



Book reviews for December 2021 / January 2022

Thanks as always to everyone who shared their thoughts around our latest choice of books. We particularly appreciate that you enjoy the fact that our recommendations are not normally books you would automatically reach for. Unusually, we went with three non-fiction choices this time and two had a distinct NHS feel to them.

Penicillin Man, by Kevin Brown, was described by Barbara as: “well researched and sympathetically written” and she enjoyed it. Barbara has a personal connection with Fleming as she is a microbiologist who worked at St Mary’s Hospital in the research labs. She added: “A lot has been written about Alexander Fleming, not all of it flattering and, as Kevin Brown shows, not always fair. This book really does set the record straight and describes the man, his work and his personality in a calm, rational and straightforward manner. Rather like the man himself, I would love to read a book by him on Florey, Chain and Heatley, although he does put their side very fairly too.

“I really enjoyed reading about the origins of the department and it's history. During my time at St Mary's, Fleming wasn't really talked about and rather dismissed as a messy bench worker who got lucky. I was fortunate enough one day to be shown his loops, microscopes and other lab equipment which was kept in a cupboard on one of the landings! I felt very honoured to be able to see and touch them. A few years later the museum came into being and when I went with my small daughter it was empty so she was allowed to sit on Fleming's stool and peer down his microscope. It worked, she became a molecular biologist!”

Rosemary thought the book: “gave a detailed but very accessible account of the discovery and development of penicillin, as well as showing the changes that have taken place over the last century in medical training and governance. Although giving full weight to Fleming's hard work and detailed observations, the book shows how many other people were involved in producing a clinically useful medication. It is remarkable to see how Fleming, a humble man, unintentionally caught the global attention and has become almost solely accredited with penicillin in the public imagination.”

However, Chris found the book: "Interesting and informative but a little bit tedious at times with all the detail about funding, internecine competition and who said what or went where. Somehow the characters did not always shine through. I felt it was a technical achievement rather than a book written from the heart."

Rosemary felt some imagination had been used in Elisabeth's Lists "to piece together the human experience behind inherited lists and diaries." She added: "I love the domestic details juxtaposed with the exotic travels and busy social life of an embassy wife. Although in many ways privileged, Elisabeth came across as a rather sad individual who led a restless and ultimately poignant life, which she tried to hold together by list writing. I found a feeling of futility underlying the story, but it explores the legacy which Elisabeth passes on to subsequent generations. The author parallels the premature ending of her grandmother Elisabeth's life as shown by the conclusion of the lists and diaries with the actual ending of her own mother's life as the story nears completion. In one way she has lost them both, but in another way she feels their presence in her own life."

Barbara said she found Elisabeth's Lists "rather hard going, in spite of being interesting and well written. It was all rather depressing with I felt a little too much focus on Lulah rather than Elisabeth. I know she didn't have that much to go on in reality as neither she nor her mother knew Elisabeth but I felt there was a really fascinating story somewhere but we got a bit too much of the author's own feelings. I did appreciate the descriptions of life in Franco's Spain particularly. Rio and Beirut were also interesting and I would have liked to know more. The use of the lists was quite clever but she did go on about them a bit towards the end. I found some of the other characters, especially Gerry, a bit shadowy. I would have liked to know more about him. So an interesting book but one that didn't quite appeal as much as the reviews on the cover promised."

Alison also struggled with the book. She said: "The review made it sound really good but the story actually made me feel sad and annoyed in equal measure. It was a fairly interesting read but I felt the narrative was constructed from very little. To build a story around a lot of lists felt a bit thin; possibly this was an example of a 'vanity project'? Elisabeth's life was quite varied but sadly too short. The author wrote the book to help her cope with her own mother's death and I hope that it was a healing process for her. I suppose I felt uncomfortable with this aspect of the book as everyone experiences and deals with loss in their lives and deals with the experience differently, and personally I wouldn't choose to address my grief in this way."

She added: "I was irritated that you couldn't read most of the lists and I think the text lost quite a bit because of this. More could have been made of the interesting places that Elisabeth lived in - I know the author was' padding out ' the lists to make a story but this was an opportunity lost. The book was top heavy with all the sad things in her life - her own mental health and the death of her brother, but she clearly had a lot

of good things in her life, which were rather glossed over. All in all it was an ok read but instantly forgettable and I wouldn't recommend it."

Sheila agreed that she would have liked the lists to be clearer to read. She said: " I have found it moving and enlightening about diplomats wives. At times I think the author went too deep but an unusual and interesting concept."

Chris found Twin Tracks engaging, and said: "Although I was only 11 at the time of the four minute mile I do remember a lot of the excitement it caused. I felt as if I was rooting for the author all the way through and he painted vivid pictures of various characters and events. There is no mention of a co writer but the book gave the impression that it was a series of remembered anecdotes, sometimes veering slightly off the theme. Could have done with a bit more attention to paragraphs when the subject changed."

Rosemary found Twin Tracks to be: "a wonderful first hand account of how enthusiasm and hard work drove an amateur athlete to the brilliant achievement of a sub four minute mile for the first time in history. At the same time he was training for his outstanding medical career and he went on to a life of distinguished public service, as well as being a devoted family man. The different "tracks" of this book mean it is not always chronological which can be hard to follow but it is enjoyable and inspirational, leaving me wondering how one person could achieve so many things in their lifetime!"

However Alison was not a fan. She explained: "It's very rare that I give up on a book but I failed dismally with this one. I was struggling along, bored rigid by his style of writing; I equate it to the 'I was born, I went to school, I moved house etc etc ' style. It's a shame as he was a very talented man in many ways who achieved so much in his life but his narrative was far too dry to be entertaining or to engage my interest."