

BOOK CLUB 1 JANUARY 2023 UPDATE from Chris Laukaitis

Devotion by Hannah Kent

Having read and enjoyed two previous books by this young Australian author we eagerly awaited the publication of her next book. However, the responses of the group were a bit like 'Marmite': creating strong but mixed reactions.

We all enjoyed the first half, which was beautifully expressed historical fiction, telling the story of a group of German settlers, fleeing religious persecution in Prussia and their quest to make a new life in southern Australia.

In the middle of the book and the middle of their sea journey there is a dramatic event, which is marked by a change in the style of writing, tone of the book and the perspective of the narrator. Although the story of the settlers continues, the writing also pursues many themes related to the title:

Devotion, such as love in its many forms, grief and religious belief. Some of the group found this change in perspective and leap in the plot difficult to accept, others found the continuation a fascinating insight into the power of love / devotion.

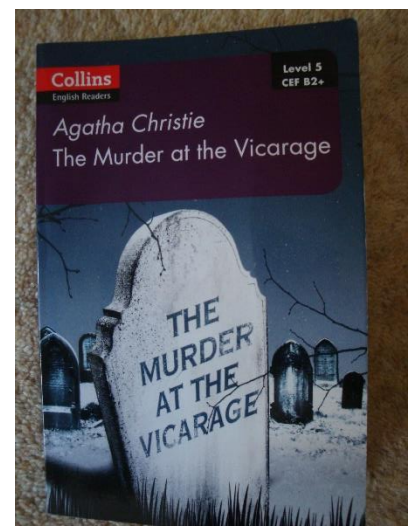
All were agreed that this was a deeply spiritual book

BOOK CLUB MARCH 2023 from Chris Laukaitis

The Murder at the Vicarage by Agatha Christie

This title by a well-known and much-loved author stimulated a lively and fun discussion. Some members have fond memories of eagerly reading these classic 'whodunits'. Most remembered film or television adaptations and several had enjoyed theatre productions.

This was Christie's first full-length novel that featured Miss Marple and she was to appear in many novels from 1930 right up to 1976. We felt that the depiction of village life in the 1930's rang true and we could understand the nostalgia for a quieter, gentler time, and yet there is nothing gentle about murder! Despite the popularity of Miss Marple, we found her character to be very clichéd as were the other characters. There was a gradual 'drip' of information that took us towards the novel's end, but we found that both the plot and the characterisation did not hold our interest and without Miss Marple's insight we would not have been able to solve the crime.



Book Club April 2023 from Chris Laukaitis

HAMNET by Maggie O'Farrell

The group found this title to be an engaging and compelling read. When we met to discuss the book we were amazed at how much had been very cleverly packed into the book. There were complex descriptions of the characters and settings, and really interesting details of life at this time, also smaller sub-plots that enhanced and developed understanding of the book's themes.

We all agreed that O'Farrell is a gifted storyteller and most of us enjoyed her beautiful prose. Her words paint amazingly detailed pictures of her characters, their interactions and the emotions they experienced. The story is an imagined recount of Shakespeare's early life and the tragic death of his son Hamnet. Her descriptions of the grief experienced by the family is heart rending, but provides compelling accounts of the different ways that people grieve.

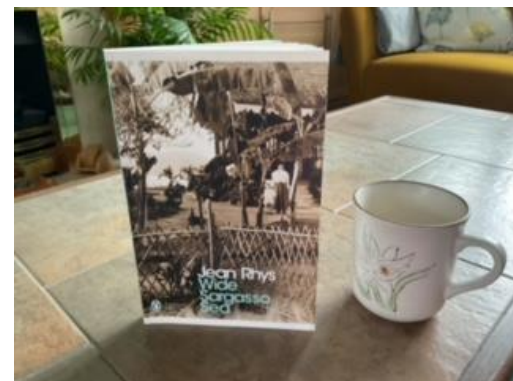
BOOK CLUB May 2023 from Chris Laukaitis

Wide Sargasso Sea by Dominican-British author Jean Rhys

When published in 1966, the book was well received by critics. The premise of the book surrounds the character of Bertha 'the mad woman in the attic' from Jane Eyre: it was her imagined back story.

The strength of the novel was the beauty and skill of Rhys' prose. The descriptions of the characters, the natural environment and emotional distress / madness/ paranoia experienced by many of the characters was very effective and atmospheric. However, we all found the book disjointed. At times it was difficult to determine who was being described, the relationship between the characters and also who was currently narrating.

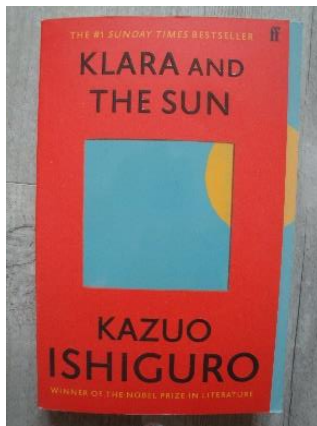
To conclude we didn't find it a very satisfying read, but it has prompted some members to re-visit Jane Eyre.



BOOK CLUB June 2023 from Chris Laukaitis

Klara and The Sun by Japanese-born British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro

This book choice, based on the futuristic theme of artificial intelligence, proved a very topical choice as there is currently much discussion of the benefits and risks to society of this rapidly advancing technology.



The premise of the book is based on an AF or Artificial Friend. It follows the story of a family who decide to purchase an AF for their daughter. The book is written in the first person and gives a voice to Klara the Artificial Friend. This was a strength of the book and also gave rise to discussion about how far AI could go in understanding and imitating human behaviour and emotion.

We felt that the book was cleverly constructed with a gradual dripping of information about this imagined future. It made for a compelling read with genuine moments of drama and tension.

