

## Book reviews for 2020



<u>Month</u>		<u>Author</u>	<u>Review</u>
<b>January</b>	Dear Mrs Bird	A J Pierce	The first book of the New Year was <i>Dear Mrs Bird</i> by A J Pierce. The novel is set in London during World War II and is about Emmaline who wants to be a war correspondent but due to a misunderstanding she accepts a job working for the newspaper's formidable agony aunt, Mrs Bird. Emmaline is frustrated because Mrs Bird will not answer questions about any emotional problems and so she starts answering the letters herself in secret. Everybody found the descriptions of the Blitz interesting, especially the women's part in it. For example, Emmy was a fire watcher at night and then she would do a full day's work at the newspaper. We all liked the main characters and felt that we recognised someone we had met in the description of the prudish Mrs Bird. Some members did not like the section where Emmy and her friend Bunty had an argument and felt it was not very realistic in the circumstances. The only other criticism was that the ending was rather rushed and wrapped up a little too neatly. This book made an excellent start to our new reading year as everyone gave it 8/10.
<b>February</b>	Middle England	Jonathon Coe	This month we read <i>Middle England</i> which has the words 'A comedy for our times' on the cover, we all agreed that we this was not strictly true as we couldn't find much humour in it. The novel covers the period leading up to Brexit and includes real events such as the 2012 Olympics which some members found interesting but we all struggled to keep track of the vast number of characters in the novel and how their various lives connected, plus we didn't really warm to of the characters. Most members said it took a long time to get into the novel although it did get easier once you got used to the switching between the different strands of the plot. The novel was well written and is the third novel in a trilogy so we did wonder if it would have helped to have read the first two novel as some the characters appeared in those books. Marks given ranged from 3 to 8 averaging out to 5.

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<b>March</b>	The Trouble with Goats and Sheep	Joanna Cannon	<p>This was our book for the March meeting, the last one before the lockdown began.</p> <p>This book is set during the famously hot summer of 1976 and is mainly narrated by 10-year-old Grace. The central mystery of the novel is the disappearance of her neighbour Mrs Creasy and what a group of the neighbours did nine years previously. The neighbours live in a crescent at the end of a cul-de-sac and Grace's story is interspersed with six other perspectives giving the reader insight into the lives of some of the secretive neighbours in the crescent.</p> <p>Most members liked the fact this book is written mainly from a child's point of view and shows how children can misinterpret the actions and words of adults. We liked the way the story slowly unfolded and the tension built up as more facts were revealed and the author's vivid description of the oppressive heat that summer added to tension.</p> <p>The book has a map of the cul-de-sac showing which neighbours lived at which number house and this helped but some members still found the number of characters somewhat confusing as the narrative switched from one to another.</p> <p>There were some funny scenes such as how the neighbours responded to an Indian family moving in to the cul-de-sac, also in one scene all the neighbours gather together as someone thinks they have seen the face of Jesus on a drainpipe and it showed the sense of community which is not always present in neighbourhoods although that has perhaps changed over the last few weeks.</p> <p>Scores ranged from 9 out of ten to 5 with an average of 7.5</p>

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April	Northern Lights	Philip Pullman	<p>This was the first meeting in lockdown and some members met up on a Zoom Meeting, others emailed their reviews which were circulated to other members. Val submitted this review of the Zoom meeting</p> <p>Opinion was divided with Susan liking the adventure, imagination and suspense and everyone else feeling that it was a bit of a simple story, really aimed at children. However, we were all agreed on two things - The book was very well written and easy to read. No one was tempted to give up!</p> <p>No one intends to read the next book - Susan as she does not want to be disappointed if it is not as enjoyable as the first and the rest because they did not care enough about the story to find out what happens.</p> <p>Everyone gave it a 7! Reviews emailed in</p> <p><u>Lyn</u> I would not usually read or watch a programme on this subject. But I was hooked from the first page. It has been very well written. Exciting, frightening, gripping, a fantasy, magical, imaginary novel. Because there was a child (Lyra) involved I think that was what made it so realistic (in my mind). I was the one hiding in the cupboard in the Retiring room. I was the one that travelled all that way, right to the end of the book. It was like a doctor who and Harry Potter programme all thrown into one.</p> <p>I would give this book a 9.</p> <p><u>Pat</u> I first read this book several years ago and expected it to be a rather simple fantasy story as it was written for young adults but was pleasantly surprised and read all three in the series. I have always like good fantasy books and this was perfect for me, it has a feisty heroine and some truly worthy baddies. I liked all the authors inventions in this alternative world, particularly the daemons and the words he used to describe things in this world and enjoyed working out what they meant. The reviews of the book point out that it works at two levels and that children may not pick up on the implied criticism of established religion and what he sees as growing state authority, ie. the Magisterium in the book.</p> <p>I would give this book a 9</p>

