Gold Coast Book Lovers

GCBL Volume 7, Issue 6 July 2010

Our July Meeting by Claudia

We went back to Ceramic House our usual place, for our July meeting and it was very cosy.

Just enough of us present to have an interesting discussion about the book of the month **Gilead** by Marilynne Robinson (Pulitzer 2005).

It's a rare book that although a hard read and sometimes frankly slow, leaves the reader strangely satisfied; it's full of gems. The woman can write and it's worthwhile, but I much preferred **Home** our December book by the same author and her first novel **Housekeeping**.

We discussed again our format for next year and instead of imposing 4 groups (Fiction, Non-fiction, Bio/ Memoir and Poetry/Short story) we decided to stick to the free choice but trying to make it more varied by keeping these other genres in mind. Choosing outside our comfort zone - fiction- might help keep our minds sharp.

To our members: please choose two books for 2011 by the beginning of October. That will give us plenty of time to find, borrow and read them.

Next month we get together to discuss **Kingdom Come** by J.G. Ballard hosted by Dianne, it should make for an interesting discussion.

See you all next month and happy reading!

About us

We are a discussion group dedicated to enhancing our enjoyment of well-written books by developing our literary knowledge and reading skills, by sharing our impressions and opinions and by expanding our reading experiences among other book lovers. Our aim is to satisfy our passion for the written word.

We meet from 7 to 9 PM on the 2nd Monday of every month EXCLUDING PH at CERAMIC HOUSE located on Bischof Park, Nerang Street (next corner White St), Nerang , next door to shops at 54 Nerang Street.

A small contribution is required towards the rent of the room. The amount depends on the number of people attending.

One book title is chosen each month and we all read that book. There is a 'host' who introduces and co-ordinates the discussion. The role of host is rotated around the group so that each member has the opportunity to nominate their book (it could also be an author, theme or genre). The host also acts as chairperson for that meeting.

Although we are not a social club–we are readers- we occasionally attend literary events, relevant movies or plays here at the Gold Coast, Brisbane or Byron Bay.

We conform to basic meeting practices and everyone has an equal opportunity to express their opinion. Everyone's interpretation is valid, as long as it's expressed respectfully.

We welcome any new members who share our aims and are happy to contribute to our group. Newcomers are not required to have read the book to attend the first meeting and no contribution is required the first time.

Upcoming Books

9/08/10

Kingdom Come by J.G.Ballard

Hosted by Dianne

13/09/10

The Transit of Venus by Shirley Hazzard

Hosted by Deb

11/10/10

Document Z by Andrew Croome

Hosted by Alexa

8/11/10

Let The Great World Spin by Collum McCann

Hosted by Nicola

Contact Details

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goldcoastbooklovers.wordpress.com/

Books of the Month

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson – Claudia

To bloom only every 20 years would make, you would think, for anxious or vainglorious flowerings. But Marilynne Robinson, whose last (and first) novel, '*Housekeeping*,' appeared in 1981, seems to have the kind of sensibility that is sanguine about intermittence. It is a mind as religious as it is literary -- perhaps more religious than literary -- in which silence is itself a quality, and in which the space around words may be full of noises. A remarkable, deeply unfashionable book of essays, "The Death of Adam" (1998), in which Robinson passionately defended John Calvin and American Puritanism, among other topics, suggested that, far from suffering writer's block, Robinson was exploring thinker's flow: she was moving at her own speed, returning repeatedly to theological questions and using the essay to hold certain goods that, for one reason or another, had not yet found domicile in fictional form.

But here is a second novel, and it is no surprise to find that it is religious, somewhat essayistic and fiercely calm. *Gilead* is a beautiful work -- demanding, grave and lucid -- and is, if anything, more out of time than Robinson's book of essays, suffused as it is with a Protestant bareness that sometimes recalls George Herbert (who is alluded to several times, along with John Donne) and sometimes the American religious spirit that produced Congregationalism and 19th-century Transcendentalism and those bareback religious riders Emerson, Thoreau and Melville.

