

REVIEWS OF BOOKS WE READ DURING 2022-23

MAY 2023 - "BRIDGE OF CLAY" by MARKUS ZUSAK

Some information, which may be of interest: Gathered from Q&A Session with the author - He found he had to push himself to write this (his next book) and be more ambitious and do something even more original.

His thinking was that a lot more people would read it and have greater expectations. This may explain, why this novel is as it is and the time lapse of nearly 13 years between publications.

The group had mixed reactions to this epic book, i.e. attempted to read but didn't continue as found style off putting and although it may seem trivial to some, the set type also made it difficult to actually read!!

This story in its basic form is about a family of 5 brothers, their mother and father and their relationships and back stories etc. The main character CLAY, as in title, is both an actual bridge and a symbolic one as well.

Other characters include brothers Henry, Matthew, Rory, Tommy - mum Penelope and dad Michael and Carey.

Although mostly quite serious, there are smidgens of humour. There are other items of symbolism to be discovered.

In essence a heartfelt family history, although much more complicated - the majority of us made it to the end and to the "reveal".

APRIL 2023 - "A DICTIONARY OF MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING " by JACKIE COPLETON

This book was a mixture of historical facts, ie., bombing of Nagasaki on 9th August 1945 and a fictional story of a Japanese family interwoven throughout.

It highlights their loss, love and a gambit of emotions. Mainly Ama, mother, her daughter Yuko, grandson Hideo and Dr Sato. A box of longtime hidden letters and diaries, brought to America by Hideo, stirring past and present emotions. The author revealing late in the book reasons for earlier 'tussle' concerning Dr Sato.

It was thought at times to be difficult to distinguish if letters etc, were mothers or daughters. Some of the Group found they couldn't 'get into' the story as the cruel past of the Japanese clouded their judgment.

We found interesting the way each chapter began with a Japanese word and definition, revealing a lot of their cultural mindset ie, concerning obedience, shame and honour. The horrific description of THE DAY of dropping of the atomic bomb, was all too vivid !! We agreed that Dr Sato, in our opinion, had no redeeming features and was most unlikeable.

This was a poignant novel, worth a read.

MARCH 2023 - "A GENTLEMAN IN MOSCOW "by AMOR TOWLES

This book is set in Russia between 1922-1954. It opens with Count Rostov being sentenced by a Bolshevik Tribunal to a lifetime of house arrest in the Metropol Hotel in Moscow. (His crimes were being an unrepentant aristocrat and taking blame for a friend, who had written an unacceptable poem.

The story follows his life within the confines of the hotel. He is a friendly, popular and charismatic figure, with many friends and connections. His movements and writings were carefully scrutinised by the head waiter - who became the manager - known as the Bishop.

The Count befriends a clever, smart young girl Nina, aged 5, who has a pass key to all the hidden places and rooms etc in the hotel. They have many adventures and their friendship deepens to the extent that he ends up being guardian to her daughter Sofie. His knowledge of food and wine makes him an asset to the hotel, and he becomes an efficient waiter.

The Group felt the book was a good read but it required perseverance to get 'in to it'. The writing was clever and drew everything together - and 'the red herring ' was not guessed by us.

We would definitely recommend this book.

FEBRUARY 2023 - "THE SWEETNESS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PIE" by ALAN BRADLEY

This book with the quirky title, took us all back to books of pre and early teens.

The story is set in a quintessential 1950s English village, reminiscent of Miss Marple and with innocence of a BLYTON novel. Having Flavia aged 11 is unusual and her family living in the manor house. They are all slightly eccentric, as were other characters, and their names as well follow this theme, eg., Mrs Mullet, Dogger, Miss Mountjoy, Dr Kissing and Horace Bonepenny.

The story, has go-getter Flavia trying to solve a murder, always one step ahead of the police! She is highly intelligent, obsessed with Chemistry experiments. She could be pretty annoying, as were some of the random asides throughout the book, but a few were interesting and made you smile, giving the reader an insight into Flavia's whirring mind.

