

# Earlsdon Literary Magazine 169

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

**Next meeting:** Thursday 9th October 8pm  
**Venue:** Earlsdon Library  
**Book for discussion:** *Norwegian by Night* — Derek B. Miller

## An Interesting Journey

### Our September Book

*The Secret River* — Kate Grenville

*The Secret River* tells the story of William Thornhill, a Thames lighterman who is reduced to theft when his circumstances take a turn for the worse. He is transported to Australia where he is indentured as a labourer to his wife, Sal, who travelled voluntarily on the same ship knowing that this arrangement would be possible. Before long he has his sights set on owning land by another river, the Hawkesbury, but his dream leads, inevitably, to conflict. Conflict with the native Australians who have made use of the land for centuries, with other settlers whose attitudes to the land and its people differ, and with his family as Sarah longs for home and their children become part of this, the only world they've really known.

Grenville's descriptions are powerful whether she is describing the life of the poor and destitute in London, or the opportunities and dangers of the new and different Australian landscape. However, life remains precarious: in both places, William is constantly in danger of losing the things he has worked hard for – his boat, his fledgling farm. The constant tension and the squalor and violence of many situations meant some readers found it upsetting to read.

While William's history explains a lot of his later actions, several readers felt that the story didn't really begin until he and Sarah reached Australia. The scenes in London

were too familiar, his life was related in a very straightforward fashion and we wondered if a less linear narrative might have allowed a more gripping start. The blurb promises the story of him in a new land, but he doesn't get there until over a third of the way through the book. "I knew where it was going," said one of the more satisfied readers, "but it was an interesting journey."

The crux of the book, most people felt, was the way it explored the varying reactions of the settlers, trying to tame the country, to the Aborigines, who knew and understood it intimately. William, of course, is forced to choose between those trying to find a way of co-existing in spite of having no common language and mutually incomprehensible world-views, and those who consider the people they come across as little more than animals because their way of life is completely alien. His struggle, and indeed that of Sarah and their children, to find a way of life that leaves them feeling secure, with clear consciences and their dreams as intact as they can be, causes them to grow and change. These changes in the characters have an inevitability about them that means we remained sympathetic to them even while we were appalled at what they did (or at least condoned).

Several people said that Sal was their favourite character. She is certainly a

stronger person than William and it is thanks to her determination that they survive the death of her father and make it to Australia together. She too changes her expectations, but each of the compromises she makes seem to be on her own terms, whereas William's hand is more often forced by those around him.

Overall then, a compelling, interesting and sometimes shocking book that may well tell you things you didn't know about how convicts and the first voluntary migrants to Australia established and held the colony.

**Catherine Fitzsimons**

**Next month we will be reading:**

*The Grass is Singing* — Doris Lessing

The date for discussion of this book is Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> November.

**We are amused!**

*The Hundred Year Old Man who Climbed out of the Window and Disappeared* —  
Jonas Jonasson

Not many books have made me laugh out loud but this one did many times. The book opens with Allan Karisson sitting in his room at an old people's home thinking of ways to avoid the birthday party that is being arranged for him in the lounge; everyone is going to be there including the Mayor. His only means of escape is the window so, still in his slippers, he climbs out and heads for the bus station with no plan in mind.

While he sits by the bus stop a guy asks him to look after his suitcase while he uses the toilet. This Allan agrees to do, not knowing the guy is a criminal and the suitcase contains fifty million crowns (not sure how much this is in sterling but it sounds a huge amount).

When a bus pulls in, Allan, for no particular reason, gets on taking the suitcase with him and this is the start of his hilarious journey: some incidents accidental, some farcical, and some downright dangerous. On this incredible journey Allan meets many characters with the author giving you great descriptions of their lives so you start to care for them. As well as the growing affection you have for Allan, you even start to feel sorry for the criminals. So, with the police looking for him as a missing person and the criminals looking for the suitcase, Allan stumbles from one situation to another and,

as long as there is a plentiful supply of vodka, stays positive and very happy.

