

# Earlsdon Literary Magazine 189

*The newsletter of the AVID Readers Group, based at Earlsdon Library*

**Next meeting:** Thursday 9 September 2016 at 8pm  
**Venue:** Earlsdon Library  
**Book for discussion:** *The White Princess* — Philippa Gregory

## Better than the bad review

*Our July Book*

### ***Alice and the Fly* — James Rice**

It was a depleted group that met in July. As well as the usual reasons for absence, we also had a farewell message from Ted, who was busy getting his new home in Wales ready for him and Margaret to move into. We shall miss his quiet insights – not to mention his tales of his gallivanting around Europe in search of Guinness.

But to the book, which we did manage to discuss at some length. Only problem is that, with so long between the meeting and typing this up, some of my notes are a bit of a mystery to me so please write a 'letter to the editor' if you think your (unattributed) opinions have been misrepresented or I have left out something key.

Greg, the narrator of *Alice and the Fly*, has a phobia of spiders – real and imaginary – and his routines to avoid them and his unwillingness or inability to talk to others lead to him being bullied at school. Alice is the girl on the bus who actually smiles at him, and eventually becomes the closest thing he has to a friend. But we know from transcripts of

police interviews interspersed with Greg's narrative that something terrible happens in the end. While some of us could guess what that was, there was still the question of how – and indeed why.

There's a dictum famous amongst writers and dramatists known as 'Chekhov's gun':

*If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there.*

There were a couple of unfired guns in this that annoyed some readers. While the literal one (OK, a nail gun) might be forgiven as deliberate mis-direction, there is at least one episode that appears to have little relevance to the main plot – or, indeed any sub-plot. Actually, there aren't really any sub-plots, which I suppose is only to be expected with an obsessive first-person narrator in a relatively short book, and this may be why one reader felt the writing was more 'juvenile' than she would have expected.

**Our next book is**

*Maybe I'll Write More Later ... Maybe* — Patricia Ilich  
and we will discuss it on 13 October 2016

There is no doubt that the circumstances in which the characters exist are bleak. Much is made of the bus ride down from the part of town where Greg and his family live to the shabbier area where he once lived with his grandmother and Alice still lives with her bullying father. But things are no better for the 'haves'. Greg's father appears to be focused on his work and his mother is so desperate to impress that the family have the same dinner night after night while she struggles to perfect her cooking of it before presenting it to guests. Greg himself is subject to dissociative episodes which we experience from his point of view in breathless chapter-long sentences. Some people felt sorry for the characters, but others were unsure of their motivations at key points and yet others felt they were too two-dimensional and vehicular to generate any sympathy.

Overall opinions reflected the spectrum of thought about the characters and extended all the way from 'just didn't get on with it'

(and therefore didn't finish) through 'looked forward to picking it up' to 'couldn't put down' (and therefore first book worth reading in months). However, given the subject matter, even the last person said "'Enjoy" isn't quite the right word.' However, the building of an air of menace was something that held several readers, making it an easy book to finish, and it even drove some through the powerful chapters describing Greg's episodes without caring about – or sometimes even noticing – the lack of punctuation.

**Catherine Fitzsimons**

If you have any other reviews or recommendations, tales of literary events, or anything else you think other AVID readers would find interesting, please send them to:  
Catherine Fitzsimons  
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## What to Read Next ...

Just a list this month of things that came up in discussion – with a note if I can remember why I wrote them down!

- *This Charming Man* – Marian Keyes – because hero reminded someone of the father in this month's book.
- *We Need to Talk About Kevin* – Lionel Shriver – because someone thought *Alice and the Fly* might end in a similar way.
- The *Adrian Mole* series – Sue Townsend – because they're a much lighter look at the life of a misfit.
- *Hard Times* – Charles Dickens.
- *The Secret Agent* – Joseph Conrad.

... a poem to listen to ...

- <https://youtu.be/jXhh-DwQseg>

... and a film to watch

- *Clueless* – because some people didn't realise it was based on Jane Austen's *Emma*.

As was a poem I wrote over the summer. If it gets quiet at our next meeting ...