

**ROOM TO READ BOOK GROUP**  
**JULY'S BOOK: *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* by Elizabeth Taylor**  
**Report by Annie Clouston**

The "Other Liz Taylor" as this novelist has sometimes been called (I think I would be miffed not to be the "First Liz Taylor") has a wonderfully understated writing style that nevertheless shows remarkably astute observation skills and a witty style that conveys the foibles and mannerisms of her characters, warts and all, with a benevolence that often they do not deserve.

It is the 1970s when Mrs Palfrey, a stoical ex-colonial widow finds herself in need of a home in which to live out the rest of her days. She chooses the Claremont, a respectable but dreary Kensington hotel with reduced rates for all year round occupancy, in part for its proximity to her grandson, Desmond, in the hope that he will at least provide a family connection and the odd diverting excursion. Her daughter, a ghastly woman, who has reared an equally ghastly Desmond, lives in Scotland and is only just dutiful (probably with an eye on what limited inheritance Mrs Palfrey can bequeath). She occasionally reminds Desmond of his duty (for similar reasons) but he is very remiss. Happily for Mrs P along comes a substitute, Ludo, who by happenstance tends to her wounds when she has a fall on the pavement above his basement bedsit. He is an aspiring writer in need of a grandmother as much as she is in need of a grandson. His introduction to the permanent and moribund residents of the Claremont desperate for vicarious relationships, has consequences, particularly when eventually the 'vrai Desmond' turns up.

There is in this novel a great cast of characters, mostly the sort you would not want to spend your final days with. They have in common their loneliness and isolation and the need to preserve their dignity (whatever that means to them) and keep up appearances. One of the glories of Elizabeth Taylor's writing style is that her characters' essence is brilliantly presented in the dialogue, often funny but redolent with underlying pathos. If there is a clear message in the novel it is that relationships have to be nurtured through a lifelong effort or it could be the Claremont for you!

We thought it an excellent book group read (score 5/5), and to recommend to friends, yes (4/5), but with a health warning: not a comfortable read for people of a certain age. The film of the novel was made in 2005 with Joan Plowright in the title role: just right, I should think.

**Next meetings:**

No meeting in August

18 September *Unsheltered* Barbara Kingsolver

16 October *The Girl on the Landing* Paul Torday

20 November *Old Filth* Jane Gardam