

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 190

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

Next meeting: Thursday 13 October 2016 at 8pm

Venue: Earlsdon Library

Book for discussion: *Maybe I'll Write More Later ... Maybe* — Patricia Illich

Two camps united?

Our July Book

***The White Princess* — Philippa Gregory**

The White Princess tells the story of Elizabeth of York, daughter of Edward IV, sister of the short-lived (murdered?) Edward V, lover (allegedly) of Richard III, wife of Henry VII, mother of Henry VIII and ... well, you get the picture.

If you are a little hazy on the history of the period, Henry VII came from the Lancastrian side of the series of conflicts we now call the Wars of the Roses. His marriage to Elizabeth after defeating Richard III at the battle of Bosworth was spun – and continues to be portrayed – as a way of uniting a divided nation and family, although, as this book makes clear, it was as much to do with producing an heir whose legitimate right to the throne could not be questioned, even if his own was perhaps tenuous.

Of course, it wasn't that simple. Henry's position remained precarious for most of his reign, especially as people claiming to be Elizabeth's younger brother, Richard, kept popping out of the woodwork – or rather, from over the sea.

So, although the story is told from a female perspective there were some battle scenes for those who like that sort of thing, albeit not enough for the more traditional historian.

But at the centre of the novel is a more domestic battle: that between Henry, his powerful mother Margaret Beaufort, and Elizabeth. The marriage does not even take place until Margaret's shockingly brutal conditions are fulfilled and when, in spite of her continued attempts to sideline and denigrate her daughter-in-law, it seems that the couple might be beginning to find a way of being together – even loving each other – circumstances conspire to make life difficult again. As a result this ends up being the tale of an unhappy woman, isolated from her own family by dynastic imperatives and suffering from the actions of two ambitious mothers – for her own, Elizabeth Woodville, although portrayed more sympathetically, is every bit as determined to maintain her family's power as Margaret Beaufort.

Our next book is

***Bring up the Bodies* — Hilary Mantel**

and we will discuss it on 10 November 2016

But what did we think of it? Of course, the summary above includes insights from some readers, but did we *like* it? Well ... on balance, yes, but it was a close-run thing.

At least two readers who enjoyed it were surprised at doing so, and joined others in pointing to the characterisation as what made it hold their attention – even if they didn't really like any of the people portrayed. Some people thought Henry was an even more sympathetic character than Elizabeth: he too had been forced into the marriage, his insecurities had been made worse by the way his mother treated him and when he finally falls in love, he doesn't know how to cope ...

A couple of readers gave up quite quickly, even though one of them was interested in the period, because they found the style heavy going. The narrative voice is introspective and therefore the plot can move rather slowly – as indeed, pointed out the historian present, events would have done for Elizabeth: at the time, news took days (at least) to cross the country and even rich women had limited opportunities to control their lives. However, the language mirrors the version of events given in that it manages to tread the line between authenticity and comprehensibility, sticking to the facts and telling a compelling story and that, in the end, won most of us over.

Catherine Fitzsimons

What's on

#COV One Big Thing Wednesday 19 October

Noon—2:00pm at Central Library

A health event including health information stalls and displays, Zumba taster, health checks, healthy walk from the library. More details from 024 7683 2314 or at coventry.gov.uk/onebigthing

Author Talk – Nikki Owen Thursday 20 October 5.00pm–6.00pm at Central Library Please phone 76832314 to reserve a place.

Philippa Gregory's Plantagenet and Tudor Novels

The Lady of the Rivers

(Jacquetta of Luxembourg)

The White Queen

(Elizabeth Woodville)

The Red Queen (Margaret Beaufort)

The Kingmaker's Daughter

(Isabel and Anne Neville)

***The White Princess* (Elizabeth of York)**

The Constant Princess

(Katherine of Aragon)

The King's Curse (Margaret Pole)

Three Sisters, Three Queens

(Margaret Tudor, Mary Tudor, Queen of France and Katherine of Aragon)

The Other Boleyn Girl

(Mary and Anne Boleyn)

The Boleyn Inheritance

(Jane Boleyn, Anne of Cleves and Katherine Howard)

The Taming of the Queen

(Katherine Parr)

The Queen's Fool

(Hannah Green, a girl in the court of Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I)

The Virgin's Lover

(Elizabeth I and Amy Robsart)

The Other Queen

(Mary, Queen of Scots and Bess of Hardwick)

What to Read Next ...

I decided not to list ALL Philippa Gregory's novels, for she is prolific, but just stick to the Plantagenet and Tudor series, showing how they overlap and how the author has made telling history from the point of view of the women involved her trademark. I made my list and went to Wikipedia to check I'd not left any out ... only to find that I could have saved myself the effort, for they are listed there the same way! It also told me that there is a novel about Lady Jane Grey due next summer – and it will be interesting to compare that to the portrayal in Alison Weir's *Innocent Traitor*. And that brings me to the other thing – how different novelists deal with telling history.

One of the first grown-up books I read was *The Tudor Rose* by Margaret Campbell Barnes (published in 1953) which also deals with Elizabeth of York and her marriage to Henry

VII. When I'd finished reading *The White Princess* for the first time, I pulled this one off the shelf to read again. Of course the two authors emphasise different things and portray the characters in different ways – Campbell Barnes' Margaret Beaufort is a much more sympathetic character, for example – but for me the biggest difference was that the older book is much more wide-ranging: it focuses on events rather than zooming in on people's responses to them.

Having found a copy of Jean Plaidy's *Madonna of the Seven Hills* soon after reading Sarah Dunant's *Blood and Beauty* I was able to do the same thing: the Borgias 1950s vs the Borgias 2010s. This time Plaidy had the more focussed viewpoint, but the pace still seemed slower. Some of this, I think reflects a general demand for faster-moving stories than in the past, but both have things to offer.

However, differences aren't always to do with what's in fashion. Another comparison – and back to the Tudors – *The Boleyn Inheritance* and *The Confessions of Katherine Howard* (Suzannah Dunn) – this time both modern. Although Gregory's Howard has an annoying habit of counting her possessions, she's much more easy to believe in than one whose vocabulary includes phrases such as 'Only kidding'.* It seems that, at least from my perspective, one can be too up-to-date!

Have you read a pair of novels that both deal with the same events?

Which was better? Why?

If you have thoughts on this, 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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And finally ...

We're missing Eve, but she's having fun and, it seems a few surprises. What exactly prompted this reaction? All suggestions welcome!

**One of you is now going to tell me that this phrase has a much older provenance than I believe and that it's used in Shakespeare somewhere, aren't you?*

