



Book Club reviews September – October 2021

Your favourite book this time was by far 'The Splendid and the Vile' by Erik Larson.

Barbara K explained: "This is a great saga about Churchill, London and the beginning of the war. It covers from May 1940 until 1941 and the crucial years before America joined in to help the war effort. There is a lot of personal detail as the book is based in large part on the diary of John Colville who was one of Churchill's personal private secretaries but who before Churchill worked for Chamberlain. There are wonderful touches like descriptions of Churchill clambering onto the roof of No. 10 with his golden dragon dressing gown to watch the bombing and how his wife would write him a letter if she wanted to point something out to him, like his bad behaviour towards the Cabinet.

"There are descriptions of dinner at Chequers with champagne, brandy and cigars. Family gossip is recounted, who is having an affair with whom as well as some snippy remarks about various public figures made by other public figures.

Altogether it puts the time in a very human context with flesh and bones behind the historic figures. As the descriptions are from diaries and people's real comments they are seen through the eyes of the writer at the time they were written."

Rosemary said she very much enjoyed the book. "It gave me a much better appreciation of the course of the war and particularly of the lived experiences of the people of Britain. The great strength of the book was that the military history and tragedy were interposed with so many personal stories of varying seriousness. This made the book very readable. The contrast between the more and less privileged citizens was marked and rather uncomfortable. However, the insights into the dilemmas and decisions made by those in authority were illuminating and I felt it was a worthwhile read."

Barbara M said: "I would never have chosen to read this book so grateful to the Book Club for suggesting it as I really enjoyed it. It was a very readable, informal and enlightening of life in a family home whilst the PM led our survival in 1940/1. The pink silk underwear and all the baths amongst the reality of horror, destruction and responsibility along with the exhausting emotion and tears.

"The leveller of family life helped to keep Churchill focussed and all the support of his team at dinner parties. The passion Churchill had for this country and its people is what drove us all forward to survive.

"I was interested to see the mass air raid on March 12th 1941 over Liverpool mentioned as I remember being bombed out of our home that night when I was just 4 years old. Just a really interesting well written book."

Brigitte said: " I found it a fascinating book reading like a thriller novel. It gave both the British and the German side of the war from 1940 – 1941. Having been brought up on the Dorset coast and

very young at the time, I did not realise how close we were to being invaded. We lived near Poole where the flying boats were kept in the harbour. It is a great pity there are no photos of the various characters. It shows another side of Churchill and his children both good and bad. A thoroughly good read.”

Barbara K concluded: “This was so much more interesting than dry historical narrative. I found it fascinating that for so many in this privileged level of society the war did not have such a great effect, life went on. There were nightclubs to go to after dinner in the Ritz or Claridges. There may have been food rationing but drink flowed freely and the bands played. At least at the beginning. I found this so interesting to read during these Covid times when there was no social life but we were also not in the same sort of physical danger and did not suffer the same sort of anxiety but we had to do it alone. A super interesting book, it has made me want to read more about the time, especially to read John Colville "The Fringes of Power" as well as "The Glamour Boys" by Chris Bryant about the MPs who saw what a danger Hitler posed years before anyone else. The Mass Observation records would make fascinating reading too.”

Our other recommendation also had a wartime theme. 'In The Dark' by Deborah Moggach tells the story of a widow trying to survive.

Barbara K said: “I found it fascinating as it described Bermondsey and the area around London Bridge which I am familiar with. There are such vivid descriptions of the November streets with the mists and darkness and the pervading air of menace.

“The descriptions of the widow's house with it's strange group of tenants and the local butcher who delivers personally all conspire to this menace. The story is interesting and involving and it is ultimately about people and what they do to survive. There is such a sense all through that something terrible will happen but then again somehow that isn't quite the end so things are not all they seem.

The sense of place and atmosphere is uncanny and becomes an important character in itself. It is very visual and you can imagine it as a film. I really enjoyed this book but then I am a fan of this writer and loved 'Tulip Fever' as well but not the film.”

Barbara M said: “The characters were so well described it was like reading a film in your head. A relaxing read that reminded you how the opportunities for women have changed and the much greater financial awareness and independence today.”