sign of the Rook*; former wealthy aristocrats had to convert part of their house into a hotel for murder mystery weekends.

Pamela Ede-Cooper

March 2025: FOSTER by Claire Keegan

The story is centred around a young girl who is sent to live, temporarily, with relatives and the contrast between her home and that of her relatives.

Opinions around the group were split and ranged from dismissive to enjoyable and thought provoking.

The narrative is understated and it is left to the reader to reach their own conclusions. This appealed to many in the group, who thought that although it was concise, it showed compassion and sensitivity, which left you feeling emotionally engaged.

Much of the discussion was centred around the feelings of the child. Her home was dysfunctional and chaotic and was dominated by a drunken father; whereas the relatives treated her with love, kindness and sensitive understanding. How would she cope with such conflicting experiences and how would it affect her in the future?

It is a sad book in many ways and leaves the reader with much to consider.

Christine Kitchen

April 2025: SATURDAY NIGHT AND SUNDAY MORNING by Alan Sillitoe

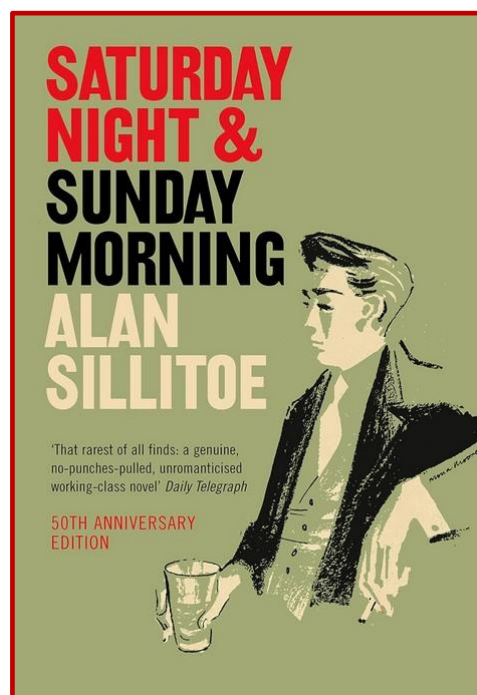
We discussed Saturday Night and Sunday Morning by local author Alan Sillitoe. Considering the novel was published over 60 years ago, it prompted an enthusiastic and passionate discussion.

We were pretty shocked by the misogyny, violence, selfishness, drunkenness and general nihilism of Arthur, the central character.

But we admired the novel for its ground breaking portrayal of working class life in Nottingham, for its continuing relevance and for the quality of the writing which extends from lyrical descriptions of town and countryside, to intense verbal and physical violence, in a strong local dialect.

We read the novel with different eyes than we had half a century ago, and it left us wanting to read more Sillitoe.

Paul Martinez



June 2025: READERS' CHOICES

As usual, Readers' Choices presented an eclectic mix of books for the group to share:

Remarkably Bright Creatures by Shelby Van Pelt

A very enjoyable read. Interesting relationship is developed between the characters, including the Octopus. Contained facts relating to the life of an octopus which were cleverly incorporated into the story. I would recommend this book.

Listen to the Moon by Michael Morpurgo

Tells the story of Alfie and his father who find a girl known only as Lucy, washed ashore on a remote island in the Scilly Isles during WW1. A fascinating read.

All the Broken Places by John Boyne

Is a sequel to "The boy in the striped pyjamas". Strongly recommended.

The Running Grave by Robert Galbraith

7th in the Strike series. Private Detective Cormoran Strike is employed by a worried father to rescue his son from a religious cult in the depths of rural Norfolk. Strike's female partner

infiltrates the cult, placing herself in extreme danger to work with Strike to expose the serious wrongdoings of the cult. Clever plotting and well drawn characters. Very long but the story maintains your interest.

Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns

Is a poignant, multi-generational novel that explores the lives of two Afghan women, Mariam and Laila, whose paths converge amid decades of political upheaval in Afghanistan. Spanning from the 1960s to the early 2000s, the novel provides a deeply human perspective on the country's shifting sociopolitical landscape—including the Soviet occupation, civil war, and the rise of the Taliban. Against this backdrop of violence and repression, particularly under Taliban rule, Hosseini crafts a powerful narrative of endurance, sacrifice, and the unbreakable bond between women facing systemic oppression. Rather than focusing solely on political atrocities, the novel illuminates the resilience of the human spirit in the face of injustice.

The World That We Knew by Alice Hoffman

In Berlin a Jewish mother and a rabbi's daughter use magic to help daughters escape the Nazis. They journey through France as the Germans approach, find comrades' bravery and love. A glorious read.

The Blind Assassin by Margaret Atwood

This is by the prolific Canadian author and poet, writer of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Based on two naive sisters from a privileged background in small town Canada. The father's business is failing so the father plans to offload his elder daughter to a wealthy man who might invest in his business. The novel is like 4 books in one, brilliantly woven together with compelling plots and twists, incorporating Atwood's signature science fiction/faction approach. It has epic scope, travelling from the early to the late twentieth century. There is a strong theme of getting old and losing power over our lives.

1066 And All That by Stuart Yeatman

Published before the Second World War, this can now be called a classic. What is it: fact/history? fiction/humour? Rereading this 50 years later, after an initial reading as a teenager, it seems slightly dated and perhaps a little less humorous, but it remains a light hearted, amusing read.

The writer, a very intelligent, bright working class chap from Ilford, Essex achieves a job on the trading floor of Citibank. The book demystifies the basics of trading. It is a funny, riveting, entertaining read, but also very troubling in its exposure of the true cost of working with and earning huge amounts of money. Gary became a millionaire.

Other books read were *The Penguin Lessons* by Tom Michell and *Daughters of the Night* by Laura Shepherd-Robinson.

July 2025: MUNICH, THE EDGE OF WAR by Robert Harris

It is set in September 1938 over four days in the context of the Munich Agreement. Hitler is determined to start a war. Chamberlain is desperate to preserve the peace. It tells a gripping story of two men, one German and one English, who play roles in the final meeting between Chamberlain and Hitler in 1938. The novel weaves together the events of history with some background fiction. The group felt the novel was a very detailed and thorough dramatization of a famous time in history and that the detail gave the book a sense of realism. Some of the group were unsure exactly where fact and fiction met or overlapped. Robert Harris left the reader with a more sympathetic view of Chamberlain.

We discussed whether Munich was historical fiction or speculative [what if] fiction.

Also, the novel made us reflect on our current political climate around the world.

Many of the group had read other Robert Harris books like *Conclave* and *Pompeii* which they preferred.

August 2025: THE POWER by Naomi Alderman

At first the group were quite confused about when the book was set but after much discussion, we agreed it was written by someone 5,000 years in the future who describes the cataclysm that turned society on its head.

The story begins when teenage girls worldwide simultaneously develop a 'skein', a strip of muscle in their collarbone which conducts electricity, allowing them to instantly inflict pain and even death. Some girls have more power than others and they are able to wake up the force in older women too.

The novel follows four characters and is written from their point of view; the abused became the abusers. The empowered women were as tyrannically inclined to dish out pain and subservience to men as some men do to women. The world changes and the scenes become a mirror image of our society.

Our group agreed the greatest theme is uncontrolled power corrupts and that agreed that Alderman writes about oppression and gender in a clever and disturbing way. However, many of us did not like the book due to its relentless violence. It reminded the group of novels by Orwell or Margaret Atwood (Alderman's mentor) but not as good.

September 2025: HISTORICAL FICTION

In September, we had reports on 7 novels in our dive into historical fiction, ranging in period from the Tudors to the Colonels regime in Greece. By and large we felt that the authors avoided the most obvious problem of historical fiction, where authors insert contemporary characters, preoccupations and outlooks into the past.

We agreed, too, that the main reasons we read historical fiction include:

- Greater understanding of the past (or indeed historical works of literature)
- Fleshing out historical figures known to us mainly through their actions
- Engaging with different cultures, beliefs and mindsets.

