

Book Club 1  
2022 Reviews

January 2022 :

**The Sixteen Trees of the Somme by Lars Mytting**

A fascinating book with lots of intricate threads woven to create an amazingly unexpected and original story-line. The beautifully written book engaged, entertained and informed us in equal measure.

The story traces the history of three families that are spread across Europe. The complex links that exist are gradually and cleverly revealed as a series of mysteries. The descriptive prose creates detailed and beautiful images of the varied landscapes, people and objects contained within the book; stimulating all of the readers senses and emotions

February 2022 :

**The Mad Women's Ball by Victoria Mas**

'A darkly sumptuous tale of wicked spectacle, wild injustice & the strength of women' This debut novel did not disappoint, it was all of these things and much more. The group found the novel to be interesting, enthralling and thought provoking. The novel is based on research by the author into the Salpêtrière hospital which at the time of the novel - 1885 had world renown as a neuropsychiatric teaching centre. Medical students would flock to Dr Charcot's lectures where he demonstrated treatments for hysteria using subjects/ patients from the hospital. At the time, his practises were deemed to be progressive, not something readers of the book would agree with.

The Lenten Ball was an established part of the nineteenth century Parisian social calendar. The rich and famous would eagerly await their invitations to attend the ball at the hospital, where they would be able to view the 'Mad Women'.

We are introduced to a range of characters whose stories make the reader fully aware of the injustices and prejudices that allowed perfectly sane women to be incarcerated within this institution.

The book moves rapidly to its culmination. The ending is predictable, disturbing and unexpected.

March 2022 :

**Endell Street by Wendy Moore**

This interesting and highly readable book has a very powerful opening, contrasting the horrors of trench warfare with the calm, clean, and cheerful environment of the Endell Street Military Hospital. The book charts the history of this remarkable group of women who successfully and efficiently ran the first all-female military hospital. On the outbreak of hostilities in 1914 these enterprising women suspended their campaign for women's suffrage and threw their energies into proving their worth with the motto: 'deeds not words'. From performing difficult and life-saving surgeries to managing the day to day running of the 573-bed hospital, the book demonstrates the skill, stamina and determination of these women to provide the very best of medical care.

It also gives an insight into the social norms of the time and how their deeds and the catalyst of war was pushing against accepted norms of behaviour.

April 2022 :

**Old Baggage by Lissa Evans**

This book created a mixed reaction, some felt that it was bland and initially did not capture the interest of the reader. The book was indeed a gentle read but many felt it held hidden depths. The plot once established was clever, revealing greater depth to the characters, many comic scenes and also raised serious issues regarding the suffragette movement and social and political issues experienced during the inter-war years. The main protagonist presented as an intelligent and logical person was faced with an emotional dilemma which led to a grave error of judgment. This culminated in a day that was both dramatic and comic and the consequences felt by all of the characters.

We were all puzzled by the abrupt and some felt far-fetched ending, which although linked to one of the themes in the book was not well worked. Despite this several members are eager to read her next book.

May 2022 :

**Songbirds by Christy Lefteri**

Usually when writing a review, I take care not to give any plot spoilers, however the strength of this book lies in the parallels between the fate of foreign domestic workers and those of songbirds trapped in nets during their migratory flights across the Mediterranean and then sold illegally to the restaurant trade. This traditional practise outlawed in Cyprus since 1974 may be too distressing for some readers. This was a well-crafted book with disturbing scenes. Most of the group found the book engaging and the characters were given depth. Many parallels are drawn between Nisha a young Sri Lankan woman at the centre of this poignant story, her employer and her partner. All of whom are trapped in different ways.

June 2022 :

**The Priory by Dorothy Whipple**

This is the second book the group has read by Dorothy Whipple. We thoroughly enjoyed *Someone at a Distance* and found *The Priory* to be a delightful read. It was interesting and entertaining with many comic characters and situations. There was an eccentric elderly Aunt, a scheming woman who was determined to get her man, an impoverished aristocrat without an ounce of self-awareness and spinsters galore. Many of the characters were flawed and yet at times we felt sympathy to their situation and dilemmas.

This novel published in 1939 provides elements of social history of the inter-war period, with the decline of aristocratic families who were finding it hard to maintain their properties and the servants needed to support their lifestyle. Many of the characters, both male and female did not have the knowledge or skills needed to progress their lives. It also addresses the role of women and their role in society at this time.

July 2022 :

**Miss Benson's Beetle by Rachel Joyce**

This book proved to be a funny, light-hearted read. The characters were heavily cliched and the plot was so implausible that you were drawn into an entertaining and amusing portrayal of two women, who for extremely varied reasons were about to embark upon a life changing adventure. As the book progressed many issues were raised the most important one being societal expectations and how limiting they can be.

August 2022 :

**The Funny Thing about Norman Foreman by Julietta Henderson**

This was a modern contemporary read written in an easy conversational style. Alternating between the voices of a young mother and her son the plot guides us through some very challenging life events. Despite this there was a strong thread of humour running throughout, and some memorable comic scenes. We were introduced to a disparate but interesting collection of characters, some more believable than others. They all contribute to the progress of the story and its culmination at The Edinburgh Fringe. Although the group mostly enjoyed this choice not all members would rush to read another by this author.

September 2022

**The Uncommon Reader by Alan Bennett first published in 2006**

At the time of writing this review we have been overtaken by the sad news of the Queen's death at Balmoral. Many accounts of her life speak of her warmth and humour and in this tone, I will continue with our thoughts on this witty book. To enjoy it you have to be a fan of Bennett's wry humour and his dry but clever observations. We felt that the voice of the Queen and members of the household, although caricatures, did match our expectations of what they would say and do. They were confronted by a monarch who having lived a restricted and predictable life of duty and service began to change her behaviour. All she wanted to do was to read books and talk about books, not a crime in itself, but it caused great consternation in her household and opportunities for many comic scenes. The book also spoke to the opportunities given for books to open new horizons, new experiences and new emotions.

October 2022

**Barracoon: The Story of the Last Slave by Zora Neale Hurston**

In 1927, the author conducted a series of interviews with Oluale Kossola, who in 1860, over fifty years after slavery was outlawed, was forcibly taken from his home in West Africa and transported to Alabama. The book, written in dialect, charts an incredible but tragic life.

Many of the group felt a great affinity with Kossola, and were moved by the hardships he experienced and the way in which he recounted them. All of the group found it an informative and thought-provoking book that changed their perceptions of slavery.

November 2022 :

**Diary of an Ordinary Woman by Margaret Forster**

This book was both an exploration of the life of an 'ordinary' woman; Millicent King, and a social history of the Twentieth century. The group enjoyed the book and felt it provided interesting, intimate and thought-provoking description and comment, both on Millicent's life and the impact felt by all who lived through this century of great conflict and change.

The book prompted lively discussion, and we concluded that Millicent's life was far from ordinary.

December 2022 :

### **The Queen and I by Sue Townsend**

The author, Sue Townsend of Adrian Mole fame, shows great wit and incision when throwing two groups at opposing ends of the social scale together. Her observations of their behaviour and the misunderstandings that ensue allows for humour and social comment.

The book takes a hard look at society and exposes many hardships and inequalities. It also shows that compassion can be found in surprising places.

The book, first published in 1992 was of its time, but many of the themes it explores still resonate today.