



November/December Reader Reviews

Here are the reviews for our latest round of recommendations – we were pleased to see more of you taking part and telling us what you thought – thank you for that! We hope you enjoy our next round.

Our first choice was **Landlines** by **Raynor Winn**.

Sheila S explained: “To understand why they took such extreme risks to do the walk post lockdown when Moth’s health was causing concern, it is necessary to read “The Salt Path”. In this first book they lose their family home and Moth is diagnosed with an incurable brain disease. Defying medical advice they walk the South West Coastal Path, wild camping along the way. In spite of the challenges faced, Moth’s health improves.

“In “Landlines” Raynor shares her emotions with her readers. These are woven between a colourful tapestry of landscape, nature, midges, heat, rain and sleeping in wet clothing. They survive the journey, Moth’s cognitive ability and mobility improves. The good news at time of publication his brain scan is normal.

“I was relieved that this intrepid couple arrived home in Cornwall after a hazardous thousand mile trek from Scotland with no more serious injuries than Moth breaking a finger and Raynor’s blistered feet.”

Rosemary had also enjoyed our previous recommendation of The Salt Path and found Landlines didn’t disappoint. She explained: “Her descriptions of the landscape, wildlife and above all the remaining trails of unspoiled natural habitat, after which the book is named, are wonderfully evocative and this is the great strength of her writing. Raynor’s message that we should wake up to the effects of climate change and destruction of nature comes through strongly, as a warning against greedy consumerism and a disconnection from nature, but a balance has to be struck with the needs of human beings who have to be warmed and fed, whether by cutting peat or mass farming, and sometimes I felt that the author was lecturing me. I think Raynor Winn addresses this balance more in the last few pages.

“I enjoyed the way the journey through the countryside was embedded in recent history which we all remember, such as England playing in the Euros and the difficulty finding meals and accommodation in the post Covid era. The account of Raynor and Moth’s time at Sycamore Gap was especially poignant in view of the fact that the tree has been recently felled by vandalism.

“Above all, this is a very human story inspired by hope, love and courage which overcame seemingly impossible barriers and defied all expectation of reason and medicine. Raynor Winn takes us with her on a journey which many of us would love to take in our dreams.”

Jenny found it “instantly readable, partly due to the good writing that engages well, also to follow Moth’s illness and find out what happens next.” However, she found that she enjoyed it less than the first two books “because the repeated lament about the demise of the natural world has become overworked and I found it encouraged page-turning.....not in a good way.

"For me, the original freshness of the prose, the story itself, and spending time with the characters was becoming less inviting. The second and third books helped us to get to know Ray and Moth, and they become rounded, fleshed out people, but something in this third book holds me back from completely buying into the authenticity. Perhaps cynically, I began to detect marketing creeping in, a great product being further exploited but not in the name of a literary piece of work, more as a commercial success to be expanded. It lacks the wide-eyed wonder of discovering Ray's sheer determination, and her own astonishment at her and Moth's ability to defy his medical diagnosis, and their survival against all odds. Landlines feels more contrived and less spontaneous. Perhaps by her third book, her writing might have become even better crafted and articulate, but it didn't lack this in the first place. It's possibly unfair, but to me it comes across as rather formulaic, she's found her niche and is now rollicking away.....I know, harsh criticism!"

Sheila J added: "This was one of the best books I have ever read. I don't read much non-fiction, so was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed it.

"Raynor has a talent for the descriptive. I loved the way she paints the pictures of skies and landscapes that she and Moth travel through, and their connection to it.

"Landlines is a thoughtful and well written book which can be read on several levels. Simply as a travelogue from Scotland to Cornwall, but also the emotions, worries, hopes and fears that Raynor in particular voices. To undertake such an epic journey, took so much courage and determination.

"The start of their journey in Cape Wrath interested me as I stayed in the area many years ago when my youngest daughter was six weeks old. I remember looking out at the hills and lochs and the sheer wildness of the terrain.

"Raynor expresses strong concerns about the destruction of our habitat through use of pesticides and climate change, and these are echoed throughout.

"I also enjoyed the "experience" of such a long walk (and cycle) with the camping, food, wildlife and encounters with fellow walkers and others in cafes. I won't eat chips again without thinking of Raynor and Moth's journey."

Ruth read **The Rotters Club** by **Jonathan Coe** which she admits she wasn't sure about but then really enjoyed. She said: "It was something I probably would not have thought of reading but I found it difficult to put down, as it wove the story of Benjamin and his friends becoming young adults with their dreams and aspirations, set against the background of strikes and power cuts back in the 70's. I liked the way the adults lives were intertwined although the teenagers were more concerned with growing up than the impact of the 'winter of discontent ' which lead to a baby boom! I do remember it as I was bringing up three young children at the time."

