

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 200

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

Next meeting: Thursday 8 November 2017 at 8pm

Venue: Earlsdon Library

Book for discussion: *Agnes Grey* — Anne Brontë

My apologies for delaying this 200th edition of ELM: I'm afraid that real life got in the way and, since I was the person who made the notes, I didn't feel I was letting someone else down by not making sure that everything they'd worked hard to get ready by a deadline was shared with the rest of you. The downside of that is, of course, that I'm left trying to make sense of scribbles that are nearly two months old ...

Amazing facts about Yellowknife

Our September Book: *Bones are Forever* — Kathy Reichs

This isn't our first Temperance Brennan novel: *Death du Jour* (ELM 172, December 2014) was her second appearance and this is her fifteenth, so her personal circumstances have changed, just a little, and some of the characters who pop up would be familiar to those who follow the series. But, of course, many of us don't – at least, not yet. One of the readers who said they wouldn't have chosen this book admitted that they had enjoyed it and would read more – in spite of someone else saying they had done so and found the one they had picked up next 'even more gruesome'. Another said that they hadn't enjoyed the book particularly but would happily watch television adaptations because they thought it would work better in that medium. Yet another said, 'The only reason it wasn't a waste of time was because it was a new genre for me and I wanted to find out why they sell so well.' So, quite a range of opinions. Why?

The story starts in one city with dead babies and a woman who appears to have recently given birth running from a hospital, moves to the investigation of a pimp in another and ends with an exploration of diamond mining, land rights and more deaths that might be murders in far more rural Yellowknife. The focus on forensic evidence meant lots of science for some people to find interesting and others to skim. The use of French slang, and the intricacies of policing between jurisdictions within Canada, was another aspect that fascinated some and annoyed others who thought the author was simply showing off her knowledge – and they were irritated by her explaining things they could look up or work out had they cared enough. Even these readers found the novel easy to read and could imagine doing so in a noisy environment, offering that as a possible explanation for the success of the series in airport bookshops.

Again, fairly obviously, there was plenty of plot, and those who enjoyed the book thought the various stories were interwoven well: 'You weren't led by the nose,' said one person. 'Although you knew Tempe wasn't going to die, there was still stuff to keep you guessing' and things that you wanted to understand. However, others thought the dead babies and the diamonds were only tenuously connected – one even referring to the babies as a [McGuffin](#) – and that some parts of the plot were not credible, feeling they were either contrived ('the end-of-chapter cliffhangers were unsubtle') or relied too much on coincidence. One reader, bored by the 'saggy middle', started fact-checking, refusing to believe there could really be a [Ragged Ass Road](#) in Yellowknife.

As often happens, the surfeit of plot meant that many readers didn't care for the characters. Criticisms included unrealistic dialogue, a romantic sub-plot that had no real tension (because the main characters were too thin) and shallow supporting characters – readers felt some could have been got rid of and others were much more rounded in the television versions. While someone thought 'the writing was fine within the context of the target market', another person thought that invented verbs ('curtained the room' was one they singled out) made it too clunky to be deserving of praise.

Catherine Fitzsimons

Our next book is

Two Brothers — Ben Elton

and we will discuss it on 14 December 2017

How fictional?

Our October Book: *Girl in a Blue Dress* — Gaynor Arnold

It's worth noting this was Gaynor Arnold's first novel. It was an assured debut that was enjoyed by a few AVID readers. It's closely, as opposed to loosely, based on the life and marriage of Charles Dickens. We get a good feel for Victorian family life and conventions. Dorothea/Dodo (aka Catherine Dickens), widow of Alfred Gibson (aka Charles) narrates the story. Alfred was a Victorian A-lister, a celebrated novelist, adored by the British public who mourned his death. Alfred begat excellent literary works and lots of children – which he

blamed Dodo for having (Hello, Alfie: it takes two to tango!).

Arnold begins the story on the morning of his funeral. Dorothea was not invited. The Gibsons had lived apart for years. Dorothea was exiled to a small London house. This event causes Dodo to reflect on her life with a demanding husband, whose growing ego was fuelled by his readership and wonder how he changed from the start, through the middle, up to the end of their marriage. The visit to Queen Victoria was regarded as a 'let down'

Some AVID readers felt Dorothea's hurt, other wished she would 'get a grip' and wondered when she was going to 'open her eyes' or 'feel outraged'. Some wondered how it was possible to love someone who had done one great harm. Women's rights were non-existent at the time, and we realised her lot with Alfred was much better than life on the streets of Victorian England.

Some readers enjoyed the descriptions of Victorian family life and Victoriana (objects, conventions and dialogue quirks).

Additionally, Gaynor Arnold was applauded for ensuring her writing style matched the historical period represented in her novel.

The flashbacks were regarded as skillful, as were characterisations – generally! One reader felt there was an element of 'Panto Villain' and perhaps, cartoonish characters

who were at the extremes of 'loveable' to 'hateful' spectrum.

Two readers regarded *Girl In A Blue Dress* very highly, ekeing out the novel by reading more slowly than usual: 'deliberately not speed reading' They found the writing style 'riveting' and thought the use of parallel narratives was clever.

There were also dissenting voices: 'not my cup of tea'; 'read half, it was OK'; 'first chapter was great, but next thirty or forty pages ...' presumably were not engaging enough to finish. 'What's biography and what's fiction?' wondered one reader. Another concluded that 'Charlie was a breast man' on the basis of oblique references to the 'fact' that Alfred liked women with big breasts!

Christine Miller

If you have any thoughts about this news; 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

What to Read Next?

Yes, the question mark is deliberate. With this edition of ELM I'm sending the latest library service Readers' Groups' booklist so you can peruse it and pass ideas on to Dave – ether for things on it you think we should read, or for things NOT on it that he should suggest they find for us! I've highlighted (albeit in grey, so it prints out OK) things we have read over the last few years.

What's On

Join Dr Afiniki Akanet at Central library on Saturday 11 November from 11am to 1pm. Afiniki will be talking about her book *Life without coffee: Choosing happiness over stress*. Books will be available to buy. The event is free of charge and everyone is welcome. No booking required, but call 7683 2314 or email central.library@coventry.gov.uk for further details.