Gilead is set in 1956 in the small town of Gilead, Iowa, and is narrated by a 76-year-old pastor named John Ames, who has recently been told he has angina pectoris and believes he is facing imminent death. In this terminal spirit, he decides to write a long letter to his 7-year-old son, the fruit of a recent marriage to a much younger woman. This novel is that letter, set down in the easy, discontinuous form of a diary, mixing long and short entries, reminiscences, moral advice and so on. (Robinson was perhaps influenced by the similar forms of the two most famous books narrated by clergymen, Francis Kilvert's diary and Georges Bernanos's novel *The Diary of a Country Priest.)*

Robinson, as if relishing the imposition, has instantly made things hard for herself: the diary form that reports on daily and habitual occurrences tends to be relatively static; it is difficult to whip the donkey of dailiness into big, bucking, dramatic scenes. Those who, like this reader, feel that novels -- especially novels about clergymen -- are best when secular, comic and social, may need a few pages to get over the lack of these elements. In fact, *Gilead* does have a gentle sort of comedy -- though there is nothing here to match the amusing portraits in *Housekeeping* -- but it is certainly a pious, even perhaps a devotional work, and its characters move in a very small society.

The great danger of the clergyman in fiction is that his doctrinal belief will leak into the root system of the novel and turn argument into piety, drama into sermon. This is one of the reasons that, in the English tradition, from Henry Fielding to Barbara Pym, the local vicar is usually safely contained as hypocritical, absurd or possibly a bit dimwitted. Robinson's pastor is that most difficult narrator from a novelist's point of view, a truly good and virtuous man, and occasionally you may wish he possessed a bit more malice, avarice or lust -- or just an intriguing unreliability.

John Ames has cherished baptizing infants: "That feeling of a baby's brow against the palm of your hand -- how I have loved this life." He loves the landscape too: "I have lived my life on the prairie and a line of oak trees can still astonish me." When he informs us that he has written more than 2,000 sermons, and that he has written almost all of them "in the deepest hope and conviction," the reader surely protests: "Never in boredom or fatigue or sheer diligence?" and perhaps thinks longingly of Yorick, the parson in *'Tristram Shandy* who, at the bottom of his eloquent funeral eulogy, is seen to have written an improper "Bravo!" to himself, so secularly pleased is he with his own eloquence.

But while John Ames may be a good man, he is not an uninteresting one, and he has a real tale to tell. His grandfather, also named John Ames and also a preacher, came out to Kansas from Maine in the 1830's and ended up fighting on the Union side in the Civil War. He knew John Brown and lost an eye in that war. The book's narrator remembers his grandfather as a formidable, old-fashioned warrior for God who used to conduct church services while wearing his pistol.

Robinson's portraits of the old man are vivid slashes of poetry. Marvellously, we see Grandfather Ames as "a wild-haired, one-eyed, scrawny old fellow with a crooked beard, like a paintbrush left to dry with lacquer in it." He seemed to his grandson "stricken and afflicted, and indeed he was, like a man everlastingly struck by lightning, so that there was an ashiness about his clothes and his hair never settled and his eye had a look of tragic alarm when he wasn't actually sleeping. He was the most unreposeful human being I ever knew except for certain of his friends." Our narrator recalls entering the house as a little boy and being told by his mother that "the Lord is in the parlor." Looking in, he sees his grandfather talking with God, "looking attentive and sociable and gravely pleased. I would hear a remark from time to time, 'I see your point,' or 'I have often felt that way myself.' "

But our narrator's father, also called John Ames and also a preacher, was a very different kind of man. He was a pacifist and he quarreled with Grandfather Ames, so that the older man, who had been living with his son, left the house and wandered off to Kansas, where he died. *'Gilead'* is much concerned with fathers and sons, and with God the father and his son. The book's narrator returns again and again to the parable of the prodigal son -- the son who returned to his father and was forgiven, but did not deserve forgiveness. Ames's life has lately been irradiated by his unexpected marriage and by the gift of his little son, and he consoles himself that although he won't see him grow up, he will be reunited with him in heaven: "I imagine your child self finding me in heaven and jumping into my arms, and there is a great joy in the thought."

Gradually, Robinson's novel teaches us how to read it, suggests how we might slow down to walk at its own processional pace, and how we might learn to coddle its many fine details. Nowadays, when so many writers are acclaimed as great stylists, it's hard to make anyone notice when you praise a writer's prose .

Books of the Month

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson – Claudia

There is, however, something remarkable about the writing in *Gilead*.

It's not just a matter of writing well, although Robinson demonstrates that talent on every page: the description of the one-eyed grandfather, who "could make me feel as though he had poked me with a stick, just by looking at me," or one of a cat held by Ames's little son, eager to escape, its ears flattened back and its tail twitching and its eyes "patiently furious." It isn't just the care with which Robinson can relax the style to a Midwestern colloquialism: "But one afternoon a storm came up and a gust of wind hit the henhouse and lifted the roof right off, and hens came flying out, sucked after it, I suppose, and also just acting like hens." (How deceptively easy that little coda is -- "and also just acting like hens" -- but how much it conveys.)

