

Into the Wilderness by Sara Donati

This book was very well received by all of the group. Indeed, it is the first book in a series and several members are already on the second or third titles. It is set in the Canadian Wilderness towards the end of the eighteenth century. The author vividly conveys the beauty and harshness of this natural world. The plot is a combination of passion, hardship, trust and betrayal, taking the reader through personal and cultural clashes. The characters were well written and believable and it is their stories that members are eager to continue.

Erebus The Story of a Ship by Michael Palin

Several members of the group admitted that they had prejudged this book, not expecting to enjoy the subject but were quickly drawn in. We found Michael Palin's writing to be informative, enjoyable and well researched without being too academic. He included interesting and thought-provoking anecdotes about his own travels.

The details of how the ships were provisioned, the plans and routes they took, the life on board ship and their scientific research was fascinating. The book also gave insight into society at this time. The crews were undoubtedly brave and courageous men who sacrificed much for the advancement of science and knowledge of the world, but we also saw the negative side of Empire, with little thought of the planet or indigenous peoples.

This book was an interesting read and included maps, photographs and artists' records of the voyages and their geographical and scientific discoveries.

Blood Orange by Harriet Tyce

This was a modern, dark, gritty read, where the author wove many challenging subjects: coercive control, consent, rape, abuse, suicide into the plot. Many found the story line compelling with many twists and turns – a great psychological thriller. The plot line and the characters also created a strong reaction in the group, particularly to the protagonist. Her ability to block out the consequences of her self-destructive behaviour made her difficult to like and yet the author did manage to engender some sympathy for her situation. This was a thought provoking read.

My Name is Why by Lemn Sissay

Lemn Sissay is an English, poet, author and broadcaster. This childhood memoir is a powerful, moving read and many of the group felt a scandalous indictment of the care system. Placed in care as a small baby and given an English name – Norman; he was given a long-term foster placement which abruptly broke down when he was twelve, he then went into children's homes and other styles of residential care. All of these appeared to hold the premise that children were seen as problems that needed managing / controlling. Any behaviour that did not conform would be seen as evidence of the initial premise. Heartbreaking.

As a young adult Lemn requested and eventually received his case notes from social services. His narrative is interspersed with documents and reports contained in these notes. This provides interesting insights into his story and the dominant attitudes of the time that so blighted his time in care. These notes also revealed tragic information about his birth mother, she in fact tried and failed to get him returned to her care.

What is truly remarkable is how resilient he managed to be. Despite the repeated messages of abandonment and worthlessness that dominated his teenage years he forged such a successful life. The book also contains beautiful examples of his poetry, at times angry and poignant but also uplifting.

At the Edge of the Orchard by Tracy Chevalier

Tracy Chevalier is a well-known author of historical fiction. In this novel she takes the harshness of life as experienced by American pioneers and creates a plot around their lives and the life of this new nation. Chevalier draws the reader into the lives of her characters; evoking a range of strong emotions from extreme sympathy to absolute horror at their behaviours. She cleverly interweaves the plot with real life stories of John Chapman aka Johnny Appleseed and William Lobb plant collector. This creates a fascinating read.

The Secret River by Kate Grenville

The group found this book to be an interesting and informative novel. It takes the reader through two distinctive phases, life in London at the end of the eighteenth century and then life in Sydney Australia at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The prose is very evocative, you really feel that you have stepped back in time. The author deals with many difficult issues in an honest and direct way, nothing is fudged. The impact on the reader is significant, our twenty-first century perspective is shocked by many of the situations and behaviours, this is compounded by the fact that characters who you have come to know are engaged in such reprehensible behaviours. A very thought-provoking novel that if we were able to meet face to face would have led to a lot of discussion.

