

Room To Read Group – October 2019 Report

‘The Girl on the Landing’ by Paul Torday

Michael and Elizabeth have a steady, if passionless, marriage. Utterly reliable, decent, dull, Michael's life consists of Grouchers, his Mayfair gentleman's club, and Beinn Caorrun, the Perthshire estate he inherited from his parents and from which he remains, to Elizabeth's frustration, "indivisible". Drawn to Michael not for his money - or at least "not only for his money" - Elizabeth finds in Michael's "steadfast, boring look" the complete dependability her father lacked, though this doesn't altogether compensate for the niggling awareness that they don't "laugh a lot together"..

Told by the two of them in roughly alternate chapters, a potentially irritating device but one which does offer 2 viewpoints, the story begins 10 years later when, staying for the weekend in an Irish country house, Michael is struck by a painting of a girl in a green dress walking across a landing. On mentioning it to his hosts, Michael is confused to be told that there isn't a girl in the picture. He goes back to check and discovers that the girl is no longer there. It's the first in a series of unsettling jolts, as Michael's internal reality starts to conflict with the outside world as perceived by those around him. Introducing herself as Lamia, the girl in the green dress starts appearing to Michael more and more frequently, and her presence, at first beguiling, becomes increasingly ominous, until it seems she "was always whispering to me, whether I was awake or asleep".

Elizabeth begins to notice a change in her husband's behaviour. Her slight unease at discovering an unopened packet of strange medication is tempered by her relief at finding that the lifeless man she thought she had married has been transformed into the passionate Mikey. He takes her to Rome where, in contrast to their first honeymoon, "a few damp days" in a cheerless hotel in Ireland, their time together seems "an endless daze of wine, and food, and happiness". It's a happiness that proves short-lived when they return to London. In an effort to make sense of what's going on, Elizabeth starts asking questions and soon discovers her husband's past is rather livelier than she had imagined. Known as a child as "Mental Mickey", he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and spent a year in a secure unit before, thanks to some "chemical engineering" otherwise known as Serendipozan, it was considered safe to release him. The important thing, the psychiatrist tells Elizabeth, is that Michael keeps taking his medication which, of course, he has already stopped.

The novel crosses over several genres: magic realism, (eventually) police thriller, gothic mystery without ever realising the full narrative potential of any one. Taken up as an escapist read, it unfolds reasonably satisfactorily and with sustaining pace and some food for thought, but it could be accused of insensitively utilising Michael's mental condition as a plot device: if the writer intended to get the reader to question just what we do when we administer drugs, he has only partially succeeded. The Grouchers club setting, a necessary backcloth for Michael's characterisation (and for which the author surely owes Conan Doyle a considerable debt) has intrinsic interest, but Mr Patel's contentious application for membership which preoccupies the members and the reader to a considerable extent and which is a springboard for Michael's revealing dinner party diatribe is not thereafter fully seen through. It is also somewhat hard to get a reliable fix on the era portrayed: the novel has contemporary reference points, but it is a little disjointed with a touch of the Agatha Christie about it.

Overall, the novel received a mixed appraisal. It was awarded 4 for book group discussion purposes, but would only get 2 as far as recommendation to a friend was concerned.

