

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 214

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

Next meeting: Thursday 13 June 2019 at 8pm

Venue: Earlsdon Library

Book for discussion: *A Man Called Ove* — Fredrik Backman

Our May Book: *The House on the Strand* — Daphne du Maurier

The thoughts of Natalie, Karen, Steve, Catherine, Judy, Naomi and Dave

Our book for April was Daphne du Maurier's last novel, *The House on the Strand*. The novel was set in Cornwall and revolved around Dick, who was on holiday away from his family, staying in the house of his scientist friend, Magnus. At the request of Magnus, Dick began taking drugs that transported him back into the fourteenth century to follow around the previous inhabitant of the house in his daily life. As the story goes on, Dick continues to flit between the past and the present. In the present, his family join him and become increasingly concerned by his behaviour.

This novel was not particularly enjoyed by the members of the AVID group as it was found to be quite disjointed and no one really connected to the times that Dick went into the past. This may have been due to the fact that most of Dick's thinking and emotions were expounded in the present time whereas the past just seemed to be a series of underdeveloped events. This left us wondering why Dick was continually so desperate to get back, and also about his obsession for a woman from the past who seemed to have no personality (no matter how beautiful he thought her). The medieval events seemed to have much potential – for instance, as one reader pointed out, the initial scene in the priory could have gone many ways, but in the end it just seemed unnecessary.

In contrast, many of the readers found the parts set in the current time much more interesting. Along with a greater understanding of Dick's feelings came an interesting plot of a family unravelling. However, the characters left much to

be desired. The wife seemed to develop from an annoying extra to someone with compassion – but the more compassionate, the less of a role she had in Dick's life. Nor could our readers understand why they were married as they did not seem to like each other and her children remained single-faceted.

Many readers struggled with the names of the characters in medieval times. As readers already felt a disconnect to the past, adding characters with similar names such as 'Champernouve' and 'Carminowe' added to the struggle to engage with the scenes – though the possibility was discussed that the characters may be actual historical figures as the amount and type of records about them found by the characters in the present was realistic. What was enjoyed was the description of the setting – especially by one reader who had visited Cornwall.

Questions were raised about the helpfulness of the extra sections. One reader found the prologue off-putting, saying she felt that it instructed you how to interpret the novel. Another reader was in two minds about the blurb on the back – saying that it was helpful as it was the only way that she had realised time-travel was involved because it was so subtle but on the other hand it promised history and horror which was not really delivered.

It was generally agreed that this was not du Maurier's best novel, but that it should not put readers off testing her other works.

Naomi

Our next book is

Cousins — Salley Vickers

and we will discuss it on Thursday 11 July.

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

Catherine Fitzsimons cathfitz5317@yahoo.com

What to read next: Something familiar?

The *House on the Strand* is one of a handful of books that we've read twice and, it seems, many people would rather we hadn't bothered. Some people remember stories (or at least the good ones) too well to read them again – and reckon books that don't stick in the brain aren't worth re-reading. So, leaving aside the small number of absolutely brilliant books that one can't wait to read again (and I'm sure we all have different ideas about what fits into that category), why on earth would you bother to give something a second go* when there are so many new books out there to discover?

Because we're not the sort of group that picks the latest bestsellers, the chances are most of us have found ourselves leaving a meeting with a copy of something more or less familiar – either because we read it a few months ago (*Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*) or way back in our school days (*A Tale of Two Cities*). I'll give most things another go, but there have been times when I've refused to re-open a book because I remember really really not enjoying it first time around (*The Corrections* springs to mind).

In my case, though, reading something again more or less by default is something I've been doing for years. Before I started earning money, and in the days when you could borrow a mere three volumes on one ticket, I quite often finished my library books on a Tuesday or a Saturday – no hope of getting a fresh supply for two whole days! Since it was too soon to read any of the current batch again, I'd go back to one of the few I possessed or had access to. So goodness knows how many times I've read *Jane Eyre*, *What Katy Did*, *Little Women* or (yes, I know these are a little odd by comparison) *Comrade Don Camillo/Don Camillo and the Devil*.

Then there are the books I start only to realise there's something familiar about them. The latest example was a piece of teen fiction called *180*

Seconds – not one I'd recommend reading once, to be honest, but I did persevere with it even the second time through because ... actually I don't know why! Most are candyfloss novels I pick up through Bookcrossing or at station bookshops when I know I'm not going to be able to concentrate. More often, it's because the blurb doesn't really match the story – or, at least, my memory of it. Or because it's a new edition that looks completely different. And bargain e-books with no visual clues at all have only made the situation worse – especially when authors buy the rights to their back catalogue and reissue out-of-print texts with, perhaps, minor updates or, even worse, new titles.

But it's most likely to happen with prolific authors – particularly, but not entirely, if the books don't form a series, but have certain similarities. And that makes genre fiction a prime suspect: as if only seven basic plots wasn't constraint enough, producing something to sell to readers demanding a particular type of resolution leaves little wiggle room. But they aren't always bad. I only realised that I'd gone and bought a second copy of Georgette Heyer's *Cotillon* something like five or six chapters in when the thing that was odd, that made it stick, happened. But I'd been having fun up to then and so could still enjoy the writing and sub-plots and little bits I'd not remembered even though I knew how it was going to turn out. Then there was a Stephen Booth Cooper and Fry novel I realised I'd read out of sequence when I came across the description of a Peak District cave ...

But what about you? Have you ever found yourself inadvertently re-reading a book? When did you realise? What did you do? Did you care?

Catherine

*Of course it's a bit different for manuals or textbooks where you might need or want to look in detail or review at different parts they become relevant. But let's ignore those, and stick to novels.