

# Earlsdon Literary Magazine 171

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

**Next meeting:** Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> December 8pm

**Venue:** Earlsdon Library

**Book for discussion:** *Death du Jour* — Kathy Reichs

## Hard Going

### Our November Book

*The Grass is Singing* — Doris Lessing

An oft-repeated piece of writing advice is to start with something more interesting than the weather so the discovery of a dead body at the start of this fits the bill nicely. Is this a murder mystery? Is young Tony, newly arrived from England and not yet aware of how things work in mid-twentieth century southern Africa, going to upset the apple cart? Are we going to discover that the houseboy being led away is innocent, that there is more to this case than meets the eye? Does landowner and neighbour Slatter, who races to the crime scene, annoyed at how he has been informed of the crisis, have something to hide?

Possibly we'll find out but first the book jumps us back to earlier in victim Mary's life. We read of her childhood with an alcoholic father and struggling mother, how she builds a life for herself in the city and is content until she overhears some people say what they really think of her and realises she should marry. Farmer Dick Turner has come to the same conclusion and the two end up together although neither really knows the other. For a few weeks, all is well as Mary does what she can to create a home. But when the money and opportunities run out, thanks to Dick's fecklessness, she refuses to get involved in the running of the farm, he refuses to countenance a child, and her poor relationships with the domestic and farmworkers become even more

problematic. When Dick contracts malaria and Mary is forced to oversee work in the fields, she makes a mistake that, perhaps, ultimately leads to her murder. But first we have more months – years even – of Mary isolating herself, Dick making more mistakes, and both becoming more and more depressed until, just as things seem about to change (note, I didn't say improve!), Mary is murdered and the book ends.

So not a detective story but a psychological study of isolation. Mary and Dick are trapped by their financial circumstances, frustrated ambitions, an inability to communicate with each other and, in Mary's case, fear of the servants and labourers that she has no idea how to handle and that she also, thanks to the racism of the time and place, fears. Many readers therefore felt short-changed. They wanted to know what happened next, were frustrated by characters who were unable to make the changes they needed to be happy – 'Mary needed a stronger man, Dick needed a stronger woman' – and were waiting for some glimmer of hope or happiness or humour which never seemed to arrive.

As well as having frustrating and unlikeable main characters and a plot that was 'unremittingly grim', many people felt that the descriptions of the landscape and country were disappointing: 'it didn't have

me dripping with sweat', 'the poverty and the farm could have been anywhere'. On the other hand, we agreed that it did provide insight into the region at that time and the mind-set of a white woman scraping a living in an apartheid society with no idea how to direct the work of, let alone relate to, people she has been brought up to consider sub-human or, at best, unworthy of attention. That we get to know and understand Dick and Mary (even if we don't empathise with them) demonstrates the power of the writing that some people praised along with the way the political is made so intensely personal.

Even so, no one said they were inspired to seek out and read more by this author – Nobel Prize notwithstanding. The content – so shocking and surprising sixty years ago – is no longer new: today's readers are far more aware of the injustices and dangers of a discredited regime. Is this perhaps why we struggled to appreciate what is generally agreed to be a modern classic? I didn't make a note of who summed up the discussion, but the words were: 'Is this a bad book? No. But it is difficult and depressing!'

**Catherine Fitzsimons**

**Next month we will be reading:**

*Me Before You* — JoJo Moyes

The date for discussion of this book is Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> January.

## Ideas for further reading

In spite of the negative reaction to *The Grass is Singing*, it would be unfair not to say something about Doris Lessing's other work. After all, her career spanned over half a century, she won the Nobel Prize for literature and is considered one of the greatest of British novelists.

Perhaps her most famous piece is *The Golden Notebook* which is widely regarded as a feminist classic although Lessing rejected that label. It tells the story of Anna Wulf, her friend Molly and their families, with the narrative interrupted by excerpts from Anna's colour-coded notebooks: her journal, notes for her novel, thoughts on communism, and her experiences in Southern Rhodesia. The eponymous gold-coloured one aims to pull them together, to make sense of Anna's life. The structure means this is not a book for someone who wants a linear narrative or something easy to read, but it does create an interesting way to explore a character. However, once again, some aspects of life that are central to people's motivations have changed so much that the intellectual discussions and existential worries can seem rather pointless and I found them difficult to read.

Lessing fans among my friends say I need to read *Alfred and Emily*, which is based on the life of her parents, and *The Good Terrorist* which apparently 'does what it says on the tin' but I've not got round to them yet, so can't say more. I have read, remember enjoying, and have set aside to re-read soon, the *Canopus in Argos* series – five science fiction novels that explore themes of social structure and evolution. They are very different in their settings, obviously, but continue to focus on relationships and people so are not the sort of 'hard' science fiction that is likely to appeal only to the more geeky of us. As an indication of that, two have been made into operas with libretti by Lessing herself and music by Philip Glass (mind you, he's a minimalist, so that may not prove anything).

