

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 163

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

Next meeting: Thursday 10th April 8pm
Venue: Earlsdon Library
Book for discussion: *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*
– Rachel Joyce

Knitting Can Be So Sinister **Our March Book**

A Tale of Two Cities – Charles Dickens

Set in London and Paris in the years leading up to the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror at the start of it, this is one of Dickens' better-known novels. For many older readers this was a second reading, as it was formerly a popular choice in schools.

The story opens with the rescue of Dr Manette from the Bastille by London banker Jarvis Lorry. He is taken to London where, with the help of his daughter, Lucie, he recovers his health. She is loved by two men: Sydney Carton, a ne'er do well; and Charles Darnay, son of a hated French aristocrat who has renounced his family.

Even so, when he returns to Paris to help a servant of the family estate Darnay is arrested, imprisoned and eventually sentenced to death for the sins of his father. This brings the Manettes and their friends back to Paris for an unforgettable conclusion to the tale.

The story contrasts the turmoil in Paris, where the implacable Madame Defarge sits in her shop recording the names of those to be executed in her knitting, and more domestic scenes in London.

Some found the descriptions very real and enjoyed the humour of some of the London scenes in particular. Others found themselves re-reading paragraphs in order to fully understand the meaning.

The first and last lines of the book are amongst the best-known in English literature. The lengthy opening sentence begins; "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," and the closing declaration of Carton is another phrase which people tend to quote only in part; "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

Nevertheless many readers found this a difficult read and either gave up or skim-read a large part. Even fans of Dickens agreed it was not one of his best. One reader found it a bit disjointed but, as it was written and published in sections, this is hardly surprising. However, some of those who hadn't enjoyed it confessed they thought the way everything came together at the end was good.

Chris Wilkin

Next month we will be reading:

Sacrilege – SJ Parris

The date for discussion of this book is Thursday 8th May.

Ideas for further reading

Lots of other books came up in the discussion of *A Tale of Two Cities*: others by Dickens, of course; the novels we had 'done' for English Lit; and other books with which we had struggled. Oh, and Hilary Mantel's mammoth *A Place of Greater Safety*, an AVID book some years ago, also got a mention since it too is a fictional account of the same period, albeit one which concentrates more on the powerful men at the centre of events.

So, more Dickens. Several people admitted that their dislike, or at least avoidance, of his novels stemmed from being forced to read them before they could properly understand his complex sentences – but no-one had a good word for *Bleak House* even having read it as an adult. On the other hand, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield* (a favourite of Nigella Lawson, apparently), *A Christmas Carol*, *Hard Times* and *Great Expectations* were mentioned with more affection so, if you're ready to give Dickens another go, perhaps start with one of those.

When it came to examination books, things have moved on, it seems. Those of the O level generation had Dickens or Hardy (*The Mayor of Casterbridge* or *Far from the Madding Crowd*), Lawrence (*Sons & Lovers*, rather than *Lady Chatterley's Lover*) or Conrad (*The Secret Agent*). The furthest we seemed to get from the classics was William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*. All forever tainted by the things we were told to write to get good marks and the interpretations of York's or Cole's notes. However the examination boards no longer confine their definition of good books to those written by Dead White Males. Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* and Angela Carter's *Wise Children* are favourites, and the mention of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* reminded me that I bought it in Borders and still haven't read it, in spite of having enjoyed *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

I am going to mention a couple of Difficult Books. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* may lag behind only Joyce's *Ulysses* in lists of the genre but, like *A Tale of Two Cities*, follows ordinary people – well, OK, slightly less ordinary than Cruncher et al, but not historical figures – as significant historical events unfold. Reading it prompted me to find out more about the Napoleonic Wars than the Trafalgar and Waterloo bits which were covered in History lessons at school so, in that respect at least, it was worth the effort. Another (dis?)honourable mention goes to Umberto Eco, whose *Foucault's Pendulum* apparently has a four-page description of a gate, making Dickens' descriptions look positively succinct. I have to say I don't remember that particular bit – probably skimmed over it – and am not going upstairs to dig the thing out and search for it now!

Is there a Difficult Book you are proud of having read or /and you think does not deserve its reputation?

Is there anything you were made to read that changed the way you thought of an author or genre?

What about novels that deal with real history: any favourites?

I would love to include more from other people in ELM.

Please send reviews or recommendations, tales of literary events, thoughts on anything associated with reading ... to Catherine Fitzsimons
cathfitz5317@yahoo.com.

And there's more! I have the name PG Wodehouse amongst my scribbles from our meeting, which was probably the result of someone pointing out that Jeeves and the inhabitants of Blandings show that not everything by DWMs is difficult to read; Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* was no doubt recommended when we were considering the savagery of the Defarges and the various Jacques; but how Sue Townsend's *The Woman who Went to Bed for a Year* came up in this discussion I really can't remember. It is a good book though ...

What's On

I will send on the library's events calendars when they arrive but, in the meantime, have a look at Coventry Libraries' Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/coventrylibraries>, which you can view even if you don't have an account.