

## BOOK GROUP 2

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ARTICLE FOR THE U3A WEBSITE

### NARCISSUS ROAD by Marion Whybrow

This is a novel set in the 1950s where we meet Lily and Danny moving into a squalid room in Narcissus Road (foregoing an expensive wedding in order to save money but needing to get married to secure accommodation in those days).

The rest of the book covers their life and progress out of there. The description brought back many memories of the normality of bedsit/shared house life in the 50s and 60s and the group shared sad and happy recollections of their experiences in these houses and the variety of people who lived in them such as difficult landladies, lonely people on the fringes of society, damp bedding, dangerous gas fires, thin partition walls, and the general odd mix of fellow tenants' cultures and fun of firsthand experience of real life away from home (and some awful smells!). The ambition to own a home and the difficulty in finding rented accommodation (particularly for people from an ethnic background) was realistically presented – and it was agreed that sadly there is a similar problem today.

Underlying the story are many examples of what social psychologists of the time were defining as “instant gratification” versus “deferred gratification”. This was often used as “class identifiers” rather than the income of the individuals. Lily, especially was determined to be upwardly mobile despite her “working class” background, helped along the way by Danny’s aunt Myra (the embodiment of pseudo, but not actual, middle class living). Lily is determined that her future will be very different from those of her old schoolmates and friends, and forgoes all the holidays, babies, clothes, evenings out that they enjoy, in the belief that he that all their sacrifices were worth it r way will eventually result in her heart’s desire, a house. There is a sense of satisfaction that all their sacrifices were worth it when Lily and Danny eventually “make it” and move into their new home.

There were some mixed views of the book but we had a lot of fun discussing our personal experiences of life in the 50s and 60s – from the introduction of family planning (albeit for married couples only in the beginning), jazz clubs in London and everything from wallpaper to crockery!

Some comments from the group:

“This book especially resonated with me as during my early teens, an enormous “London over-spill” estate was built at the bottom of our road in our small village. The estate incorporated shops and first of all, I delivered papers around the estate and then worked part-time in the shop. I got to know many Lilys and Dannys and watched as they cherished both their houses and gardens. They had “made it”! Within a few years, there were children

everywhere! And as wealth grew in the 60's, holidays became more readily available, so in Lily terms "The sacrifices were well worth it!"

"It brought back many memories of life in a small bedsit in London"

"I remember a quiet man who rarely spoke and lived in the attic room of a large house where I had a bedsit and the song "A Most Peculiar Man" by Paul Simon always reminds me of him."

"Accurate descriptions, engaging style, very visual but capturing a depth of feeling and description"

"Previous book club reads, even when we didn't like them, could be praised for the use of language, interesting dynamics and lyrical descriptive passages which lifted the writing out of the mundane, but I struggled to find that here"

"The setting in the 1950s was described quite well and the last third of the book was stronger than the preceding chapters. In all it was a forgettable novel and I won't be looking for any more of her books"

"Being made aware of the author's later life in the artistic communities of St Ives gave her writing a biographical slant and promoted a wish to know more about her life . A worthwhile read"

Christine Wright