

# Earlsdon Literary Magazine 194

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

**Next meeting:** Thursday 13 February 2017 at 8pm

**Venue:** Earlsdon Library

**Book for discussion:** *The Girl on the Stairs* — Louise Welsh

## An Oslo coming-of age tale

*Our February Book*

***It's Fine by Me* — Per Petersen**

Set in a rough suburb of Oslo, this story is about the coming of age of the main character, Auden Sletten. It slips backwards and forwards between the years when he is 13 and 17, ending up with him in his twenties.

As a young thirteen year old moving to a new area, he starts to rebel by refusing to remove his dark glasses at school and refusing to talk. As the story proceeds and Auden tries to find his place in life, you begin to get little snippets about his earlier life: how he coped with the death of his younger brother and that his absent father is a violent drunk who beat his mother. Because of this you get to understand that Auden needs to protect his family, especially from this violent father who moves silently around in the background of Auden's life and seems to still bring terror into his world – although the father does not play a big part in the story. Even at a young age, Auden realised that he needed to help financially and never fails to deliver his paper round on time and still get to school. He does become friendly with Arvid who seems to be very political but this area is never explored.

The consensus was that the story never developed fully and a lot of the characters were never fully explained so it was difficult to build any likes or dislikes, although a lot of the characters helped Auden in different ways. His love of music and the books he had been introduced to was never opened out into the story line very much; they fell by the wayside and would have maybe fleshed out Auden's character and given more insight to his thoughts. It was also pointed out the description of the working-class suburb and the amount of drinking did not put Oslo in a favourable light, and the constant reference to street names was too much.

As Auden becomes older he drops out of school and finds work at a very dangerous paper/printing works. The description of this section of the book was excellent and drew you into the noisy, dirty and dangerous factory where Auden seems to find a great work ethic. It was felt that, without this section, the book would fall very short of being a worthwhile read. This section, however, did feel to some readers that the author had this insight to working in a print

**Our next book is**

*The Girl who saved the King of Sweden* — Jonas Jonasson  
and we will discuss it on 11 May 2017

factory and was determined to place it somewhere in any book.

There was an incident in the book where Auden's sister, who has left home with her baby and moved in with her boyfriend, rings Auden and tells him to come straight away and pick them up because she must come home that day. Auden borrows a car and rushes to her home miles away thinking she has been hurt by her boyfriend and, as a reader, you are thinking *here comes the*

*battered woman section*. But, when he arrives, he finds his sister just wants to come home for a bit of a break: so this different slant on an assumed outcome was refreshing.

Many avenues of this story are left open for the reader to decide the interpretation especially the ending. Some comments were made about it not being a book that would be recommended to others although, as it was a short read, it was overall enjoyed.

**Eve Stephen**

## Authors Writing Under Pseudonyms

Many years ago, being a big fan of Stephen King's books (he writes mostly horror or supernatural stories) I was pleased to hear he had written some books under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman. I thought he would have chosen to write crime fiction so I went to the library eagerly – only to find he had written a fantasy, a genre which I am not a fan, of so I was very disappointed.

On listening an interview he gave on the subject, it was interesting to hear why he had chosen to write under a different name. He said he wanted to find out whether his success was due to being a very good writer or if it was just plain old good luck.

Unfortunately, everyone knew he was Richard Bachman before the book came out, so he never found out. However, these fantasy books were also a big hit so I've decided his success is because he is a good writer.

Dean Koontz also wrote under the name of Deanna Dwyer when he wanted to break away from horror into Gothic romance: he thought his fans would not be pleased to find they had bought a romance book if they'd chosen it only on the basis of the name Dean Koontz.

The Bronte sisters initially published using the surname of Bell because they knew that, as women authors, their stories would never be printed. Even Charles Dickens wrote some little stories under the pen name of Boz.

So, although it seems authors write under pseudonyms for various reasons, for many it's to so they do not disappoint their fans when they break away from the genre that has made them famous to try some different style of writing. I am sure it must become a little tedious for them to have to come up with a different slant on a plot but the same format. If you have found an author you really like, it might be worthwhile to see if they write under a pseudonym and give that version of them a try.

**Eve Stephen**

*Answering a query in the last issue of ELM, Jennifer Vaudin writes:*

*Yes, there is a good reason for 'Perez': he's of Spanish descent and in her description this is very evident in his appearance, and is occasionally relevant. Unfortunately I understand that the casting for the TV series (which I've not watched) went with more stereotypical Scottish looks.*

## A book to think about

### *Our March Book*

#### ***Never Let Me Go* — Kazuo Ishiguro**

*Christine Miller took notes at this meeting but, for personal reasons, was unable to put them together so this is an attempt to synthesize them by someone who wasn't there.*

*Never Let Me Go* falls into a category often referred to as 'speculative fiction', but that others say is really science fiction under another name. The novel is set in an unspecified, but apparently not too distant, future where a particular scientific advance has changed society. In the classic tradition of 'show not tell' the differences (which I'm going to try hard not to talk about) are revealed to us as we follow the lives of a small group of characters.

