

## Covid-19 Book Group April

Salley Vickers

*Miss Garnet's Angel*



*Chiesa dell'Angelo Raffaele*



Raffaele, Tobias and dog

Alix

I finished the book last night. I was not that enamoured of it. I liked parts of the book but not my favourite.

Ann

I read “Miss Garnet’s Angel” sometime ago and have read it again for Book Club. I think it is a book that tells you more of the themes of love, death and growth of the human spirit” (quoted from the Times critic) the more you read it. I love Venice and am fond of Angels so that magic mix endeared me to this charming story.

Angie

I found this book fascinating and it is one I will certainly read again. Following the death of her friend Harriet, Miss Garnet throws caution to the wind and decides to travel to Venice. Here she comes across the painting of Tobias and the Angel in a local church, and it is as she uncovers the story of Tobias and his trek that her own outlook on life is challenged and changes. The two tales are cleverly interwoven by Sally Vickers and follow very similar paths. The story highlights that moral choices and issues between good and evil have not really altered over the centuries and in our lives today we are faced with the same complex decisions as Tobias was on his journey centuries ago. None of us are perfect.

Chris

This story of Julia Garnet, a newly retired school teacher, who comes to Venice following the death of a friend is a like a fairy story I found, drifting from place to place around the enchanting streets, churches, piazzas, balconies and bridges, a place full of ghosts of the past, not only of ancient Venice, but the modern times too. She contemplates her narrow life, her father one bullying ghost who probably forced her withdrawal from her emotions, and her recently much-missed demised friend Harriet who tried to encourage her to enjoy life more. She finds herself re-examining her own feelings towards the Church, her own timidity, and lack of emotion, and when she finds herself in love starts to open up and finds herself proud to actually find her own way and make new friends, more than she ever had in her whole life. This story is wound around the story of the Archangel Raphael, both in the modern world in statues and pictures, and in the

ancient world through the mythical story of Tobias, who travels to Medea unaware he is accompanied by the Angel. I found the old story rather interrupted the flow of the modern story but so interesting in fact that before long found myself picking out those bits to read first. As her interest develops in Venetian history, the Angels, and the Church, and not least in herself, she finds a new life and is happy to leave the old one behind. This makes it, I found, an uplifting story.

Jean

Reading Salley Vicker's novel, 'Miss Garnet's Angel' left me with a feeling of peace. I liked the rhythm of the book and it evoked memories of my student days, when I spent a holiday in Italy, staying in youth hostels. My friend and I were booked into the hostel on the Grand Canal, but, on arriving late, we had to spend the night on a water bus instead! I loved the beauty, charm and restfulness of Venice and carried home, in my rucksack, an exquisite pink glass swan which stands in my home today. Venice had the same magical effect on Julia Garnet. Like Tobias, she embarks on a soul-altering journey of her own. Although Julia finds that Carlo and the twins aren't exactly what they seem, the Angel Raphael's watchful spirit will help good prevail. In the end, Venice, not London, becomes Julia's spiritual home. Yes, I shall re-read this beautifully structured novel.

Her time in Venice encapsulates the 'Prime of Miss Julia Garnet'.

Margaret

I read this book in 2002, just before a trip to Venice. We eventually found the *Chiesa dell'Angelo Raffaele*, depicting the Story of Tobias but unfortunately it was closed for renovation.

Julia Garnet, a single woman and now retired teacher, had lead a rather narrow and regimented life. After the death of her friend, Harriet, with whom she had shared a home for many years, she decided to set off for Venice. From then on her life changed dramatically from having no real friends and being critical of those she did have, to a person who found a new confidence and friends in Venice and she also took an interest in them. She had previously had communist views but now she was appreciating the beauty of the churches and their paintings and especially the story of Tobias and the restoring of his father's sight, as depicted in the Chiesa Angelo Raffaele. In Venice Carlo paid her a lot of attention and she fell in love with him and then realised that he was really only interested in getting to know the young boy, Nicco, she had befriended. I was a little impatient with Julia at times especially when she bought a dress to wear to a party and then still decided to wear her black skirt and white blouse instead - just a little bit of her old self perhaps - but at least she made the most of and enjoyed her life in Venice.

Sharon

I read Miss Garnet's Angel some years ago and did not re-read it as I was busy with another book, as below. I remember enjoying the book and the setting of Venice was beautifully written. Miss Garnet turned out to be a more complex and likeable character than I first thought and, from memory, the time shifts and two stories ran together quite well.

I have been reading *The Mirror and the Light* by Hilary Mantel, the much awaited third of her trilogy on Thomas Cromwell. Having loved the first two, I couldn't wait to get stuck in but, at nearly 900 pages, it was a bit daunting. However, and even though we know how it all ends, it

never dragged, the characters and the times were beautifully portrayed and her writing is generally wonderful. I find she writes with a very strong "voice" and she is one of those authors who really takes you to a time and place. Recommended for a long read.

