

Twas the Nightshift Before Christmas by Adam Kay

This title met with a very mixed response. Some found it "laugh out loud" funny, full of humour and also compassion, giving insights into our health system and the challenges met by health workers. Others found his laddish humour and the language used excessive and some of his anecdotes far fetched.

However, those who had read his first book: This is Going to Hurt – Secret Diaries of a Junior Doctor were in complete agreement that his first book was a much better read.

The Silent treatment by Abbie Greaves

Many members felt concerned about the disturbing opening of the book, but then found themselves drawn in by the stories of firstly Frank and then Maggie. It was the same story but told from their differing perspectives. They were a couple who had been together for over fifty years. Their love and care for one another and their joy while raising their daughter is very apparent. However, they struggled with some very challenging issues which stretched their relationship.

The 'silent treatment' was not a petty response to a trivial argument. This was a sad, moving story and we felt great sympathy with their situation. They like many people found it difficult to express their feelings only to later realise that had they managed this it would have prevented misunderstanding and pain.

Letter to Louis: A Celebration of a Different Life by Alison White

The group found this to be a well written, moving but honest read.

The story of Louis' life was simply but beautifully told, including the hardships and frustrations but also the joy that his family experienced in raising this very special child. After the trauma of his birth and the very real fear that he might not survive, the family then had to adjust to his continuing needs that would drain them all both physically and emotionally.

Many of the group felt anger towards individuals and professionals that the family encountered and the difficulties they experienced in getting the right support that they felt Louis deserved. However, this was not the main theme of the book; indeed, the family through their dogged determination did find gifted individuals who gave Louis the therapies he needed.

Louis's mischievous personality and zest for life shines through the narrative and there were many 'laugh out loud' moments. As one group member said: 'It is a very touching and heartfelt story, one to be read.'

Girl, Woman, Other by Bernadine Evaristo

With one exception, the group found this to be a challenging, interesting and unusual read. One member said that the beginning of the book 'felt as though I was on a runaway train. I had to keep taking a breath!' Evaristo uses the device of giving voice to many different women and cleverly interlinks their stories through family ties, friendships and work relationships across many settings and generations. Through these stories we get snapshots into the hardships, prejudices and racism that they had to confront.

Despite these serious issues there was a lot of humour and joy in the book. The poignant ending was unexpected, revealing a final link between two of the women that left the reader feeling uplifted.

Mudlarking : Lost and Found on the River Thames by Lara Maiklam

The majority of the group found this to be an interesting and fascinating insight into an unusual hobby. It was well written and was very evocative of the sights, sounds and smells found on the Thames foreshore. It gave plenty of historic information regarding the development of London and this impact on the Thames. The description of her finds and her research gave glimpses of bygone times.

Her enthusiasm for the hobby is well communicated through the delightful imagined histories she gives for some of the finds.

Aberfan – A Story of Survival, Love and Community in One of Britain's Worst Disasters by Gaynor Madgwick

This was a tragic and heart breaking story and I know that many of the members felt apprehensive about the content. Within the group we acknowledge that not every member will want to read all titles. Although it was an emotional read many found it was both interesting and compelling.

Some contextual information regarding the mining waste and the actions of the National Coal Board and the Government both prior to and after the disaster was given in the introduction, and was referred to during the book. However, the main impact was the author's heartrending story of tragedy and survival. Gaynor was eight years old and in school on the day of the disaster, not only did she sustain injuries which meant a long spell in hospital she also lost two siblings. Much later in life she decided to examine her own memories of the events and also those of people within the community who were impacted. These were poignant and emotional interviews that I felt worked because she was a survivor rather than a researcher or a journalist.

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

Many of the group were returning to this classic book and most felt that it was still a joy to read. It is written in an easy style with lovely descriptions that really brought the characters and settings to life. It could make you laugh out loud and also make you cry. The story written from the point of view of a child, gave clever insight into events, at times adding humour and warmth but also casting a sharp lens onto the attitudes and prejudices of the time. The main crisis in the book is heart rending. It seemed of another age until the headlines in America made reminded us that these issues are sadly, still prevalent. A serious book that was a delight to read. In my opinion, a book which is widely acclaimed, and fully deserving of the reputation that it has.

Notes from an Exhibition by Patrick Gale

A couple of members of the group found this book difficult 'to get into'. However, the majority found it an interesting and enjoyable read.

The book gave great insight into bipolar disorder and its links to creativity, but also the profound and enduring impact it has upon the individual and family members. There was movement within the timeline, which could be confusing but also helped the reader to make comparisons between different generations at the same point in their lives. The book gave interesting insight into Quakerism both worship and lifestyle, this provided a refreshing contrast to the manic episodes.

The characters were well developed and nuanced and as a reader you were eager to see how they progressed from infant to teenager and adult. The novel was mostly set in Cornwall and several members felt a strong affinity to the area.

The Prison Doctor: Dr Amanda Brown

In this book Dr Amanda Brown charts her decision to leave General Practice and a subsequent move to work in the prison service.

The author gives us a sad but interesting insight into the prison system. She worked at different times in a young offender's institution, Wormwood Scrubs and in a substance abuse clinic in HMP Bronzefield.

The group agreed that she was a caring and compassionate doctor, who was non-judgemental in her work and with whom most inmates however troubled would find an empathetic and committed doctor.

However, there were different views about her motivation for writing the book, some felt that she was trying to validate her own position; others felt that she was writing an honest insight into prison life and the issues faced by both the prisoners and those working in the service.

It certainly raised many issues regarding our prison regime and the need for effective rehabilitation to break the offending cycle.

The Little Coffee Shop of Kabul: Deborah Rodriguez

This book was very well received by the group. Although light and easy to read it had hidden depths and showed us the complexities of life and death in Kabul. The story weaves through the lives of five contrasting women and how they found friendship while living in this dangerous country and restrictive culture. An excellent choice for a book club discussion, due to the issues it raised.

The Elephant Whisperer by Lawrence Anthony

In this book, Lawrence a committed conservationist recounts his quest to rescue a small herd of elephants. The style is light and readable and gives information about these amazing creatures that is both fascinating and accessible. He had many difficulties to contend with including power struggles between local tribal chiefs, poachers and the elements but most crucially the past trauma that the elephants had experienced when in contact with man.

Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China by Jung Chang

In this personal history, Jung Chang relates her own memories and those of her mother and grandmother. The powerful writing portrays three courageous women living through periods of great turmoil and change. The book gives a shocking insight into the brutality and violence to which they were exposed and the seeming stupidity of many of the policies adopted by Mao. Chang grew up in a totalitarian regime and her story charts the gradual change from adoration of Mao and total acceptance of his policies to doubts and then disillusionment. This journey was painful and very poignant, proving very difficult for her mother and father who had both been hardworking and committed communists.

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