

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 215

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

Next meeting: Thursday 11 July 2019 at 8pm

Venue: Earlsdon Library

Book for discussion: *Cousins* — Salley Vickers

Add an L to Ove

Our June Book: *A Man Called Ove* — Fredrik Backman

Our book for this month was *A Man Called Ove* by Frederik Backman. Despite much debate on how his name was pronounced (whether it rhymed with *olé*, *hoover* or *mauve*) and which car brands really are the ones to obsess over, what we did agree on was that this was a very well written and enjoyable book.

In the novel's present time, Ove is presented as a thoroughly cantankerous and argumentative old man, one who is eminently practical and rational, keen to avoid social interactions and insists on strict adherence to the rules. He has lost his wife and has now given up on living to the point that he is ready to commit suicide. It becomes apparent that his wife kept him social and connected, and without her, he becomes disillusioned and withdrawn. For some readers, the overwhelming negativity and grumpiness made him a little difficult to engage with at first, but those who persevered did enjoy his redemption curve as he becomes an important and loved member of the local community. Through the use of flashbacks to Ove's past, we were able to understand how his character and personality have developed; the incidents in the novel's backstory helped to explain his behaviour in the present, which the group thought was effective and endeared his character to us. The moral episode with the wallet was mentioned as being a key indication of his character: he was a man who always did the right thing without complaint, even to his own detriment. Ultimately, it is this begrudging compulsion not to ignore those in need

of help that makes him so valuable to his friends and neighbours, and causes him to re-assess life.

Another aspect of the novel that the group liked was the choice of characters, particularly the cat! The characters were well selected and worked as effective counterfoils to Ove, each bringing out a dimension of his personality and helping on his journey to redemption. We especially enjoyed Ove's relationships with the neighbouring family, whose chaotic actions often inadvertently scuppered his suicide attempts and dragged him back into the community, forcing him to rethink situations and what is important, and to use his knowledge of the residential rules and practical skills to help others. He was then able to reconnect with old friends on the street, encourage other people to change their mindsets and become more accepting of the diversity of life, and become part of a family himself. Overall, the tone was light, which meant that otherwise quite difficult and emotional situations were conveyed with sensitivity and humour.

One slight criticism of the book was that the plot was a little predictable: after one failed suicide attempt, it became quite apparent that Ove was going to be saved and reintegrated into society. However, this didn't detract from the groups' thoughts on the effectiveness of the plot: it was well planned and deliberate, weaving together plotlines without leaving loose ends. This led to a clever and satisfactory ending where history repeats itself with the new couple who, rather amusingly, also had an obsession with car brands.

Natalie

Our next book is

Until Death — Ali Knight

and we will discuss it on Thursday 8 August.

What to read next: More grumpy old men ... maybe

This month I finally got hold of Deborah

Moggach's *These Foolish Things* – a book that had been on my wishlist for some time even though I had inadvertently seen the film of the book in between times (it's better known as *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* and, like *Q&A/Slumdog Millionaire* is probably now in bookshops with the latter title). While the book is also an ensemble piece, it is somewhat darker and focuses more on the living-in-England doctor who becomes a partner in setting up a care home partly to get rid of his obnoxious father-in-law, Norman. So I found myself reading about another grumpy old man! This one remains unpleasant but his fellow residents start to come round when ... no! No spoilers.

That got me wondering about other grumpy old men in literature. How many are, like Ove and Silas Marner, redeemed? How many Normans and Lears are there out there?

I struggled to think of them, so I went hunting for lists and there were some seriously high-brow recommendations that show up on those lists of worthy novels one 'must' read before one dies or/and were originally written in French (OR Italian, or Latin). While I know that doesn't mean necessarily mean they're difficult or no fun I'm not inspired to reserve a copy any time soon (let me know if you think you might be and I'll let you know what they are!).

There were a few that I know the group has read – *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Old Filth* (that was a very long time ago, though), *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* and *The 100-year-old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* – and I wouldn't exactly call all their protagonists 'grumpy' so whether or not the same applies to those that follows remains to be seen. I can't offer much guidance, because I've only read the first two:



- *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*
Helen Simonson
- *The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry*
Gabrielle Zevin
- *The Curious Charms of Arthur Pepper*
Phaedra Patrick
- *Etta and Otto and Russell and James*
Emma Hooper
- *Lost & Found*
Brooke Davis
- *The Widower's Tale*
Julia Glass
- *Noah's Compass*
Anne Tyler
- *An Available Man*
Hilma Wolitzer
- *Let Me Be Frank with You*
Richard Ford
- *Lillian Boxfish Takes a Walk*
Kathleen Rooney

But, of course, that's the problem with other peoples' lists: sometimes the criteria aren't quite what you would expect and my search threw up other things that I knew weren't about grumpy old men because I've read them. They were merely by the same author (*My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*), had older people doing the unexpected (*The Little Old Lady Who Broke All the Rules* by Catharina Ingelman-Sundberg) or had a hero who viewed the world in an odd way was much younger (*The Rosie Project* by Graeme Simsion). All of those are good fun, though.

But I was totally bewildered by Bookbub's inclusion of a book by chick-lit queen and former Coventry resident Jenny Colgan!*

Catherine

Please send news, reviews, recommendations, tales of literary events or anything you think AVID readers would find interesting, to:
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*It was *The Bookshop on the Corner* – if that makes sense to you, write a review to explain to the rest of us, please.