

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 203

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

Next meeting: Thursday 12 April 2018 at 8pm

Venue: Earlsdon Library

Book for discussion: *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* — Gail Honeyman

An incredible achievement

Our March Book: *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* — Jean-Dominique Bauby

Locked-in syndrome – Definition: *The affected person cannot communicate except by eye movements (blinking, and some patients may possess vertical eye movements). The patients, however, have the ability to see and hear and have normal intelligence and reasoning capabilities. Total locked-in syndrome occurs when the eyes are also paralysed.*

We, the readers, immediately understand the analogy in the title of this book: viz, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*.

Although all of us acknowledged this was a tragic book, we agreed it was both brilliant and inspirational. Brilliant because it was beautifully and lucidly written. In the blog-like chapters – which are insightful, vibrant and full of life – the author recalls his pre-injury life or, more correctly, rock-star lifestyle (forgetting PC-isms for a moment), making it all the more tragic.

The inspirational dimension is partly a result of his all-consuming injury and its aftermath: how did Jean-Dominique cope – more than cope – with his bed-bound existence given his love of Words and Language (he was editor of lifestyle magazine *Elle*)? It is also inspirational in that he inadvertently makes the reader question themselves: are we grateful for our own lack of disabilities, and do we make the very most of our freedom to do, go and think where and whatever we please? Incredibly, he coped mentally with the passive business of being a patient (although, to be fair, he had zero options!)

It's hard to imagine the frustration he felt when someone turned off the TV whilst he was watching it – and powerless to do anything about it.

It was also interesting to reflect on what he selected, from his relatively short but incident- and memory-filled life, to focus on and recall for this book. The quality of his writing, including the wit, should never be underestimated. During our discussion, many AVID readers mentioned his fabulous imagery.

Descriptions are almost in ultra-HD, reminding me of those in William Golding's *Pincher Martin*.

One can only admire his thought processes, and his desire to leave what would inevitably be his legacy: increased awareness of the plight of locked-in-syndrome sufferers. There are many famous sponsors of ALIS: *Association du Locked-In Syndrome*.

Monsieur Bauby gets an honourable mention in Dr Henry Marsh's notable memoir: *Do No Harm: Stories of Life, Death and Brain Surgery*. AL Kennedy said this book is “a staggering piece of work. It represents an almost inconceivable act of generosity, the gift of the mind and the spirit for which writing was designed.” And there's this from Robert McCrum, of *The Observer*: “We listen, because what he has to say goes to the core of what it means to be human.” ... I think we all echoed those sentiments.

The manner in which this book was written is stupefying: Bauby memorised chunks of around 600 words, each giving an almost perfect description of a snapshot from his life along with a reflective conclusion, and ‘recited’ them using only his left eyelid. He needed persistence and dedication to tell his amazing life story.

The last chapter brings everything together, taking us back to how and when everything changed. As the author describes his accident and injuries, his wordsmithery never deserted him.

This book is so brilliantly written, that the *Financial Times* has labelled it one of the Great Books of the century and one forgets the manner in which it was written: transcribing it took two months, and editing it took two weeks.

I thought it was Simply Stunning, and I believe AVID Readers were in agreement.

Christine Miller

Our next book is

The Little Friend — Donna Tartt

and we will discuss it on 10 May 2018

If you have any thoughts about this book; news; 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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