



Reading Circle Book Reviews

September 2010 - *Engleby* by Sebastian Faulks.

A disturbing novel about a very disturbed young man. One hopes the anti-hero of the title will prove innocent but the more you read, the more you realise he is indeed capable of murder.

Credible characters with lots of fine detail from an established author and a plot that gradually unravels to its only conclusion. Some found it an uncomfortable read, others enjoyed it more.

Readers score: **6.3**

Also written *Birdsong*, *Charlotte Grey*, *A Week in December*, etc.

November 2010 - *The Echo* by Minette Walters (430 pages).

This is for readers who like the crime thriller/detective genre. Detailed storyline with a likeable main character trying to piece together and make sense of an apparently motiveless murder. All loose ends satisfactorily resolved, resulting in a satisfying read.

Readers score: **6.5**

Also written *The Ice House*, *Acid Row*, *The Scold's Bridle*, etc.

January 2011 - *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson (510 pages).

A real roller-coaster of a read. Very like the Russian classics the first part is the hardest. It is a slow uphill struggle to come to grips with the foreign names, unknown places and culture, oddball main characters and a complex plot. Some of our readers wondered if it was all worth it at about a third of the way through. But don't give up. As the plot starts to unravel you find you are on the downhill part of the roller-coaster and there is no putting the book down until the end and the final denouement. We all enjoyed it and most have gone on to read books 2 and 3 with equal satisfaction.

Readers score: **9**

Also written *The Girl Who Played with Fire* and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest*.

February 2011 - *The Divide* by Nicholas Evans.

A favourite with our group. A good all-round novel on lots of levels, the Divide of the title is a geographical ridge in the Rockies under which nestles an outdoor leisure resort - the opening scene of the initial murder and the final scene of its resolution. There are other divisions; within families, society and culture and we found the story and main characters were compelling and written with sensitivity.

Readers score: **8.8**

Also written *The Horse Whisperer* and *The Loop*.

March 2011 - *When Will there be Good News* by Kate Atkinson (579 pages).

Book 3 of a crime series with DCI Louise Munroe as a likeable but flawed main character. An appalling crime comes home to roost after the convicted man is released from prison. We all enjoyed it but it might be more satisfactory to read the previous books to get a better fix on the main personalities.

Readers score: **7.3**

Also written *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, *Case Histories* and *One Good Turn*, etc.

April 2011 - *The Guernsey Literary & Potato Peel Pie Society* by Mary Ann Schaffer and Annie Burrows (240 pages).

A delightful read told in the form of correspondence between a rather quirky but likeable group of main characters. Good descriptions of life on the island under the German occupation and the privations and restrictions that lead to lasting friendships based on a love of reading. Somewhat implausible ending but we all found it gentle and heart-warming.

Readers score: **7.7**

May 2011 - *Strange Fits of Passion* by Anita Shreve.

Atmospheric novel based around the chilling consequences of women married to violent men. Told mainly in the form of letters and interviews to a local journalist who then interprets them in such a way as to blight the lives of the main characters. Intriguing and leaving the reader in doubt as to what was reality and what imagined.

Readers score: **8**

Also written *The Pilot's Wife*, *Eden Close*, *Resistance*, etc.

July 2011 - *The Cellist of Sarajevo* by Steven Galloway (223 pages).

Short, highly graphic picture of life during the siege of Sarajevo and the trials of ordinary people trying to go about their daily lives. Provoked strongly opposing views with some moved by the story and others really disliking it.

Readers score: **6.8**

First novel to be published in the UK.

August 2011 - *The House at Riverton* by Kate Morton (600 pages).

Written in the style of the period, most of us thought this book was wordy and too long but nevertheless had been well researched. Recounting the passing of the old "upstairs/downstairs" era, it was a light summer read but reminiscent of several other books written on the subject.

Readers score: **5.7**

Also written *Burning Bright*, *The Forgotten Garden*.

October 2011 - *One Day* by David Nicholls (450 pages).

A story of modern times (80's onwards) and a relationship that twists and turns over a 20-year period from students through careers, relationships, etc. to early middle age. Most of us liked the two main characters whilst acknowledging their failings but the man did arouse some strong feelings of being self-centred and weak. We thought it well written with good descriptions and insights - the author started out as a scriptwriter for TV/radio and it shows.

Readers score: **7.1**

Also written *Your Starter for 10*.

November 2011 - *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hussein (415 pages).