So what were other readers prompted to think of by this book? Most of us drew a blank, although Maria was prompted to mention Cormac McCarthy's Border trilogy (*All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*). The first has been made into a film although apparently, as ever, the book is better. This is another series that might at first appear to consist

of genre novels – Westerns in this case – but they too explore life in a rural landscape of the 1940s where times are difficult and people are poor. Since this is Mexico, some of the dialogue is in Spanish which is disconcerting at first but does help evoke the place and time. I was certainly pulled in by the first one (haven't read the others yet) even though I neither speak Spanish nor have any interest in horses. However, although not as bleak as *On the Road*, none has an ending that is exactly cheerful.

Determined to cheer us all up, Eva recommended James Bowen's books: *A Street Cat Named Bob* and *The World According to Bob* (there are also related books for younger readers). Once again, you don't need to love the eponymous animal to enjoy the books. They tell the story of how the cat adopted the author (as they do) at a time when he was undergoing treatment for heroin addiction, living in sheltered housing and busking or selling The Big Issue. What makes it an 'ahh' story, says Eve, isn't just that Bowen turned his life around with the help of Bob, but that the story is human, real and hopeful.

CAF



Those of you who read *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* will remember that Queenie Hennessy is Harold's former colleague who is dying of cancer in Berwick-on-Tweed. Joyce describes this book as a companion to *Harold Fry*, as the events take place at the same time as Harold's walk. We meet the other residents in the hospice: Barbara, whose glass eye keeps falling out, Mr Henderson, The Pearly King and Finty, who has a penchant for ostentatious hats. They all develop an interest in Harold's walk, also waiting for his arrival as a diversion from waiting for death. One of the nuns starts a 'Harold Fry corner' where she pins up all of his postcards.

Queenie begins to write a letter to Harold, telling him her two big secrets; firstly, that she had always loved him. Secondly, that she knew his son, a troubled creature. Her failure to save him is something for which she has felt guilt ever since. There is also an

account of her life since leaving Kingsbridge, living on a cliff top near Berwick and building a sea garden.

I bought my copy of the book when Rachel Joyce came to Coventry recently (and had it signed, of course). One of the things she mentioned was that people had shown an interest in making the book into a film. One American said he had the perfect person in mind to play Harold – John Travolta! – so she just had to include a reference to him in the book.

I thought the scenes in the hospice were well written. Everything seems similar to a friend's account of a similar home for the elderly, whose only future is death. At the end of *Harold Fry* I felt there was a future for Harold and Maureen. We know there is no such ending for Queenie. Nevertheless this is not a sad book and I would recommend a reading.

Chris Wilkin

## What's On

Ruth Cherrington will be talking about her *Not just Beer and Bingo! A Social History of Working Men's Clubs* at

**Central Library on Tuesday 13**

**January at 11:30am.** The book is a unique and comprehensive account of a social movement that has provided companionship, education,

recreation and a great deal of pleasure to working class communities for over 150 years.

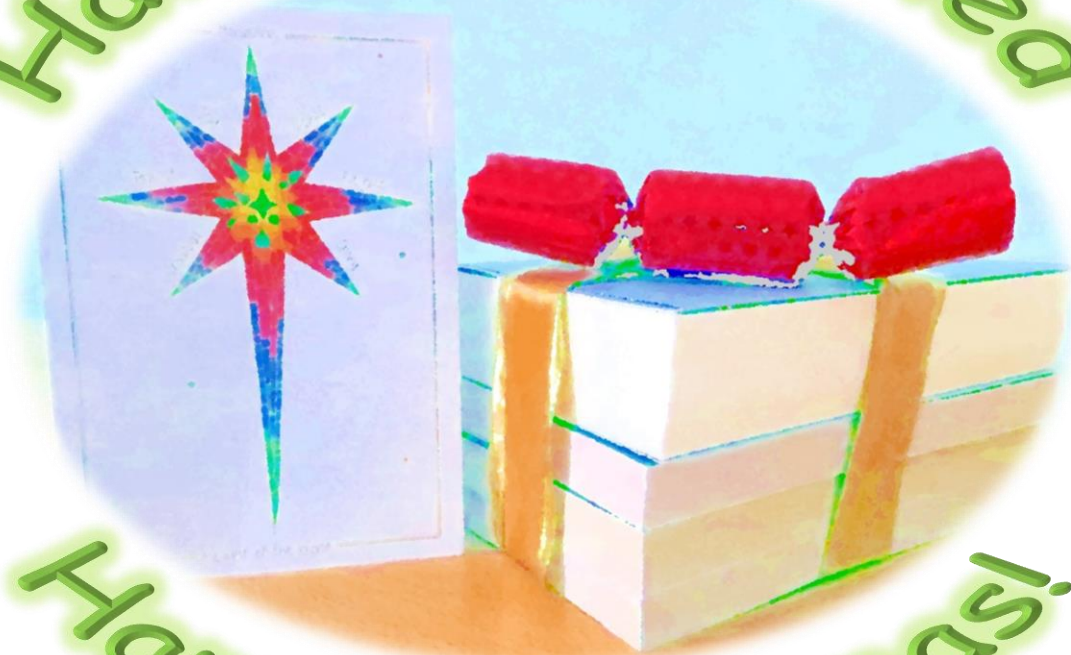


If you have any other reviews or recommendations, tales of literary events, or anything else you think other AVID readers would find interesting, please send them to

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Have a book-filled



Happy Christmas!