

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 212

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

Next meeting: Thursday 104 February 2019 at 8pm

Venue: Earlsdon Library

Book for discussion: *Milkman* — Anna Burns

A story of redemption

Our January Book: *The One-in-a-Million Boy* — Monica Wood

The one-in-a-million boy of the title is dead when the story begins (and this is revealed very early on, so that's no spoiler) and is never named, yet he permeates this book. The narrative explores how those close to him deal with their grief and is broken up by lists of world records he has compiled, and transcripts of his interviews with Ona, a 104-year-old woman for whom he does yard work. He has also decided she would be a good subject for a school project (and a personal one) but he refuses to speak on tape so we never hear his words. We felt this rather odd structure worked surprisingly well – the choices and format of the lists added to the image of the boy we developed from the main story so that we knew, in the end, exactly what he'd mouthed to Ona even when her reply didn't echo his question.

The consensus was that the depths of the other characters were also revealed in a similarly gradual way through their conversations and interactions rather than through description. We were able to relate to them and warm to them because they were not heroically coping with grief but had believable flaws and made mistakes. For example, while Ona had suffered as a result of her circumstances and been betrayed by people close to her, she was not at all helpless or confused and thus her unwillingness to reveal her vulnerability and to admit she needed help at several points in the story made perfect sense.

The action of the novel begins when Quinn, the boy's periodically estranged father, takes over the work he was doing for Ona and catalyses a whole new set of relationships which also involve

the boy's mother, his scoutmaster and the son Ona had taken from her many years before. Someone thought it was brave of the author to be so honest about the difficulties both Quinn and Ona have in relating to their sons.

Our discussion was punctuated by people exclaiming over bits they loved: the driving lessons, the road-trip, the Lincoln/Linkman mix-up, the scrapbook, Ona's childhood language returning as she comes to terms with her past, the final narrative chapter ... But there were also bits some people skipped or glossed over: the lists in several cases, and 'the bits with the Christian rock band' in another. However, in the end, this group of lads – propelled into the limelight by a song originally written for Ona – give a redeemed Quinn a sort of second chance at fatherhood.

Oh dear, that makes it sound terribly deep and worthy, doesn't it? Maybe it is, but it is also really really fun. One person (and no, for once it wasn't me!) read it in a single sitting and someone else said they looked forward to picking it up every time. Even the person who said they didn't think they enjoyed it as much as everyone else pointed to things they liked – in particular, the way the final list of records hints at the lives of the characters after the story ends. So, when Dave said he'd probably not finish it because he had a new Murakami to read, there were serious attempts to get him to change his mind!

Catherine

Our next book is

Smile — Roddy Doyle

and we will discuss it on Thursday 14 March.

AVID in April (and after)

Dave recently met with Earlsdon Carnegie Community Library (ECCL) to discuss an arrangement for AVID once they take over the library on Monday 1 April. ECCL are very keen for us to continue using the library but are in a financial situation where they need to generate income to cover ongoing costs (not for profit). They are therefore proposing to charge £30 for us to use the building for two hours each month but are willing to negotiate. We therefore have the following options:

- accept a charge of £30
- make a counterproposal
- hold the meeting at a time when the library is open (this will reduce any charge)
- hold AVID at another location.

Dave is happy to liaise with ECCL but the decision about the way forward is one for every AVID member. **The matter will be discussed at the February meeting** but, if you are one of the people who attend meetings but cannot make this month, please **email Catherine** (address in box) or respond to the **Facebook post by 6PM on Wednesday 13 February** and she will collate responses to pass on to Dave for consideration during the discussion.

Please send
news, reviews,
recommendations,
tales of literary events
or anything you think
AVID readers would
find interesting,
to:

Catherine Fitzsimons
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What to read next: A series!

I've been thinking about series this week (and yes, that's the correct plural – I checked) as I ploughed through Alison Weir's *Jane Seymour: The Haunted Queen*. You see, Weir's credentials as an historian are undisputed but as a novelist ... ? I had mixed feelings about her first foray into fiction (*Innocent Traitor*) but, having read a few others, I thought she was improving. However, it seems the pressure she has put herself under to produce six novels about six queens in six years has led to her retreating into rather more stilted prose and dialogue so, while I found her portrayal of the least well-known of Henry's queens fascinating, I can't say I thoroughly enjoyed it. And that puts me in a dilemma. When *Anna of Kleve: Queen of Secrets* reaches the library, do I get it out? I'm anticipating it will be hard going, too, but I sort of feel I have to finish the series – after all it's only six books.

OK, so maybe that desire for a sense of completeness is a tad obsessive (so I'll say nothing about how, if I'm buying them, the editions also have to match) especially when it leads to rather long commitments: I finally finished Zola's Rougon–Macquart novels last year after making a flying start in January 2015.

But at least with a series you have a bit of a head start, knowing – and hopefully loving – at

least some of the characters. So, for example, I'm really looking forward to catching up on I don't know how many volumes of the adventures of Mma Ramotswe and friends.

Yet even that doesn't come without its problems. I picked up one of Stephen Booth's Cooper and Fry Peak District stories last autumn and, while the central investigation was satisfyingly standalone, there were things happening in the protagonists' personal lives that made no sense to me because there were one or two installments I'd missed out.

Balance that frustration against the pleasure of being able to stay in a fascinating world for a while longer rather than being wrenched away at the end of a single volume – I spent most of Christmas vicariously living the dying days of Moorish Spain in the company of David Penny's Thomas Berrington – and you have another contradiction.

So, series:

Love them or loathe them?

And how do you read them?

Over to you, please. I've a horribly busy month coming up and would love to have stuff by other people to put in the next issue!

Catherine - again