A wonderful read, full of colourful imagery, bringing the plight of women in Afghanistan into harsh reality. Although written several years ago, sadly the problems for women in a dominant male society remain largely unaltered, particularly in the rural areas where traditions change hardly at all and women still have few rights and no voice. Makes you realise how lucky we are!

Readers score: **8.5**

December 2011 - *The Waiting Game* by Bernice Reubens (240 pages).

Love it or loath it? We had one dissenting voice but for the rest of us we delighted in the black comedy, the wicked antics and quirky characters we read about. All set in the oh-so-respectable confines of a rather select retirement home for gentlefolk of a certain "class". What a delicious read and told in such detail that the characters came to life. Although they were all playing out the 'waiting game' there was no room for morbidity as the storyline went from one comic episode to the next. As someone said "Growing old disgracefully"!

Readers Score: **7.8**

January 2012 - *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett (450 pages).

A well written book enjoyed by all for its arresting subject matter plotting the lives of black maids in a racially segregated community in the deep south of USA. It depicts the tensions not only between black and white but also the plight of the "poor whites" caught in between and despised on all sides. This first novel took five years to write and was rejected by 60 literary agents before finding a champion. Racial sensitivities live on still!

Readers Score: **8.6**

February 2012 - *The Siege* by Helen Dunmore (290 pages).

A beautifully written and detailed account of life during the blockade of Leningrad as experienced through the lives of one family as they struggle to stay alive during the harsh winter of 1941/42.

The gradual decline of a once prosperous and vibrant city as it comes to terms with the horror of the unstoppable advance of the German armies and the plight of its citizens subsequently is graphically portrayed - indeed some found it too emotional to read it all! Most members enjoyed it in spite of its depressing storyline.

Readers Score: **7.5**

March 2012 - *Before I Go To Sleep* by S J Watson (370 pages).

Whilst this book was a good read at the time we were left with questions unanswered and it was not wholly engaging. For a first novel it was original but perhaps overly ambitious. We felt the main character, Christine, was not quite plausible - was this because it had been written by a man perhaps. Most people enjoyed the first part of the book rather than the second as we had by then more or less worked out the scenario and the ending was disappointing as it was rather too abrupt, leaving many things in the air - as if the author had simply run out of steam.

Readers Score: **7**

May 2012 - *A Question of Loyalties* by Allan Massie (430 pages).

This book provoked a different response from each of us. Some really enjoyed it; others found the writing style difficult and confusing. We were all agreed that it did give us a good insight into life in France during the occupation and the story itself was a good one. However, the characters were not generally engaging and the plot was rather lost under a welter of words. Those who had, found they had enjoyed it more on a second reading.

Readers Score: **6.4**

June 2012 - *Passionate Minds* by David Bodanis (312 pages).

This was another book that engendered a wide diversity of views within the group. We were all agreed that we gained a good insight into the views and behaviour of upper class society at that time and in particular the role of women to provide ornamentation, hospitality and idle chatter but very little else. It gave us useful background on a slice of life in France at that time and the beginnings of the Enlightenment ideas and thinking. However, some among us found the author's writing style dry and hard to engage with.

Readers Score: **7.2**

July 2012 - *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden (490 pages).

An easy-to-read story, if overly long, which gave a fascinating and detailed insight into the lives and culture of Japanese geisha. We were agreed it made a refreshing change from anything else we had read recently because of the so very different background and behaviours the book described. It proved just as enjoyable on a second reading too. Apparently, the film is beautifully done although not entirely faithful to the story.

Readers Score: **7.5**

August 2012 - *Pigs in Heaven* by Barbara Kingsolver (340 pages).

This book ticked most of the boxes. It was beautifully written, very descriptive and had lots of messages. Small wonder it is a set text in US schools. On one level it was full of comedy and comic caricatures but of course there were political, social and cultural issues to provoke the reader into thinking more deeply around the subject. I think we were all agreed it was an enjoyable read and we all learnt from it.

September 2012 - *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith (400 pages).

The majority enjoyed the book - "delightful, enjoyable, a light summer read" whilst on the other hand some found it "trivial and unengaging". We agreed it could have been classed as a children's book but some of the descriptions were really original and you had to keep reminding yourself that it was written well over half a century ago. This was the first novel that Dodie Smith wrote in 1949 when she was then 52, living in the States and nostalgic for the British way of life. It was no mean task therefore to write the book from the viewpoint of a 17 year-old narrator which we agreed was not altogether successful.

October 2012 - *The Rotters' Club* by Jonathan Coe (402 pages).

