



Book Club Reviews – April/May 2023

Thanks to everyone who took the time to submit reviews for our latest book club recommendations – we really do enjoy hearing your thoughts.

Our first choice this time was **"Still Life" by Sarah Winman.**

Sheila told us: "Reading the reviews for this book, I looked forward to reading it. However, I really struggled to get into it. It was a style of writing I hadn't encountered before and it put me off. But, I am so glad I persevered. What a delightful, well written book. All the characters were so well drawn - I really felt I knew them and cared about them and how their lives moved on. There was humour and pathos too.

"I especially liked Claude the parrot. I have never been to Florence (am going in September), but was entranced by the descriptions and art interpretations, and also saddened by the devastating floods. It was such a lovely tale of love, freedom and adventure."

Chris loved the book too. She said: "I was already a fan of this author before this. I liked the way people's lives went on, imperfectly at times, and there was a sense of continuity without a schmaltzy happy ending. I think the real heroine was Florence and I do remember the devastating floods there."

This choice also got a big thumbs up from Sandra. She explained: "Anyone who has an interest in art and history would like this book. At first, I found it quite hard to read, as I've never read a book before that had no speech marks. It took me a few chapters to get into the 'swing of things', but once I did, I found it really flowed.

"The characters are so varied and true to life. Having been to Florence in the 1990s, it was easy to imagine the locations, which were described in such detail, and visualise what it was like post-war and before the great flood of 1966. I liked the way that the author fitted the characters into true events. Several times I 'googled' something to read more about it and found the author to be very accurate in her description of real historical events. I think the highlight of this was towards the end of the book, when Whipps Cross Hospital was named. I worked there for 25 years!

"Overall, I liked this book and would consider reading another by this author."

The book was recommended to Barbara K and she gave a lengthy and detailed review. She said:

"I liked the first section very much and looked forward to seeing how the story developed and how the author would weave the characters back together and what she would make of them. I liked the sound of Evelyn and Ulysses and could quite imagine their friendship.

"The tale then takes us back to post war London and Peggy and the pub with a cast of somewhat unlikely characters who are quite entertaining. Not very much happens until Ulysses gets his legacy and goes off to Italy just like that, taking his ex-wife's daughter along as she prefers him, moves in and stays there, makes friends with everyone, spends his days at Michele's café and everything is lovely. So he didn't have any problems and no one questioned any of it. I know it is a novel but it was just a little bit unrealistic for me.

"That was all fine but nothing happened for a very long time, we hear about Peg who was rather an unlikely character, we don't hear much about Evelyn who was a bit more interesting. At this point it all got a little boring and reminded me of stories we used to write at school which went 'The sun was shining and the grass was green.....' and not a lot happens.

"Finally we got the flood, that part was excellent. That ominous sense of dread and disaster and the descriptions of the flood and the devastation were really vivid and compelling but then it all went a bit flat again and everything just went back to normal. Alys became a talented globe maker just like that and the whole episode didn't seem to leave any mark on any of the characters. There was also never any friction between any of the characters who all lived together, if not in the same flat the same building and seemed to share everything like a sort of blissful commune.

"I quite like the descriptions of the near misses when Ulysses and Evelyn nearly met but didn't. I'm glad they did eventually but somehow I can't see them all moving in and living happily ever after altogether.

"This is a nice book with a good premise but the characters are just a bit too unlikely and it is all a bit neat. Having said that there are some excellent descriptions and you get a very strong sense of place and feeling. I could quite imagine myself sitting in Michele's eating pasta looking out onto the square. Those were atmospheric and nice but they did go on a bit. I did find it quite repetitive in places especially when talking about the different characters and their feelings. The characters were also a bit similar and not very realistic.

"It was also too long, the last section about young Evelyn meeting E.M. Forster was just not needed in my opinion.

"So a nice atmospheric novel with very little relation to reality and on the long side. I quite enjoyed it but was relieved when I finally finished it."

Our next choice was "The Murder Room" by Mark Billingham. Graham told us he has read all of Billingham's Detective Thorne books but described this one as "average." His review does contain a spoiler but he explained: "I felt it was par for the course. I don't like authors bringing back old characters, but at least Stuart Nicklin seems to have been killed off now. He was never a character I could believe in"

Chris said: "A good exposition of police procedure but marred for me because it was one of a series and much of the past (and in my case unknown) history had to be included to make the story more coherent. Also I disliked the frequent warnings of what was to come offputting, and I don't relish the "protagonist as victim" scenario."

Our non fiction recommendation this time was **"Old Rage" by Sheila Hancock.** Chris was not impressed, explaining: "As I am a similar age to this author and I live in the same area as she does in West London, I found this somewhat of a non event. She has to have her say on everything and while I am happy to either agree or disagree with her, I found the views expressed were no different than those of the peer group I meet after Aquafit classes or when doing a stint at the charity shop. And she does moan a lot."