Chris M said: "It was interesting to read about times one has lived through, but overall I found the changes in the narrator a bit disconcerting and the story line a somewhat tedious."

Jenny also read The Rotters Club and quoted the book: 'If you remember the 60's, you really weren't there'. She explained: "Which I do, and I was. But of the 70's, I could more truthfully say that I was there, but I don't remember them. During the early 70's I was mostly travelling, carelessly spending money that I didn't have to use to repay my college loan, sending sporadic postcards to my worried parents and only

vaguely tuning into news from home of strikes, three day weeks, and people having to eat pitta bread because they couldn't buy proper loaves.

"The Rotters' Club saved me the effort, then. In roughly 400 pages, Jonathan Coe covers the decade from every angle; political, historical, cultural, musical, social....and his three protagonists, the school friends Ben, Philip and Doug, bring to the page life in 70's Birmingham with very funny and often tragic consequences, using real events in a way that echoes film makers interspersing real footage into scripted drama.

"There are so many quotes from this book that it could almost be appreciated simply from reading them, and as I reread it, much of it became instantly familiar. I remember enjoying it when it was first published, but this time round I found I was tuning into the saddest moments and really not appreciating the humour, possible because the 'coming of age' novel has developed into almost a contemporary literary form, and this one now seems so dated. The tragic stories within the story leapt out at me. The holiday in Denmark, for instance, when Rolf, the German boy is the target for serious bullying from two Danish boys next door. This story within the story has for its narrator their grandmother Marie, who explains the traumatic events behind their behaviour in a vividly affecting way. This steps out of the context of the 70's decade and I remembered it well.

"This is only one of several inserts into the main story line and this itself is referred to as an unpublished story found among Benjamin Trotter's papers by his niece....and although I think this is a clever device, I'm not sure why Coe has worked it quite like this. It alerts me to the fact that I could have missed something that he has played with the construction of the novel for some reason and that there are other literary references that not all readers will pick up. Very likely it provides material and hooks for sequels to be added on to; I haven't checked.

"I skim read the book as I remembered passages I no longer wanted to revisit, and felt that the effort was not rewarded. Such a dense book, not difficult to read and full of history and events but ultimately I think the characters didn't resonate with me and I can't say that I came to know them or relate to them. I cared more for some of the characters who left the page than those who were telling the story."

Graham read **The House in the Woods** by **Mark Dawson** but wasn't sure about it. He explained: "I was expecting to enjoy this book as it seemed to have the type of story line I like. However, I found Mark Dawson's style very annoying. He seemed to need to say things that better writers would credit the reader with knowing....opening doors to rooms, starting the car etc.. There are many examples of this. Most authors would find a better way of explaining basic things like that. I don't know his other works, maybe they are better"

Jenny said they "completely swallowed this book", adding: "as implausible as the plot is, I found it believable enough in the moment to continue reading. I thoroughly enjoyed it. The characters themselves hold everything together and I warmed towards them immediately. The friendship and professional relationship between Mack and Atticus has its ups and downs, and my sympathies are shared between them, which clearly helps me forgive any inconsistencies as they move through the novel. Tension between them on a professional level, as they find themselves on opposite sides of the case, plus the sexual tension as previous lovers, gives a rich background to a puzzling murder mystery story.

"The Mallender characters are well drawn, with plenty going on in the dynamics of their family life to confuse and offer false starts for the police, Mack and Atticus, and all together I found it a very enjoyable read."

"I enjoyed this book as much as the previous ones. I would have liked more detailed maps and found myself looking at Google and some ordnance survey maps for elucidation. I couldn't do anything like this and am in awe of the author. Where next?"

Sandra said: "I was so pleased to see a murder mystery recommended as I love a good crime novel and this ticked all the boxes for me. I found it easy to read and I liked the short chapters, meaning that I didn't have to stop midway through a particular narrative.

"Atticus is a charismatic, talented private investigator who not only uses his knowledge and instincts to get results, but does not always operate within the law. Much of the book is set in the courtroom and for anyone who has never been to a trial the description of proceedings in a courtroom was accurate and informative.

"I liked the many twists and turns in this novel; just when I thought I knew for sure who the murderer was, another twist in the story happened and I was left wondering again.

"I was intrigued by the online chess that Atticus played. One of his opponents definitely had a part to play in the murder, but wasn't revealed in this book.

"I enjoyed this book so much, that I read the next two books in the series. I'm now waiting for the fourth book as there were still loose ends to tie up at the end of the third book. As the author states, 'Atticus Priest will return'. I can't wait!"