

## **BOOK CLUB**

**2020**

### **January: "Breaking Cover" - Stella Rimington**

An espionage thriller from the former head of MI5. Slow moving to start, with the author's background in evidence with much detail of official procedures, it built to an exciting but not altogether unpredictable climax. An enjoyable if unspectacular read.

### **February: "Love is Blind"- William Boyd**

A young tuner from Scotland is sent to Paris to assist with expanding the piano making business of his employers in Edinburgh. He develops links with a virtuoso pianist who uses and endorse the company's instruments to advertise them, but becomes infatuated with the opera singer lover of the maestro. Concert tours take them to much of Europe but all does not go smoothly. Enjoyable.

### **March: "The Clockmaker's Daughter" - Kate Morton**

An unusual ghost tale, part mystery and part love story which unfolds over 150 years. The chief characters are a ghost and the beautiful house on the banks of the Upper Thames which becomes a summer retreat for a group of young artists. We enjoyed this though at time the number of characters and interlocking elements of the story could be confusing.

**2019**

### **January: "The Immortalists" - Chloe Benjamin**

Four young siblings visit a shadowy woman who professes to be able to tell them the dates on which they will die. None of them tell the others what she tells them, but their lives are deeply affected by what they hear. Is this sorcery or are they subconsciously influenced in their life styles to fulfil her prophesies? Opinions were divided on the story

### **February: "Beneath a Scarlet Sky" Mark Sullivan**

Based on a true story, this tells of the exploits of a teenaged boy in Milan after Italy capitulated and was overrun by German forces from 1943 to 1945. Pino and his brother were from a prosperous background but both became involved in the escape of Jews and allied forces into Switzerland and passing military information to the partisans. Exciting, rather journalistic in style

### **March: "Warlight": Michael Ondaatje**

This proved to be something of a "Marmite" choice rated either very high or very low. London in 1945: not only were many buildings in ruins, but so was the family of teenagers Nathaniel and Rachel, whose parents, unbeknown to them, were still engaged in undercover intelligence. Their lives become very unconventional, and only several year later do they learn why.

### **April: "Anatomy of a Scandal": Sarah Vaughan**

A successful young barrister is given a brief to prosecute a rising young politician accused of rape, a type of case in which she has specialised. Why has she followed this course, and how is the case related to events at Oxford University over twenty years earlier? Many of the characters resonate with actual politicians of recent years, reflecting the author's background in political journalism.

**May: "Homefire": Kamila Shamsie**

The aimless teenage son of a British Asian family becomes drawn into the politics of extremism, which in turn affects his two sisters. The ending is inevitable but devastating. Opinions of this powerful book were very divided.

**June: "Long Way from Home" : Peter Carey**

Set in Australia in the 1950's this is the story of the "Redex" road rally round the continent and its effects on the young couple who hope it will bring success to their car sales business, but it becomes more of a damning account of the treatment of the First Nation inhabitants of the remoter regions of the country. Most readers found it a struggle, but some thought it brilliant - another "Marmite" book.

**July: "Where the Crawdabs Sing" - Marcia Owens**

We all enjoyed this account of a poor family in the swamps of North Carolina, with the author's background as a naturalist giving a vivid illustration of the interaction of the protagonists and their unspoiled wilderness home, intertwined with the story of an unsolved murder.

**August: "Old Filth" - Jane Gardam**

"Old Filth" is the affectionate nickname of a British lawyer who makes his career in the Far East before retiring to the Dorset countryside. His background is gradually revealed to give an insight into his character which was deeply influenced by experiences in his childhood. An intriguing read which we enjoyed.

**September: "Tulip Fever" - Deborah Moggach**

Very mixed reactions to this story set against the passion for exotic tulip bulbs in 17th century Amsterdam. Some enjoyed the humour and plot but others found the characters unconvincing, though it was considered a good read.

**October: "You Were Gone" - Tim Weaver**

A former police detective turned private investigator cannot be sure if he is suffering a breakdown following his Wife's death or if he is the victim of a complex plot to discredit him. This well constructed and cleverly wrought story comes to a thrilling conclusion, with the denouement coming only at the end.

**November: "Circe" - Madeline Miller**

This is an interesting version of the Greek legend of the nymph Circe who falls in love with a mortal and is banished to a remote island. The writer gives it a rather modern twist from the point of view of Circe herself, which is a change from the masculine perspective of the original. Quite fun!

**December: "Chasing the Monsoon" Alexander Frater**

For a complete change, we chose this account by travel writer Frater of his fascination with weather study which led him to travel through India as the seasonal Monsoon moved inland from the South to its climax in the North East, the wettest place on Earth. This gave focus to an entertaining travelogue during which he met many fascinating people and saw the effects of the rain, or lack of it, on their lives. Best appreciated with a basic knowledge of clouds and weather systems!

