

June – The Dark of the Moon by Fiona Valpy

Most of the group thoroughly enjoyed this book an inspiring story told with humour and pathos. The book is cleverly told from two different viewpoints, Philly a 90 year old WW2 veteran and Finn a 13 year old boy with Autism.

Philly is visiting Finn's mum who wants to write a book about her war experience as a pilot for Air Transport Auxiliary Corp and at Bletchley Park. She was involved in dangerous missions delivering decoding mission to France. She fall in love and marries Ben has twins but unfortunately he disappears on a mission.

Listening to Philly's story opens up a new world for Finn and helps them to develop a special relationship and, with his persistence and dogged determination solve the mystery of Ben's disappearance.

An easy read, with all the different strands of story brought together at the end.

April – The Marriage Portrait by Maggie O'Farrell

Eight of us met to discuss this fictionalised account set in the 16th century of the life of Lucrezia, a member of an Italian aristocratic family who was murdered by her husband for failing to produce an heir. Or did she manage to escape?

Everyone enjoyed the story although some felt it was too wordy and another didn't like the constant swapping between the past and current events.

The story was loosely based on the real life of the Duchess of Ferrara immortalised in Robert Browning's poem 'My Last Duchess'

March – Before the Coffee gets Cold by Toshikazu Kawaguchi

Mixed reviews of the book but, as always, we had a good interesting discussion. We all agreed that the book was a bit confusing to begin with, and the characters' names were too similar. However the four stories were interesting and if, as was intended, the story was originally a play, we would like to see it if it came our way.

February – Skellig by David Almond

This emotional book, written for adolescents, tells the story of Michael (probably age 10/12) living through numerous significant changes in his life. He meets Skellig and Mina when his family move house and after the birth of his sister who is unwell.

Most members enjoyed the book for various reasons, considering it an unexpected, unusual read.

The writing style, described by one member as '*captivating, almost every line enchanted me*', revealed Michael's feelings and confusion enabling powerful imagery.

Characters are likeable, with Skellig '*being laugh out loud funny*'. Michael's warm family are ordinary, loving and caring. His friendship with Mina and school chums Leakey and Coot demonstrates his conflicting emotions when he says '*I wanted them to go away/I wanted them to stay*'. Is Skellig an angel guarding over the baby? What is the future for Skellig? The baby remains nameless until she is home following heart surgery.

Setting feels like 1970's although not stated. Skellig Michael is a protected Bird Watch island, with birds figuring extensively throughout the story.

Themes identified include home schooling versus conventional education; impact of unwell child on the whole family; crying with anger/sadness as well as happiness/relief; faith beliefs, while not overt, thread throughout.

The book generated wide ranging discussion including memories of members' childhood experiences and how attitudes have change regarding the protection of children.

January – The Bastard of Istanbul by Elif Shafak

This book tells the story of Armanoush (Amy), raised in Arizona with an American mother, Armenian father and Turkish stepfather. She decides to visit her stepfather's family in Istanbul and meets her 'cousin' Asya and her four 'aunts' (one of whom is Asya's mother), uncovering their family history and secrets.

Most members found this book hard work and somewhat confusing, particularly the various Armenian and Turkish names and characters, current and historic, and their relationships. There were also incidental and distracting characters and side-stories, and references to myths and djinns. The writing itself was mostly enjoyed, with some beautiful descriptions and characterisations and gently humorous passages.

Despite not really enjoying the book, it provoked a good discussion around the history and cultures, and the family dynamics. It was felt it would make a good film - or indeed a better book, if re-told in a clearer timeline. It was also felt that the title was not representative of the book. It was a shame that it was hard to follow, as it is actually a moving and interesting story with an informative history of Turkey and the 1915 Armenian genocide and how the two cultures choose to forget or remember it. (This actually led to the author being prosecuted on a charge of "insulting Turkishness" which could have resulted in a 3-year prison sentence.) The titles of the chapters are the ingredients for the Turkish dessert ashure, which proves very significant at the end of the book.