The story also takes you back in time to Allan's youth and how his life became so complicated. He was an expert in explosives with no political views whatsoever, so he did not care who he worked for as long as he could work with his beloved explosives. These chapters in his past life are also very well researched, although it did remind me a little of the story of *Forrest Gump*, especially in the way he met so many world leaders in a very random fashion. As long as you don't mind a story chopping from one era to another, the author blends it very well.

I loved the style of writing, not flowery and not over the top with descriptions. Also there was a conclusion for all the characters; some going happily on their way, some meeting an untimely death.

Would I recommend this book? Yes, I would, even if it only made you laugh once. When I finished the book, I so wanted Allan to go rambling on forever, it made me realise how all the elderly have stories to tell and no one listens. I have decided that if I ever go into a home, I am going to look for that window and climb out of it – but first I will put on my shoes and I'll take care to leave suitcases alone.

**Eve Stephens**

## Ideas for further reading

Kate Grenville has written two other novels set in the years soon after the British arrived in Australia. *Sarah Thornhill* is the story of William and Sal's daughter. Like *The Secret River*, it is based on the author's own family history and takes the story not only on a generation, or two, but to New Zealand. From what I've seen on the [author's website](#), it sounds well worth a read. The other novel, *The Lieutenant*, also examines the issues surrounding 'First Contact' and is again based on a true story. I've not read this either, but have added both to my wish-list.

What was interesting for me about this book, and felt new, was the description of the lives of the convicts who were hired out as indentured labourers. The system is described in Robert Hughes's famous *The Fatal Shore* (non-fiction), but it had obviously made far less impression on me than his accounts of lives in the penal settlements of Norfolk Island and van Diemen's Land. If you think the things the settlers did to the Aborigines in *The Secret River* were brutal it may (or may not) be reassuring to find from this that the English establishment was no more merciful to its own people.

Another famous piece of non-fiction, Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* is nominally about the relationship between the land and its people, but is also a lot about the author and his philosophy and serves to reveal that, for all our tolerance and attempts to understand, there are ways of looking at the world that may be forever beyond those not brought up to them. In that respect, I was interested to come across, in my browsing, a book called *That Deadman Dance* by Kim Scott. It has mixed reviews, in spite of having won many Australian literary awards, but, 'in playful, musical prose, the book explores the early contact between the Aboriginal Noongar people and the first European settlers.' (Goodreads summary) Sounds a bit like *The Secret River*, but this is Western Australia several years on, and it is Bobby Wabalinginy, a young Noongar man, who is forced to take sides when conflict arises. Will be interesting to compare ...

Meanwhile, the big event of the month – for Dave at least – was the publication of *Colourless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, the thirteenth novel from Haruki Murakami. More accessible and more firmly set in the real world than some of his longer and more famous works (*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, for example) this does serve as an introduction to Murakami's themes and style (although didn't notice either cats or spaghetti as I read it). I have to say that, although I enjoyed the writing (as ever), there were a few things about the resolution that meant I don't think it's one of his best.

## What's On

Lots going on this month – far too many things to list them all in detail because there are two festivals to start with:

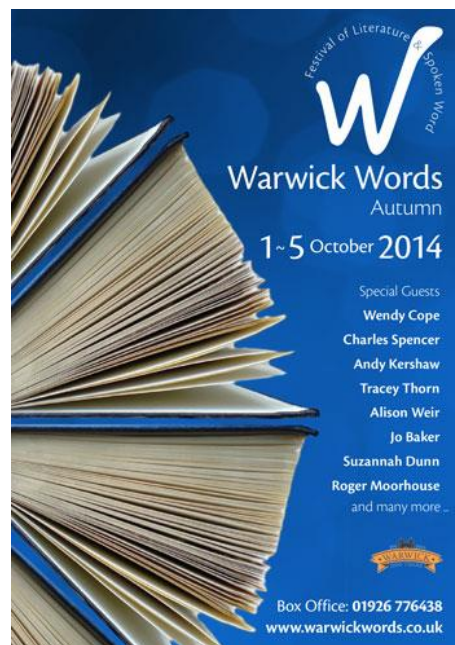
**Warwick Words Autumn Festival** runs from **1-5 October** (programme [here](#)) and

**Birmingham Literature Festival** from **2-11 October** (events page [here](#))

both with lots of variety and some big-name authors.