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May	The Survivors	Kate Furnivall	<p>This was our 2<sup>nd</sup> book club meeting held on Zoom and this time eight members were able to join in. Everyone said more or less the same about this book, we initially thought the subject matter would make the book hard to read given the current situation but most members found the book very gripping once they started on it. We agreed that it was well written and that the characters were well rounded particularly Klara, Hanna and Scholz who was universally strongly disliked. The story brought home how much longer the terrible consequences of war continued long after the war itself was over. Klara did some terrible things in order to survive and she constantly put her daughter at risk too which meant that some members questioned Klara's motives at the start. We agreed that it was eventually made clear that she was desperate to get her daughter safely back to England and everything she did was to that end. Members found the ending somewhat unsatisfactory as it wrapped everything up too neatly. Most members gave this book a 9.</p>
June	This is Going to Hurt: Secret Diaries of a Junior Doctor	Adam Kay	<p>Adam Kay was an NHS doctor until he gave it up to become a comedy writer and standup comedian. This is a nonfiction book consisting of a collection of diary entries made during his medical training from 2004 to 2010. There were some very funny anecdotes about incidents with patients in the book and most people enjoyed reading these stories, although they also felt rather uneasy in that the author was using his patients to make us laugh and that we would not want to recognise ourselves in a narrative like this. The book did make us reflect upon how hard a junior doctor works, long hours often with inadequate supervision and pay. The average mark was 6</p>

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<b>July</b>	Sometimes I Lie	Alice Feeney	This book is a psychological thriller with lots of twist and turns in the narrative. Most members liked the beginning of the book where we are told by the female protagonist that she is a coma, her husband doesn't love her any more and that sometimes she lies. Then the narrative moves between the past and her thoughts lying in a hospital bed. One member really loved the book but most thought it was confusing with too many subplots and twists to follow the story. Most of us found the ending very confusing and unsatisfactory and we all had different interpretations of what of actually happened. The book has been a best seller with a mini series made in the USA but the marks we gave it ranged from a 9 to 3
<b>August</b>	The Burning Girl	Claire Messud	We managed an actual face to face meeting for this book as there were only six of us. It was a lovely warm evening when we met on Ottershaw Park and it was great to see everyone. This is the story of two friends who are inseparable in childhood until events conspire to separate them. Most members felt there were a lot of unanswered questions in this book. Was the man Cassie looking for really her father? The evidence seemed rather thin. Did her stepfather molest her as there are hints that he did. Overall, we felt it was an unsatisfactory read. Marks ranged from 4 to 7
<b>lives September</b>	All the Light we cannot see	Anthony Doerr	Back to zooming for this meeting. In general we loved this book. The story follows the parallel lives of a German boy who has a talent for fixing and building radios and a blind French girl. Their paths collide in Saint-Malo as they are both trying to survive the war. The book is long but the chapters are short which makes it easier to read and it is beautifully written. This book really brings home the horror of war and shows how ordinary people become involved. Average mark was a 9

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<b>October</b>	The Night you left	Emma Curtis	The main character in this book is Grace who lives with her partner Nick and her young daughter. Her partner proposes to her and then disappears. The story then switches between the present and past events. Most members felt that the book was quite well written and it started well but lost momentum in the middle and the ending was too convenient. Not all members were happy with the constant switching between past and present and we thought there were too many characters which made it hard to keep track of everyone. For example when the story was in the past there were 3 families and It was hard to remember which child belonged to which family. Some characters came across as stereotypical, for example the cruel stepmother and some members felt there were too many co-incidences in the narrative. Marks were 5 & 6 with one 8.
<b>November</b>			
<b>December</b>			