

Report from Room to Read Book Group (3) June 2019

Annie Clouston

The Cut Out Girl by Bart van Es

The first and overwhelming impact of this book, an account of the life of Lien, a Jewish woman, who survived the Holocaust and life thereafter, is that none of us had any idea of the scale of collaboration and collusion in the Netherlands to eliminate the Jewish population during Nazi occupation. Previously well integrated and protected by a Constitution that enshrined tolerance of religious faiths ("It was really Hitler who makes Lien Jewish" p7) Jews were vigorously hunted down by the Dutch police whose special units "quickly exceeded the targets that were set by their German masters, and in the end delivered 107,000 "full Jews" to the death camps in the east" (p59). Only 5,200 returned. Interestingly the post-war authorities dealt with the Jew-Hunters with astonishing leniency – five to six years' imprisonment and then rehabilitation to 'respectability' seems to have been the norm.

There were very brave people who sheltered and cared for Jewish families and children whose parents, knowing their own fate, arranged for them to be fostered by non-Jews. Bart van Es' grandparents were just such people, who took Lien aged nine, just before her parents were transported to and then murdered in Auschwitz. Lien is 'the cut out girl'. Possessed of an extraordinary resilience – a testament to the early love she had from her parents – Lien endures many humiliations and terrors that characterise a vulnerable childhood including rape and the ever-present threat of betrayal and discovery.

Whilst the focus of the book is on the war years, the author moves back and forward through time to give historical background, from archives that he has assiduously examined, and contemporary contextual detail, setting the frame for the Lien whom he meets for the first time, when she was in her eighties. He wants to discover the family secret that resonates with his own experience – how has Lien become 'the cut-out girl'? Once loved by his grandparents and then suddenly, when in her late forties, cut out of the family, Lien herself is deeply hurt and puzzled by her abandonment by her foster-mother and her instruction to the rest of the family that they must do likewise. In trying to understand how his grandmother could do such a thing (he is clear that it is not Lien's behaviour that warranted this harsh treatment) he sees a parallel in his own behaviour towards his stepdaughter. This is a profound realisation that leads to their reconciliation.

This is a moving and scholarly but intensely readable book. We would strongly recommend it to other book groups and our friend alike, with a unanimous score on both counts of 5/5.

Next meetings:

17 July	<i>Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont</i>	Elizabeth Taylor
No meeting in August		
18 September	<i>Unsheltered</i>	Barbara Kingsolver
16 October	<i>The Girl on the Landing</i>	Paul Torday