Those present agreed that this book was an enjoyable read, both funny and tragic. However those who read it for the first time, found the second half a little confusing and long drawn out. Jonathan Coe was born in 1961 in Birmingham and would have been a teenager during the same time line as this book. The story of Benjamin Trotter and his friends growing up in Birmingham during the 1970's, not only tells the story of the struggles of youth but is also a social history of the day and we all found it very nostalgic.

November 2012 - *The Paris Wife* by Paula McLain (337 pages).

The book circle was in total agreement, that this was a really enjoyable book. There is much written about Hemingway, his affairs and lifestyle, when he had become famous but this is the story of his first marriage to Hadley Richardson from her perspective. Beautifully written, it is full of the emotions of a woman totally enthralled with her husband's energy, intensity and burning ambition and prepared to sacrifice herself for his happiness and success.

December 2012 - *Pigeon English* by Stephen Kelman (260 pages).

Harri, the 11-year old "hero" of Pigeon English, appealed to all of us in his struggle to fit in and make sense of living on a bleak multi-cultural sink estate after his happy, carefree life in Ghana. His childish knowingness coupled with his native innocence and naivete left him so vulnerable to the evils of the world around him. Agreed, the slang, jargon and various foreign words were somewhat daunting and, for some, off-putting at first but having persevered it was a story full of comic as well as tragic incidents and told in such a colourful and immediate writing style.

January 2013 - *Fruit of the Lemon* by Andrea Levy (340 pages)

Most of the group enjoyed this book, in particular the descriptive passages, and the general idea that you get to know yourself through your family history. Of course the racial prejudices of the day were tackled and it was interesting to learn of those also existing in Jamaica, where the degree of your "blackness" was very important in certain circles where the whiter your skin was, the more you were acceptable. *Small Island* by the same author was also highly recommended.

February 2013 - *The Life of Pi* by Jan Maartel

The concensus was that we all had mixed feelings about this book. We were all agreed that the first part set in India about the zoo and Pi's quest for religion was the best part of the book. We also agreed that there was lots of colourful descriptions and vivid imagery. However once the story started to go into realms of fantasy which stretched the boundaries of credulity most of us switched off or became too confused. None of us could make much sense of why there were the two endings, nor why it was described as a "religious novel". We decided the author would have been better to stick to straight story-telling and leave the philosophy out of it. We did not think it warranted the Booker Prize.

March 2013 - *The Art of Racing in the Rain* by Garth Stein (338 pages)

While a couple within the group found the book unengaging, the majority of us this choice. It was an easy to read, heart-warming and uplifting story using Enzo the pet dog as narrator to philosophise on the meaning of life, why we are all here and what happens next etc. was a novel idea. Some found the car racing tracts got in the way and skipped over them while recognising however that they were relevant. But who was the little boy, Enzo, at the end? Simply a little boy or a reincarnation of our canine hero? Who knows, but there were so many issues touched on in the book that I think we could have spent ages afterwards debating them.

May 2013 - *At Sea* by Laurie Graham (337 pages) & *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* by Rachel Joyce (368 pages)

Two delightful and very amusing books which we all enjoyed. Both have as their central character a person who grows and develops a renewed sense of awareness over the course of the events that unfold. Enid in the first book at last has the opportunity to break free of her husband and unsatisfactory marriage by mixing with a whole range of characters who teach her to have fun and be herself for once. She learns quickly! On the other hand, Harold Fry also goes on a pilgrimage of self-discovery but in the end wants only to renew his failed marriage and find again the wife he has loved over the years but who has spurned him. An optimistic ending is in store on that front but there are many social issues raised along the way.

June 2013 - *The Hundred Year Old Man Who Climbed Out Of The Window And Disappeared* by Jonas Jonasson (396 pages)

This Swedish saga got mixed reviews from laugh out loud to whimsical to un-engaging. Some felt it was just too long yet others found it fun and original. True, a tale of the life of a centenarian cannot be told in five minutes and yes it was highly fantastical but for a first novel it showed lots of imagination and ingenuity. The humour did not work for some but then we worked out that we all responded to humour in different ways.

July 2013 - *The State of the Union* by Douglas Kennedy (630 pages)

The author gave us much to think about in his epic tale and I think we covered most aspects - mother or parent and daughter relationships; the hidden depths within people; the obstacles we make for ourselves throughout life; the difficulty to ever be content; the fear of tackling the new or unknown. I could go on and on as it was such a broad canvass and an unputdownable (if there is such a word) book once you got into it. It certainly gave us plenty to go at and we all had picked up different aspects which rang personal bells. Altogether a very good read and to be recommended.