## 2018

### **January: Cutting for Stone: Abraham Verghese**

We learnt a lot from this book which starts in The Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, then moves to New York. The author, like the central character, is an Anglo-Indian doctor who was born in Ethiopia and is now practising in the US. The earlier sections about the characters' youth and backgrounds is more interesting, but this is a good read.

### **February: Lion: A long way home: Saroo Brierley**

This true story about how a five year old Indian boy became lost, adopted by a family from Australia and eventually traced his origins was made into a successful film. The story is amazing, but the writing is less inspiring and fails to convey the feelings of the boy as well as does the film, so was rather disappointing.

### **March: The Lightkeepers' Daughters: Jean Pendzirool**

The setting of an isolated lighthouse on a tiny island in Lake Superior is real, as are some of the events described. Two characters' backgrounds are explored, an orphaned teenage girl on the verge of delinquency and an elderly blind woman in a residential home. Their unlikely relationship reveals much about the backgrounds of both, with some interesting twists along the way. Most found it a very good choice.

### **April: "Eleanor Oliphant is completely fine": Gail Honeyman**

No wonder everyone seems to be reading and talking about this book. It is a remarkable account of a young woman's emergence from her lonely, emotionless existence to a fuller and happier life. It gets under the skin of Eleanor and gradually explains her odd, isolated character as she begins to blossom. Already optioned for filming, any screen version will have to be good to match up to the book.

### **May: "Good Me Bad Me": Ali Land**

This was quite a gruelling tale of a teenage girl whose Mother is on trial for the abuse and murder of several children. To what extent has her background corrupted the daughter, and can she ever escape what she has experienced? Chilling!

### **June: "Cartes Postales from Greece": Victoria Hislop**

Ellie receives a series of postcards from Greece addressed to the former occupant of her flat, and eventually decides to see for herself the places from where they were sent. Each place presents a story, sometimes pleasant, sometimes darker. Ellie not only learns a lot about the country, but also about herself.

### **July: "The Inheritance of Loss": Kiran Desai**

A Booker Prize winning novel set in Kashmir, beautifully written to capture the Himalayan setting and the lives of an orphan girl, her grandfather and their small community. As separatist groups struggle against the Indian authorities. Very slow moving in parts, but full of atmosphere.

### **August: The Constant Soldier" William Ryan**

The Second World War is in its final stages as a wounded soldier returns to his home in the upland area bordering present-day Germany and Poland. He takes a job in a rest home for senior officers, whom he despises, but he has his own motives as the Russian forces advance. A riveting read and rated highly by all

**September: "Then she was gone": Lisa Jewell**

One day a fifteen year old girl leaves home for the library and never returns. Her family never recover, but ten years later her mother, now divorced, meets a charming stranger and discovers that his daughter has a striking resemblance to the lost girl. The complex and often frightening answers reveal what happened.

**October: "The Word is Murder": Anthony Horowitz**

Why would a prosperous woman in her sixties make detailed arrangements for her own funeral a few hours before she is murdered? The case is investigated by an unorthodox detective with the author himself acting as his reluctant assistant. There are many twists and turns before the surprising denouement. Enjoyed by all

**November: "Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain": Barney Norris**

The unusual title refers to the site of Salisbury, the setting for a series of events involving or witnessed by five very different characters. Their lives have all touched in one way or another before the car crash which forms the main focus of the action. Well-constructed but not everyone found it convincing.

**December: "This is going to hurt" - Adam Kay**

The best-selling diaries of a junior doctor, which alternate between hilarity and tragedy before the author is so deeply affected by one particular case that he decides to leave the profession. Long hours, heavy work loads, relatively low pay and an interrupted social life weigh against the rewarding and often extremely funny moments working in a major hospital

**2017**

**January: The Glass Palace: Amritav Ghosh**

A young boy arrives in Burma in the late 19th century when all is tightly controlled by the British colonial powers. The story of him and his family follow the changes here and in India and Malaya up to the post-war independence movements. This intertwining of the personal and political changes involve the reader and maintain interest throughout

**February: A Place Called Winter: Patrick Gale**

The outline of the story is based on the real life of the author's grandfather, who mysteriously vanished from a comfortable middle class family life in Edwardian Strawberry Hill and was eventually traced to a remote farming community in the harsh Canadian Prairies. The details of his story are largely fictitious, but very involving, especially the descriptions of the landscape, climate and society of the early pioneer farmers.

