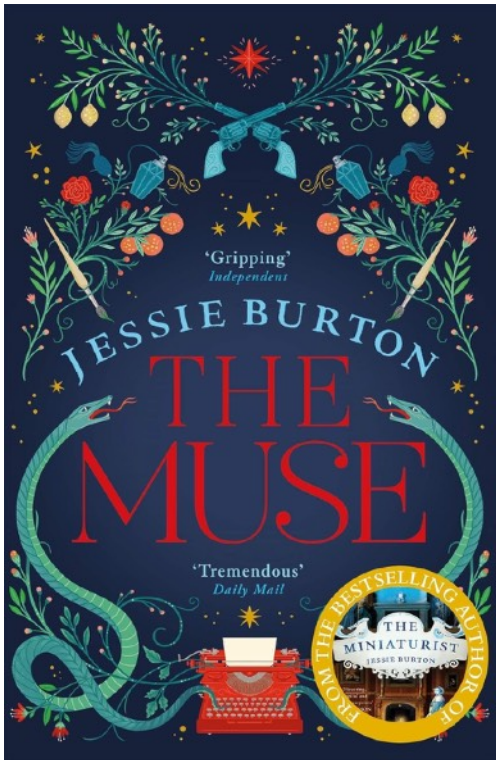


May - "The Muse" by Jessie Burton



This is a story with a cast of interesting characters, who are seamlessly interwoven in the time frames of 1936 Spain and 1967 London.

We thought the descriptions of the Spanish countryside embedded the scene in our 'mind's eye' and also gave us an insight into the pre-Civil War situation.

The relationships were not as simple as we first thought and the surprises conjured up made the book more interesting.

The London sections with Odelle covered the difficulties of the Windrush generation in integrating and finding a job to suit their talent.

Some of the group found the story a bit slow-paced at first.

Marjorie Quick we found to be an enigmatic character and perhaps, as a reader, you know there is a mystery to be solved. Burton also brought to the fore the problems that talented female artists had in being recognised, and indeed considering this as a successful career. The two main paintings played a crucial part in the tale (if only they could talk).

All in all, we very much enjoyed this book and would recommend it.

April - "Look at me" by Anita Brookner

Anita Brookner

Look At Me



This book was first published in 1983, but gave the impression of being older - some thought the 1920s and others the 1950s. It may all be to do with the writing style, which is mostly in the first person (Frances relating the story) but in the closing chapters changes to the third person.



'Bewitching' *The Times*

Frances and most of the other characters work in a medical library in London, which may appear to be very interesting, but is mostly boring and mundane, which is reflected in them all having private lives in the same vein, with the exception of Olivia.

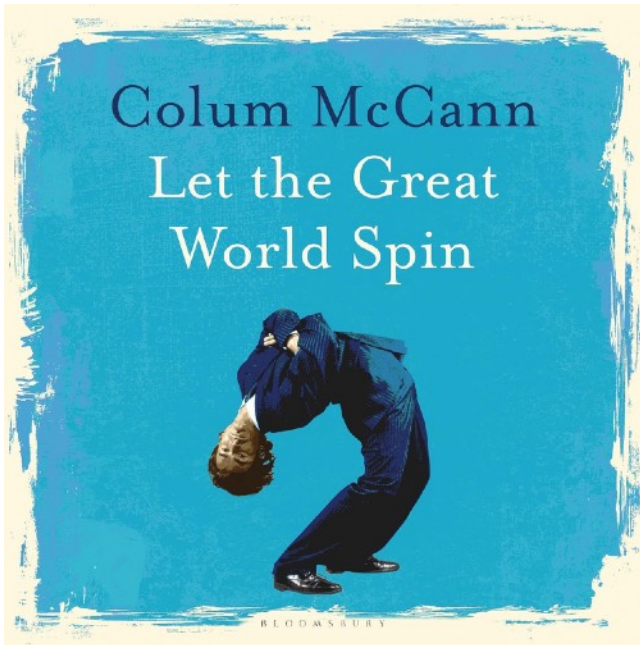
Outwith this establishment we have mainly Alix, wife of Nick, and Nancy, elderly housekeeper of Frances and her mother before that. Nothing changes until Alix invites Frances to join her trendy circle of friends for regular

dinners.

