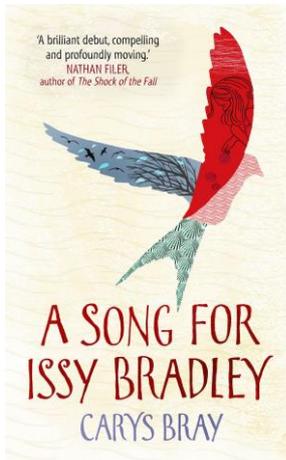


BOOK GROUP 2
April meeting 2022

A Song For Issy Bradley – Carys Bray



Everyone agreed that this was a very well written book with wonderful imagery in places and based on the author's own upbringing as a Mormon.

The constraints, rituals and comforting familiarities of religious faith – Mormon in this case – are explored within a family which is plunged, without warning, into a devastatingly sad situation. – the death of 4 year old Issy Bradley from meningitis over the course of a single weekend. Dealing with this change in family dynamics is the basis of the novel.

There are the teenagers, Zippy (Zipphorah) and Al (Alma who is male) both dealing with their own moral crises aligned with growing up, and 5 year old Jacob whose birthday preparations coincide with Issy's onset of the disease. The author captures the different levels of understanding of the children, challenged and thwarted by religious doctrine as they grow up and seeing the differences between themselves and others around them. The father, Ian, indoctrinated in the Mormon beliefs, afraid of criticism in his position as Bishop, is a rather weak personality who only ever stood up for himself when he insisted on marrying "an outsider" Claire, (who is required to adhere to the Mormon faith). She manages her role as a dutiful wife and mother whilst becoming increasingly frustrated by the rigidity and absurdity of some of the rules and the impact on people.

After Issy's death, Claire is overwhelmed by guilt for not realising how ill Issy was and leaving her alone and dying whilst being preoccupied with Jacob's birthday preparations. Her method of dealing with the death is to turn inwards on herself and refuse to get out of Issy's bunk bed, tantamount to rejecting her family completely and leaving Ian to deal with the fallout (which is an eye-opener for him!)

The most poignant, lost character for one of our members was 5 year old Jacob who is still young enough to believe in miracles and believes if he is good and prays hard enough, Issy will come back. "Jacob is only pretending to look at the Big Book of Fairy Tales, he is actually imagining what it will be like when Issy comes back". It is equally sad when he comes to terms with her death "Issy's going to be dead for my whole entire life isn't she?"

For one of our group, this was "An uncomfortable read of a young authors' perspective of life in a contemporary British Mormon family. Central to the plot is the sudden death of a child and

how each of the family copes with grieving. From my perspective having survived a Catholic upbringing including a monastic education and experienced some of the emotional constraints described in the book I was appalled by the level of control imposed by their religious observance. One has enormous sympathy for the mother and her conflict of loyalties and her shock realisation of the family's extraordinary way of living. The father is emotionally blocked, the surviving children have coping mechanisms that gives hope they will eventually break out to a better place “.

Another member of the Group thought this was an example of the patriarchal extremism and control exercised by forcing people into a belief system based on the fear/explanation of death, inherent misogyny, racism, myth and dogma found in most religions in order to exercise control over others. Yet another member found the setting around the Mormon religion irritating and could not identify with the characters. He has visited Salt Lake City, the principle location of the Mormon religion, and found it “a strange place and the strength of belief rather scary” whilst acknowledging that every individual should be free to make their own choice. “But isn't that what religion takes away from us?” said another!

A book well worth reading which led to an interesting discussion.