

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 206

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

Next meeting: Thursday 12 July 2018 at 8pm

Venue: Earlsdon Library

Book for discussion: *The Great Gatsby* — F Scott Fitzgerald

Too close to home?

Our May Book: *Man and Boy* — Tony Parsons

Our book for June was Tony Parsons' *Man and Boy*, which most people felt was easily readable, and a welcome relief after *The Little Friend!* When it was published in the midst of the chick-lit boom, *Man and Boy* was hugely popular, and for some of our readers, it is easy to understand why. In places, the characters, such as Harry's parents, were felt to be well developed and believable; the style in which the conversations were written allowed the reader to have a vivid insight into the characters' personalities; and the journalistic style and pace of the novel were amongst the strengths identified by the group.

Those less keen on the book highlighted that it was a holiday read lacking in substance, with a bland, formulaic and pointless plot. Members of the group simply didn't like or care for the main characters and found them to be unsympathetic and unengaging. The remaining cast of characters were generally found to be plot devices, constructed only to explore the themes of marriage, conflict and the modern family. Gina and Harry's relationship, for example, was intended to contrast sharply with that of Harry's parents, thereby addressing the theme of generational attitudes to marriage. Similarly, the character of Gina's father contributes to Parsons' study in the modern

family. However, the author's treatment of theme and characterisation was not sustained, and resulted in a rather flat, stereotyped and superficial approach.

We were also unsettled by the plot's proximity to the author's real life: the supplementary notes and podcasts revealed that Parsons' experiences were heavily drawn upon and directly influenced his writing. For one reader, this was enough to put her off even attempting to read the novel. The book belied a late 90's laddish humour, which dated it, and its tendency towards using coincidence to drive the plot and the mawkish turns of phrase grated on most readers.

Surprisingly, several people said that, despite all this, they would still like to read the sequel, *Man and Wife!*

Natalie Pocock

If you have any news; reviews or recommendations; tales of literary events; or anything you think AVID readers would find interesting, please

send them to:

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What to read next: Lad lit ...

... is, obviously, the male version of chick lit, but given we were discussing whether or not *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* fits into

that genre, perhaps it would be a good idea to start by defining terms.

I'm counting as chick/lad lit a story where the protagonist:

- is twenty or thirty-something
- is often looking for romance or having problems with romantic relationships – but has a best mate so we know that their lack of a partner is not because they're a loser
- has (or had if unemployment is to provide the crisis) a solidly middle-class job or small business – often in a creative field
- usually lives in a big city (although some chick-lit heroines are in small friendly villages, especially if they run a teashop or bookshop)
- is insecure - struggling to meet expectations of society, family or friends while still being happy and true to themselves, although they may not yet know what that means
- oh! and probably drinks or/and spends too much (often fashion for the girls [sigh!]) or has a relatable obsession (football, music, *Star Wars* for blokes).

By the end of the book, whatever crisis has befallen them has been resolved - usually with a fair dollop of humour, often with at least one farcical episode and always with the protagonist having grown and learnt something about themselves. So, faced with a literary snob decrying the form, I think it would be reasonable to up the pretension stakes and describe them as the *bildungsromans de nos jours!*

Another issue is when to start. Most people think of Nick Hornby as the founding father of the lad-lit genre, and that *Bridget Jones Diary* started the chick-lit explosion. Others argue that books by, for example, Amis (père – *Lucky Jim*) and Austen (any of them, really) fit their version of my criteria. I'm not going to

get embroiled in that argument just now, and shall stick to people writing post-1995.

Like its sister, lad lit has recognised stars, each with their own take on the general formula. So, if you liked *Man and Boy*, or want to find out if it is really representative of the genre, here are a few to be getting on with.

Nick Hornby (of course) – *High Fidelity*, *About a Boy*, *Fever Pitch*. Later novels, such as *A Long Way Down*, are more balanced and *How to be Good* is even written from a female point of view.

Mike Gayle (not to be confused with Patrick) – *My Legendary Girlfriend*, *Mr Commitment*, *Turning Thirty* – places some of his heroes (although I can't remember which) in Birmingham rather than London.

John O'Farrell – *The Best a Man Can Get*, *This is Your Life* – has now turned writing political history in the same jaunty style, see *An Utterly Exasperated History of Modern Britain*, *Things Can Only Get Better*.

Danny Wallace – *Yes Man*, *Charlotte Street*, *Friends Like These* – also appears in most lists but I haven't read any of his novels – or at least I don't remember doing so. He has had more success with pop-sociology such as *I Can't Believe You Said That*, and books like *Join Me* promoting random acts of kindness.

Matt Dunn – *A Day at the Office*, *The Ex-Boyfriend's Handbook*, *What Might Have Been* – got off to a slow start but always appears pretty high up the Kindle lists ...

Nick Spalding – *Fat Chance*, *Checking Out*, *Mad Love* – says in his bio that “try as he might, [he] can't write anything serious” and always seems to have books available on Kindle Unlimited, so he might provide a low-cost way to start exploring the genre if you have a subscription.

Catherine

Our next book is

Brighton Rock — Graham Greene

and we will discuss it on 9 August 2018 (unless Dave's away!)