It is clear that Alix is a manipulative, controlling person, who has to be the centre of attention, in contrast to others involved. This story is a sad reflection of characters repressing their feelings, and hoping for change - but does it happen?

Some of us found it more interesting than others. Make your own judgement.

March - "Let the Great World Spin" by Colum McCann



This book is written by an Irish author, born in Dublin, now based in New York.

It is set in 1970s New York - in fact August 1974, the time of Lyndon B Johnson's presidency.

Initially, there is a man about to step off terra firma on to a high wire fixed between the twin towers of the as yet to be finished World Trade Centre. So, what is to come below in the busy streets as opposed to the calmness above? Well, the lives of the ordinary citizens mentioned are fraught, to say the least!

We have the Corrigan brothers - John in particular at this juncture, but joined later

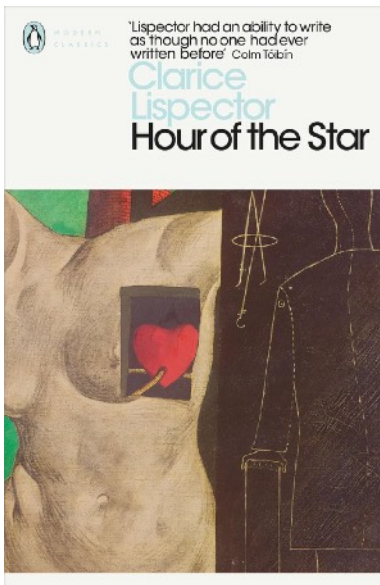
by his brother Ciaren. John is struggling with his inner feelings, living amongst the prostitutes in the Bronx. The Book Group found this section hard to plough through, which deterred us from continuing, but don't despair, carry on!

The gathering mothers in their grief restore some equilibrium, but as is the theme throughout, their feelings and fragility is heartfelt. The other characters are similarly torn, to name but one Lara.

The author does cleverly interweave them and eventually they all connect, albeit it in a convoluted fashion.

The title is an allegory for the struggle and sadness, but hope and promise that may be achieved as life in this world continues regardless.

February - "The Hour of the Star" by Clarice Lispector



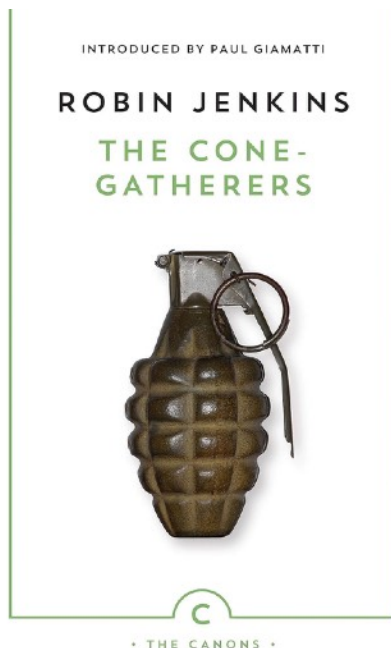
This is a novella, translated from Portuguese and set in Rio de Janeiro. It is puzzling from the start, but what is somewhat clear is that the author is an unusual, complex character herself. In this case she appears to become the alter ego of the main character in the story, namely Macabea, asking strange questions re her thought processes and straying from the actual tale. As a reader, this makes the book quite incomprehensible!

If you can disregard this, you find that there are basically three main characters: Macabea, as previously mentioned, is a poor, wretched, sullen girl; Olympico, her boyfriend, another character with a high opinion of himself; and finally Gloria, a work colleague of Macabea, who appears to be her friend, but then succeeds in stealing Olympico from her. None of these characters is endearing at all, and asides

about them make reading this book even harder going.

"The Hour of the Star" was a mystery to us all in the book group and one, we felt, to be avoided.