August 2013 - *The Scheme for Full Employment* by Magnus Mills (340 pages)

This was a very different novel from anything we have read as a group before and we had plenty to say on it considering its length - or rather lack of it! Shades of *Animal Farm* we all agreed on but *Postman Pat* was also mentioned. Indeed it was a simple tale simply told and the author, Magnus Mills, certainly drew on his experiences as a bus driver. I think the majority found the storyline was very grey, rather mundane, routine, impersonal and set in a virtually all-male environment. As someone said, a book supposedly about full employment but with nobody actually fully employed. Small wonder the scheme imploded in the end.

October 2013 - *Dominion* by C J Sansom (560 pages)

The majority of us enjoyed the book, did find it a page-turner after possibly a slow start and did enjoy the plot and the inter-action of real characters with the fictional ones. But at the same time there were adjectives such as: ponderous, too long and boring, not engaging enough etc and one reader has not been able to finish it as it was keeping her awake at night! We did however all appreciate the skill and amount of research that went into the writing and the rather sobering thought that this is how it could all have turned out. So a great read for some but not for others.

November 2013 - *Whistling for the Elephants* by Sandi Toksvig (300 pages)

There was however no general consensus in our views. We agreed it was largely enjoyable, funny and a good light-hearted holiday read but not a book to be recommended particularly. There were lots of eccentric characters and some lovely little details of the times but then some thought it descended into farce and became totally incredible. Also Dorothy who sometimes talked like a ten year-old but at others was far too worldly wise. There were lots of serious and feminist issues in the background but they seemed to get lost in the general hotchpotch of the plot. You could hear Sandi's voice coming through and, like her, it was quirky.

January 2014 - *Peached for Monsieur le Curé* by Joanne Harris (540 pages)

Our group was as one with this book; a great read, beautifully written with a variety of credible and well-drawn characters. It is a follow up to *Chocolat* by the same author and set in a small village in rural France. But is bang up-to-date with the many social, religious and moral issues raised when two cultures collide. Comes highly recommended."

March 2014 - *The Bay at Midnight* by Diane Chamberlain (470 pages)

This one was difficult to sum up really. Comments ranged from - too long, good insights into how families cope with grief, rather simplistic, no irony or finesse, how a death and guilt affects people for life and changes them, several social issues raised including black/white interface. I think to sum up from this cornucopia we all enjoyed the storyline and wanted to finish the book to see how it ended but we didn't get much else out of it, perhaps because it was a book written for an American audience? Who knows, but it did not really engage any of us.

April 2014 - *Hunting Unicorns* by Bella Pollen (350 pages)

This choice was popular with our group and a witty account of life among the decaying and cash starved English upper classes. It is well crafted and described as a cracking romantic comedy with a Wodehouse feel. The author's background ensures an accurate and highly poignant portrait of the main characters and their backgrounds. A good light-hearted read which touches on so many social and historical issues which give it added depth and poignancy.

May 2014 - *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn (510 pages)

We all thought this was a well plotted if rather dark psychological thriller with many unexpected twists and turns. In fact it gave rise to lots of different discussions such as how much background and parental influences lead to the flawed and twisted characters we read about. Was it nature or nurture? Whichever, it has a gritty storyline described with vivid imagery and strong language and so very different from our previous read. The one criticism was the open ending. But could it have been otherwise? The author felt it was the only ending possible to leave both her characters suspended in a purgatory of their own making. That the author appeared relatively young also surprised us but the fact that she did her writing in a dark, silent basement did not. How like Amy might she really be!!

July 2014 - *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes (150 pages)

For such a short book I think we came up with as many theories as we had readers for what had taken place within the story and maybe one of the appeals of a good tale is that it leaves you guessing and wanting to go back into it to find more clues. I think it should have been subtitled "you just don't get it do you?". We still did not get round to deciding whether it was a worthy Booker winner in spite of its brevity.

August 2014 - *The Virgin's Lover* by Philippa Gregory (540 pages)

To be honest it had mixed reviews. Was it a serious historical novel or a romantic novel which happened to be set in Tudor times? She is a prolific and popular author, especially of this type of book, but there is controversy among historians as to her claim to be a historical novelist. The main characters did indeed exist in real life but the rest, as they say, is ...er fiction. It was long on romance and short on action. Not perhaps as riveting as the Shardlake books nor as original as Hilary Mantel's novels. However, an enjoyable light read.

