



Thank you to everyone who took the time to submit a Book Club review this month – we really do enjoy reading your thoughts about the choices we have recommended.

We were also delighted to have a more in depth ‘proper’ conversation about the books at our Book Club Zoom. We will be holding the event again – on a different day and time – to encourage more of you to join in. The feedback was excellent and one point that was made several times is that reading other people’s views – or hearing their thoughts in the discussion – prompted people to go back and look at the books again with a different perspective in mind.

The Other Bennet Sister (Janice Hadlow)

Alison thought this was a very interesting concept but felt that a reader had to be a Jane Austen fan to really appreciate it. She said: “I really like Jane Austen and even though Mary doesn’t feature very much in “Pride and Prejudice” there is certainly lots of clues to her personality and identity. She is portrayed as a rather prissy, prim young lady which is well explained by Janice Hadlow’s novel.”

Ruth enjoyed the book and said: “I thought the author really captured the desperation and plight of the un-married spinster in the Georgian times - the reliance on her family for a home and income of her own. I felt the author also captured the feelings of Mary as she was constantly put down by her mother and how she felt overshadowed by her two beautiful and talented older sisters and vivacious younger siblings and I enjoyed the way she managed to convey how Mary eventually overcame her feelings of low self esteem to accept she was just as worthy in her own right with the help of her aunt. The constraints of the society in which she was brought up in were portrayed well. One criticism though I felt that the book was a little too long but I enjoyed reading it.”

Rosemary said: “It was a pleasant, innocent and undemanding read which followed the usual Austen formula – Mr Wrong proposes and is rejected, but eventually after all misunderstandings are resolved, Mr Right proposes and the heroine lives happily ever after. The book is long and at times it seems rather tortuous in reaching the predictable conclusion. Mary Bennet, like the other characters, isn’t completely believable with her veering approaches to

life and exaggerated characteristics but she still draws sympathy and a desire for a happy ending.”

Our Zoom meeting highlighted that Janice Hadlow turns the characters from the Jane Austen classic around so that a different perspective of them is shown. Alison commented: “I’m not sure that Mr and Mrs Bennett are quite as bad as she describes and I don’t want them to be!”

Alison added: “Mr Collins isn’t nearly as oily and creepy as we once thought whereas Charlotte Lucas is a slightly unpleasant, single minded girl. As for Lizzie and Jane – they don’t cover themselves in glory, in particular Jane; and they offer little support to Mary, despite their huge privileges. Thank goodness for the lovely Mrs Hill and the Gardiners who ultimately help Mary mature and grow in confidence so that she can eventually withstand the truly awful Miss Bingley. Plus there’s a happy ending in the spirit of Jane Austen so all’s well.”

A Single Thread (Tracy Chevalier)

Alison thought this was a lovely read that had her rooting for Violet right from the start. She explained: “She had experienced so much loss and sadness and seemed destined to spend her life alone. However, she was brave, despite her awful domineering mother, and was intent on making a new life for herself. I particularly loved all the parts of the book that focused on the ‘Broderers’ - the details of the embroidery were well done and captivating, and the stories of the band of ‘broderers’ with disparate backgrounds was really well done. Violet’s family, her landlady and work colleagues shone from the page.”

Alison added: “Ms Chevalier is a master at rounding out her characters so that we feel we know them. One to two minor niggles - where had Jack come from and why was he introduced other than to menace Violet on several occasions; his character was unnecessary. I thought Arthur was a rather weak man - interesting that all the male characters were weak and a bit flawed - no doubt intentionally. Violet deserved some happiness - I’m not sure that she’ll get that although Iris will bring her joy. Still, she, Gilda and Dorothy will probably be viewed as rather eccentric women and left alone. The description of Winchester Cathedral was great. All in all a cracking read.”

Barbara said: “I really enjoyed this book too. I loved ‘Girl with a Pearl Earring’ but was not quite as taken with some of her other books because of her writing style but this one was terrific. I loved the story, the atmosphere, the characters and of course all the descriptions of the stitching. I thought she got the dreary atmosphere across so well, the brownness of life, how drab it was for single women who were not well off. It was very much an England that I can still remember where everything had to be very proper and seemly and what people thought was what really mattered. I did like Violet and her independence but I found the end so sad and a tiny little bit neat. Another very enjoyable read with lots of interest and a great feel for Winchester and the cathedral too.”

A Rising Man (Abir Mukherjee)

Barbara said she first heard about the novel on a radio 4 interview with the author. She said: "He was such a nice ordinary man with a sense of humour, the sort of person you would want to chat to if you met him and then invite him round for dinner. He has an optimistic view of life and is very refreshing and not 'up himself' in anyway. I am looking forward to reading more."

However, Barbara did have one complaint: "There was one slight niggle though which just showed that the books were written now and not in the 20's, the characters keep saying ok. That expression was not invented until the Second World war by US pilots. Generally the way they speak is a bit modern too but I'm happy to overlook that for the rest. A great read."

Barbara said: "I thought this was a terrific read, well plotted and paced as well as being slightly unusual in being about an Englishman in India written by an Indian in Britain. I find anything about the twenties era fascinating and I thought this was well researched but more than that Abir has such a feel for the place (his parents come from there), that he makes the reader feel it too. The oppressive heat, the smells etc all become very real. I liked the hero Sam with his addiction and flaws, he is still a sympathetic and realistic character. I loved the descriptions of the British Raj especially previously only having read books from the period by English authors such as John Masters.

Another Barbara said: "The description and the picture painted of the unique city of Calcutta in 1919 was wonderfully achieved. You could almost smell the bustling city and its people and full on life. I felt transported into the life there and sitting in the Long Bar at the Great Eastern Hotel and then across the Hoogli river.

She added: "Detective Sam Wyndham matched well with the plot which was quite complex. I loved Surrender-not Banerjee. I think I probably need to read it again to get to grips with it all but what a pleasure as such an enjoyable book."

Alison observed: "Another great read and I'm so glad to be introduced to this author. The characters were so interesting and well described - Wyndham is likeable but incredibly flawed and I really hope he can find some solace with his lady friend. I wonder how he can function in his job with such a serious addiction. I loved Surrender-Not, the racism towards him and the rest of the Indian population by the British was incredibly shocking but well handled. The sense of unrest was palpable and Wyndham was both conscious and sympathetic to this. Surrender-Not was far more intelligent than the majority of his superiors and hopefully this, and his relationship with Wyndham will be explored in future books. I felt desperately sorry for him - torn between his family who disapproved of his job and what he saw as his duty. It was a multi layered book - primarily a murder mystery, but also historical. I knew very little about Indian history during the last days of the Raj and it inspired me to learn more. I didn't guess 'who done it' although it wasn't a huge surprise."

Ruth thought the author: “managed to capture the essence of the time with rising tensions and the changing attitudes in India after the First World War. The days of the raj were beginning to come to an end and the comments by Sargent Banerjee about India needing educated police officers to take over from the white officers was very prophetic. The author also managed to convey the ghosts and trauma that Sam Wyndham was trying to lay to rest whilst maintaining a high degree of justice he wanted.”

Sheila said she chose the book because it was out of her comfort zone and added: “The main character Sam was so well drawn with his strengths and major weaknesses that I became hooked. I liked the way the other police characters were so different especially "Surrender-not Bannerjee". However, I did find the text quite wordy at times and the use of italics for the Indian words became an irritation. It was not a book I would normally have chosen but I am glad I read it.”

We will release information about our next round of recommendations next week.

Sherry, Lucia and Debbie