Robinson's words have a spiritual force that's very rare in contemporary fiction -- what Ames means when he refers to "grace as a sort of ecstatic fire that takes things down to essentials." There are plenty of such essentialists in American fiction (writers like Kent Haruf and Cormac McCarthy), and Robinson is sometimes compared to them, but their essentials are generally not religious.

In ordinary, secular fiction, a writer who "takes things down to essentials" is reducing language to increase the amount of secular meaning (or sometimes, alas, to decrease it). When Robinson reduces her language, it's because secular meaning has exhausted itself and is being renovated by religious meaning. Robinson, who loves Melville and Emerson, cannot rid herself of the religious habit of using metaphor as a form of revelation. Ames spends much time musing on the question of what heaven will be like. Surely, he thinks, it will be a changed place, yet one in which we can still remember our life on earth: "In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets." There sings a true Melvillean note.

As the novel progresses, its language becomes sparer, lovelier, more deeply infused with Ames's yearning metaphysics. His best friend, an old Presbyterian minister named Boughton, who lives nearby and is also ailing, has a wayward son, now in his 40's, who returns to Gilead in the course of the novel. Boughton's son comes to Ames for spiritual counsel, and his sad story provides a counterpoint to the relationship Ames has with his 7-year-old -- which he would dearly like to continue beyond the grave.

Ames does not want to die and dislikes aging, not least because he cannot play vigorously with his son: "I feel as if I am being left out, as though I'm some straggler and people can't quite remember to stay back for me." At the end of the book, Boughton's son leaves Gilead even as his own father is on his deathbed, and Ames registers the filial cruelty of this act: "It was truly a dreadful thing he was doing, leaving his father to die without him. It was the kind of thing only his father would forgive him for."

Only his father and only His Father. The link between the terrestrial relationship and the religious one is made explicit when Ames recalls that "Augustine says the Lord loves each of us as an only child, and that has to be true. 'He will wipe the tears from all faces.' It takes nothing from the loveliness of the verse to say that is exactly what will be required." Heaven, then, as Ames sees it -- and perhaps Robinson too -- will afford a special kind of amnesty, a sublime gratuity, in which those who least deserve forgiveness will most joyously receive it. Ames hints at this when he reflects on his own unspectacular filial piety: "I myself was the good son, so to speak, the one who never left his father's house. . . . I am one of those righteous for whom the rejoicing in heaven will be comparatively restrained."

Robinson's book ends in characteristic fashion, with its feet planted firmly on the Iowa soil and its eyes fixed imploringly on heaven, as a dying man daily pictures Paradise but also learns how to prolong every day -- to extend time, even on earth, into a serene imitation of eternity: "Light is constant, we just turn over in it. So every day is in fact the selfsame evening and morning." *Gilead* closes as simply as it opened: "I'll pray, and then I'll sleep."

From the internet

Ratings out of 5 : Alexa 3.5, Claudia 4, Dawn 4.5, Denise 3.5, Di 3 & Nicola 4.

About the Author

Marilynne Robinson was born on November 26, 1943 in Sandpoint, Idaho. After attending high school in Sandpoint she went to Brown University, graduating in 1966; she then enrolled in the graduate program in English at the University of Washington, where she started writing her first novel, *Housekeeping* (1981), which tells the story of two girls growing up in rural Idaho in the mid-1900s and is regarded by many as an American classic; it received the PEN/Hemingway award for best first novel and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

After the publication of *Housekeeping,* Robinson began writing essays and book reviews for *Harper's, Paris Review,* and *The New York Times Book Review.* She also served as writer-in-residence and visiting professor at numerous colleges and universities, including the University of Kent in England, Amherst College, and the University of Massachusetts.

Her second book, *Mother Country: Britain, The Welfare State and Nuclear Pollution* (1988), revealed the extensive environmental damage caused by the nuclear reprocessing plant at Sellafield, in the north of England; the book evolved from an essay that she wrote for *Harper's Review* and was a finalist for the National Book Award.

A decade later, Robinson published a collection of essays entitled *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought.*

Gilead, her second novel, was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in the US in November 2004 won the Pulitzer Prize 2005. Her latest novel is *Home* 2009 Orange Prize for Fiction; finalist for the 2008 National Book Award.