**March: Road Ends: Mary Lawson**

Another Canadian setting, this time a small community in Northern Ontario. The lack of communication within the central family can only be explained by revealing the background of the previous generation, but ends on a more optimistic note as realities are faced.

**April: Golden Hill: Francis Spufford**

Hailed as "the best 18th century novel since the 18th century", this is written largely in the style of authors such as Fielding, and in some ways resembles his "Tom Jones". In 1746 a young man arrives in a small coastal town on the east coast of North America still under British rule. He causes much curiosity and mayhem. The depiction of early New York, its appearance, economy and society are masterful and the story twists and turns before the final revelation in the last few pages.

**May: Knowing Anna: Sarah Meyrick**

A group of family and friends undertake to walk the Pilgrims' Way in memory of Anna. During the journey, they discover a lot about themselves and also about Anna herself. A promising idea, but some found it too contrived to be convincing.

**June: Disgrace: J M Coetzee**

A university lecturer in South Africa is forced to resign his post and reconcile himself to his personal shortcomings. Moving to his daughter's remote rural home he encounters a different world and tries to come to terms with his own disgrace. Brilliantly written but often brutal, this was admired but not to everyone's taste.

**July: The Hotel at the Corner of Bitter and Sweet: Jamie Ford**

The plight of the Chinese and Japanese immigrant communities in the USA after Pearl Harbour is told through the eyes of a school boy and girl, one Chinese, one Japanese. Their story is both bitter and sweet and based on real events during and after WW2.

**August: The Return Home; Justin Huggler**

This story is again told from the view of a young boy, and refers back to a real event during the German occupation of Jersey. The youngster's voice is well captured, as is the Channel Island setting, so we all enjoyed it.

**September: Tighrope: Simon Mawer**

After a traumatic undercover mission to occupied France, a young Anglo-French girl is debriefed and gradually returns to everyday life, but the lure of espionage catches up with her. Well written, fairly typical spy tale.

**October: The Ballroom: Anna Hope**

In the Yorkshire countryside stands a Victorian asylum, its most unusual feature a beautiful ballroom, where the male and female patients are allowed to gather and dance one a week. Based on the experiences of the writer's ancestors, the story develops through the experiences of a young doctor and two patients, and reveals the attitudes to and treatment of the mentally ill early last century. Thoroughly recommended.

**November: This must be the place: Maggie Farrell**

Take the mysterious disappearance of a cult film actress, an American academic with family problems and a semi-derelict house in a remote corner of Ireland and mix well! Some intriguing twists and well portrayed background make this an enjoyable read.

## **December: The Dry: Jane Harper**

A small rural Australian community is suffering a prolonged drought, then a family murder and supposed suicide draw back a city detective who left the area in awkward circumstances many years earlier. The stress of the killings on top of the drought are described very well as we gradually learn how what happened in the protagonists' youth led to the recent events. Gripping and a very good read.

## **2016**

### **January: The Long Song: Andrea Levy**

Several members found the graphic depiction of slavery in 19th century Jamaica too realistic for comfort, and the use of Jamaican patois difficult to understand, but the story was very well told and reactions to the book varied considerably.

### **February: The Truth about the Harry Quebert Affair: Joel Dicker**

A murder mystery for a change, set in New England and describing the atmosphere of the small town and its inhabitants extremely well. Generally we enjoyed this and appreciated the twists and turns of the plot.

### **March: Us: David Nicholls**

From the author of "One Day", here was the history of a marriage and its eventual breakup intertwined with an account of a disastrous family holiday across Europe. Enjoyable but rather lightweight.

### **April: All the Light we cannot see: Anthony Doerr**

This fascinating book tells the interweaving stories of two teenagers, one a blind French girl, the other a German boy soldier, whose paths meet during the bombardment of St Malo in 1944. This deservedly won the Pulitzer Prize - a wonderful, gripping piece of story-telling.

### **May: A Tale of Love and Darkness: Amos Oz**

This is a fascinating autobiographical account of the author's family's experiences in the early days of the state of Israel and the back stories which led to their migration from various parts of Europe to Palestine. The mass of detailed reminiscences made this quite a hard read for some members.

### **June: Waking Lions : Ayalet Gundar- Goshen**

Also set in Israel, this is a totally different window on the country. A young doctor becomes involved with a group of illegal immigrants and their largely unseen activities on the margins of society. An added complication is that his wife is a police officer involved in investigating some of the activities - a gripping sequence of events

### **July: The Return of the Native: Thomas Hardy**

As a total contrast, we chose a classic which had escaped most members. Opinions differed on the writer's style, though all considered the story to be very well told and the characters really vivid.