September 2014 - *The Guilty One* by Lisa Ballantyne (450 pages)

Those of us who were at the meeting enjoyed it and were delighted with this selection. We found the story and characters credible, particularly the passages relating to Minnie and the young Daniel which were more fleshed out and descriptive. I think we all realised that Sebastian had been guilty all along in spite of his charming streak; that Minnie had been hard done by by Daniel and that Daniel himself had turned out to be a bit of a loner with a reluctance to enter into commitments. The author's research into childhood abuse and its results and the juvenile criminal justice system were acknowledged and for a first novel it had a lot going for it.

October 2014 - *The Darkest Hour* by Barbara Erskine (550 pages)

This book was considered by the majority as a really enjoyable and entertaining read, particularly as the story unfolded and the haunting episodes became more frequent, whether you were inclined to believe in "something out there" or not. Yes, it was a bit 'Mills & Boon', particularly at the beginning, but most of the characters gained credibility as the story developed. A few loose ends and a bit overly long but, for me, I enjoyed reading a ghost story which I have not done for years .. and it kept me awake a couple of nights - listening out for strange sounds in the middle of the night!

December 2014 - *The Virgin Blue* by Tracy Chevalier (360 pages)

This book had mixed reviews. Surprising really as the author has written over seven books, all very different and all successful. This was her first novel and obviously not her best. We found the historical episodes better than the current day storyline but the novel was unsatisfying as a whole, the characters not engaging and sketchy, the ending inconclusive and parts just not credible.

January 2015 - *Restoration* by Rose Tremain (400 pages)

We were split 50/50 with three really enjoying the book and the rest of us to varying degrees not so. Rose Tremain's *Restoration*, based in the time of Charles II and written about 20 years ago was nominated for the Booker Prize and described by one reviewer as a 'Knickerbocker Glory' of a story. It was apparently loosely based on the life of Pepys. Our hero, Merivel, was at different times a buffoon, a popinjay, a court jester but also a qualified and eventually skilled doctor. Some found him very likeable, others were left cold. Some really appreciated the writing style, others felt it was not as good as similar historical novels. You can't win 'em all as they say.

February 2015 - *Ignorance* by Michèle Roberts (230 pages)

Ignorance, was agreed by all of us to have been a winning choice. The story itself covered so many wartime issues in a powerful but understated way, beginning through the eyes of a young girl. Gradually, the hardships and conflicts of occupation unfolded and the undercurrents became obvious as the different characters were brought into play. Cleverly plotted and of course beautifully written. Wonderful, sensuous imagery, full of textures, sounds and smells. It is just a shame it ended when it did as I think we would all have liked to find out more of what happened to the characters once the war ended.

March 2015 - *Terrorist* by John Updike (430 pages)

This is a very topical novel, written in 2007, and dealing with the radicalisation of young and idealistic Islamists. Something which is happening not only in the States but currently all over Europe. We all appreciated Updike's detailed descriptions of people and places which vividly brought to life the main characters within a socially decaying and impoverished American society. With over sixty novels in his portfolio, this book is a good example of Updike's powerful and rich prose and a good insight into his pet themes of the sorrows, frustrations and banalities of American life."

May 2015 - *The Husband's Secret* by Liane Moriarty (400 pages)

This book was described as 'unputdownable' on the front cover. Whilst we didn't quite go along with that, we all agreed it was an easy and enjoyable read which raised several moral issues and dilemmas. Indeed, the author through her cast of characters managed to cover most of the emotions - guilt, grief, love, lust, family unity and relationship break-up. Some really liked the book and storytelling but others were not so turned on and felt some of the events were too contrived. However, we did all agree the Epilogue of alternative outcomes did not add anything to the plot and served rather to confuse. A good holiday read overall.

June 2015 - *The Razor's Edge* by Somerset Maugham (340 pages)

The majority of us enjoyed this book; it was easy to read, the characters real and vibrant. Through this largely auto-biographical work, Maugham as the narrator, gave us a detailed picture of a slice of society at a particular period and followed Larry along his quest for enlightenment. The book was published in 1944, 50 years after Maugham's first novel, and when he was already famous with four plays running in London at the same time.

July 2015 *The Little Paris Bookshop* by Nina George (350 pages)

Our verdicts on this book were somewhat inconclusive. No-one really rated it and we all found certain aspects we liked but others which rankled. We liked the descriptions of France, from the pension full of idiosyncratic characters in Paris, the journey down the canals and rivers and the countryside around Provence. None of us felt the characters were fully credible and some of the situations seemed rather contrived - all too pat. As to the main character, Jean, we all had had enough of his angst by the end of the book. Although she has written numerous books, short stories, newspaper articles, this is the author's first book to be translated from the original German into English. It was written shortly after the death of her father - her 'best friend' - which greatly affected her. The writing of this book was part of her way of coming to terms with this and Jean's journey of discovery was loosely based on her father's experiences.

