

Covid-19 book group

Reviews

Kamila Shamsie

Home Fire

I thought *Home Fire* was quite interesting although I wasn't entirely gripped. I started it some months ago and only got part way through and picked it up again a couple of weeks ago. I thought the circumstances and characters in the book were quite believable and the relationships well drawn. I suppose it was a window (no idea how accurate) into another world, but I found the end rather vapid. Too neat for me. However, I have picked up another of her books in Kindle offers and I thought her writing was good enough to tempt me to read something else by her.

Angela

I thought *Home Fire* was an interesting book, and research tells me it is supposedly based on a Greek Myth, but not quite, about conflicted loyalties of love, family and religion. I suppose there was that and I felt sympathy for the children's younger lives, but little sympathy with their adult lives, because these were all taken to ridiculous lengths, I saw it more as a story of obsession – on many grounds, with a person, a faith, a career etc. Although there are aspects which chime with current-day (political) thinking about citizenship, the media, immigrants etc I'm not sure the personal storylines ring true to life at all, security being what it is now(!) but then this is fiction! The ending was rather weak, as if, well, time to close now. **Chris**

I read *Home Fire* with very mixed feelings, it was certainly not a comfortable read nor was it in any way a happy tale however it opened my eyes to a range of problems including those faced by some youngsters growing up today. I really felt for Isma and the rest of the family over their shame at their missing jihadish father (and the fact that they dealt with this shame by never mentioning it). Similarly when Parvaiz was being radicalised his sisters just thought he had a girlfriend and never spoke to him about it. I was very touched by the obvious bond between the three siblings growing up without either parent and the complications of each also wanting independence. The character of the Home Secretary and his overpowering need for respect and status eventually ended with the very public death of his beloved son. I felt a great deal of empathy for most of the characters and perhaps have slightly more understanding of the difficulties facing some families growing up in Britain today. I am pleased to have read this book but would not read it again! **Stephanie**

I think Kamilla Shamsie's books are incredibly well-written and thought provoking. In *Home Fire* she gives a nuanced view of British Moslem life and community, one which ranges from Parvaiz, a teenager, whose radicalisation is described in terms in which we can understand his subsequent actions (at least, I can) to an authoritarian Karamat Lone, now the Home secretary, who has left faith and community and family behind. I'm not good on Sophocles on which the novel is based, but am quite fascinated by the questions this book poses. I found it very sad (and, in retrospect, perhaps not one that is the best for the present time), but I still enjoyed it. I think it shows the lack of understanding between different faiths/communities and also the differences between Moslems themselves. I am interested in how risk is viewed and dealt with by governments and wonder how a liberal, democratic state can deal with risk without becoming

authoritarian and I think this is central to the question of denying citizenship and preventing teenagers returning home. Obviously I have no answers. **Gill Hudson**

Have just finished reading *Home Fire* by Kamila Shamsie. I think you asked for comments, but not sure. This is what I thought about it.

It was an interesting book, I thought, but the characters did not behave at all sensibly! I think people's prejudices are based on fact : for example, if you have a father who is a known terrorist, it is bound to bring attention on your family. After all a lot of people are killed by misguided Muslim terrorists etc. I thought that the characters were selfish, unrealistic and ungrateful. The only character I really liked was Isma. I think it showed that Muslims who are born and live in this country on the whole have a different culture and criticise our system of government and culture, which although not perfect, seems to be a lot better than the countries they fled from. It made me think about some of the issues in the book, some of the attitudes of the characters in the book made me feel quite cross. **Ann Molloy**

My thoughts on *Home Fire* By Kamila Shamsie

The opening section reflects Isma Pasha's treatment at the hands of "immigration" officials at Heathrow. Were we meant to sympathise or even empathise with the indignities she suffered? Was this meant to make us feel uncomfortable or could we just dismiss the experience and read on. Perhaps it was meant to stimulate a clarion call demanding a change in society's attitudes to 'immigrants'.

The author drew inspiration from the playwright Sophocles and his drama *Antigone*. Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, was prohibited by law from burying her brother. I was advised to research the ancient-Greek tragedy and I found that helpful with coming to terms with the plot. There seems to be numerous books of fiction using this formula.