The book posed many questions about the moral choices faced by the characters and potentially ones that we as individuals and society will have to face.

A very interesting read that we would all recommend

BOOK CLUB June 2023

The Reading Group by Elizabeth Noble

This book tracks the lives of five women over a twelve-month period. We were amazed at the number of relationship issues and life dilemmas that could be squeezed into and resolved within this time frame. As such the plot was somewhat contrived! However, we were impressed by the depth of the writing. Noble showed great insight and compassion in her depiction and analysis of the issues and the way the characters interacted.

We were hopeful that the title would lead to information about their book choices and give insight into the characters, their opinions and decisions. Although there were twelve book choices, the discussion of them was brief and superficial.



The reading group was simply a device to link the five women.

Despite these reservations it was an interesting book that stimulated lots of discussion – over the obligatory cup of tea and cake, of course (photo by Chris Rowe – before the cake got eaten!)

One issue raised by the book concerned the gender of authors: do female writers have greater capacity for describing emotion? Although we did

not agree with this view, it did make us look at our book choices, which are predominantly written by female authors. Our October title will help to redress this imbalance.

BOOK CLUB August 2023:

"The Last Rose of Shanghai" by Weina Dai Randel

The title of this book is taken from a Jazz song that was popular in Shanghai at the start of World War Two. The author uses the turbulent historic events of the time, and wide cultural differences to create a story of forbidden love, marred by great tragedy and loss.



We found the historical scope of the book to be very interesting, giving us insights into the complex history of the settlement and the way that world events impacted on this. The plot also highlighted a clash of cultures that created strong dilemmas for many of the characters.

Although at times, we found the author's handling of her characters a little clumsy we enjoyed the book and none of us anticipated the big reveal at the end.

BOOK CLUB - 1 SEPTEMBER 2023:

Lessons in Chemistry by Bonnie Garmus

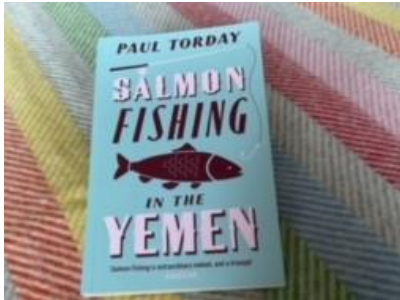
The group found this book which was set in the 1960's engaging and original. It visits some very topical themes regarding the role of women in society and societal attitudes. There was a lot of humour and the author cleverly gave the main protagonist a very direct speaking style that revealed the absurdity of human behaviour. Much as we loved the main character, we thought that the dog was brilliant. There were some dramatic twists in the plot and some challenging life events which despite the direct style were related with great sensitivity and conveyed the depth of feeling of the characters.



To conclude it was an unexpected and memorable read.

BOOK CLUB: 1 OCTOBER 2023:

Salmon Fishing the Yemen by Paul Torday



With one exception the group found this farcical tale very enjoyable. We had an uplifting afternoon recalling the ridiculous opinions and actions of the characters. The author tells a story of an absurd venture where enthusiasm and an unlimited supply of money overcomes common sense, all rationality flies out of the window.

On a more serious theme the book lays bare the political expediency of finding a 'good' news story to deflect from serious issues. In addition to the spinning of fishing reels there was much 'spinning' of political policies and news coverage. The book reaches a tragic /comic crescendo, which should serve as a warning to all politicians: beware of the next photo op you agree to.

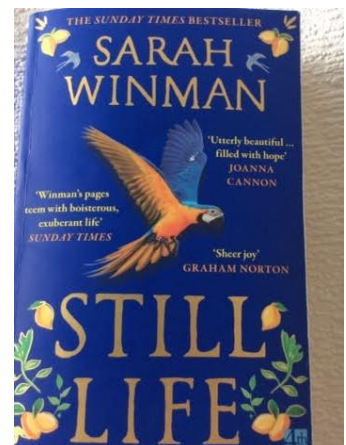
BOOK CLUB - November 2023:

Still Life by Sarah Winman

Some members struggled with the beginning of the book but as they read on found the book became more engaging. The characters were an interesting, quirky and lively bunch, very human, full of frailties but very endearing. There was a lot of humour in the book and a talking parrot who showed great wisdom.

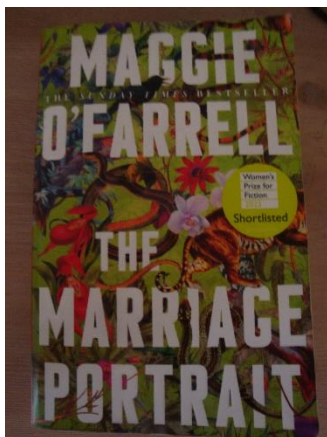
The descriptive prose was beautiful and painted a good back drop to the settings. Be it the dreariness of post-war London or the beauty of Florence.

Not everyone was certain if they would read another book by the same author.



BOOK CLUB December 2023

The Marriage Portrait by Maggie O'Farrell



This month's choice marked a return to an author that the group have enjoyed in the past. We were not disappointed. O'Farrell has created a very compelling story based on the brief life of Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici (February 1545 – April 1561).

The book has a dramatic but sombre opening where Lucrezia confronts her realisation that her husband intends to kill her. The book then moves forwards and backwards in time depicting her childhood and the imagined circumstances that led to her death. Some members found the switches of time a little confusing, but despite this there was definite tension and pace as the story reached its conclusion.

We felt the book was beautifully written, the descriptions created a very visual experience and brought the characters, settings and plot to life. Given that part of the plot involved Lucrezia sitting for a portrait this visual element really complimented the themes.

A most interesting and enjoyable read.