

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 219

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

Next meeting: Thursday 9 January 2020 at 8pm

Venue: Earlsdon Library

Book for discussion: *Pure* – Andrew Miller

A powerful biography

Our December Book:

The Terracotta Dog — Andrea Camilleri

First published in Italian in 1996 and translated by Stephen Sartarelli

Despite its several flaws the consensus was that this was an enjoyable easy read. It “pootled along” providing a light read not dissimilar to *The Number One Ladies Detective Agency* writings of Alexander McCall-Smith. Most were aware of the television series although only Eve had watched enough of this to pass comment. She felt the book was not the best reflection of the author’s material noting it was only the second in a long-running series (written when the author was 71 years old, it was the second of 27 Montalbano novels).

Summarising the novel proved a challenge as the story consists of several interlinked plots and subplots. This was not, then, a traditional crime/detective tale where there is usually a single

crime or series of crimes to be solved which have been committed by an individual or individuals. Briefly, a supermarket heist at the beginning of the novel turns out to be the cover for a stolen cache of guns. These are tracked down to a cave. Whilst exploring this cave, Montalbano finds the entrance to a smaller one in which two bodies are discovered. They are surrounded by several artefacts (including the terracotta dog of the book title) and there is symbolic artwork on the cave wall. Fortunately, Montalbano is on leave after being shot by the local mafia for reasons described in a subplot – he has involved himself in their affairs. Fortunate because he can now investigate the crime, which proves to be historic and not of interest to his senior colleagues. His investigations reveal some horrific past crimes including child abuse, rape and murder as well as the solution to the mystery of the artefacts left with the bodies.

There were several criticisms. The characterisation, particularly of women, was stereotypical. Montalbano, the “hero” of the novel was described by

Please send news, reviews, recommendations, tales of literary events

or anything you think AVID readers would find interesting, to:

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David as an unpleasant character, arrogant and self-centred, leading a life largely of leisure, swimming naked in the secluded bay next to his home, savouring the culinary and viticultural delights of Sicily whilst giving the women in his life the runaround. Despite this, most are “in love” with him, including his housekeeper, who is happy enough to buy his underwear when this needs replacing! Such was the role played by the females in the novel that the Bechdel test¹ was failed. His junior colleagues fared little better: they are portrayed as inept buffoons and frequently subject to his ire. However, it appeared that it was often their hard work that helped solve the crimes.

Descriptive writing was at a premium. Characters were two dimensional. There was little written about the Sicilian countryside or weather. For Helen, McCall-Smith’s writings about Botswana evoked an interest in visiting the country but this was not the case for Camilleri’s descriptions of Sicily which seemed to be limited to a lot of place names. This, together with the many names and nicknames of the protagonists, made it difficult for Eve to follow at times.

Catherine found the translation clunky, particularly that of some of the dialogue. She postulated this might be because this was written in the Sicilian dialect and hence difficult to translate accurately – much like it would be tricky to translate the Scots junkie dialect of *Trainspotting* into Italian.

Despite these criticisms, most felt positive about the novel as a one-off read agreeing with Holly’s solid 3 out of 5 rating. Steve concurred but, being an ardent Italianophile, used the evening to show off his *Veni, Vidi, Vici* T-shirt. Catherine was reading the book for the second time, having read several of the series (she does, however, read 150–200 books annually). Eve thought she might read some of the later novels.

There were only two dissenters. Ed had only read a few pages, the light, at times comedic nature of which had not engaged his interest, and Karen found the storyline ridiculous, the characters superficial and the novel generally uninteresting and unmoving.

Overall then, a thumbs up for *The Terracotta Dog* and an endorsement for the University of the Third Age. Creative writing is not the preserve of the youth!

Ed

Our next book is

The Portrait — Iain Pears

and we will discuss it on Thursday 13 February.

¹ The Bechdel test, named after Alison Bechdel, an American cartoonist, is a measure of the representation of women in fiction. It asks whether a

work features at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man.

Source: Wikipedia