Someone at a Distance by Dorothy Whipple

This author was mostly unknown by members of the group and the book choice was prompted by the March monthly meeting: The Literary Heritage of Nottingham. Dorothy Whipple was born at the end of the nineteenth century and her novels were popular between the wars and two of her novels were turned into films. This title was written in the early fifties and as well as presenting a well written novel there is an element of social history and bygone times. The book features a comfortably off family, who seem very content in their loving and secure family life that includes boarding school, ponies and a daily help. After this gentle start another character is introduced who is devious and self-centred. Slowly but surely the extent of this callous manipulation is revealed, causing total devastation to their lives. As a reader the impact is all the greater because you can see it coming and are powerless to stop it. An interesting and impactful novel.

A Watermelon, a Fish and a Bible by Christy Lefteri

This was an intriguing title and we all wanted to find the significance of the items. The author is of Greek Cypriot heritage and was well placed to write this novel that is part historical fiction and part love story set during the Turkish Invasion of Cyprus in the summer of 1974. The prose was beautiful and very sensory, filling us with the sights, sounds, taste and smells of Cyprus. The writing was also very powerful as many of these wonderful images were poignantly linked with images of bloodshed and loss.

The plot is gradually revealed through the reminiscences of three of the characters. Several of us found this slow reveal a little confusing, however at the end everything became very clear and the resolution at the end of the story was satisfying. We also discussed whether this was author's intent.

Although the events of the novel were within living memory, many of us were glad to have access to the internet to clarify historical points. Although a twentieth century war, the political rivalry, prejudice and bigotry has sadly existed for eons. An interesting and moving read.

Small Pleasures by Clare Chambers

The inspirations for this very enjoyable book were taken from two unrelated historical events that were very cleverly woven to create an interesting and dynamic plot. The book was beautifully written and through the descriptions, characters and clever use of source material was very evocative of the early fifties. This time setting was interesting to discuss, we were able to talk about the characters actions and behaviours against this backdrop and consider if we thought contemporary behaviours would be different. The main joy though was in the richness of the characters that Chambers created, we felt all of their pleasures, frustrations and pain.

The Silent Patient by Alex Michaelides

This book has been in the best sellers for some time and so we were eager to read the title. At one level the book worked it; was a very compelling read with lots of twists and turns, red herrings and multiple motives and all of us found the ending unexpected. So, at one level it lived up to the hype, it was a tense psychological thriller / a real page turner.

However, a few of us experienced some doubts about elements of the book. I don't want to spoil the plot for anyone, but when the big reveal happened, we all found it difficult to understand the actions of one of the main characters. Some of us felt this was a big flaw, and detracted from the impact of the book.

Shuggie Bain by Douglas Stuart

This book is not for the faint-hearted, it is a harrowing, hard-hitting story about a family struggling with the consequences of alcoholism. Some members were uncertain about continuing to the end of the book, but most were glad they did. The book painted a bleak but eye-opening picture of the poverty and deprivation endured by the characters in the book. This harshness of life meant that little true kindness was shown. We discussed the fact that there appeared to be no identified adult or agency to support the children who really were on their own. Also, the role reversal that occurred with the children caring for the adults and the fear that accompanied this. Fear of leaving the adult in such a dangerous state, but also fear of what they might find on their return home.

Rodham by Curtis Sittenfeld

The group gave very varied responses to this title. Many found it difficult coping with the counterfactual genre which attempts to answer 'What if..' questions. In this instance: What if Hillary hadn't married Bill. Some thought it was 'just silly!' Others tried to research which of the lesser characters were real and which were made up, which could be confusing. Possibly, an American reader would cope with this a little better. We found humour in the 'racier' parts of the book. Although sexual scandals were a part of the Clinton presidency, some of the scenes described in this book appeared gratuitous and prevented us from taking the book more seriously. However, it did provoke a lot of discussion regarding the American political system and the differences between American and British culture and attitudes.

To conclude, we felt that Hillary was portrayed as a strong, intelligent woman who may well have been the first female president. With regard to Bill, the book certainly reinforced many of the negative views some had already formed.

Chris Laukaitis