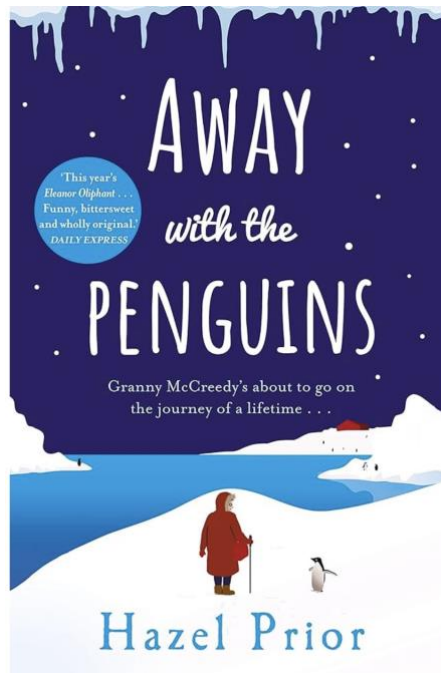


## June 2025 - AWAY WITH THE PENGUINS - Rachel Prior



85 year old Veronica McCreedy is a very wealthy woman living in a coastal mansion in Ayrshire. She has been lonely and alone for a long time, with no family, divorced from a serial philanderer, her only human contact is with Eileen who comes in to clean and do what is necessary. She is an unstoppable force of nature, stubborn, determined and contemplating what to do with her money. She tasks Eileen with the job of an Internet search for long-lost relatives which uncovers a grandson, Patrick. Veronica and Patrick soon meet, and unfortunately, the two do not take a liking to one another. Patrick's life has fallen apart, his girlfriend, Lynette, has left him and he is taking drugs.

Veronica's one interest is wildlife documentaries, and whilst watching a programme about a research project on the Adelie penguins of Locket Island in the Antarctic, she decides this is worthy of her financial support. The locket has a strong personal meaning for her and she sees this as an omen. She contacts the team promising funding and requiring them to provide living accommodation for 3 weeks. She takes absolutely no notice of their frantic efforts to dissuade her and embarks on the challenging voyage.

This story is about loneliness, penguins, the impact of WW2 on the lives of soldiers and civilians from different countries, and the restoration of faith in people. An easy, wonderful read!

Some comments from Group members:

"I really enjoyed this story, a simple read but with an unusual idea, setting and characters. Veronica wants to make a difference in the world after her own difficult childhood. Sent to live with her unsympathetic aunt after the death of her father in the blitz, she falls in love with an Italian POW and becomes pregnant at 15, is sent to a nunnery and forced to give up her son, Enzo who was subsequently killed in an accident at eighteen. The author's description of Veronica's attraction to the penguins was written with compassion, humour and quite a lot of anthropomorphising but neither soft nor sentimental. By finally recognising how Terry, Patrick, Pip the orphaned penguin and others were also lonely characters, she succeeded in her desire to make a difference by funding Patrick's addition to the scientist's team, seeing feelings grow between him and Terry and by watching the return of Pip the penguin to its rightful environment."

"I read this book as soon as we got it and galloped through it in two days. I loved the humour and laughed out loud right from the beginning. The author creates interest

by not revealing everything at once, for example, what is in the padlocked box. The author references climate change without making a big issue about it and pokes fun at oldies who are not computer literate and do not want to be. However, as I came to review the book, I realised it was not all funny. Veronica has a happy childhood until she is evacuated after the loss of her parents in the Blitz, her Italian boyfriend is “moved on” and her baby taken from her. She ends up very rich but all alone. Patrick and the other characters all have their tales to tell, even the penguin has a poor start in life!”

“This story grabbed me from the “get go” – I thoroughly enjoyed it, a page turner and very easy to read. Veronica still feels on top of her game mentally and her bad-tempered idiosyncrasies become endearing. She is a truly inspirational person with a strong social conscience and high morals and the book was enhanced by having two distinct voices narrating their stories, Veronica and Patrick. Veronica’s poignant life is revealed as her story unfolds, suffering heart-wrenching sadness at an early age when her baby is snatched away from her. It also highlights that we have a responsibility to our planet, that we should not judge others too quickly as we don’t know what may have happened in their life or indeed, what is happening now. It is also a reminder that it is never too late to go on an adventure, try new things or make changes in your life!”

“My problem is trying to find fault with the book. An unusual story but quite plausible. In-depth description of all the characters. Positive themes of tackling loneliness for both elderly and youth. Seemingly accurate research on penguins and life in Antarctica. The narrative is easy to read, a good story that holds one’s attention from beginning to end. I found the descriptions of life as an evacuee moving and the associated grief and parental loss so sad. I felt sure the collection of hair locks over 70 years would lead to DNA tracking of the Italian POW father but alas I was wrong! There is a follow-on book which I will not read as this book we have read I do believe could not be bettered”

“I really didn’t get on with this book at all. I generally like books featuring grumpy old folk as they’re often very funny but this one didn’t even raise a smile. Veronica’s acerbic commentary barely cut through the sentimentality, the happy ending was utterly predictable, and the suspension of disbelief needed to accept that she’d just turned up in the Antarctic was beyond me. The penguins were cute though.”

“I loved the character of Veronica and could relate to some of her attitudes to life. Her feistiness and refusal to acknowledge the limitations of ageing and her search for something meaningful to do with her money after her death – one begins to like her more and more. Her first meeting with Patrick is a disaster (he is a disaster!) but as the story unfolds, they both begin to lose their edges and forge a relationship with each other through penguins. A lovely, feel-good story!”

“I liked this book probably because I could relate to the main character Veronica, an octogenarian (like me) who at the beginning of the novel seemed to be away with the fairies, oh, how I cheered her when she shouted shut that door!

I thought all the characters were portrayed well as was the development of her relationship with her grandson. Hazel Prior painted a picture of wartime Britain very accurately as though she had experienced it herself. I loved her description of Antarctica and the penguins too.

(Veronica's relationship with the Italian prisoner of war took me back to my own childhood memories of happy times spent with my friend and a young Italian prisoner of war who worked on the farm near where we lived and played with us showing us how to slide down the big haystacks in the barn.)

Christine Wright