From the Internet

Other Books We Read This Month

The Stars My Destination (or Tiger, Tiger!) by Alfred Bester – Claudia

Gully Foyle is my name,

And Terra is my nation,

Deep space is my dwelling place, The Stars my destination

How's that for a hook? Pretty compelling stuff, isn't it? You have no idea. Wait until you get into the novel. This is what adventure is all about. Adventure and a whole lot more.

You've probably seen *The Stars My Destination* included in every science fiction top ten list published. Forty-five years have passed since it was first published and it's yet to be knocked out of the masters' circle. That's a pretty impressive statement. Bester's classic has the stuff to back it up.

Meet Gully Foyle. He's not exactly one of the good guys, but he's your hero for this trip. Foyle's life has never been easy, but as the novel opens he is in about the worst predicament of his life -- stranded in space, alone, with little or no chance of rescue. Like I said, the worst scrape of his life... yet. Things are bound to get better for Foyle; things for the people who betrayed him are bound to get so much worse.

Call him what you want: criminal, victim, have-not, survivor, scoundrel; he is at all times a very dangerous man. If revenge is a dish best served cold, Foyle doesn't have the time or passion to wait around for it to cool. Get ready for some rough stuff. Really rough stuff. But, will vengeance be as sweet as he hopes?

Bester's portrayal of a divided society where the rich are the real masters of the universe, is social commentary at its best. It's a lesson that slips seamlessly into the brain, riding on the back of a non-stop action story. This world, where a jaunte can transport a person's body across thousands of miles, is closed to someone like Foyle who appears to be not worth the time and trouble it takes to teach this feat.

The Stars My Destination holds on to its coveted top ten rating with its dazzling mixture of tantalizing plot, multi-faceted cast of characters, social commentary, and chilling speculation. Thousands of science fiction stories have been published since this amazing novel appeared in 1956. Good, bad, superb -- none has bumped Bester's landmark novel from the list of the genre's true classics.

Space opera, adventure story, heroic journey, and wry social commentary -- consider it Bester's own Count of Monte Cristo, with a less noble background, of course. But, nobility is a relative thing in Gully Foyle's universe; give this ripping tale a good read and make up your own mind. And be ready to join in the next discussion of the truly stellar examples of science fiction.

From the Internet

Rating : 5/5

The Twin by Gerbrand Bakker – Claudia

In contemporary literary fiction, a spare, restrained prose style is anything but rare. What is rare, however, is to find a stylistic simplicity used with such clear intention and, ironically, with such subtlety as is found in Gerbrand Bakker's novel *The Twin*. Originally written in Dutch, and skillfully translated by David Colmer, the novel has all the careful observation and and delicate shading of a painting by one of the Dutch masters– Bakker sees beauty and complexity in the smallest corners of everyday life and portrays them with a quiet mastery that gives his story both great weight and great lightness.

The book begins when the protagonist, a middle-aged man named Helmer van Wonderen, moves his dying father from his bedroom on the main floor of the family farmhouse to a small room upstairs. At our introduction to him, Helmer seems cold, perhaps even cruel in his treatment of the weak old man, and the relationship between the two is unclear. The use of farm imagery, which provides a consistent, rhythmic background to the book, begins in the second sentence with this description of Helmer's father: "He sat there like a calf that's just a couple of minutes old, before it's been licked clean: with a directionless, wobbly head and eyes that drift over things." Helmer's unfeeling treatment of his helpless father, including his flat refusal to call a doctor when asked, makes the reader immediately cautious of him. Our understanding is quickly complicated a few pages later with a very matter-of-fact description of the old man ridding the farm of a litter of feral kittens by repeatedly backing them over with a car. With only the slightest change in tone, we are able to see the old man through Helmer's eyes, and our perception of the dynamic between the two changes entirely. From a helpless calf, the old man is transformed into the kind of person who would muster his dwindling strength to exterminate

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Other Books We Read This Month

The Twin by Gerbrand Bakker – Claudia

an animal in an unnecessarily cruel way–saying "Good riddance to bad rubbish," and wearily wiping his hands in a "one-chore-out-of-the-way gesture."

This sort of delicate irony and the use of quick, demonstrative exposition to describe complicated emotions and relationships is illustrative of Bakker's technique throughout the novel. The real story begins thirty years earlier, when Helmer's twin brother Henk is killed in a car accident shortly before his marriage to a woman named Riet. The tragedy has a devastating effect on Riet and the family, but changes Helmer's life in particular. As a twin, he has twice lost what he feels to be half of himself–first to a woman, and finally to death.