We all found ourselves reading on to find who the culprit was. As the author didn't visit the UK from Canada until he was 69 we could understand the style of the book, although not everyone's favourite. There are numerous other De Luce mysteries, which will hopefully encourage the 12 to 15 year age group to discover the joy of reading.

JANUARY 2023 "MERCY" by JUSSI ADLER-OLSEN

This was the first novel by this author from Copenhagen in 2008.

The prologue certainly sets the scene and predicament of the victim who has been kidnapped and imprisoned (Merete Lynggaard). In knowing this doesn't distract from the revelations to come. Detective Carl Mork, an experienced officer, is tasked along with his slightly eccentric, inexperienced assistant to solve this 5 year old case. Although not getting on with his colleagues after an incident in which one officer was killed and another paralysed and also dealing with this trauma himself - despite these problems, he is determined.

There are many complicated strands to this story and numerous characters to go through before the reader starts bringing things together. At times the book gets a bit lost in translation, and slightly repetitive in technical descriptions of decompression tank.

We all thought this was a good read of this type of Scandinavian noir crime novel, and all the more so, as we have not read one for some time.

DECEMBER 2022 - "REFUGEE BOY" by BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH

This story is one geared towards 11-14 year olds.

The main character is Alem a fourteen year old boy from Ethiopia (of mixed parentage- Ethiopian+Eritrean) caught up in a senseless civil war. Bravely his father sees no solution but to take him to London and leave him in the hope the authorities will look after him. Unaware of this plan Alem finds himself alone in a strange land.

ZEPHANIAH guides the reader through this polite, studious boy's turbulent passage in dealings with the Immigration and Care System in Britain. Kindness is shown to him by The Refugee Council ladies and his foster family, the Fitzgeralds.

On many fronts, it is about acceptance, ie. from the boys at school, Ruth (the Fitzgeralds daughter) and the authorities.

The BOOK GROUP fully appreciated that Alem and the situations may appear to good to be true, at times. Perhaps this was deliberate, by the author, as there was enough content to be discussed by teenage readers.

We thought that this book should be read by teenagers and adults alike - thought provoking in that 'what would you do and how would you like to be treated?'

NOVEMBER 2022 - "The SECRET KEEPER" by KATE MORTON

This intriguing story takes you to 1963, 2011 and 1941 (and back and forth).

Initially, in an idyllic setting in 1963, the peace is shattered by a violent act. We flash forward to 2011, where Laurel, along with her sisters are with their hospitalised mother Dorothy (90). In Laurels case, this triggers memories of the dreadful day in 1963, and compels her to find out the 'history' of this and others involved - the secret she has kept for 48 years.

Flashing back to 1941, we have Dorothy (or Dolly), Jimmy, Vivian and Henry.
- Dorothy a dreamer who believes she is meant for wealth and better things.
- Jimmy - love interest and talented photographer.

- Vivian - a troubled, wealthy wife of Henry Jenkins (a talented writer, of dubious character).

Kate Morton includes love, blackmail, revenge and intriguing twists and turns in this wordy tome.

We all agreed we liked Jimmy and grew to like Vivian more and Dorothy a great deal less as time went on, but Henry was disliked from the start. This book all told was a joy to read and the final denouement was a surprise to us all.

OCTOBER 2022 - "The VANISHING ACT OF ESME LENNOX" by MAGGIE O'FARRELL

Firstly, we agreed that this book by the above author, is totally different from others she has written. It takes us initially to COLONIAL INDIA, re ESME, and then fast forward sixty odd years later to Iris, her great-niece, who is totally surprised to hear of her existence.

There are no specific chapters, which takes some getting used to, but helps to heighten the revelations which unfold.

It shows the attitude to children, who did not conform, and how easily they could be 'hidden away' in an asylum and forgotten about. In this case, her sister KITTY, who was involved in ESMES' fate, is now in a home suffering from Alzheimer's. Iris is involved in an unfulfilled relationship with a married man, and Alex (her step-brother), would like to be with Iris. So in a sense, we are dealing with all these characters mixed intense emotions.

MAGGIE O'FARRELL gives us 'the lot', betrayal, conformity, truth and tragedy. Revealing all bit by bit with a surprising denouement.