

Covid-19 Book Group July

'The Bookshop' by Penelope Fitzgerald



William

I am grateful to the Book Club's selection that has introduced me to writers who were previously unknown to me. What I did enjoy when reading this book were the numerous very cleverly-composed cameos reflecting quite outstanding observational characterisation. The following particularly impressed me:

'She was in appearance small, wispy and wiry, somewhat insignificant from the front view, and totally so from the back',

'His rudeness was resented only in the same way as the weather, brilliant in the morning, clouding over later, however much it had promised'.

'.... it will be properly done - no need to count the sandwiches.'

'Will-power is useless without a sense of direction.'

'.... the little brick-and-tile houses seemed to cling to each other.' and my favourite:

'The solicitor explained that rights were in no way affected by the impossibility of putting them into practice.'

For those of us who love 'books' its context and conclusion are rather sad and looking beyond that simplistic statement it also reflects the attitudes of an introspective local community who reject change and fear its potential consequences. Our heroine and her ambition were thwarted by conniving lawyers, suspicious and protective neighbours and double-dealing politicians. It was a book of hope. Hope that was dashed. A life's ambition that became a lost cause. I was saddened by the closing lines: *'.... she sat with her head bowed in shame, because the town in which she had lived for nearly ten years had not wanted a bookshop'*. I appreciate that it is a book about 'life' and I enjoyed reading it - for its many facets: emotion, well-constructed text and outstanding characterisation.

Jean

When I started to read Penelope Fitzgerald's novel I was immediately drawn to her writing style which is concise and gentle, too. Ostensibly, the novel is just a story about a quaint seaside village in East Suffolk, but it is much more than this: it is about rancour and spite. Florence Green, a widow, is a victim. Although she thought that 'you had to succeed if you gave everything you had,' sadly, this proved not to be the case. She finds that she lives in a cruel world, indifferent to honest endeavour. In order to establish her bookshop, as well as prejudice, she also has to battle against a poltergeist and decaying buildings. 'Small and wispy', Mrs. Green resembles Miss Marple in that she possesses the same directness and can make acerbic remarks. When dealing with Mr. Thornton, the solicitor, she ends their correspondence with

Dear Mr. Thornton,
Coward!
Yours sincerely,
Florence Green.

Fitzgerald has great descriptive powers: e.g. when referring to Milo North - 'His emotions, from lack of exercise, had disappeared altogether.'

(Shades of Jane Austen here - - -).

And her description of Mr. Brundish, who, 'dressed in tweeds of dark green and grey, looked like a moving gorse bush, against the gorse'. There is gentle humour in the novel and Florence Green shows sensitivity when she relates to ten-year-old Christine. She empathises with her when she fails the 11 plus exam. The ending is ineffably sad when the bookshop is closed and Mrs. Green leaves for London.

'As the train drew out of the station, she sat with her head bowed in shame, because the town in which she had lived for nearly ten years had not wanted a bookshop.'

Chris

I have read both books chosen for July before, but chose the shorter one to review! I enjoyed *Waterland* very much but it is rather dark, so I felt something a little gentler would suit just now. *The Bookshop*, though gentler and does have its amusing moments, is rather sad but beautifully written. Here are my thoughts:

Florence Green is a warm hearted widow who decides to use her small inheritance to set up a bookshop in a Suffolk seaside town. The story progresses through a procession of depressingly parochial and selfish attitudes to the incomer, with the brighter and more hopeful characters only briefly lifting the story. Mrs Green's courage and resistance to the local political machinations to oust her from what they consider to be her wrongful place is ultimately self-defeating and in a sad and unexpected ending is forced out, now penniless. This is a gentle story with a feeling of someone just drifting through, although unfazed by other people's attitudes, ultimately sadly doomed. I enjoyed the descriptions of the landscape, the buildings and the people, although rather exasperated and saddened by Mrs Green's kind but rather haphazard acceptance of her fate. I loved the writing though and immediately looked about for another Penelope Fitzgerald book.