After his brother's death Helmer's father forbids him to continue his studies in Amsterdam (an endeavor for which his father clearly had nothing but scorn), and summons him home to take his brother's place on the farm. The double loss of his twin and his freedom create a deeply buried frustration that the events of the book brings to the surface.

Part of the power of Bakker's writing is his immaculate sense of rhythm and timing. When the book opens, the reader has the feeling that she is entering a closed world with a slow, steady tempo–a passing character comments in one scene that the farm is "timeless. It's here on this road now, but it might just as well be 1967 or 1930." The feeling of stagnancy, that the characters are simply shells of human beings who have been going through the same changeless routine for decades lies heavy. The book, however, begins with a significant change–Helmer physically moving his father into a new room, exiling him from the life of the house. This change precipitates other changes; at first seemingly superficial changes, such as Helmer redecorating house, soon give way to larger ones when a letter arrives from Riet, who has not been heard from since Henk's death. Riet's son–whom she named after Henk–comes to stay with Helmer, disrupting his aloneness and stirring up complicated memories and questions for Helmer about the relationship he had with his brother and the rupture his brother's death posed to Helmer's own ambitions.

From small changes, an avalanche of motion occurs and the tempo steadily increases into a powerful accelerando, which is nonetheless tempered by the unrelenting quietude of the prose. Bakker uses this spare style with a palpable sense of purpose. Detailed observations of nature and the rural setting are contrasted with a bare minimum of information at the very moments of highest drama, which manages to actually heighten rather than diminish the impact. A scene as banal as the donkey shed on an average night, for instance, is given an attention which brings it vividly close,

Despite this human scale, Bakker lends *The Twin* a slightly mythical quality and avoids any feeling of mundanity with his use of recurring symbols and imagery. The symbols, are usually nature-related, like a hooded crow that comes to roost outside the dying father's window. Such symbols are certainly hard to miss, but they escape the danger of feeling heavy-handed because, like the characters themselves and the changes they undergo, their meanings remain ambiguous. In this way, they become more cipher-like motifs than representative entities.

The book comes to an unexpected end, and one that does not promise a clear future for Helmer. The unceasing rhythms of rural life only serve to underscore the changes that have occurred–Helmer and his farm no longer seem stagnant or timeless, yet exactly what it is that has changed within his life and heart is difficult to define. The reader is left with a strong sense of new possibility, but the changes are small and undramatic, organic rather than message-laden. It is a testament to Bakker's fine craftsmanship that Helmer's delayed realization of selfhood and healing from the thirty-year-old wound of his twin brother's death can bring the narrative to momentous resolution.

It is refreshing to find a book at once so engaging and intelligent, and in which stylistic simplicity is used with grace and effectiveness. David Colmer's translation brings the Dutch into English in a way that is colloquial and familiar-feeling without losing a pleasant sense of foreignness. *The Twin* cannot be said to be innovative, yet it is unique and surprising in the depth it finds in a quiet tale of pastoral realism The maxim "less is more," is often used as an excuse for what is simplistic rather than simple, but in this case Gerbrand Bakker has truly created a tour de force.

From the Internet

Rating 3.5/5

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Other Books We Read This Month

What Becomes by A.L.Kennedy– Claudia

If the stories in *What Becomes* are reducible to a single theme, they are about "nasty thinking", the mixture of self-knowledge, dismay, guilt and an unfolding awareness of their predicament to which Kennedy's characters seem inescapably prey. They are also about ambivalence towards the possibility or desirability of communication; about the torments and traps of the past; and about the even greater claustrophobia of being marooned inside one's own head.

They are also, quite often, very funny and very angry. The reluctantly adrift relaxer of "Saturday Teatime" might find her mind drawn back to the household violence that she witnessed as a child, or sliding across an unattained and unwanted romance, but she also finds time to anatomise a couple whom she meets at a party: "Fair enough, his wife is a dead-eyed, organic hummus-producing marionette with a whispery, creepy laugh - but he'll have made her that way. And she'll have made him a sticky-handed fraud reliant on alcohol, golf and non-threatening porn. They are every excuse they could ever need to abscond and yet they'll stay and, having ruined themselves and each other, they will grind on and on and their son will be worn down and hollowed at 17 - a self-harmer, criminal, crack head. Hope not." Kennedy doesn't do instinctive social dislike by halves, nor the prediction of gloomy futures, but in her characters' gouts of vitriol there is also, of course, both desperation and lament for their own, necessarily solitary lives.