January - "The Cone Gatherers" by Robin Jenkins



This story is based on the practice of gathering pine cones to extract the seeds to grow new saplings during World War II. This did truly occur, as 30,000 acres of woodland were felled between 1940 and 1946.

We agreed that this story, written in 1955, contained the attitudes of that time - for instance towards a person with a physical difference - i.e. Calum, who was described as a hunchback; and also the attitudes of the landed gentry - namely Lady Runcie-Campbell, who treated the brothers abominably.

There is good and evil portrayed, and a dark malevolence is ever-present, which builds to a crescendo.

Good is represented by the brothers Neil and his disabled brother Calum, who are respectful, kind and

lovers of nature.

Evil is clearly the gamekeeper Duror, a man obsessed with perfection, but this is not his way of life.

The group had mixed feelings towards Jenkins' style of writing - some loved it, others felt quite the opposite.

We were similarly split in our conclusions. The Cone Gatherers is interesting to say the least - take from that what you will.



December - "The Nightingale" by Kirstin Hannah

This story is set in France during World War II and also has reflective chapters set on the Oregon coast in 1995.

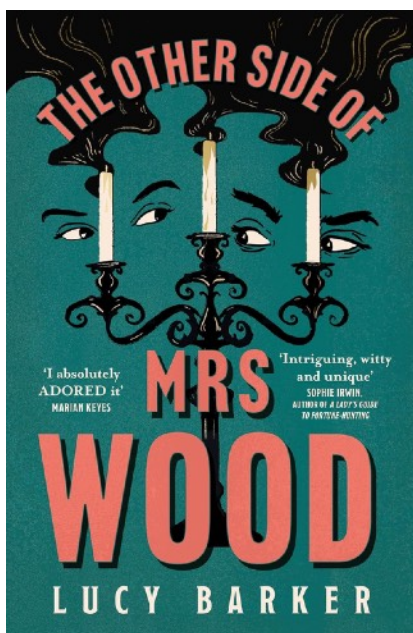
It all starts with one of the main characters receiving an invitation to a reunion in France. What is this all about? The revelations begin. We follow the lives of two sisters, Vianne and Isabelle, who have contrasting characters (or so it seems). Many emotions are conjured up - bravery, fear, love and loss etc.

The author conveys well the horror of Nazi occupied France and the fight for survival.

Isabelle - the 'go getting' one - joins the French Resistance.

Vianne - the family orientated one - strives to keep her family safe (in the absence of her husband) by whatever means are possible!

Kirstin Hannah certainly draws you in to the story - it is descriptive and the internal and external conflicts of the two sisters, especially with their father, are important as is the turmoil of other characters. The majority of the group highly recommended this book.



November - "The other side of Mrs Wood" by Lucy Barker

This novel is set in Victorian times - London 1873 to be exact - where mediums and stances are 'in vogue' among many of the upper classes.

There is fierce rivalry; many have tried but have been exposed as charlatans except for Mrs Violet Wood (no. 1 at this juncture).

She along with her loyal assistant Miss Newman 'hold court', either in her large house, in a fashionable part of town, or in the mansions of her clients and sponsors.

Enter a young girl, Miss Emmeline Finch (Emmie), down on

her luck, whom Violet feels sorry for and takes in to learn the complicated 'ins +outs' of this trade.

There we have the crux of the story. The contrasts between the two of them - young and old - ruthlessness and genuine concern and more are to be discovered in this tale.

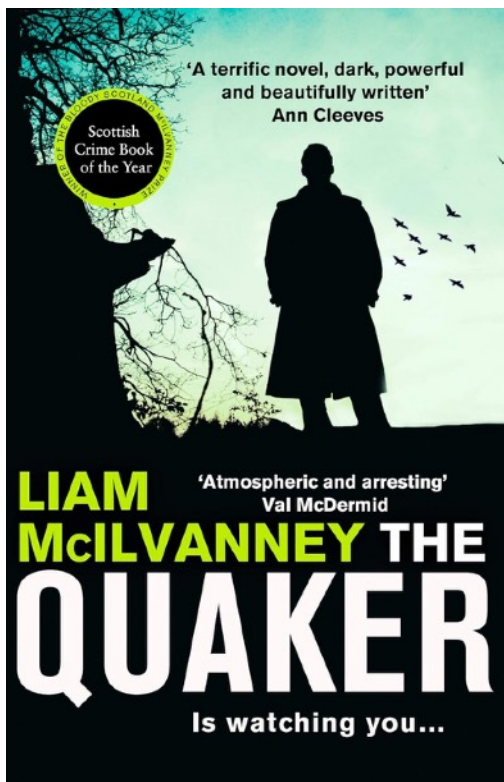
The group found the writing style quite banal, especially in the first quarter.