Ann

I have enjoyed "The Book Shop" by Penelope Fitzgerald. Books are such fun, you never know what to expect until you start reading. Firstly it starts off like a fairy story. Florence Green makes a decision with her heart to start a Book Shop in a dilapidated Old House, haunted, left derelict for years with no mod. cons., and flooded cellar, together with 'the oyster shed' which turned out to be unusable!. She certainly didn't buy it with her head. The Bank Manager, unrealistically, agreed to allow her a loan, even though it was an endeavour unlikely to succeed in a very small and isolated town, constantly under siege from the winds straight from Siberia. However, charmingly she does have some success with some help from lovable characters, such as a nine year old competent and engaging girl, a handy boy scout and other well wishers. I am reminded of Worzel Gummidge in this quixotic story and his antiauthoritarian ways which I think echoes this story, but in the Worzel Gummidge books, Mrs. Bloomsbury Barton is quite innocuous in comparison to the evil Mrs. Gamart in this story, who manages to manipulate a large number of influential acquaintances and relations into subverting democracy. They all did what she wanted, because it made life easier. This book then changes from its fairytale quality into a very sinister message indeed. Democracy is a very fragile thing. The book therefore ends in Florence being defeated. I dislike unhappy endings, but nevertheless thoroughly enjoyed this beautifully written book. Very thought provoking. I enjoyed Penelope Fitzgerald's book so much that I am now reading her book called 'The Gate of Angels', I happened to have on my book shelves. I had read Graham Swift's "Waterland" some time ago. I make a note of what I have read, as my memory fails me these days. I put a note 'not to read it again' and 'very convoluted' but I looked up the internet connection you sent, which was interesting.

Alix

I have read "The Bookshop" and enjoyed it though was surprised it ended when it did. That is the disadvantage of a Kindle as you can't tell when you are near the end. I felt sorry that the lady who ran the bookshop was not successful and left the area.

‘Waterland’ by Graham Swift

WINNER OF THE BOOKER PRIZE
GRAHAM SWIFT
WATERLAND



Stephanie

I loved this book. The scope was huge covering the history of the Fens and the effect of drainage – by the Dutch – and the subsequent dynamic relationship between dredging, sluice-gates locks and the ongoing competition between land reclaim and sea reclaim of that land. Tales of the early labour based around the Fens was also fascinating with one of the main characters being a lock keeper and living in the lock keepers cottage near the main sluice gates (memories of my childhood in Teddington when we children were allowed to open the lock gates for the barges taking coal up to the nearby power station and I used to swim across the river just upstream of the sluice gates – I am sure my parents never knew!). Eel fishing reflects earlier times when eels were still prevalent in the waters and presumably people liked -or had – to eat them. The book also covers social issues examining the differences between the rich land owners and the manual labourers and there is topical discussion of the role of history in our lives.

Much of the story was related by the history teacher at the local school and in spite of recounts of pre-marital sex, backstreet abortions, incest (and the resulting ‘normal for Norfolk’ offspring) drunkenness, murder and hauntings it came across as a very gentle account of by-gone days in East Anglia. The characterisation was very good indeed as was the portrayal of the locality; surprisingly so since the author himself comes not from the Fens but South London

Margaret Graham Swift Waterland

In intervening chapters we are given the history of the Fens and the rather personal history of the history teacher, Tom Crick. This is all done through long and detailed descriptions. At the beginning of the novel we learn that the history teacher will be forced to retire from his post as his wife stole a baby and landed up in an asylum. Gradually we learn a bit about his wife and what led up to this i.e. her abortion as a teenager by a backstreet abortionist, which left her

infertile. There is much in the book about teenage lust, jealousy, murder, incest and abuse. But we learn all about eels and that there is a mystery of how they reproduce; there's also a long chapter about the Atkinson family who owned the brewery. In Chapter 20 p167 there is rather a thought provoking quote about not wanting explanations from one of Crick's students, (Price), "...and people only explain when things are wrong....not when they're right."

Doreen

Apart from its literary merits , it was a sordid and exceedingly depressing book!

Gill

My review: I read *Waterland* quite a few years ago and loved it. On re-reading, I love the way it's written, the descriptions of the fens and people who live(d) there. Most of all, I am fascinated by the way he muses about history; the 'whys' and 'hows' of looking at stories of the past and the way he talks to the kids. I used to supervise science students in history of science and medicine and included ch.13 in the reading list. This was to encourage them to think about the past in a contextual manner rather than as history progressing to the 'better' present(sometimes it worked, sometimes not!). This whole story does this - it feels as though the characters and environment are 'real' and seen in their own space and time.

Really good read!

Angela

I first read *Waterland* some time ago, when Graham Swift was our chosen author for the month. It was love from the start. I think this is the most wonderful book with a really slow and drifting rhythm exactly mirroring the fens and their apparently timeless character. When the schoolmaster Tom Crick begins to turn from his syllabus in the history department, to recounting stories of personal history within the local fenland setting, his head teacher sees this as an opportunity to be rid of him for more personal and tragic reasons. However, the story that he tells, of himself and his ancestors and their links with a very different family, the Atkinsons, which takes us on a journey through the ages, turns out to be far more interesting to his class than the set work on the French Revolution, which seems irrelevant by comparison. This book takes us on a fascinating trip through the rise and fall of families, relationships, landscape (both physical and mental) and social politics. The way it is set down, un-hurrying, though uncompromisingly dealing with troubling themes, gives it a very skillfully crafted feel of reality. One of my all time favourite books.

