



Book Club reviews: March/ April 2021

Thanks to everyone who took the time to share your thoughts and opinions on another round of diverse and interesting choices we selected for the Book Club. As always, we enjoy hearing your thoughts and perspectives!

Our non-fiction recommendation this time was Sathnam Sanghera's "The Boy with the Top Knot" and you thoroughly enjoyed it.

Rosemary said: "At first I found the constant time travel between chapters challenging, until I realised this was a literary device to represent the confusion and frustration that Sathnam felt when he tried to construct an orderly account of his family's experience of mental illness. Met with a wall of secrecy and records which pre-dated current standards of transparency, Sathnam eventually concludes that individual perceptions and relationships matter more than clinical facts. Finally this enables him to reach some sort of resolution in his own circumstances."

Barbara described it as: "a real delight." She added: "It was very real, poignant, truthful, funny, sad, moving, exasperating and very, very interesting. I think this must be my favourite genre now, the memoir with a bit of a difference, telling the tale of growing up in England when your origins are from elsewhere and how it translates. I find this especially relevant as I'm first generation too so some of it is very, very familiar in spite of being culturally quite different. Let's hope these sorts of books widen our understanding of other people inhabiting not only this island but the rest of the world. A great honest and truthful book."

Another Barbara thought it was "a moving humbling story so sincerely written." She said: "What an amazing lady his mother was with such resilience and determination to survive against terrible odds. How many of our young people could be sent to a foreign country as a teenager, marry a stranger, have no local language or knowledge of life, transport, money, habits and white people. Very different in the 60's to now. It was a real eye opener to how difficult it must be and can see why they clung to their communities. Language problems within the family alone hugely handicapping. The most dramatic moment for me was when he had his topknot cut off. How tragic about the schizophrenia in the family but at least here they got medical help once he was moved from prison. It was a very worthwhile read and I hope it broadens all peoples mind to understanding others."

Brigitte said she thought it was “compelling” and “shows an insight into Punjabi/ Indian culture.” Ruth also thought it was insightful and added: “I have read a book that was probably out of my normal comfort zone and found it fascinating. It really brought home to me the problems of the way different cultures see mental health issues and the lack of knowledge. Sathnam Sanghera was so open in the discussion about his family and was illustrating the typical lack of awareness in teenagers about the problems in his family and also the way we take for granted the behaviour of our family members until we meet other families and compare.”

You had mixed views about our fiction recommendation – Big Sky by Kate Atkinson.

Barbara said she enjoyed it more than Atkinson’s previous books, adding: “A good story again quite relevant and timely, interesting three dimensional characters, a great sense of place and with a real whiff of reality about it. I found it quite involving and even liked the end.”

However Alison, a fan of protagonist Jackson Brodie, felt disappointed. “I feel the book was a bit muddled and confused. The story at times seemed cluttered and a tad confusing as more characters were introduced without apparent links. Although these tied up eventually I didn’t find it easy. There's not enough of Brodie - he has always been an engaging and interesting character. I did enjoy learning more about Jackson's relationship with his children, but I thought moving him to a Yorkshire seaside town didn’t work.”

Chris said she has one quibble with Atkinson’s writing: “Her sort of scatter gun approach to introducing characters at the beginning can be a bit discombobulating.... I need to make a list to avoid confusion (or is this just age??)”

However Amanda was delighted with the return of Brodie. Welcome back Jackson Brodie. She mused: “It starts slowly, building up the background to what is to be a story about serious, timely topics - sex trafficking of young females from Europe and a historical paedophile ring. Kate Atkinson tempers the serious aspects with her usual dry humour and creation of believable characters. Excellent writing - I devoured this book in two days.”

You gave the most comments about our third choice The Midnight Library by Matt Haig. Sheila said it was a different concept to many books she had read previously and explained the premise: “Nora Seed has an unhappy life with many regrets and wants to end it all. She finds herself at midnight in a vast library with a familiar face - her former librarian. She then goes on a journey to try out different outcomes in her life by making other choices. It took me ages to "get" into the book, but eventually found I quite enjoyed it, and liked "tasting" the different lives Nora could have had.”

Barbara said: “I really liked the end and the little moral that went with it about liking the life you live. The main character was a little annoying at first but I found it quite an easy read. The only bits I found slightly irritating were the scenes in the library

which were fine once but got a bit tedious.”

Alison said she wanted to love the book and a psychiatrist friend had told her it was a true representation. However, she found it depressing and came close to giving up. She explained: “Maybe it's the times we are living in that made me feel this way. I didn't like Nora as a character; the only people I cared for were Mrs Elms, Ash and Voltaire (poor Voltaire). The book only came to life for me at the very end when Nora escapes the library and recognises that all actions have consequences - many for the good. I wouldn't recommend this book - whilst recognising the importance of the subject, and it was well written, it was altogether too unsettling and upsetting.”

Chris added: “The aspects of regret in life were well illustrated and it reminded me of some of the work of Paul Coelho i.e. a journey all round everything and back to where you started with a new perspective, the moral being live the life you have and appreciate it. Perhaps this is very opposite to our current situation.”

Ruby found the book “humorous and interesting” whilst Karole found the concept “captivating.” She added: “Quantum physics, psychologists, travel so interesting and what a lot of research Matt Haig has gone into. I admit to not understanding a lot of it but it didn't spoil the story. Ultimately she realises a fondness for Ash and that because Mr Bannerjee had no one to look after him his fate was miserable, and that she was needed in her root world.”

Lucia

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