

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 165

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

Next meeting: Thursday 12th June 8pm
Venue: Earlsdon Library
Book for discussion: *Notes on a Scandal* – Zoë Heller

“You can’t skim through treacle”

Our May Book

Sacrilege – SJ Parris

So said one reader who, as you might guess, did not enjoy this month’s book.

Sacrilege is a crime novel with an historical setting. Sophia has been accused of murdering her husband. She persuades Giordano Bruno, who she knows has strong feelings for her, to go to Canterbury to clear her name. However Bruno is in the employ of Queen Elizabeth’s spymaster, Walsingham, so is given permission to travel only on condition he also carries out another task, this one of national importance. This being a novel, the two investigations turn out to be linked and involve Bruno in romance, politics and, of course, personal danger, before the mysteries are unravelled.

Those who didn’t enjoy it felt that the writing was rather ‘ploddy’, with little change of point of view or pace, and the story therefore seemed very long – hence the treacle remark. They felt that Bruno stumbled upon his clues rather than being an active investigator, and pointed to motivations or timescales they felt were inconsistent or incredible. It was also criticised for being very linear and having too many dislikeable characters.

Then there were other readers who normally avoid historical fiction but were pleasantly surprised by this one. They felt that the political context was well-handled: enough was explained for you to understand what was happening, but there were no lengthy or boring ‘info-dumps’ to interrupt the flow of the story. While these readers were pleased to see that the language was up-to-date (and therefore comprehensible), those who have suffered bad examples of the genre were relieved to note that it was also missing glaring anachronisms. Even so, some of

the converts did find it a little slow to start with, and one found that listening rather than reading helped things make sense.

The plot itself, described as ‘a bit James Bond’ by one reader, has a twist at the end which only a few people saw coming. Most people were pleased that the romance angle was not over-emphasised: Bruno is a little obsessed with Sophia, but it is never allowed to be centre stage. This is probably a good thing as, in spite of the dreadful things which have happened to her, few people actually liked Sophia. Some of the other characters were a little cartoonish: servant Samuel is obviously treacherous, and potential fall-guy Nicholas may be a nasty piece of work but we all believed in his innocence from the start. And, on the subject of nasty, there are some particularly vivid descriptions of rather gory scenes – an Elizabethan prison being the least of them – which means this is probably not a book for those blessed with the combination of a good imagination and a weak stomach.

Bruno, Walsingham, the Howard family and a few other notables mentioned in the story were real people and we had an interesting discussion of how this choice affects our opinion of the ingenuity and creativity of the author. Are they somehow cheating by using characters that are not their own, or do they make life more difficult for themselves by having to fit their story into history’s gaps?

In this case, more of the readers who were at the meeting were impressed than otherwise. If *Sacrilege* is treacle, we were obviously a sweet-toothed gathering.

Catherine Fitzsimons

Ideas for further reading

You'll probably be relieved to know that we have fewer words and more books this time. There were lots of suggestions from people at the May meeting so this is more of a list than usual.

First of all, SJ Parris' other books about Giordano Bruno. *Heretic* gives more of his background, explains how he met Sophia and is set in Oxford. The second book, *Prophecy*, is more political and includes a greater number of real people and events.

The historical crime genre has been going for a while – think of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and the *Cadfael* books of Ellis Peters – and spans the centuries from the post-war Lydmouth of Andrew Taylor (start with *An Air that Kills*) to Lindsey Davies's Roman vigile, Marcus Didius Falco, who first appears in *The Silver Pigs*. One of the most critically acclaimed series is also set in Tudor England: Matthew Shardlake first appears in *Dissolution*, as one of Thomas Cromwell's commissioners, but ends in places very far from monasteries in the later novels. CJ Sansom's Cromwell is, of course, very different from the man in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies* – prizewinning books that have become known for their length as much as their style and plot, as has the more recent prizewinner *The Luminaries*. Two Avid Readers are working their way through this at the moment and I have been challenged to make sense of it before next time. It's not, as far as I'm aware, historical crime fiction though.