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LITERATURE  
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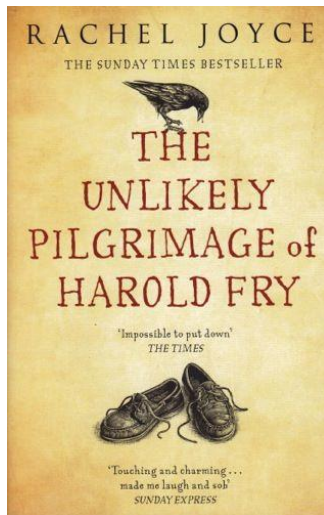


Closer to home the major events are centred around the **Big City Read** (see below), although there are others popping up every now and again – just keep an eye on <https://www.facebook.com/coventryreads> or/and <https://twitter.com/covlibraries>.

In fact, if you wanted, you could make Wednesday nights in October author night because there are events at the Book Rotunda in the **Library of Birmingham** later in the month.

On **22 October Anthony Horowitz** will be talking about his new novel *Moriarty*, which follows the investigations of Pinkerton agent Frederick Chase in the days after the infamous events at the Reichenbach Falls. And, on **29 October**, crime/thriller writer **Peter James** will be talking about his new novel, *Want You Dead*.

Both events start at **8pm** and ticket cost £5 from [Birmingham-box.co.uk](http://Birmingham-box.co.uk) or 0121 245 4455



### Big City Read

Coventry's **Big City Read** campaign will run from September 2014 to June 2015. The plan is to get as many people as possible to talk about the same book with a chance to meet the author, come up with alternative endings and get together to share the love of a good read. And the book? *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, which we read a few months ago.

The first event is a visit from Rachel Joyce to Central Library on **Wednesday 15 October at 7pm**. Call Central Library on 024 7683 2314 to book your place.

For more details of how you can get involved throughout the year, see <http://www.coventry.gov.uk/bigcityread>

The library is also embarking on a related project with Network Challenge, a national citizenship programme which supports young people aged 16-18 to build skills working with different organisations and members of the public. The project is being led by Luke Brown, and will involve young people spending two half days in the library, designing and carrying out a survey of library users. They are looking for people to become involved. For more details contact Lesley Martin ([lesley.martin@coventry.gov.uk](mailto:lesley.martin@coventry.gov.uk), 024 7683 2703) or Marie Shipley ([marie.shipley@coventry.gov.uk](mailto:marie.shipley@coventry.gov.uk), 024 7683 2552), or visit the Central library on **Thursday 30 October 30** between **2 & 3pm**.

### And Finally

I've had an e-mail asking us if we'd like to be involved in a reading initiative led by West Midlands Readers' Network. It would involve us, as a group, reading a novel called *Alys, Always* by Harriet Lane (<http://www.harriettlane.co.uk/alys-always>). We would then have an opportunity to attend an event at Newman University (Bartley Green, Birmingham) on **Thursday 22 January** to find out what other groups thought and hear what Dr Ginette Carpenter (an authority on the text, from Manchester Metropolitan University) has to say about it. There will also be wine, literary goody bags and a book swap. ***If you're not going to be at October's meeting, let me know what you think and, if you are, prompt us into discussing it!***

***Thank you to Eve for her contribution to this month's bumper edition.***

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](mailto:cathfitz5317@yahoo.com).