August 2015 *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult (380 pages)

Our group could not reach a consensus on this one. On balance I think more of us enjoyed the novel than disliked it. Whilst some found it an absorbing page-turner, others complained about the credibility of the characters and the 'cop out' twist in the tale at the end. The author's research was acknowledged but again some thought there was too much medical detail in there and the book was overly long. It did of course raise many topical

moral and ethical issues around designer babies, organ donations, a person's right to die etc, and we all could cite instances we knew of where families had to contend with similar circumstances. Certainly a book to engender lots of debate but not agreement in our case.

September 2015 *Elizabeth is Missing* by Emma Healey (270 pages)

The characters in the book were plausible and well drawn. We all agreed Maud's struggle with progressive dementia was well described, particularly as this was a first novel by a writer in her twenties who had observed the behaviours of her two grandmothers to get inside the head of a confused and increasingly muddled 80 year old. The daughter's struggle to clear up after her mother and maintain her patience, especially when Maud moved in with her was heartfelt as was the grand-daughter's amused (bemused) attitude. That was the present. Maud's flashbacks to her childhood within a post-War family and community struggling to make ends meet was also very true to the period, plus the impact of her big sister Sukey's sudden disappearance on her family and friends.

November 2015 *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd

I think it is fair to say that our group was more or less split 50/50 over this novel; some really got a lot out of this "coming of age" book with its racial tensions, family relationships, strong and somewhat eccentric female characters, social issues and indeed notes on bee-keeping; whilst for others it was a light read - hardly memorable, with a rather trite plot and too many bee facts. However, it has to be said that *The Secret Life of Bees* was a huge best-seller when it was first published and the author's subsequent novel, *The Mermaid Chair* was also a No.1.

January 2016 *Levels of Life* by Julian Barnes (117 pages)

This collection of three short stories is at once a celebration of love and a profound examination of sorrow. It received a mixed response though with some of us appreciating it more than others. One criticism was the perceived lack of a link between the three stories and the final story, where the author describes in such detail his grief and loss over the death of his wife, was thought by some to be overly long and repetitive. On the other hand, not everyone had finished the book and the final story is very much the most important and engaging part. As usual, as many views as there were readers.

February 2016 *Custard Tarts and Broken Hearts* by Mary Gibson

We all agreed it was an easy, light read but not much more and it had really nothing to distinguish it from hundreds of other historical novels. Yes, the issues relating to the period such as the Bermondsey women's strike, the matchbox piecework in the evenings to make ends meet, the recruitment for the war, the horrors of the battlefields of the Eastern Front, the plight of the war horses were all touched on. But just this long list will make you realise that the author attempted to cover far too much in one novel. Hence there was not sufficient depth on any one issue. The writing was pretty ordinary, not gritty or real enough. And the ending was implausibly 'happy ever after'. The author has written two further novels since this, her first- *Jam and Roses* set in the Kent hop fields in the 1920's was a top ten Kindle bestseller; and *Gunner Girls and Fighter Boys* about the ATS in the Second World War.

March 2016 *The Paying Guests* by Sarah Waters (600 pages)

This book was universally liked, even though several thought it could have been a good bit shorter than the 600 pages we had to read. However, it was well written, with lots of detail and true to the period. It was obviously well researched and the characters, because they were so well drawn were credible and came to life outside the page. Most of the author's books contain lesbian themes and this one was no exception. Some found this aspect made for slightly uncomfortable reading but the developing relationship between the two main characters, Frances and Lillian, was a fascinating if tortuous one. Other themes touched upon were the class distinctions, the crude gathering of clues after the murder (no DNA testing etc which we now take for granted) and the nightmare that was illegal abortion in those days. Our group gave it the thumbs up.

May 2016 *Flight* by Isabel Ashdown (320 pages)

Isabel Ashdown, 46, lives in Sussex with her husband and two children and has three previous books to her name. Before becoming a full time writer she had held a highly paid (and highly stressful) marketing job with Body Shop until she eventually found it too hard to juggle between work and home and opted to try to make a successful career in writing. Luckily, her first book *Glasshopper* was a winner and she got her first contract.