I would love to include more from other people in ELM.

If you have any other reviews or recommendations, tales of literary events, or anything else you think other AVID readers would find interesting, please send them to

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Book Club Blushes

(Number 1 in an occasional series)



If you're going to

skip to the back of the book to find out the end;

then make sure that

you're not reading the bonus first chapter of the next book!

We also had a discussion, arrived at who knows how, about books that were funny – *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared* (Jonas Jonasson) was highly recommended – or were trumpeted as such by the blurb but turned out to be anything but. Step forward Nick Hornby's *A Long Way Down* and Joseph O'Connor's *The Salesman*.

Other random recommendations were Phyllida Law's compilation of memoirs *Three Mothers (and a Camel)* and CJ Sansom's *Winter in Madrid*, which is set in the Spanish Civil War.

Next month we will be reading:

The House on the Strand – Daphne du Maurier
The date for discussion of this book is Thursday 12th July.

What's On

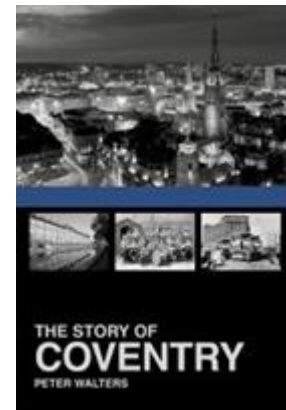


Throughout the year Coventry libraries will be remembering World War I with special displays of fiction and non-fiction books, talking books and DVDs on the theme of the war. Look out for commemorative bookmarks suggesting childrens' and adult books to read. There will also be events in libraries, including sessions provided by the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, where participants can look at World War I artefacts and memorabilia, watch a film or see a presentation.

The first of these is at **Allesley Library** on **Saturday 28th June** from **1–2pm**. You will have the opportunity to handle objects from the past, learn about them from a museum learning officer and take part in discussion with others who attend.

Please contact the library on **024 7678 5813** for further details

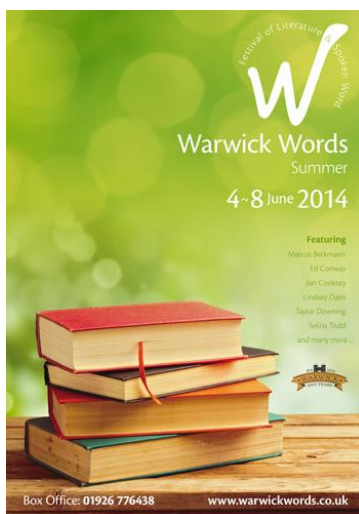
Also for the history buffs, author Peter Walters will be visiting several libraries over forthcoming months to talk about his book *The Story of Coventry* which traces the evolution of the city from the myths of Godiva, through to the issues, challenges and opportunities facing it in the twenty-first century. Exploring Coventry's heritage through records, architectural developments and anecdotes, it reveals a fascinating and much misunderstood city, whose history is often overshadowed by its bombing during the Second World War. Peter Walters, well known for his numerous newspaper features and active role in local heritage, shows that there is a great deal more to the history of Coventry than first meets the eye.



The locations and dates are:

- Willenhall Library—Monday 16th June 2–3pm
- Tile Hill Library—Monday 8th September 5.30–6.30pm
- Foleshill Library—Thursday 4th December 12 noon–1pm
- Central Library—Saturday 7th February 2–3pm

All sessions are free but please check for booking details at www.coventry.gov.uk/libraries



A little further afield, this week's **Warwick Words** festival also has several talks on historical themes, including one from the aforementioned Lindsey Davies. For the full programme, see <http://warwickwords.co.uk>

(I'm still looking for people to join me at the quiz on Wednesday evening!)



For other Coventry Library events, see <https://www.facebook.com/coventrylibraries> and <https://www.facebook.com/coventryreads>