Reading the reviews on the back of the book it seems to have been an acclaimed piece of literature. I found it an uncomfortable read - both the theme and the dialogue - but if you read books to give you pleasure - this wasn't one for me. **William**

Home Fire is basically a love story exploring differences between Muslim and British thinking. Isma is to go to the United States to study for her PhD but she is worried about her siblings, Aneeka and Parvaiz. Especially her anxiety relates to Parvaiz, who leaves to join a radical jihadist group to feel closer to their jihadist father, who abandoned them. I felt sorry for Isma about the unreasonable difficulties she had in getting through customs. On one of her first mornings at the university Isma meets Eamonn Lone, whose father, Karamat Lone, is a politician (British Home Secretary) who had left his Muslim beliefs behind. Eamonn and she become close and eventually learn from each other about their respective fathers. Eamonn is going to London and agrees to post a package to their Auntie, instead he visits the house (this seemed a bit far fetched, I thought). Thus his affair starts with Aneeka, who follows him after he leaves and tries to get his help, via his father, to bring her brother, Parvaiz, home. In the end Parvaiz is killed when he is trying to get home, having been unable to find out anything about his father. The book ends after Eamonn goes, against his father's wishes, to be with Aneeka who is staying with her brother's body (as in the play *Antigone*) as the British government would not let her bring

him home . Someone puts a suicide vest round the couple and they are killed. I did find the book a page turner but also most distressing, especially the ending. I couldn't help wondering what would have happened to Karamat Lone after the loss of his son. **Margaret**

I only just finished *Home Fire* last night. I saw Stephanie's review and agree that I did not particularly want to read it, it was not a pleasant read, though it flowed well being well written. I think I learnt quite a lot and am actually glad I did read it, so thank you whoever suggested it. It can be seen how easily young people (in any walk of life) can be influenced, especially when they have had a difficult upbringing and have no ambition or hope for the future.

Yes, not an easy read and it stays with you - still thinking about that ending - but valuable.

Sharon

I've just completed the novel. What can I say?

I found *Home Fire* emotionally compelling with lucid story telling. Kamila Shamsie writes about complex issues with great clarity. I found her use of symbolism intriguing. Near the beginning of the novel I noted that the parachutist seen by Isma through her skylight window is a symbol of Eamann who she is about to meet. When she sees the parachutist she thinks of Icarus who flew too near the sun and couldn't be rescued by his father. Eamann is similarly doomed when he follows Aneeka to Karachi at the end of the novel. Karamat fails to save his son. Because of his own excessive pride he is unwilling to make a political concession to bring Parvaiz's body -and with it-Aneeka, back to England.

I found the final chapter riveting, with beauty and horror intertwined.

Just before the explosives are detonated, Shamsie writes:

'She rests her cheek against his, he drops his head to kiss her shoulder. For a moment they are two lovers in a park, under an ancient tree, sun-dappled, beautiful and at peace.' This is an unforgettable novel. **Jean**

Kamila Shamsie

Burnt Shadows

I read *Burnt Shadows* a while back and really enjoyed it. It is a bit of an epic and I think I got a bit lost around Pakistan/Afghanistan and who was working for the CIA and who was part of the training camps. Again the idea of risk is present. Hiroko, who has seen both her fiancée and father killed by the Nagasaki atom bomb, says she cannot understand why the Americans dropped this 2nd bomb. At the end of the book, living in New York at the time of 9/11, she says she now understands that governments cannot take risks with their citizens' lives. **Gill Hudson**

In *Burnt Shadows* a Japanese woman, Hiroko, escapes after the Nagasaki bomb was dropped and most of her friends and relations, including her German fiancé (Konrad Weiss) are killed. She ends up with horrific burns on her back (taking on the shape of the three black cranes printed on her kimono) and after treatment decides to go to Delhi where her fiancé had a relative, namely Elizabeth Weiss. Hiroko falls in love with an employee of the household, Saijad Ashrat, whom

she eventually marries after the death of Saijad Ashrat's mother who would not have allowed it. The novel also covers the Partition after which the Ashrat family are split up after returning from their escape to America - Saijad was not able to return to Delhi and landed up in Pakistan. I haven't finished the book yet. *Margaret*

I read *Burnt Shadows* a long time ago and didn't enjoy it enough to want to read it again. The only part I remember was the description of the actual dropping of the bomb. Had I had enough time, I would have re-read it as often a second reading can alter initial opinions.
Doreen