Indeed, it put some of them off continuing, while others went on and found it improved and were keen to find out the conclusions.

So, on the whole there was near enough a fifty-fifty split of whether it was liked or not.

It certainly is a quirky one!

October - "The Quaker" by Liam McIlvaney



This story begins in a dour, depressing Glasgow in the middle of the freezing winter of 1969.

On reading the early chapters it is unsure if we are dealing with a large heist or a multiple murder crime.

In fact, both are catered for, with echoes of the real life killer Bible John, which even now evokes memories of that time.

Indeed some of the book group members were transported back to their younger days living in Glasgow.

Even if you weren't familiar with the city, this book did convey the mood which would have been felt in any place in the UK in the throes of this situation.

The Murder Squad involved are a mixed bunch, battle weary after 3 murders with nothing to show for it. In to the mix appears lone outsider DI

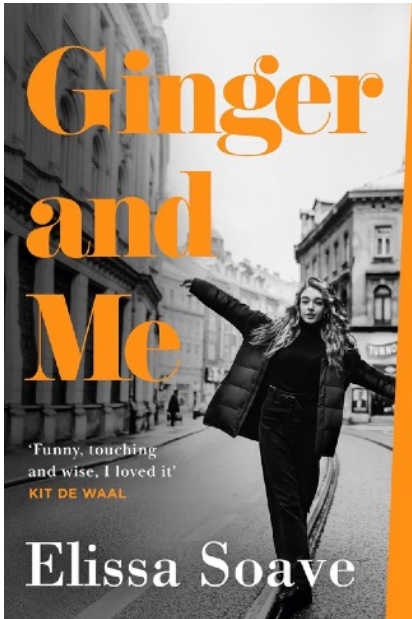
McCormick - resented by colleagues - who knows he's there to quickly close the case - but nothing is ever as simple as that.

McCormick becomes obsessed with finding the killer and answers to the fourth murder and robbery.

For us readers we have gangsters, informer and other dodgy characters to enjoy.

This Scottish Noir has all the ingredients of an intriguing, satisfying read.

September 2024 - Ginger & Me by Elissa Soave



Initially, we find Wendy (aged 19) in prison, the question is how did this happen? Narrated by her, we find her living alone, not coping with life after the death of her mother. She is a 'lost' soul, not spacially aware, not able to go through the motions of day to day life and also not aware emotionally of other people's feelings and how to normally interact with them.

She is encouraged by her social worker to make friends. Her joy in life is driving her no. 522 bus around Uddingston, and all the characters who regularly hop on and off. She is kind and obliging, which is to her detriment and leads to trouble.

Then enters Ginger, who is 15 years old, skipping school, riding the bus all day, escaping from her traumatic home life. So these two characters become friends, which

means different things to each of them, and is tested throughout the unfolding story.

The third person is Diane, a professional writer whom Wendy befriends online, and then in person at book signings. This is mixed with the Writers Group that Wendy joins. The colourful people in the group are described well, but in this situation she has no empathy for them, as she thinks she is a better writer than all of them - In the same 'class' as Diane. This leads to conflict with Ginger, who hopes she and Wendy may have hope of new beginnings. But Wendy's obsession and subsequent stalking of Diane, puts paid to that, which leads to the ominous conclusion!!

All the group, in general, were pleased to read this novel which is set in Lanarkshire with some familiar elements. This being the case, we will remember this book and recommend it to others.