



Book Club reviews (Feb/March 2023)

Thanks to everyone who took the time to comment on our latest round of book recommendations, as always we love to hear your thoughts!

Our first choice was 'Taste' by Stanley Tucci. Graham said: "I enjoyed reading this book, although at times I was a little frustrated as I think the author struggled to insert the recipes into the book, whereas a straightforward autobiography might have been better. However, overall, I think it worked fairly well. I liked his humour and honesty about his own and his wife's illnesses. I would happily read other books written by him and we are going to try some of his recipes, and will keep the book in our cookery section."

Jean enjoyed the variety of our recommendations this month and thought Taste was "an interesting account of his life through his strong family bond forged around the dinner table. All members of the family were passionate about their food and the sense of history and belonging it gave them cooking and eating together. He is carrying on the traditions with his own family (how many of us find ourselves repeating what our parents have said to us?). I enjoyed the recipes he included in the text. It was a particular tragedy for him when his oral cancer threatened not only his career as an actor but also his sense of self when he was no longer able to enjoy for himself or participate with his family when the very smell and texture of food disgusted him and gave him pain. His gruelling recovery was based upon his strength of character and the support he received from his family, and Deadpool. This book has made me want to see him in his films and TV series and to look out for other books he has published."

Barbara observed: "This is an enjoyable book when you want something by your bed that won't keep you up reading late into the night, that is not to say it is boring, far from it. Stanley has nice easy style as if he is talking so it is a nice counter to the emotions which are released in A Terrible Kindness!

"I particularly enjoyed the descriptions of his early family life and growing up in small towns in New York State. I also liked reading about various eateries in New York City but found it sad that so many 'neighbourhood' places have closed down.

"The descriptions of the dishes I found less interesting, most of them didn't appeal too meaty and tomatoey! I also really didn't fancy the Timpano (the dough thing with ragu sauce, cheese, pasta, salami, meatballs.... need I go on. No definitely not! The dishes which appealed and I will try are the fish stew and zucchini pasta!

"One thing which I do find offensive though is the American habit of using swear words as adjectives, or just using them period! Please, think of another expression!

"I did like the last chapter though where he writes about his illness and treatment and the after effects, it was sympathetically written and heartening, of course he had his treatment in the US in spite of living in London, but still there was no mawkishness or self pity and I found it quite informative. "So a pleasant little book on the whole although I much prefer eating food to reading about it and can't help wondering whether he would have found a publisher if he hadn't been a celebrity married to a literary agent!"

Our first fiction choice was 'The French House' by Jacquie Bloese and Sheila thought this was a good choice.

She told us: "I do not normally read or enjoy books of a family saga or as my husband calls them 'pot boilers'. However, I really enjoyed The French House, and it kept me wanting to read more. I thought it was well written, and the characters strong and well drawn.

"I didn't know anything about the German occupation of Guernsey, so this was of interest. I would like to visit the Channel Islands.

"I was frustrated by Emile, as he came across as a weak man at times, but liked his work ethic in the gardens. Letter was a strange one, and I did have a certain sympathy for her and the life she led. I was glad that she had the courage to finally express herself.

"The other characters were interesting especially 'the censor Schreiber', and I was saddened to hear of the lack of understanding of his homosexuality.

"The loose ends were tied a little too neatly for my liking, but all in all I found it a compelling and satisfying read."

Jean thought it was a 'slow burner'. She explained: "Emile had a hard life but was not a charismatic character for me. He had little control over his life and living in occupied Guernsey led to more hardships and brought out the worst and best in the characters in the book. I am glad that the 'loose ends' were tied up but I don't think I would look for another book by this author."

Our third choice was 'A Terrible Kindness' and Jean said it "had me gripped from the beginning." She said: "The Aberfan disaster was horrific and the book laid bare the terrible injuries of the children and the shock and grief of their parents. The caring and maturity with which the central character approached his work at the disaster did not protect him from the personal injury he suffered by being exposed to so much sorrow and distress. The image of him singing alone on the mountainside was moving. As was the later revelation of a grieving woman who heard his song. Nowadays he would be offered counselling. Then, after all the horrors and sleep deprivation he drove home from Wales to get on with his life. It triggered a memory for me when I was a student nurse, of laying out a patient in A & E after a violent car crash. Rising above personal feelings of horror and shock to deal with the dead person and his stunned relatives.

"I enjoyed the rest of the book with the revealing of the previous influences upon the life of the central character in his childhood and the importance to him of family tradition. The loss of his father and subsequent desertion of his mother when he chose embalming as his career. The impact of the disaster upon his future when he was unable to get engaged to his girlfriend. It was a complex book which held my attention and interest. It was a relief to have a happy ending."

Barbara said she thought "this was a really interesting and different book. I really enjoyed it in spite of some trepidation, I shed some tears but it was worth it."

"I actually agree with all the comments on the book jacket saying it was exquisitely crafted and incredibly moving. I loved that so much was written in the present tense, it made it so close and immediate, you could feel all the emotions running through William. It is also written with a certain humour which stops it all from becoming sentimental and mawkish."

"The characters are wonderful, maybe a bit allegorical but that works so well. I loved William and wanted everything to come right for him. I also loved Betty in Aberfan. I wasn't quite so sure of the characters of the mother and uncle Robert maybe they went a bit too far in holding grudges."

"My favourite section was the one when William goes to London to train and meets Gloria and Ray. I thought the writing about how he felt about Ray and how Ray insinuated himself into his life was just brilliant. I could feel it all, I think it may be something many of us have experienced in some form. This chapter was the best."

"The way William's feelings were described when he did things he knew that really he shouldn't but carried on anyway, that resonated so much too."

"I felt that the Midnight Choir chapter was maybe the weakest but it was needed to bring everything together."

"A truly wonderful book which provides an insight into a world we would rather ignore and pretend doesn't exist but is there for all of us, full of emotions, anguish, joy and insight. I recommend this book even though sometimes it makes us uncomfortable by holding up a mirror to human behaviour showing that even good people do foolish and hurtful things. A very human book."