



Book Club reviews March

Thank you to everyone who submitted a review of the three books we suggested for the latest round of the Fellowship Book Club – as always, we were delighted with the response and with the thoughtfulness you put into your reviews.

Our choices this time were *Where the Crawdads Sing*, by Delia Owens, *A History of Britain in 21 Women*, by Jenni Murray and *Knots and Crosses*, by Ian Rankin.

We received most reviews about *Where the Crawdads Sing*, the much lauded debut novel by biologist Delia Owens. The central character – Kya – grows up in almost pure isolation in the marshes of North Carolina but the prejudices against her come to prominence when local sports hero and teen heartthrob Chase is found dead. Generally, you loved it – and Jill told us it was the best book we have recommended so far! She said: “I really enjoyed it. I don’t think I would have tried it unless it had been suggested for the book club. I read the thriller and two of the previous list, but this was by far the best.”

Chris said: “I was amazed how the heroine Kya survived such an awful life as her family dropped away and she had to survive alone. I do love a book that takes me into a world that I had not previously thought much about and I found the poetic descriptions of life on the marsh so enthralling.”

“Although the first part was a nice narrative, that I was happy to put down each evening, by the time I got to the middle, I couldn’t put the book down. I never suspected that Kya was responsible for the murder or that she was a poet, although I did wonder where the poetry in the text came from, as no mention was ever made of her owning a poetry book. So much reference was made to the missing necklace, that I couldn’t wait to find out who had taken it. Everything fell into place once the necklace was discovered. I will certainly read this author again and *Where the Crawdads Sing* has inspired me to read and learn more about that part of America in which it is set.”

Carole added: “I found Kya’s strength and resourcefulness amidst such tragic circumstances incredible. Her communication to Tate with feathers showed me how powerful a symbol nature is and that words, both written and spoken, are not always essential. It also brought home how trust is so easily broken and can take years to re-build. The twist at the end, revealing who murdered Chase came as a total surprise to me.”

Barbara said: “I loved this book. I found it very engaging and well written with wonderful descriptions of the natural environment and animals. I think that

was the strongest point, Delia Owens really makes the marsh come alive and become a character. I also liked the story and the human characters who I found to be believable and sympathy inducing. I found myself sitting on the end of my seat that Kya would get away with it! I'm so glad she found her true love too and things worked out for her. A truly lovely book."

Alison appreciated the vivid descriptions in the book. "Such powerful and poetic writing - you could feel the humid heat and hear the swamp and mangrove sounds as you were reading. I'm not normally keen on books with lots of description but the author painted such an evocative picture of Kya's environment that I was entranced. A slightly implausible story perhaps - a young girl effectively 'off grid' and bringing herself up - but the landscape she lived in seemed so remote and isolated you believed it could happen. I loved so many of the characters especially Jumpin' and Mabel and the bad guy got his comeuppance in the end - I did guess who committed the crime fairly quickly but this didn't detract from my enjoyment. Overall a story of resilience against prejudice and ignorance, a tale of love and being at one with nature - highly recommended."

However, Penny did comment that: "at times I felt it was a little fanciful to expect Kya to self-educate to such a level."

Sheila told us that she recommended A History of Britain in 21 Women because she had previously read Jenni Murray's "A History of the World in 21 Women" and had enjoyed it and found it inspirational.

However, she expressed some disappointment in this version. "Jenni's feminist traits and beliefs really come to the fore, and sometimes I felt that the history of these 21 women could only be measured in terms of their feminism. Some of their personalities were lost because of it. However, I did learn a lot about some women, in particular Elizabeth 1st and Caroline Herschall. My favourite person was Barbara Castle and her chapter was written frankly and honestly. If you are looking for a snapshot of some influential British women then this is a good read and each chapter isn't too long."

Alison was also disappointed. "It was very dry reading and quite difficult to get through. In fact, I haven't finished it as I'm struggling so much with it. The chapters on each woman were too short and didn't really tell us an awful lot about them. It must be incredibly difficult to choose women to include and I disagreed with some inclusions - Barbara Castle for example. Instead, where are Florence Nightingale, Eleanor of Aquitaine or Elizabeth Fry?"