Kennedy's characters are out of kilter but, by virtue of their own obsessional focus, brought strangely back into kilter at the same time; their pain estranges them from the world while also attuning them to it and providing them a space to live. It's a notion of balance she likes to play with in moments such as in the story "Whole Family with Young Children Devastated", when she imagines how a notice tacked to a tree might read if, for once, a stray pet actually returned home: "'Found/ Exactly What We Hoped For/ Thanks to Everyone For Your Concern/ We Are So Happy Now/ No Problems Anywhere".

Most of the time, the dog does not come home. Disappointment and disaster stalk the pages of *What Becomes*, whether they arrive in the guise of a lost child or an unfaithful husband or even a series of dental traumas, remembered in agonising detail. Those afflicted close ranks on themselves, attempt to compensate for their loss - most overtly, perhaps, in "As God Made Us", a story about a group of former soldiers who are all amputees and who centre their reunions on trips to far-flung swimming baths - and alternately resist and yield to the temptation to examine their wounds. Much of the time, they search for erasure, a moment that will not "leave me alone with me"; it's no coincidence that the manager of the organic produce shop in Edinburgh rejects his own goods in favour of powdered nutritional drinks, stirred with his "personal fork", of which the variety called "Nothing" is his favourite flavour.

If the solitaries of *What Becomes* concentrate their energies on holding their worlds steady in the face of difficult odds, the married and the partnered fare little better. In one of the collection's standout stories, "Confectioner's Gold", a couple lurch around New York, sleep-deprived and alienated from their surroundings and one another, in the wake of a largely unexplained catastrophe. Little happens; they simply eat lunch in a Japanese restaurant and become beguiled, despite their individual and collective misery, by the delicacy and beauty of the food and their surroundings. We apprehend that much of their unhappiness is financial, but not all of it; we spend most of the story failing to understand fully why this alone should have brought them to such a parlous state. But the story's power derives from its extraordinary atmosphere - ragged, shattered, oppressive. We feel that this is what disaster looks and feels and tastes like; at once horribly enveloping and bewilderingly distant.

Elsewhere, Kennedy provides a wincingly painful blow-by-blow account of a one-night stand that finishes as a stark cautionary tale about the dangers of fleeting intimacy and importunate self-exposure. In its all-or-nothing explicitness, its relentless parade of sexual openness and romantic gaucherie, it is a hard piece to read without feeling sick. In another story, a couple's walk around a crowded town centre reveals a marriage gone dangerously awry; in another, in fact called "Another", a woman secretly rejoices over her husband's untimely death and subsequently installs what she hopes will be a better version of the same man, while Kennedy remains silent over whether this will prove to be the case.

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Other Books We Read This Month

What Becomes by A.L.Kennedy – Claudia

It is a critical commonplace to describe Kennedy's work as unremittingly bleak, and she herself has talked of her writing as something she "does" to her readers and will probably not stop doing any time soon; but it would be wrong to assume that the ceaseless propulsion of her stories - into loneliness, unhappiness, despair - removes the possibility of light and shade.

These are wonderfully textured pieces, varying from sentence to sentence, mood to mood, committed to capturing the precariousness and unsteadiness of individual mental landscapes.

When Frank, the subject of the book's title story, turns away from his wife in case she is "having some kind of large emotion that she didn't want to be observed", we can be sure that Kennedy will never allow herself to be drawn into such retreat.

For her, observation of emotions large, small and unknown is the whole point.

From the Internet

Rating 4/5

I've been reading A. L. Kennedy's quirky books for some time, but this one is her best yet.

Gripping, interesting, enjoyable and a dazzling power of observation: not something that you find every day in a writer.

I really loved this book.

Comment by Claudia

Poet's Choice by Edward Hirsch – Claudia

Edward Hirsch was asked to write a column in the "Washington Post Book World" called "Poet's Choice" in 2002 after the success of his book *How to read a poem and fall in love with poetry*. This book brings together those enormously popular columns to present a minicourse in world poetry. More than 130 poets from ancient times to the present represent cultures from all around the globe.

Rating : 5/5

Hirsch was a professor of English at Wayne State University and in 1985 he joined the faculty of the University of Houston where he spent 17 years as professor of English. He was appointed the fourth president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation on September 3, 2002. He holds honorary degrees from several institutions.