#### William

I was informed that this was the author's debut novel and I found it to be a most enjoyable read. However, the enjoyment was exclusive to the main narrative that followed a structured sequence of events, was extremely well written with excellent characterisation, dialogue and choice of vocabulary, together with elements of its tale that I found very surprising and entertaining. The essence of the novel is its exploration and reflection of the life and status of a spinster who discovers there are other elements to life than she had previously experienced. Facets of the journey from which she drew advantage and pleasure and was able to generate opportunities for further satisfaction in the development of her burgeoning personal relationships. The heroine's saga was covered quite brilliantly in the development of the text which captured and reflected life for some people and their retrospective view of life that as you get older you realise that you could have achieved so much more. We are afforded only one life but it's never too late to 'come to life'. The parallel story following the death of the King of Assyria, its consequences for Tobias's family and his trek to Media with Azarius as guide and companion I found to be an unwanted distraction. I subsequently read a review of the book where its author had formed the same opinion and had not bothered to read the later elements of the 'additional' text. Nevertheless, one of the best novels on our list.

#### Other Books of interest

##### Angela

One of the books I did read this month was *The Enchanted April* by Elizabeth von Arnim. I saw that it was on offer and I had been told that the film of the book was very good, so I went on the recommendation and gave it a try. Briefly, this is the story of four very different women who are drawn together because for various reasons they take the joint let of a castle in Italy for the month of April. Throughout the book their characters and background are revealed and they find themselves coming to life under the influence of the castle and the burgeoning Spring. From tense beginnings, companionship arises and some interesting surprises with it. In the first half of the book the plot quickly drew me in, but the flavour was very sweet, saccharine even and I found this rather off-putting. However, once they all got to the castle and it began to work its magic I too became captivated. I felt the exploration of how the women's past circumstances and inner life influenced their actions was well observed and set down. Although it was very much a sentimental piece of escapism, it was not without some depth and reflection and it was an easy and feel good read. Relaxing in the enchanting castle garden in April was an absolute joy even in the imagination.

##### Doreen

Have not read the 'Miss Garnet's' book, but finished one that I had already started. So here is a

review of *Home Going* by Yaa Gyasi.

'Home Going' left me with mixed feelings. I did not enjoy it at the beginning as I found the names of the African characters and their connections difficult to master. However, the more I read, the greater I appreciated the book. I know very little about Ghana and how the slave trade operated in Africa so this aspect of the story was as enlightening as it was horrific. I didn't know that it was common for white slave traders to marry black women despite having wives back in England or that warring African tribes sold their prisoners into slavery, making them willing partners in crime.

The book was really about the legacy the slave trade had on each generation that followed the aftermath of the horror and the 'supremacy' of the white man over the black. The book followed the journeys of the original slaves from their original roots in Africa, to America and finally back to Africa. Some of the stories were very disturbing and a reminder of the terrible acts against humanity that took place during the Second World War. I will never understand why a different belief or skin colour can arouse arch hatred and unleash such cruelty on a fellow human being. Is progress a delusion? 'Home Going' was not an easy or a comfortable read, but I am glad I finished reading it. I would probably benefit from reading it again. I am trying to fit in the WI. book Club at the moment so have started reading 'Operation Mincemeat' by Ben Macintyre. The true spy story is very well researched and detailed but I think it will take me some time to reach the end as it's not really a bedtime book. The small print doesn't help for night reading either. Maybe because I am usually active out of habit, I still feel guilty reading during the daylight hours.

Stephanie

I plodded through *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly. It describes the contribution of African American women to the success of the American space program. It went into considerable detail about all the women who were involved, what schools they attended, which colleges they went to who they were married to etc and also a lot of detail about NASA and the different groups working within NASA, the different levels of employment. All this I found difficult to follow perhaps because I was not particularly interested. The part I did find very interesting was all the detail about racial discrimination in the US in the 1950s (around the time of Martin Luther King). The women working for NASA were usually employed as mathematicians and were clearly very good indeed at their jobs but their prospects of any promotion were more or less zero. There were separate toilets for the African Americans and they were expected to sit on a separate table in the cafeteria. Schools and colleges were segregated and 'blacks' had to sit at the back of buses; whites in the front, there were distinct areas of housing for blacks and whites. I was deeply shocked that such discrimination was still prevalent as late as the 50s (although my late husband who was born in the 50s and spent much of his childhood in the southern part of the USA had clear memories of the Ku Klux Klan and claims to have seen the remains of their victims hanging from trees). This book was a very interesting sequel to *THE INVENTION OF WINGS* by Susan Monk Kidd which described the appalling treatment of black slaves in the southern parts of the USA in the mid 1800s (by contrast a really good read!) Having eventually finished *Hidden Figures* I then had a day of pure escapism sitting in the sun in the garden and reading *BLOOD SPORT* by Dick Francis. Not great literature but a good gripping crime story and it is a very long time since I have read any of his books.