Paul Martinez

October 2025: The Diary Of Hendrik Groen 83 1/4 Years Old by Hendrik Green

Written in 2014, originally in Dutch, this book received numerous awards, won worldwide acclaim and inspired a TV series and film. Set in an old people's home in Amsterdam, the story consists of a year's diary entries written by an elderly man who describes the physical and mental challenges of old age and life in an institution.

Through a range of quite well depicted characters, he explores dementia, failing physical health, institutional shortcomings, euthanasia and the importance of friendship and support.

The writer has been praised by many critics and readers for his humour and directness in confronting the realities of old age. However, our group was less positive about the book, mostly finding it an often unpalatable treatment of issues we are aware of, but not so amused by in the same way as the author.

Maggie Doherty

November 2025: THE 39 STEPS by John Buchan

In November the Book Group focussed on the classic text "The 39 Steps" by John Buchan. Buchan led an extremely full life, working in the worlds of publishing, journalism, politics and high public office as well as being a prolific writer. He regarded writing novels as an amusement.

"The 39 Steps" was published in 1915, but based in the Summer of 1914, just before the outbreak of World War 1. The novel is an example of a "man on the run" thriller, a tale of espionage and cunning.

The group felt uncomfortable with various anti-semitic and racist comments made by some of the characters which reflect some attitudes current at the time that the book was written.

Later in his life Buchan was an outspoken supporter of Zionism so we discussed whether these prejudices reflected his opinions. In so many ways, the book is like a time capsule, revealing a socially divided, low tech world of code cracking, disguises, eccentric characters and isolated rural lifestyles cut off from the London world of lengthy luncheons in gentleman's clubs.

At the beginning, Richard Hannay, the protagonist, is disenchanted by his comfortable yet uneventful life in the capital, but the murder of someone in his flat introduces more drama and danger than he could have anticipated. He flees from the British police as well as the threat of a shadowy group of foreign "terrorists" and heads for the wilds of Scotland. Surviving on his wits and skills learned in the bushland of South Africa he becomes embroiled in an attempt to thwart the outbreak of the war.

Mostly, we enjoyed the fast paced, episodic plot, featuring numerous larger than life characters, almost exclusively male. We agreed that the book would have been ground breaking for the time as a spy thriller, providing an early blueprint for the adventures of the likes of James Bond and Matthew Bourne. Established writers like Graham Greene cited Buchan as an inspiration.

Maggie Doherty

December 2025: READERS CHOICE

This month we brought our own choice of book to the meeting. This is something we do a couple of times a year, giving us the opportunity to share with each other books and authors we may otherwise not have come across.

The books shared this time included, **The Hand That First Held Mine by Maggie O'Farrell**, which looks at the bonds of love and affection and the independence of women told in 2 paralleled and believable stories with great characterisation.

Flowers for Algernon is a poignant Sci-Fi, chronicling Charlie's transformation through experimental surgery and highlights how his relationships are changed as a result.

A Lake District farmer describes his time working in Norway caring for eider ducks in **The Place of Tides by James Rebanks**. It reflects on ancient practices still continuing in an amazing landscape.

Andrey Kurkov's Death and the Penguin however had a thin plot but gave an intriguing insight of a corrupt and unhealthy society.

A case of an illegal adoption, albeit to protect the child, leads to taking the child on the run, followed by an intriguing court case in **Kingsolver's Pigs in Heaven**.

The Herb Knot by Jane Loftus disappointed the reader with its unexplained coincidences and lack of detail.

All the Light We Cannot See by Anthony Doerr is a beautifully written story of resilience and staying true to oneself in the most trying of circumstances, set in WWII.

George Elliot's Silas Marner tells the story of a weaver, wrongly accused of theft, embittered by the experience until a little girl is left in his care.

Uckfield's Railway – Triumph and Tragedy depicts in words and beautiful pictures, the rise and fall of the railway system in East Sussex

The Skylark's Secret by Fiona Valpy follows 2 parallel love stories whilst chronicling the events of the Arctic Convoys in WWII and their effects on the peaceful harbour village of Ewe. It is both informative and deeply touching.