We were all agreed the novel was easy to read, with each chapter focusing on a different character but time switching between past and present. The threesome relationship was unusual, very intense and close but not sexual whilst it remained a threesome. So far so good. Then came the thorny issue of post-natal depression. Some found Wren's overnight change of lifestyle acceptable in the circumstances she found herself in, while others thought it just too incredulous. Similarly, the eventual coming together after twenty years - along with daughters Phoebe and Ava - was deemed to be somewhat contrived. However, the post-natal depression was really heartfelt. The clues were there - a solitary childhood, safety at home, not wanting to go outside, a mother with similar symptoms, feeling like a ghost or a shadow once the baby was born. We did wonder whether the author had experienced this kind of trauma herself. A provocative novel, not so much the story itself but the issues it raised.

June 2016 *James Miranda Barry* by Patricia Dunker

A good choice we were all agreed. Based on a real life person, this fascinating tale of a woman living as a man was beautifully written as it followed his/her very successful career around the world. There were many complex personalities to add to the mix but we were left with the main questions unresolved - who was his father and was his sexuality ever confirmed. A very enjoyable and entertaining read.

July 2016 *A God in Ruins* by Kate Atkinson

A God in Ruins was written as a sequel to *Life after Life* and continues the story of Teddy Todd as he comes to terms with life after the war, marriage, fatherhood, being a grandfather and finally his decline into old age.

We all loved the detailed descriptions of life as a bomber pilot during the war and the perils of flying bombing sorties over Germany. The contributions made by these pilots has only recently been properly recognised and the extremely high mortality rate they suffered: "like throwing birds against a wall to no effect". Indeed, the author wrote it as a tribute to these brave men who defended the country unhesitatingly.

Most of us found the structure of the book somewhat confusing at first as the narrative goes backwards and forwards in time over four generations but once that was taken on board we all appreciated the amount of detail research, the structure, the humour intertwined with pathos - indeed the craft of a good novelist. A book to be recommended.

September 2016 *The New Woman* by Charity Norman

The New Woman certainly caused us all to consider the sometimes difficult issues surrounding the whole LGBT debate which is so topical at present. It seems that about 1% of the UK population are transgender - and we had to get our heads round the differences between gender identity and sexual orientation. Our genes and hormones are determined before birth but luckily people who find they don't or cannot fit into "normal" social roles are becoming more acceptable and better understood by our present day society. We all agreed the novel was well written, credible and had a good pace. We followed Luke's slow and painful transition into Lucia and the effects it had on his family, friends and work colleagues. We recognised this was likely to be a somewhat easier process for someone from a middle class background rather than from a working class arena where attitudes and access to counselling might be tougher. The author had had broad first-hand exposure and experience of the whole transgender scene and the book reflected how well and thoroughly she had researched these issues. Her characters were credible and we felt their painful journeys were realistically dealt with. It's a thought-provoking book to be recommended.

November 2016 *Saturday* by Ian McEwan

Everyone talked about this novel enthusiastically, both the storyline but more particularly the author's wonderful way with words. His descriptions were so vivid that you, the reader, were there at the scene, whether it was in the operating theatre, on the squash court or cowering on the couch with the family whilst a derranged youth was threatening your life at knifepoint in your own home.

We followed the central character, neurosurgeon Henry Perowne, for 24 hours one Saturday in February 2005 during an eventful day starting in the early hours with his sighting of a burning plane flying low over central London on it's way to Heathrow. Was it an accident or a terrorist attack? The sense of possible impending danger and threat pervades the book; McEwan, like all of us, was knocked out by the 9/11 trauma - "when fact overwhelmed fiction". We are all now much more aware of such threats to our society and indeed a passage at the end of the book correctly predicts the London bombings that happened two months after its publication. This was just one issue out of many that were touched upon in the novel which made it ideal for a group discussion. Highly recommended

December 2016 *The Other Hand* by Chris Cleave

Very good book choice. We all enjoyed it, if enjoy is the right word, as there were some very harrowing passages that will stay with us for quite a while.

One of the protagonists, Little Bee, escapes the violence and true horror of war torn Nigeria only to find that 2yrs in a detention centre, as an illegal immigrant, a different kind of horror. We thought that Little Bee was a sympathetic and well drawn character. Unfortunately, most of us did not feel the same way about Sarah who we found weak, wracked by her feelings of guilt but doing nothing about it. We were not sure that Chris Cleave wrote this female character as well as he might have done.

We would recommend this book as an interesting read and very relevant to today's problems of immigration.

March 2017 *The Plain Truth* by Jodi Picot

This book had mixed reactions but was generally liked and as we agreed that it was an easy read, it would probably make a good holiday read, if perhaps a bit too long at 500 pages.