### **August: The Poisonwood Bible; Barbara Kingsolver**

A fundamentalist Baptist minister from the Deep South takes his family to the Belgian Congo on the brink of independence. His inadequacies as a missionary and as a father have catastrophic repercussions for his wife and children far beyond their time in the jungle village.

**September: The Road Home: Rose Tremain**

Still reeling from his wife's illness and death, Lev leaves his young daughter in the care of her grandmother and travels from an unnamed Eastern European country to London in search of work. He experiences the good and bad sides of locals and fellow immigrants, but eventually makes good and returns to his home and family.

**October: Orphan Train: Christina Baker Kline**

In the USA between 1854 and 1929 over 200,000 orphaned, abandoned and unwanted children were transported from the cities of the East Coast to the Midwest for "adoption", which was more often virtual slave labour. This is the basis of this moving story of a survivor of such a journey as uncovered by a marginalised teenage girl sent to help in her house as community service.

**November: The Diary of an Ordinary Woman; Margaret Forster**

On her 13th birthday, a girl is given a diary, and vows to write an entry every day, charting much of the 20th century. This "ordinary" woman seemed to be involved directly or indirectly in most of the momentous events of the century, perhaps not totally believably as is revealed in the final section

**December: Sunset Song: Lewis Grassie Gibbon**

This is consistently chosen by Scots as their most popular book and is often a school set text. This first part of a trilogy describes the lives and loves of a farming community in a Scottish village from about 1900 to the end of the First World War. Much of the writing is in Scots dialect, making it hard reading to start off, but the events and setting are vividly described and often very moving.

**2014-2015****December: The Black House: Peter May**

We all enjoyed this book, a gripping and atmospheric crime thriller set in the Hebridean island of Lewis (the first book of the "Lewis Trilogy").

**January: Me before You: Jojo Moyes**

This was a big contrast to the previous selection, outwardly a romance, but dealing with serious themes of disability and the right to die. We all enjoyed it but found it relatively lightweight. (Now a very popular film)

**February: Daughter of China: Meihong Xu and Larry Engelmann**

The true story of a young Chinese girl who trains as a member of the elite army intelligence corps during the Cultural Revolution, but who falls in love with the visiting American professor she is instructed to investigate, leading to her disillusionment with the regime and eventual escape to the USA. It proved to be a fascinating read, but not always easy going.

**March: The Accidental Apprentice: Vikas Swarup**

The author wrote the book on which the film "Slumdog Millionaire" was based, and this is a similarly fast-moving and somewhat far-fetched modern fairy tale. We all enjoyed it and found it an engaging read.

**April: An Equal Music: Vikram Seth**

Opinions were very divided on this story of a violinist and the two, inseparable loves of his life - music and pianist Julia. It proved to be a "Marmite" book - some loved it and some considered the description of the musical content too detailed and boring

**May: The Miniaturist: Jessie Burton**

Set in Amsterdam during the late 1600's this is another complete contrast. The writing was excellent but the very dark tale of intrigue and some graphic violence was not universally enjoyed.

**June: The Elegance of the Hedgehog: Muriel Barbery**

Continuing the international theme, this is the story of a Parisian concierge who leads a secret double life as an intellectual. Slow to start, it gradually drew us in to the life and outlook of the narrator

**July: The Girl on the Train; Paula Hawkins**

This was a good read and had been a great commercial success, but most of us thought it a bit of a "pot boiler" (now a film)

**August: Do no Harm: Henry Marsh**

This account of the work and life a leading neurosurgeon was fascinating, but the catalogue of case histories did not appeal to everyone, so opinions were very divided

**September: The Green Road; Anne Enright**

Longlisted for the Man Booker prize and generally praised, we did not all appreciate the quality of the writing and the sometimes disjointed narrative. The members of an Irish family follow very different paths but eventually return to their mother's home to try to reconcile their differences.

**October: And the Mountains Echoed: Khaled Hosseini**

The setting and historical background of this tale has echoes of the author's earlier "The Kite Runner". It tells the stories of embers of two generations of a family from Afghanistan and subsequently in France and the USA. We all enjoyed and admired this work.

**November: The Light Between Oceans: M L Stedman**

A fascinating and occasionally heart breaking story set in the years after WW1. The landscape and weather played a major role in the events, with most of the action occurring on a remote lighthouse off the coast of West Australia. (Recently made into a film)

**December: The Taming of the Queen Philippa Gregory**

Back to Tudor times for this fictionalised history of Katherine Parr, the last wife of Henry VIII, but there were no mentions of her stays in Hanworth! The intrigues of the court and the frequently brutal politics were well described but the book felt too long and repetitious to be fully enjoyable