He is the poetry editor of DoubleTake magazine. His essays have been published in The New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, American Poetry Review, and The Paris Review. He wrote a weekly column on poetry for the Washington Post Book World from 2002-2005.

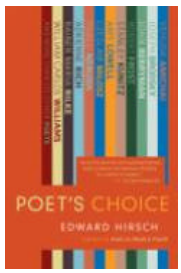
His first collection of verse, *For the Sleepwalkers,* (1981) received the Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets and the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Award from New York University. His second collection, *Wild Gratitude*, received the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1986. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1985, a five-year MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 1987 and the William Riley Parker Prize from the Modern Language Association for the best scholarly essay in Proceedings of the Modern Language Association for the year 1991.

Hirsch's self-explanatory book ***How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*** was a surprise bestseller in 1999 and remains in print through multiple printings.

From the Internet

I'm one of those people that want to read poetry but need help to do it, Edward Hirsch is an excellent teacher and I tremendously enjoyed both *Poet's choice* and *How to read a poem.* Highly recommended

Comment by Claudia



Other Books We Read This Month

Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe – Dianne

Abraham Lincoln, on welcoming Harriet Beecher Stowe to the White House, introduced her as 'the little lady who started this big war'. When Harriet Beecher Stowe published Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1851, it outraged people in the American South and was criticized by slavery supporters. The novel was declared 'utterly false' by Southern novelist William Gilmore; others referred to it as criminal and slanderous. A bookseller in Mobile, Alabama was driven from town for selling the novel and Stowe received threatening letters, including a package containing a slave's severed ear.

Any book which garners such reaction is bound to be a powerful work.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is set in the South in the 1800s and begins with the story of Tom, a slave from Kentucky, just before he is sold by his "mas'r" to settle a debt. A parallel story follows the life of Eliza, her husband George and their young son, Harry, who flee to Canada when they learn that Harry will be "sold down the river" and separated from his family.

This book does not pull any punches. It shows the brutality of slavery in explicit detail, and the narrative is amazing in its ability to capture the sentiment of the time. My first reaction to this book is that it was based much more on religion than I had imagined it to be. Stowe's main purpose of the book was to nakedly expose the institution of slavery to America and the rest of the world with the hopes that something would be done about it. To achieve this, she showed us individual instances of slavery in a country that prided itself on its Christianity and its laws protecting freedom. She showed us how absurd slavery is "beneath the shadow of American laws and the shadow of the cross of Christ."

If you want to look at this book in terms of an interesting piece of literature outside its social and political context, I don't think you have much to look at. The story itself is not interesting, it's packed with religious dogma at every turn and you see hardly any character development. Many of the characters are stereotypes – the child Eva preaching to her family about the evils of slavery at the age of seven, Tom himself is an almost Christ-like character and seems almost too good to be true. This book however has one simple focus: it uncovers the institution of slavery. This is what makes it riveting to read.

With the voice of a humane New Orleans slave owner, Stowe tells us what slavery is really: "This cursed business, accursed of God and man, what is it? Strip it of all its ornament, run it down to the root and nucleus of the whole, and what is it? Why, because my brother Quashy is ignorant and weak, and I am intelligent and strong,-because I know how, and can do it,-therefore, I may steal all he has, keep it, and give him only such and so much as suits my fancy. Whatever is too hard, to dirty, to disagreeable, for me, I may set Quashy to doing. Because I don't like work, Quashy shall work. Because the sun burns me, Quashy shall stay in the sun. Quashy shall earn the money, and I will spend it. Quashy shall lie down in every puddle, that I may walk over dry-shod. Quashy shall do my will and not his, all the days of his mortal life, and have such chance of getting to heaven, at last as I find convenient. This I take to be about what slavery is. I defy anybody on earth to read our slave-code, as it stands in our law-books, and make anything else of it. Talk of the abuses of slavery! Humbug! The thing itself is the essence of all abuse!"

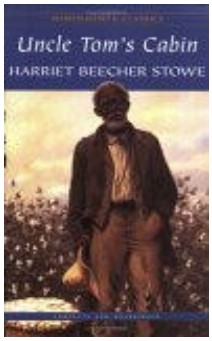
This novel is painful and powerful. It is not racist, but exposes racism for what it is – a crime against humanity. It is a slap of reality when a character is murdered, and a slave owner says: 'It's commonly supposed that the property interest is a sufficient guard in these cases. If people choose to ruin their own possessions, I don't know what's to be done.' Or when a wealthy, white plantation owner's wife justifies separating a black mother from her babies by saying: 'Mammy couldn't have the feelings that I should. It's a different thing altogether, – of course, it is,-and yet St. Clare pretends not to see it. And just as if Mammy could love her little dirty babies as I love Eva!'

