

## Room to Read Book Group – Review by Celia Chapple

### *Old Baggage* by Lissa Evans

*Old Baggage* (2018) is the 2<sup>nd</sup> book in Lissa Evans' 2014 trilogy, beginning with *Crooked Heart* and concluding with *V for Victory*. The energetic and flamboyant Mattie Simpkin's story continues, not in her youth, but in her middle age, the dark inter-war years, just before the 1928 Franchise Act is passed, giving women over 21 franchise equality with men. Mattie still wants to make a difference, and sets up a club to encourage girls and young women not to waste the gain she and others had won for them. Some of the unkind youngsters call her 'old baggage' but it could also refer to her 'emotional baggage', which becomes apparent as the story unfolds and she discovers a niece she was unaware of.

She sets up a Youth Games between her girls, The Amazons, and the uniformed mixed group, The Empire League, the event being reminiscent of the 'freedom and equality' versus 'fascism' politics of the 1930s. In her desperation to win, Mattie's judgement falters and she is caught cheating. Dismayed girls disband, permanently. Mattie's external world crumbles and so does her emotional one as people she cares for leave.

There was a lively discussion as most of the group really liked this book for the history, the characters and Evans' prose style and humour. Mattie's slightly dark, humorous description of an old friend, Aileen, was: "The handwriting on the card careered downhill amidst a shower of blots; poor Aileen, clearly back on the bottle." This curt dialogue also illustrates what the group decided was Mattie's cruel treatment of Florrie, her closest ally, Florrie's unacknowledged contribution to Mattie's life, and Mattie's general attitude toward others.

The group discussed how the book danced inexplicitly around women's sexuality, and went on to share their own experiences of Brownies and Girl Guides. Members were unanimous that the incongruous story ending was explained as a device to continue into the third book. Group recommendations out of 5: 4.5 for a book group; 4.5 to a friend; most members would read the whole trilogy.

Initially a junior doctor, Lissa changed careers to BBC Light Entertainment. She produced and directed several series including *Father Ted* for which she won a BAFTA. She has written several other books including *The Finest Hour and a Half* which was filmed in 2017. One can hear her wit in her titles! She has also written 4 children's books, such as *Web Wabbit*.

Next meeting 15 May: *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr.