

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 218

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

Next meeting: Thursday 14 November 2019 at 8pm

Venue: Earlsdon Library

Book for discussion: *The Tower* — Simon Toyne

A powerful biography

Our October Book: *The Cut Out Girl* — Bart van Es

In September we decided to read a book that wasn't a reading group title. The winning vote fell upon the Costa 2018 Book of the Year; *The Cut Out Girl* by Bart van Es. Expectations were high as it won the prize for both best biography and overall best book. Luckily we weren't disappointed.

After reading the blurb, some group members were a little apprehensive about the subject matter. Nazi occupation, the Holocaust and children separated from their families don't often feature in the titles they would be regularly drawn to. These are harrowing topics and most people said they actively avoid books about war. However, all but one member read the book and every single person said they were glad they did. The discussion at group that evening was such an interesting and extended discourse that we didn't even have time for tea and cake before it was time to lock up!

Bart van Es traces the life of a Jewish child, Lien, living in The Netherlands during the time of Nazi occupation. Her family made the hugely difficult decision to have her fostered and, as we follow her journey through her many foster families and the challenges she faced, we learn that one family that she lived with was headed by the grandparents of the author. Van Es meets Lien, now in her eighties, and she agrees to assist him in crafting her biography. She opens up her life, emotions,

memories, artefacts and innermost thoughts and feelings to him, and so we discover the horrific events that unfolded during her childhood and how this has had an impact upon the person she is today.

One member felt that this is the story for all of the children who were in hiding during World War II and who lost their identity – the 'ghost children' – and how difficult it became for them to have a sense of self without family and the stories we all share. This person felt it was such an important story, one that had to be told, and this thought was echoed by us all.

Another AVID Reader thought that the blurb was misleading – that the subject of this book wasn't a family who fell out but rather the horrific things that humans are capable of doing to each other. This member enjoyed the historical facts that were woven through the book and was shocked to learn that 80% of Dutch Jews were exterminated during WWII – a higher percentage than in any other country.

Another reader felt Lien's life story encapsulated human nature, contrasting those who were heroes and fostered children even at the risk of their own lives and those who policed the streets looking to capture people simply for being Jewish; the ones who saved others and the ones who were behind the wheel of the trains going into Auschwitz. This member enjoyed the easy vocabulary of the book – given that



van Es is a professor of English at Oxford University, we were relieved to note his style was accessible and without pretention.

Most readers thought the people described were not particularly likeable; and the friendships, though realistic in their displays of bitchiness and competitiveness, left something lacking when the same cycles of behaviour repeat and false friendships remain intact. And this was, to some extent, the main thrust of the book: it questions society's morals when those in it are at their lowest ebb.

The reason Lien fell out with a family that had been so important in her life was gradually uncovered: not an explosive moment but an arc of several incidental events that we all felt were very relatable and true to most families.

One reader touched upon the parts of the book that were particularly moving including the moment when Lien shares the names of all of her family members who

were murdered at Auschwitz ... whilst standing in one of the gas chambers on a visit to the concentration camp as an adult. Van Es's biography also includes a certain amount of prose and he has added description to the memories and events Lien shares with him. Most group members welcomed this added detail and we felt that it added more interest to her life story.

Lien's childhood had an enormous impact upon her life, and the effects were felt as she married and had her own children. We discussed the burden she felt and the pressure she put upon herself having been the 'chosen one' in her family. The life she had, and all that she endured throughout her childhood, is astonishing. She was lost without any family, suffered sexual abuse, was hidden away in small rooms for months at a time, was isolated from friends and, most of all, didn't have anyone whom she could trust. The fact that she survived physically and mentally is a miracle. As the book closes, we leave behind a lady who describes herself as happy, connected to the world around her and 'whole'. Reading her story, one that she has so graciously shared, was a privilege; and seeing her collect the Costa award with Bart van Es was a fitting end to the journey that they had embarked upon together.

Karen

Our next book is

The Teracotta Dog — Andrea Camilleri

and we will discuss it on Thursday 12 December.

What to read next: Creative non-fiction

The vexed question of what this is has surfaced time and again at the writing group to which Natalie and I belong. How does it differ from a straightforward memoir? Or, say, historical fiction? At this year's conference of the Society for Editors and Proofreaders, author Emma Darwin provided an answer:

Creative non-fiction uses the techniques of fiction to present non-fictional material.

And our October book was one of the examples she used. A formal biography or autobiography might have contextualised the events of Lien's life and given references to other sources; a normal memoir would probably have described her reactions and opinions – and might even have included many of the details about what others said or their behaviour. But neither would have, for example, given the author's speculations about people (their expressions in photographs, their motives) unless there was additional supporting evidence, and they would certainly not be interleaved with the story of how the book was created and the author's own growth.

So this book has woven the story of a family with the story of the author as do, for example, Edmund de Waal's *The Hare with Amber Eyes* and *Ethel and Ernest* by Raymond Briggs. But, sometimes, people tell their own story in more reflective way (Joe Simpson in *Touching the Void*, Blake Morrison in *When Did You Last See Your Father?*) or by focusing on a topic that is important to them (Nigel Slater's *Toast* or Marina Benjamin's *Middlepause*). And, sometimes, the topic is the focus rather than the self – although the self gets in (Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and many travel books, including much by writers such as Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux). Then there are books like Kate Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* which add a strong narrative thread to the description of historical events, or books such as those by Alain de

Boton which link an esoteric topic (philosophy) to the familiar (travel), or those that illustrate an agenda or big idea to the evidence for it using the stories of encounters or objects (Dava Sobel's *Longitude*, or George Monbiot's *Feral*).

Most of these do end up being classified under biography/autobiography or the topic they deal with, so how can you tell if a book is likely to be a good read or something more dry and academic? I have a couple of ideas. They're not infallible – in fact I'm still gathering evidence for them – but they seem to work more often than not. First of all, if a biography or autobiography or memoir is published 'properly' and is about someone who appears in neither history books nor the press (the papers and gossip mags) the chances are it will be a bit more reflective. Secondly – and this works for topic-based books too – look to the back: if there are pages of very specific references and a detailed index rather than some broader suggestions for further reading, the chances are it's more academic and probably not that fun to read. I do have to note an exception to this rule, though: if the subject is highly politicised or contentious then there may be copious references in order to protect the author or and publisher – I'm thinking of things like Angela Saini's *Inferior* or Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything*.

My reading this year seems to have included a higher proportion than normal of books like this. I have enjoyed being enlightened as well as entertained by them so would love to have recommendations from other people!

Catherine

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

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