

BOOK GROUP 2 REVIEWS – OCTOBER 2023

Due to the non-arrival of books from Library Services this month, each member chose a book that they had read resulting in a wonderful mix of genres.

Happy reading!

A Single Thread, Tracy Chevalier

In 1932, Violet Speedwell is one of the 'surplus women' left after the Great War, where her fiancé and brother died. She lives with her overbearing mother and yearns to have an independent life and to give her life depth and meaning in a society that does its best to ignore these women's existence. Eventually, she decides to leave and moves to a (rather bleak) boarding house and finds a job as a typist. Unfortunately, her wages are so meagre that she is sometimes literally starving and survives on margarine and Marmite sandwiches with one hot meal a week.

She's emotionally starving too and falls in love with a married man who rings the bells at Winchester Cathedral (an all-male preserve which Violet manages to secretly enter). In the Cathedral, Violet also discovers a group of embroiderers and decides to make a mark of her own by embroidering a kneeler. The society of 'broderers' is based on real life and Violet not only learns a new skill and makes something beautiful but finds friends, courage and a community there. When she finds herself pregnant and alone, it's these women who help her to start living an independent life.

This is a bittersweet novel, contrasting outward respectability with inner yearnings and passions and Tracy Chevalier's writing about the patterns of embroidery, bell ringing and her characters' lives is beautiful.

One Crowded Hour by Tim Bowden

Biography of Neil Davies, Australian combat cameraman (1934-1985)

This superb biography was in the planning stage when Neil Davies, an Australian combat cameraman was tragically killed, not in combat where he had spent most of his working life but on the streets of Bangkok during a military coup. Consequently, the original plan for the author to write this biography in collaboration with Davies had to be scrapped. Tim Bowden had to rely on remaining letters, meticulous notes Davies made of all his working activities and the recollection of the many people who had known Davies.

Davies worked in many conflicts and natural disasters around the world throughout the 60s up to his death in 1985, especially the Vietnam war - not under the skirts of the Americans but on the front line with the Vietnamese; conflicts in Cambodia, where he fell in love with the country and the gentle and cultured people; The Philippines and Lebanon. He was a gregarious man who loved to chat and hear their stories, rarely talking about himself. He related to all - from beggars in the street to people in high office and saw some goodness in everyone. He was often in mortal danger and collected shrapnel wounds twenty times and was hospitalised six times. He was a very determined individual with extraordinary willpower which pulled him from the brink of death on more than one occasion.

In my opinion this is the story of a truly remarkable man and I thoroughly recommend it. It is entertaining and informative, giving an insight to cultures unfamiliar to most of us. A book describing battle scenes is the last thing I would pick up to read but it is one of the best books I have read.

Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow by Gabrielle Zevin

When Macbeth speaks of "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" he speaks of the relentlessness and futility of life. When Gabrielle Zevin uses those words for her title she speaks of the possibility of

infinite rebirth, infinite redemption offered by video games. In the virtual world there are endless chances, endless re-starts.....

The story begins when two college students, Samson and Sadie, bump into each other by chance at a railway station. The pair have not met since childhood where they met in a games room of a hospital when Sadie was visiting her sick sister. Sam was recovering from a car crash that killed his mother and crushed his foot in 27 places.

This is not a typical “boy meets girl” romance, though it is romantic. They love each other but never in the quite the same way at quite the same time! Their relationship is a joining of minds and worlds that is different and purer than any ordinary physical attraction. Gaming becomes Sam’s way of escaping, of forgetting about his injured foot that has become a painful, long term disability. They create their first video game together which is an instant success and leads to Sadie developing her own games later with other friends.

I found the blurring of lines between reality and play and the language of creating video games interesting rather than off-putting to this non-gamer. In the end, the game is revealed to be a means of communication and reconciliation for its real life players, Sam and Sadie.

The Silent Sister by Diane Chamberlain

As the Group did not have a book for this month, I decided to read this one that was given to me by a friend. It is definitely not one of my favourites! The story jumps backwards and forwards in time from 1990 to 2014 and is written in the first person who is called Riley. The story starts with the death of her father and after his death she discovers a life she knew nothing about including a sister, Lisa (who Riley believed had committed suicide). Things she had accepted were what her parents had wanted her to believe and the plot becomes more complicated as she realises she was adopted. Lisa’s story has even more twists and turns (she had been living under a new name, Jade) and in the end becomes too far-fetched – more secrets and lies.

It was an easy read and some of the descriptive narrative is very good but I would not be looking to read any more of her books.

Deep Water by Paula Daly

I have never read any of this author’s books before but I thoroughly enjoyed this gripping thriller and at times, could not put it down. The story is about the disappearance of a child who was being cared for by a friend of the family. The child goes missing – and she’s not the only one! The book is written from the perspective of a small group of women, Lisa, Kate and Sally - all with busy lives – young children and work etc. Intertwined with this is the character Detective Constable Joanna Aspinall who is in charge of the search for Lucinda. The relationship between the women and their respective lives unfolds This is an excellent, gripping book

Lessons in Chemistry - Bonnie Garmus

Set in the 60s this is a story about a female chemist with an unorthodox upbringing (deserted by her mother at 4 years old when her father is imprisoned and brought up by her elder brother). With no formal education as the family moved around a lot, Elizabeth Zott becomes a chemist, a very good chemist who has difficulty understanding why she is not getting on in her career – due to the misogyny, sexual harassment and jealousy of her co-workers and managers who use her brilliance

for their own career enhancement. Due to her upbringing, she has no experience of “how to behave as a woman should” – this was a completely alien concept.

Elizabeth meets another chemist, Calvin – also a “square peg in a round hole” who falls in love with her. They have a child, “Mad” – should have been Madeleine – and a very intelligent dog called “six-thirty” whose part in the story is also significant. After leaving the lab where she worked due to unwanted advances from the senior administrator who was passing off her work as his own in order to receive a large grant, she then had to find work to support herself and Mad.

A chance meeting with someone who worked in TV meant that she began doing live cookery classes with a studio audience but these were not your typical cookery programmes! As a chemist, Elizabeth used the terms sodium chloride and acetic acid, not salt and vinegar, and during the show managed to educate her audience of women who became a loyal group. A typical quote was “Far too many people do not appreciate the work and sacrifice that goes into being a wife, a mother, a woman”.

Despite the producer’s reservation and the fact that she did not promote the products she was supposed to, the show was a huge success all over America. Elizabeth was empowering ordinary women. This is a funny, entertaining story well written and should be read by all men and women. It has been made into a TV series and I am not surprised. One of the best books I have ever read.

Members of Book Group 2