

Christmas on Lily Pond Lane by Emily Harvale

This was a light-hearted easy read, chosen for the busy month of December. The book blurb described the book as a “fabulously festive heart-warming romance” !? The book caused a lot of laughter within the group due to the clichéd characters and plot: “eyes that took your breath away”, “lustrous midnight black hair” etc. This was a ‘Happy Ever After’ book that bore little resemblance to reality. Some members found that the book did not hold their attention and they struggled with the lack of substance.

Despite this, Emily Harvale is a popular and prolific author with a wide following on social media.

The Choice by Edith Eger

This book is a powerful recount of a Holocaust survivor’s life; from her early childhood in Hungary, through imprisonment in Auschwitz, to the present day in America. Despite the horrific brutality and tragic circumstances of her life we found it an uplifting book due to Edith’s great courage, compassion and determination. Although the trauma remained with her, she refused to allow it to prevent her moving forward. She slowly built a new life, becoming a wife and mother and then resuming her education to qualify as a psychologist working with patients who have also experienced trauma in their lives. She also lectures in her field and is a much sought after speaker.

Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro

A thought provoking book that had a very mixed response in the group. The novel and issues in it unfolded very slowly, some members were frustrated by this and also by the many unanswered questions. The only perspective we had was that of Kathy who, at the age of thirty-one, was retelling her life story; her perspective was limited and very passive, all of us wanted more information about the society that was controlling the way in which these young people were living their lives. However, the novel proved a good stimulus for a discussion of the moral and ethical issues raised. It had a very poignant ending.

Back Home by Michelle Magorian

Most of the group found this an enjoyable and easy read containing many nostalgic descriptive passages. It portrayed the difficulties experienced by different members of a family while adjusting to life at the end of the Second World War. Rusty had been sent to America at the age of seven, here she had experienced great freedom and at the age of twelve found it difficult to adjust to the austerity and restrictions of life in post war England. The adults in the family also had problems to work through and most in the group felt pleased with the decisions taken at the end of the book.

1984 by George Orwell

This was a challenging book to read, particularly the level of cruelty and violence that was depicted in the torture scenes, but most found it an interesting and compelling read. We felt that many aspects of Orwell’s disturbing view have been seen in different countries and cultures throughout the world.

We discussed the techniques of control and brainwashing used by 'The Party' that would have such an isolating and dehumanising effect on the individual. We also talked about issues that are pertinent to our lives: technology that seems to read our minds by sending targeted advertising, information overload, how can you spot the 'Fake News'?

We felt this chilling read was an accurate warning of the future, rather than a simple work of fiction.

Snap by Belinda Bauer

This was an interesting and unusual crime novel by an author that was new to the group. It was gripping from the start but Bauer also managed to inject humour into the story of a shocking crime. The clichéd police officers, after many bumbled opportunities, manage with the help of a local fence and a young victim to finally work things out. At times you had to suspend reality but the book prompted discussion about the nature of crime at different levels and the impact upon victims. Not everybody found the ending satisfying, but if you are looking for something a little different this might be the book for you.

The Light Between Oceans by M L Stedman

This was a beautiful, well-crafted book. The whole premise was laid out in the first chapter but the powerful prose, compelling plot that evoked strong sympathy for all the characters and the moral dilemma they faced and uncertainty as to how the book would be resolved, kept our attention to the end. The vivid descriptions of the settings and natural environment were a joy to read. A book that we would all recommend.

The Storyteller's Secret by Sejal Badani

This book uses the familiar format of a young woman visiting India on the death of her grandfather to find 'herself' and also more about her family history, which her mother has repressed over the years.

Some in the group, felt that the portrayal of life in India lacked authenticity, which then cast doubts on the viability of aspects the plot. However, if you are able to move past this you are presented with the struggles of a young woman – her grandmother - to fulfil her dreams within the rigid boundaries and customs of the time. Many in the group found the story of this young woman, heart-breaking and compelling but felt happy with the decision taken by her granddaughter at the end of the book.

Goodnight Mr Tom: Michelle Magorian

Although written in 1981, we felt this well-written novel easily evoked the Second World War era of rationing, blackout and evacuees. It was an enjoyable and life-affirming book despite the fact that it dealt with difficult issues such as bereavement and abuse. Through simple kindness and nurturing, the characters were able to recover and grow.

Animal Farm: George Orwell

A book that many of us had read before that proved to be well worth a revisit. We found it an interesting and moving read; taking a simple context Orwell cleverly and carefully crafts a story of hope that gradually dissipates, laying bare the worst of human behaviour. He shows great insight into society and the human situation, which is just as applicable now as it was in the historic context. We felt great sadness at the plight of many of the animals, who despite hard work, conviction and heroism were ruthlessly exploited by their new masters.

The Good People by Hannah Kent

This was the second title we have read from this young Australian author. Based on a true story; the book was set in rural Ireland at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Kent's powerful writing clearly portrays the hard, impoverished lives of the characters and their unquestioning faith in an ancient belief system full of superstition and ritual. The strength of their belief would lead two women to defy the advice of their Parish Priest and in their quest to rid themselves of a 'changeling' would subject a child to abuse and ultimate death. Although bleak and hard hitting, we all felt the quality of the writing, and the thoroughness of her research meant we would welcome another title by this author.

Fellside by M R Carey

This was a difficult book to reconcile, although there were many aspects that we strongly disliked it was also a compelling read. We felt sympathy with the heroine Jess, and felt that the horrific portrayal of her time in prison was a mostly authentic description of the criminality and violence found in such institutions. We had difficulty relating to the supernatural element; it was far-fetched and detracted from the original story. The ending contained much gratuitous violence and did not provide a satisfying end to Jess' story. So not a book we would recommend.