

Room to Read Book Group Report
***The Women in Black* by Madeleine St John by Hilary Clarkson and Annie Clouston**

This book makes a fun holiday read should you be lucky enough to escape the Teesdale Wet Stuff. The writer is described by Bruce Beresford (who directed the film of the book) as 'sharp tongued' with a waspish sense of humour, and that comes across really well in her descriptions of all the characters. Set in the late fifties in Sydney, Australia, the novel reflects the sexist, ageist and xenophobic norms of the day. Men are shown to do little in the home, are sexually repressed, heavy drinkers. Foreigners and continentals were "Gawd awful", having radical ideas about politics, food and wine.

Women need to be at the height of fashion where possible and affordable. Women of 30 without children are past their prime and not fulfilling their expected roles. A university education is wasted on women. The young woman at the centre of the story, christened Lesley, but preferring Lisa as a more glamorous handle than a "boy's name", is supported by her meek but supportive mother in her application for a scholarship to university. Her father, a stereotypical dinosaur of the beer-drinking, horserace-watching variety, is against the idea. When Lisa's top marks in the entrance exam are reported in the paper his workmates congratulate him and he hasn't the first idea what they are talking about. No doubt the cudon conferred by his mates for her achievements helped him reluctantly agree to her taking up her university place.

On the second floor of the famous F.G. Goode department store, the best in town, in Ladies' Cocktail Frocks, Lisa gets a job as a temporary gofer during the Christmas and New Year rush. Her services are kidnapped by the (Continental) Magda in prestigious Model Gowns and here begins a relationship that could be described as cygnet-to-swan as Magda helps Lisa emerge from childhood into a more sophisticated Bohemian world.

The relationships between the women on the second floor are richly drawn, and despite petty cattiness, the solidarity of the sisterhood is uplifting. There is humour and compassion as well as feistiness in the writing, redolent of Barbara Pym or Jane Austen perhaps, and most of us found it a good read. Scores on the doors – as a recommendation to other book groups, four stars (out of five) and to friends, 4.5.

The film of the book ***Ladies in Black*** directed by Bruce Beresford is available on Netflix. It is very true to the book and a definite feel-good watch.