Rosemary added: "The book started well with fascinating chapters on Boadicea and Elizabeth 1, who were formidable ladies by any standards, but I lost interest when it turned to a writer of rather obscure Restoration plays. With a few exceptions such as the harrowing account of Fanny Burney's surgery without anaesthetic and the intriguing biography of Mary Seacole, the middle chapters seemed rather "samey" and did not ignite my interest again until reaching women whom I remember from my youth, such as Mary Quant and Barbara Castle.

“The book was carefully researched and thought provoking. It clearly illustrates the struggle for recognition of women in many different spheres, with all the attendant benefits, which fulfilled the author's main intention. However, at the risk of being controversial, I found it slightly repetitive and would have preferred the facts to speak for themselves.”

However, Penny declared it was her favourite of our three choices: “Although I have to admit I didn't know some of the women such as Constance Makievicz being the first women MP. I felt it was very much a personal choice by Jenni Murray so it got me thinking who I might choose and why.”

Brigitte really enjoyed this book about 21 women and their trials in a man's world and felt we have to be grateful for what they achieved for us.

Barbara said: “This is an interesting and timely read, I haven't quite finished yet but I have already learned a lot about people I knew very little about such as Mary Somerville and Fanny Burney. I think it is a good primer type book which then encourages you to find out more. It seems to be aimed at quite a young market though so I hope a lot of school children read it. Some of the chapters I found rather weak though particularly of the characters further back in history like Elizabeth 1 and Boudicca. The Jane Austen chapter was a bit so so too. Fanny Burney, Mary Somerville and Caroline Herschel had good chapters. The Mary Seacole chapter was also interesting.

“I was a little surprised by the addition of Nicola Sturgeon as she is not only still alive but still doing the job so it seems a bit soon to assess her contribution, particularly as there is some controversy around her at the moment. I feel that the addition of very well known characters such as Elizabeth 1 and Margaret Thatcher, who have both had so much written about them was a bit of a shame as it excluded others who I would have preferred to see such as Bess of Hardwick (richest woman in England in her time) and Rosalind Franklin or Dorothy Hodgkin. An explorer or two would have been nice too. Did we not have any women engineers?”

“This is a useful book I do wish it had been better written by someone who has a more of a flourish with words. I find I can only read one or two chapters in a sitting as they all start to feel the same. I like Jenni Murray's personal standpoint and how she relates it but you can tell writing is not really her 'thing'.”

Alison admitted she has never read any Ian Rankin before and although she found it was an easy read, she was disappointed. She explained: “It felt like Rankin was trying too hard -it was his first novel so maybe this is why. I didn't really care about any of the characters, I found it unlikely that Rebus would still be working in the police force given his issues. I guessed the perpetrator once Rebus had opened up about his time in the special forces and didn't think there were any significant plot twists. I won't be reading another book by this author.”

Penny also felt it was clear that Knots and Crosses was Rankin's first crime novel. She said: "It certainly didn't read or hold my attention like the rest of the series. In my book it had an interview with Ian Rankin where he states he had thought of Rebus dying at the end of the book."

Ruth agreed with the debut novel angle and felt there was scope for developing the character. She said: I enjoyed the twist at the end when the murderer's name was revealed and it pertained to the strange letters Rebus was receiving. One aspect to Rebus's character was the fact that he was a Christian which was not made clear in the television series as far as I can remember yet it is I think an important aspect of his personality especially as he is portrayed as a flawed character. It was good to have the book set in Edinburgh. As remarked by Rebus, a beautiful city but with a dark underbelly like most cities."

Barbara thought it was: "A very good book. Very well written, you can tell he is a 'proper writer'. This is not normally my favourite genre but I would certainly read more by him. My copy had a recent introduction where he talks about how he would have written it now and how he has developed the character. I got the impression it was a bit of an experiment! A great one. Once again what I liked best was the 80's setting, smoky, smelly pubs. A very atmospheric setting of Glasgow, you felt as though you were there. Journalists with crumbs and stained ties etc. Great characters too. A very interesting read. I am not quite as sure of his female characters I think it shows he was quite young when he wrote it. The only bit I found slightly disappointing was the very end, I thought it might be more dramatic."