The first person to speak thought this wasn't a page-turner, describing it as 'very putdownable'. But there was immediate disagreement from a fan of Ishiguro. They conceded that it 'starts a bit weird' and continues to be strange. But the author's strength is how well he makes the reader relate to the emotions and feelings of the characters. However, someone else described the style as 'cold' wondering if it was deliberately simple to echo the lives of the protagonists.

The next couple of people really enjoyed it, pointing to a simple narrative structure: Cathy lets us know that their lives are mapped out, but for what is revealed gradually and subtly. There are little clues throughout and no explicit mention of how their lives began – parents are never mentioned and that's something which plays on your mind and makes it sad from the start and heartbreaking by the end.

*Never Let Me Go* raises a lot of ethical and moral questions. Of course, the science on

which the world of the story is built is closer to that of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* than anything currently possible but, like the older book, it explores ideas about eugenics and personhood. (And I'm saying no more about that, lest I create a spoiler.)

Even some of those who could accept the speculative premise wondered at the lack of curiosity displayed by many of the children, especially given the actions of the maverick teacher, and their acceptance of their fate. But, pointed out someone else, 'they're plodding along with their lives, as most people do.'

I wasn't at the meeting, but shall add a thought here. The plot arc of most dystopian fiction (see 'What to read next') involves revealing the horror of the world, a protagonist who suddenly finds themselves in conflict with authority, rebellion and, ultimately, an improved situation for everyone. To explore a dystopian future from a conformist perspective is possibly a more powerful way of promoting the reader to consider how they would act.

I get the impression from the notes that the discussion that this book prompted covered a wide range of topics and moved very quickly. As I'm determined not to give too much away, I'm not going to list them, but it does seem that most of the group would suggest this thought-provoking book is worth reading.

**Catherine Fitzsimons**

## What to read next

It's a long time since I read Huxley's *Brave New World* so I can't remember if it follows the arc I described above, but many of the first books that come to mind when one thinks about dystopian fiction do. These are also predominantly aimed at young adults and many of them are series. Think of Malorie Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses* which we read a while back, Veronica Roth's *Divergent*, Patrick Ness' *Knife of Never Letting Go* and, of course, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*.

I understand that Margaret Atwood prefers the term 'speculative fiction' to describe her books set in the future - most famously *The Handmaid's Tale*, but also the *Oryx and Crake* series. In books of this genre aimed at the adult market, redemption tend to be for individuals rather than wider society – if it happens at all (I'm thinking of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*).

However, things are sometimes brighter (in the end at least) in books that tend more towards science fiction such as Dave Hutchinson's *Europe in Autumn* trilogy. (I'd also mention *Anathem* by Neal Stephenson, but it becomes clear after a while that the setting is not actually a future earth).

But back to *Brave New World*. The social segregation of that was something I first came across at primary school in *Land of No Tears*, a serial in my weekly comic (*Jinty*). In this story, the less-than-perfect were second or third-class citizens.

And I can't resist naming another book set on a future Earth where one's prospects are based on biology: Jasper Ffordes's *Shades of Grey* (not to be confused with the similarly titled series published later). It's but subversive in a different way and, in spite of

an open ending, the style makes it a definite antidote to the misery in many of the others.

Catherine Fitzsimons

If you have any 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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## Goodreads top speculative fiction books/series

*13, of course, because all have things going very wrong for someone!*

1. *The Handmaid's Tale* – Margaret Atwood
2. *The Hunger Games* – Suzanne Collins
3. *1984* – George Orwell
4. *Oryx and Crake/The Year of the Flood/MaddAddam* – Margaret Atwood
5. *Brave New World* – Aldous Huxley
6. *Fahrenheit 451* – Ray Bradbury
7. *Ender's Saga* – Orson Scott Card
8. *Never Let Me Go* – Kazuo Isiguro
9. *Dune* – Frank Herbert
10. *The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy* – Douglas Adams
11. *American Gods* – Neil Gaiman
12. *Ready Player One* – Ernest Cline
13. *Snow Crash* – Neal Stephenson

*Ready Player One* is set in the same year as the *We Have Lost ...* series by Paul Mathews (currently Kindle only) – another one to read for the LOLs.