

Book Group Two

No book group meetings although some of us are exchanging ideas and comments about books via email (we are not up to virtual meetings as some friends of mine are).

Reading is an obvious pleasure and distraction during our time at home and gives us the opportunity to read the books that have been sitting on shelves for so long.

Our choice for the May meeting was to be *Orphan Boys* by Phil Mews. Those of us who have read it enjoyed it very much, mainly because it is local. The story is that of two young boys living in Stanhope who lose both their parents at a very young age and are brought up by their grandparents who give up their home to come and care for them. From a trust fund set up for them, they are sent to Barnard Castle School as boarders from the age of 8. This experience is mixed as some staff were kind and some not so sympathetic to their loss. As one of our group put it, it was interesting to read this 'through the eyes of the young boy approach', especially the freedom of playing outside and gatherings. It reminded me very much of bringing up my boys in the 70s with the same toys, books etc. The narrator is good at conveying the excitement and emotions of the various events, sad and happy. This account of life in Stanhope and Barnard Castle will echo with local people and is certainly worth reading.

On a different note, one of our group members sent me the following comments about books she has been reading:

"I have been enjoying books by Elizabeth Strout, I read '*Olive Kitteridge*' – which won the Pulitzer prize. Yesterday I finished '*All is possible*'. The structure of both books is the same; each chapter tells the story of a person connected either closely or tenuously to the person in the previous chapter. Strout make no pretence of the fact that the world is a sad, hard place for many; but each character rises from either humble beginnings or from a childhood damaged by physical or psychological abuse to a success of sorts. It may be financial, fame or family happiness, with a peace of mind achieved by the character's own depth of compassion and forgiveness. It may sound moralistic or sentimental, but Strout's down to earth prose manages to avoid that and gives the reader or me at least a sense of yes, I understand – 'anything is possible'. Obviously these are not rip roaring tales, so more difficult to describe in a few lines; they are rather more of the 'La Condition Humaine' genre; but they are easy to read because she uses mostly everyday language, but in such a way as to make small things significant."

My own reading has been very mixed from light fiction to old favourites such as Jane Austen, along with 'heavier' books. I have just finished *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood. I was reluctant to start this (I borrowed it through the libraries online service so had a limited time to read it) as I wasn't sure of it during these difficult times.

However I am so pleased I read it as I thought it was an excellent book and so well written. I did not read *The Handmaid's Tale* until very recently or watch the TV serial although I have enjoyed her other books. I listened to *The Testaments* as a Book at Bedtime (very much abridged) which gave me the impetus to read both the books. Yes, they are bleak and harrowing in places but so well worth reading.

Hopefully, once we get back to normal, we usually meet every two months in the summer and once a month in the winter, on the second Monday in the month, although this can vary.

Please contact Elizabeth Long on 01833 641494 or book2@teesdaleu3a.org.uk for further details.