

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 162

The newsletter of the AVID Readers Group, based at Earlsdon Library

Next meeting: Thursday 13th March 8pm

Venue: Earlsdon Library

Book for discussion: *A Tale of Two Cities* – Charles Dickens

Vile Visitors?

February's Book

Oh Dear, Silvia! – Dawn French

Silvia has fallen from a balcony and lies in hospital in a coma. Unsurprisingly, therefore, she doesn't get to tell her own story, but it is gradually revealed as family, friends and her key nurse, Winne, spend time at her bedside talking to, or maybe at, her. During the week or so spanned by the story, their lives are also changed by what has happened to Silvia; some predictably or for the better, others in ways more startling or unpleasant.

Leading the discussion, Ted suggested we each champion a character but we weren't very good at sticking to that as most people felt that only Ed, Silvia's ex-husband, was likeable and normal. Winnie had her supporters too, but her portrayal, like that of Tia, Silvia's cleaner, depended on short-cuts that were close enough to racist stereotypes to make some people feel uncomfortable. Even so, Tia's not entirely innocent use of inappropriate expletives was often clever and funny.

While Ed tries to understand what went wrong with their marriage, Tia is making sure she gets what she is owed. Cassie, bewildered at being abandoned by her mother years before, nonetheless wants to introduce Silvia to little Willow, but is paralysed by fear and takes a long time to get into the room; her brother, serving in Afghanistan, remains angry and unwilling to forgive. Manipulative Cat is also angry at what she sees as a betrayal and Jo is desperately trying to

resuscitate her sister, employing all sorts of unorthodox means, some of which are hilarious.

Nearly all of the action takes place in the hospital room and a lot of the history is revealed by what people say to Silvia, talking to her for what some people felt were unfeasibly long stretches of time. As a result of this structure, the narrative sometimes felt jumpy and the characters rather underdeveloped and unsubtle. This also led to apparent plot holes, which caused some discussion – some were happy to accept that certain things could have happened, rationalising it by pointing to their opinion of how a character would behave, while others felt that there was no evidence to support such a view, given the limited, and sometimes contradictory, information about each of Silvia's visitors.

Although there were readers who said they didn't really like it, even they were able to point to an incident that made them laugh: Dawn French's expertise in writing comedy sketches is put to good use in these sections, but most people felt that she is less proficient in developing and sustaining a longer story. The overall opinion of those present at February's meeting that it was an OK book for filling a couple of hours, but didn't quite meet the expectations raised by the name of the author or the puffs on the cover.

Catherine Fitzsimons

Next month we will be reading:

The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry – Rachel Joyce
The date for discussion of this book is Thursday 10th April.

Ideas for further reading

As ever, there were several people at February's meeting who had not read the book and one, at least, was initially under the impression that the book we had been reading was Dawn French's autobiography. Needless to say, once we started discussing the plot, this misunderstanding was quickly cleared up. The autobiography is called *Dear Fatty* and, comparing the style to this and French's first novel (*A Tiny Bit Marvellous*, which does have a more straightforward storyline and mixes middle-aged loss of confidence with Adrian Mole style teenage angst) suggests that it is one of those rare things; a celebrity autobiography that has not been ghost-written. Someone asked about French's erstwhile comedy partner, Jennifer Saunders, but no-one has (yet?) read her *Bonkers: My Life in Laugh*, which seems to have been written in response to an unauthorised biography from Jacky Hyams published a couple of years before.

Next month's author, Charles Dickens, never told his own story and is safely dead, which gave Birmingham author Gaynor Arnold a chance to fictionalise his life in her novel *Girl in a Blue Dress*. The incidents on which she builds her story are narrated in more or less the same order in Claire Tomalin's biography (*Dickens: A Life*) so I now find it very difficult to think of the real person without attributing to him some of the emotions and motivations of Arnold's Alfred Gibson. I'm hoping that Peter Ackroyd's biography of the Inimitable (entitled simply *Dickens* – an abridged version is also available) will provide a different view and help remove the confusion since his style tends to be drier; a little less personal and speculative than Tomalin's. While I'm writing about Mount ToBeRead, rather than things I've yet got around to, I note that Arnold has given Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (better known as Lewis Carroll) the same treatment in *After Such Kindness*: if that proves to be similarly disconcerting, I'll let you know!

Is there a novel you can recommend written by someone famous for something else?

What about biographies? How much of what is in them can we believe?

I would love to include more from other people in this: reviews or recommendations, tales of literary events, thoughts on anything associated with reading or writing ...

Please send contributions for ELM to
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What's On

I will, as usual, send the library's events calendars out with this edition of ELM, but they are also each listed nearer the time on Coventry Libraries' Facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/coventrylibraries>,

which you can view even if you don't have an account. If you do have a Facebook account, why not support them by liking the page?

One that looks rather interesting is a free talk by author Eleanor Nesbitt on her latest book *Pool of Life (The Autobiography Of A Punjabi Agony Aunt)* at Foleshill Library on 13th March at 11.30am.

Coventry Inspiration Book Awards

Voting has now closed and the winners are listed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/covbooks>

(You can view this page even if you don't have a Facebook account.)

I hope at least one of your favourites won!

