

# Earlsdon Literary Magazine 180

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

**Next meeting:** Thursday 9 October 8pm  
**Venue:** Earlsdon Library  
**Book for discussion:** *Under your Skin*—Sabine Durrant

## Parallels

### Our September Book

#### *Water for Elephants*—Sara Gruen

I first read this several years ago and kept my copy, so I must have liked it first time around. I admit that I re-read it with one eye on what other AVID readers would think, although I've no idea why: after all, I hadn't recommended it, I had no stake in the outcome. Anyway, when it came to the meeting, I was waiting for someone to complain about how gory some of the descriptions were, but it seems that the group of us who gathered that September night were the more hardy type who could probably cope with the book Eve and Melissa recommend below.

*Water for Elephants* has a pair of parallel narratives, relating the story of pivotal year in the life of the hero Jacob and that of a few days much later on when he is ninety (or is it ninety-three?) and living in an old people's home. He is fed up of the bland mushy food and being patronised: he still has his teeth and his marbles—most of them. The past becomes more intrusive when the circus comes to town and another resident gets the glory, telling

stories of how he once carried the titular water for elephants. Jacob knows this is hooey because he did once join a circus, soon after the death of his parents, and travelled around America with it during the Great Depression. It is the story of how he came to live that life, met his wife and a host of other characters—not least Rosie the elephant—that is the other thread.

Some readers preferred one tale to the other and, it was noted, the film version focuses on the more sensational earlier strand, ignoring the other completely. While Jacob's later life is not as eventful, the changes he succeeds in making are as profound and the story is possibly more moving.

There was humour throughout, although much of it was dark, and this was one of the things that reminded some people of our recent read about that hundred-year-old man while others thought the setting and the starkness made it closer to *The Cider House Rules*. Interestingly, the same person who had criticised Joanne Harris for

### Next month we will be reading:

*Last Man Standing*—David Baldacci

The date for discussion of this book is to be confirmed.

writing so far beyond her experience last month acknowledged that, while in this book Sara Gruen had obviously done the same, she, somehow, had pulled it off. Most people commented on the powerful descriptions, even those who don't normally 'do' history and some readers praised it for its unpredictability: in spite of the fact that the climactic scene is presented as a prologue, they felt there were still twists and surprises. Opinions on the end were more varied: some thought it incredible and unlikely but 'brilliant' was the adjective used by another.

## What to read next ...

I bow to the acknowledged expertise of other members when it comes to recommending books in this genre and point you towards the article below rather than try to pick some highlights from such a well-populated field.

However, I promised you something this month, so how about the Man Booker Prize shortlist? It was only announced a couple of weeks ago and I think that now even I'd struggle to read them all before the winner is announced, since the grand dinner and special BBC programming is on Tuesday 13 October. I know we have at least one member who reads them all every year (even if only because her Mum gives them to her as a Christmas present)—perhaps some of the rest of us could join her? Anyway, here's the list:

- A Brief History of Seven Killings—Marlon James
- *Satin Island*—Tom McCarthy
- *The Fishermen*—Chigozie Obioma
- The Year of the Runaways—Sunjeev Sahota
- A Spool of Blue Thread—Anne Tyler
- *A Little Life*—Hanya Yanagihara

A couple of people found themselves neglecting chores to read it. Surely choosing it over ironing is the ultimate accolade for a book?

**Catherine Fitzsimons**

**PS** Has anyone got anywhere with working out the connections to the biblical Jacob (see *Book Club Blushes* below)? [This thread on Goodreads](#) suggests we weren't the only ones puzzled and that input from the author was needed to unpick them. Perhaps that aspect of how she wrote it might have been better kept to herself.

## Book Club Blushes

*(Number 3 in an occasional series)*

**If you're going to**

read Book Club Notes/Guide/Suggestions

**then make sure that**

you leave it until you've finished, lest they taint your enjoyment of the book.



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  
[cathfitz5317@yahoo.com](mailto:cathfitz5317@yahoo.com).

## Reader's Review

### *Natural Causes*—James Oswald

**Only for readers who enjoy a good detective story with a touch of the supernatural.**

***(Not recommended for nervous types or chick-lit lovers.)***

This author was recommended to me by Melissa, another AVID Reader. Having read so many books I was not expecting to find this to be any better than those I have tried by many other authors who attempt to write a good detective story. ***Oh me of little faith!***

The story starts with a description of a shocking, disturbing scene, which is not for the faint-hearted and replaces the original opening scene that is at the back of the book. Do NOT go there and read it: you will struggle to get the picture of gruesome violence out of your mind.

A female body is found walled up in a basement, nailed to the floor, her organs placed in jars surrounding her and the body has been there for many years.

Detective Inspector Tony McLean, the main character, works mainly in Edinburgh and the surrounding districts. He's a complex man with a certain amount of baggage in his life but this information does not distract from the story. There are also many characters intertwined in his life at the police station who are credible in their own right, especially Detective Sergeant Bob Laird (known affectionately as Grumpy Bob), who works alongside Inspector McLean, and Detective Chief Inspector Charles Duguid (nicknamed Dagwood behind his back), who is his nemesis, as well as Angus Cadwallader who is the City Pathologist and Tony's friend.

The plot unfurls with many twists and turns until the police find who murdered the girl

and why she was placed in this ritualistic position.

The descriptions of Edinburgh and the weather are so vivid you feel you are walking the streets alongside the inspector—and getting as wet and cold as he is.

The story flows along brilliantly, keeping your interest throughout, and there were many times I did not want to put the book down. There is a small input of the supernatural but not enough to make it fully a horror story; the events are more along the lines of the strange things we may all encounter in our lives—and some I hope we never do.

I am not going to tell you any more about the intriguing plot of the book only to say that, at the end, everything is brought together: something I personally love in a good story.

The books are better read in sequence and I have listed the first five for you. Needless to say I am now reading book five and have not been disappointed with any of the stories so far:

1. *Natural Causes*
2. *Book of Souls*
3. *Hangman's Song*
4. *Deadmen's Bones*
5. *Prayer for the Dead*

**Happy reading!** And don't blame me if you have sleepless nights and nightmares; remember, they are just stories. *Or are they?!*

**Eve Stephen**

## What's on

**The Birmingham Literature Festival** has now started and runs **until 17 October**. Some events are sold out, but tickets for others are still available from their website, which has details of all events. <http://www.birminghamliteraturefestival.org/>



**Messages for Peace** The Positive Images Festival team and Hillfield's Readers' Group are holding an event on **Saturday 14 November** at the Hope Centre in Sparkbrook Street. You are invited to take part by giving a short poetry or prose reading on the subject of Peace and Reconciliation and/or writing a peace message to go on the Peace Tree. You are also, of course, very welcome to attend. Any questions or queries contact Colin Scott on 024 7683 24357 or email [colrsc@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:colrsc@yahoo.co.uk)

## Opportunities

*(Things we could do, but would need to talk about first!)*

**READING  
GROUPS  
FOR EVERYONE**

Every month, I get an email from this website (<http://readinggroups.org/>) listing sets of books that they are giving away for reading groups to discuss. They're now expanding the site so that we can each log in as a member of the group (once Dave, or whoever in the library service 'owns'

the group signs up for a code to pass on to us) and then apply for these giveaways and competitions ourselves. **Can someone please remember to ask him (or nudge me to ask him) at our next meeting? Thanks!**

