

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 167

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

Next meeting: Thursday 14th August 8pm

Venue: Earlsdon Library

Book for discussion: *Light Shining in the Forest* — Paul Torday

Nothing New Under the Sun

Our July Book

The House on the Strand — Daphne du Maurier

It's the age old tale, a story we've all read before, the heady literary mix of drug taking, time travelling and medieval stalking! Can't these authors come up with anything original?

The House on the Strand centres around the exploits of Dick, a middle aged man who finds himself at something of a crossroads. Newly unemployed he accepts his friend Magnus's offer of a rent-free vacation at his Cornwall abode (this is Du Maurier after all) and, as the story opens, he is expecting the arrival of his rather strident wife and her two sons. Whilst alone at the house he agrees to take an experimental drug, invented by Magnus, which allows him to travel back in time and witness the lives of a group of 14th century noblemen and women. Each subsequent dose of the drug allows him to witness more of the difficulties of his medieval counterparts, but the knowledge comes at a price, with the side effects increasing from dizziness and vertigo to tremors and not being able to distinguish between reality and the past. The physical effects of the drug are nothing (train collisions notwithstanding) compared to the emotional turmoil he causes Vita and the children. His obsession with the past leads him to lie to and disappoint everyone around him. The ending is somewhat ambiguous, with Dick taking the last of the drug and finally obtaining some sense of closure, but it seems his physical and emotional symptoms are likely to get worse.

Whilst some enjoyed the book, others were not so keen, with a high proportion of the group not completing it and one reader falling asleep. For some the pacing was poor, with little appearing to happen for much of the book. Most complaints centred around the medieval characters though —readers couldn't understand why Dick was so captivated by them, as they all seemed rather dull! Even their names met with some criticism, because they were rather long and all seemed to sound the same. Maybe aiming to help with this, a family tree was provided (which some readers made frequent use of and others ignored). However one reader admitted to just generally ignoring the medieval characters altogether!

For those who had travelled in Cornwall, the book held some extra appeal: knowing the places mentioned and being able to picture the landscapes described made the story more captivating, and some wished they'd had an OS map to hand.

It was widely agreed that logic had to be temporarily suspended whilst reading the book since it was impossible to imagine that Dick would not have ended up, if not dead, then at least with one heck of a concussion. His uncanny ability (unfortunately not shared by Magnus) to avoid hedges, walls and large stretches of water while under the influence was a little far-fetched.

The recurrent topic of discussion was whether Dick was addicted to the drug itself or obsessed with the medieval past, and, in particular, the pretty and charming Isolda. Some believed that he was just lonely, unhappy in his current situation and looking for an outlet, and so immersing himself in other peoples' lives stopped him from having to examine his own in much depth. Others thought the characteristics he displayed were too much like those of an addict for it to be anything else.

So, a mixed review for *The House on the Strand*: whilst well-written and, for some, enjoyable, others gave up gladly.



Melissa Johnson

(She hasn't told me her new name – if she changed it that is. Ed)

Next month we will be reading:

The Secret River — Kate Grenville

The date for discussion of this book is Thursday 11th September.

A Daphne du Maurier novel means Cornwall to many readers: have you a favourite author that you associate with a particular place? Who? Why?

Do gory scenes put you off books? Are there any you are glad you've read?

Are there any books which cross between accepted genres that you would recommend? What made it / them work for you?

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

Catherine Fitzsimons cathfitz5317@yahoo.com.

Ideas for further reading

If you want to read more by Daphne du Maurier there are lots of novels to choose from, including *My Cousin Rachel* (which was a well-received AVID book a couple of years ago) and her most well-known, *Rebecca*, which, like *The House on the Strand* and many of her other more popular books (*Jamaica Inn*, *Frenchman's Creek*) are set in Cornwall. Several of her books and stories have been made into films, with Hitchcock's adaptations of *The Birds* and *Rebecca* (again) being the most famous. She also wrote several plays and biographies including a life of her father, Gerald, and a compilation of the letters of her grandfather, George, who gave us the word *Svengali*.

On a totally different track, Ted brought along a book called *Toggle* by Wyon Stansfeld which sounded rather too sci-fi for many people so I ended up taking it away. In spite of the sometimes brutal—but disturbingly real—scenes described, I read it in one go and would endorse Ted's recommendation (his review of the book can be found [on Amazon](#)). In the discussion about brutal realism, we ended up wondering why Scandinavian authors seem to make use of this so effectively, making it integral to the plot rather than mere gratuitous violence. Jo Nesbo's Harry Hole stories and writer Jussi Adler-Olsen were particularly mentioned, along with another strange book that mixes fantasy with the horribly mundane—*The Merman* by Carl-Johan Vallgren which has only just published in a paperback translation. My review of it (written to nestle, rather incongruously, amongst the chick lit of [Girls Love to Read](#)) can be found on [Goodreads](#).