Stowe notes in the final chapters that although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a work of fiction, it is based on actual events and the characters are created from people she knew or were told about. Perhaps this is why her prose rings true and clear, and the characters spring to life on the pages.If Stowe has one fault with this novel, it is that she wraps it up a little too perfectly in the end. Her optimism in happy endings is perhaps her one denial of how terrible things usually turned out for slaves.

This is not an enjoyable book, but it is an important one. And one that everyone should read.

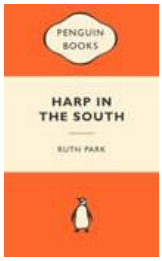
Review by Dianne & the internet

Rating 4.5



Other Books We Read This Month

The Harp in the South by Ruth Parks – Di



Actress Ruth Cracknell describes Ruth Park as 'that steady glow at the heart of Australian literature'.

This is the second part of a trilogy covering a span of over thirty years in the life of the Darcy family, the first being Missus, then The Harp in the South (1948), and followed by Poor Man's Orange.

Hugh and Margaret Darcy are raising their family in a flea-bitten boarding house in Surry Hills with their two daughters, Roie (Rowena) and Dolour amid the brothels, grog shops and rundown boarding houses, where money is scarce and life is not easy. At times confronting, often affectionate, this is a remarkable portrait of an Australian working-class family of the time.

It is a simple tale, told without narrative tricks or complex structure, with the focus firmly on the characterisation of an Irish Catholic family living in the post-war slums of Sydney. It was the warts-and-all depiction of this underclass which offended some readers, and in later years Park feared that the publicity from this book had triggered the demolition of a vibrant community as well as slum-reclamation works. These controversies are long over now, and the book is a treasured Australian classic.

The story traces their everyday lives over a few years: their trials and tribulations; the tragedy of little Thady who vanished from the street aged just six and never seen again; Granny Kilker's slide into dementia; Roie's first love and its aftermath; and Dolour's triumph in a radio quiz program. Their poverty colours every aspect of life: the struggle to put food on the table, patched and darned clothes, grubbiness, bed bugs and dingy housing. Always there is embarrassment when anyone comes to visit; always clothes for a special occasion are a problem. There is no romanticising of their prospects: generations have lived in these slums, and the children's fate is to maintain this intergenerational poverty.

What saves this fine novel from being a dreary misery is the humour and the insistence on the value of family and community. For all its faults, this family is bound together by a powerful love, best exemplified by the staunch figure of Mumma, but also by the affection between the two girls and the fierce pride that Hughie feels for his family. And while they live in one of the roughest parts of Sydney, and there is drunkenness and violence, theirs is a community which will offer friendship and compassion when it's needed.

It's unashamedly sentimental in places, but this does not detract from its honesty and charm.

From the Internet

Rating 4/5

Solar by Ian McEwan – Denise

Solar is an engrossing and satirical novel which focuses on climate change. It is a stylish new work by one of the world's greatest living writers about one man's ambitions and self-deceptions.

Michael Beard is in his late fifties; bald, overweight, unprepossessing – a Nobel prize-winning physicist whose best work is behind him. Trading on his reputation, he speaks for enormous fees, lends his name to the letterheads of renowned scientific institutions and half-heartedly heads a government-backed initiative tackling global warming. An inveterate philanderer, Beard finds his fifth marriage floundering. When Beard's professional and personal worlds are entwined in a freak accident, an opportunity presents itself, a chance for Beard to extricate himself from his marital mess, reinvigorate his career and very possibly save the world from environmental disaster.

Dan Franklin, Publisher, comments: 'Solar is a novel about one of the most serious threats to our world – global warming – but is also very, very funny. It shows a fresh side to Ian McEwan's work, that he's a comic writer of genius.'

It's unashamedly sentimental in places, but this does not detract from its honesty and charm.

From the Internet

Though a work of fiction this novel trails strong emotional hooks - global warming and its apocalyptic urgency coupled with one of the most frustratingly obnoxious grotesque main characters

moulded by an author. It is the many comic overtones in the incidents bordering on clunking literary slapstick that lift this novel from what could have been a grim discourse.

McEwan plays with the reader building up considerable suspense in the latter part , giving a powerful reminder that the subject matter is indeed serious. A good read.

Comment by Denise

Rating 4