The story is based in an Amish community, well done Jodi Picot for so much background and detail on a subject that most of us knew nothing about.

The two main characters, Katie, an unmarried Amish teenager accused of murdering her newborn baby and Ellie, her high powered lawyer, who would love to have her own baby but whose long term relationship has just ended. Even though they are distant cousins they come from very different backgrounds but are both affected by the people they love and the people who love them.

The rest of the characters from Katie's family to the police all take the easy option of not asking too many questions, well anyway, not until it is nearly too late.

The court drama is riveting as Ellie, with her own private demons, tries to make a defence case with a witness who keeps changing her story and Katie who is trying to make sense of what happened.

The twist at the end of the book is a little disconcerting and difficult to believe.

March 2017 *A Tiny Bit Marvellous* by Dawn French (436 pages)

Mixed reviews, mostly favourable, but generally a good read with colourful characterisation of the family members who presented different chapters through the book

April 2017 *The Churchill Factor* by Boris Johnson (432 pages)

Everyone agreed it was a cracking read, interesting yet easy style, "the best biography I've read" was one comment, although perhaps a little bit long ("got a bit bogged down in

the middle section and the various campaigns/wars”). A fascinating insight into Churchill - and Boris too...

July 2017 *Blood & Beauty* by Sarah Dunant (545 pages)

Well-researched and an historically accurate account of the events, but interestingly there were two differing views on historical novels as a genre. Some felt uncomfortable having words put into real-life characters' mouths (fictionalising history?) whereas others felt that the novel format helps to bring history to life in a way that a factual account of events does not. Some felt a bit of both! By coincidence, our last book was historical non-fiction (Boris Johnson's *The Churchill Factor*) - two books dealing with larger than life historical characters, both meticulously researched and both successful in their different ways in encapsulating their characters.

September 2017 *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr

As ever, there was a divide of opinion. An intriguing, historically accurate and atmospheric book set in Paris and St Malo with a strong story despite a few weak characterisations. Some absolutely loved it, although sometimes it took a second reading to fully appreciate. Others only persevered to the end because it was a Reading Circle choice (but generally were glad that they did). However everyone agreed that the descriptions of Marie-Laure and how she coped with everyday life as a blind girl were excellent. We all felt her fear when she was stranded in the attic with a German soldier prowling downstairs...

October 2017 *Breaking Night* by Liz Murray

The true story of the author's horrific childhood raised by drug-addict parents in New York. We all agreed it was a book we would never have chosen and most found it pretty harrowing, but once again it was an interesting and successful choice and we were glad we had read it.

November 2017 *The Island* by Victoria Hislop

Some of us had already read and enjoyed this book and upon revisiting it for the second time said it was very different reading it as a holiday read and then reading it again for debate within our Reading Group. Almost all enjoyed it, but all also had some reservations. The main segment regarding the life of the lepers and how they coped with their lives stayed in peoples' minds and several liked this section a lot. However the modern beginning and end parts were seen as superfluous and not very well written or thought out.

December 2017 *The Psychopath Test* by Jon Ronson

A non-fiction exploration of the intriguing world of psychopaths and sociopaths. Although some struggled with the quirky writing style, most agreed it was an interesting eye-opener into how psychopaths were and are diagnosed and treated. Some interesting discussion

following and all of those who enjoyed the book found that they are viewing people in a new light since reading it... hmmm.

February 2018 *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman

This was Gail Honeyman's first novel and winner of the Costa First Book Prize. She was drawn to the theme of loneliness when planning the book, although we didn't think it was about loneliness so much as the portrayal of two people, one (Eleanor) who changed and evolved so much as the story developed and one (Raymond) who stayed the same, but in a nice way, as a constant. One person wondered if it should have been a short story rather than a full length novel, which was interesting since Honeyman had originally written it as a 3-chapter story, which then won a 3-chapter story competition. Overall a good choice, easy to read, absorbing and flowing style.

March 2018 *People of the Book* by Geraldine Brooks

Brooks, a journalist and novelist who combined both skills very effectively in this well researched and unusual tale of a beautifully illustrated Haggadah (a Jewish text) and the story of its 'life' and the people who had owned or cared for it: "The idea of the various samples lodged within the Haggadah's structure, hair, butterfly wing, staining etc providing the narrative impetus is a really strong and clever ploy and these particular chapters are beautifully written and paced" said Gaynor. However we all agreed that the secondary story about Hannah and particularly her relationship with her mother didn't add anything to the book and that their relationship wasn't even very believable. Overall a good read.