

Room to Read - December report by Annie Clouston

Rowing after the White Whale by James Adair

This is a travelogue about a pair of overgrown schoolboys who decide they will row across the Indian Ocean from Western Australia to Mauritius in a 16 foot boat. They candidly admit their incompetence and unpreparedness to make such a hazardous and arduous journey, made all the more risky because their expected support system, proved unreliable (pulled at the last minute) and the level of back-up was reduced to a phone call now and again to bark instructions that in the prevailing conditions on the ocean often seemed unhelpful or irrelevant.

They made it on pure luck, and that threatened to desert them when the end was in sight. Attempting to enter safe harbour in perilous seas at Mauritius their boat was turned over and they had to swim for it. Exhausted, inadequately nourished and injured they beached on a spiky coral reef that tore at their near naked skin. The coast guards having given up, an adventurer who happily for them was following their progress, launched his boat and effected a rescue.

There are many criticisms that can be leveled at the book: it is not well-written and not well-edited, the whole was devoid of any reflection and depth, particularly in relation to the dynamics of the relationship of the rowers in extreme circumstances when one's survival is dependent on the other. However, it had a naïve and optimistic – not to say gung-ho – quality that made it (and the boys) likeable and proved a page-turner.

Scores on the doors: For book group discussion 4/5. As always recommendations to others relies on knowing their literary taste.

We also reviewed the year's reading at this meeting. A summary of our views is:

Book of the year, and the most memorable – *The Cut-Out Girl* by Bart van Es

Most important, still relevant and a phenomenal literary achievement – *1984* by George Orwell

Most divided opinions – *Unsheltered* by Barbara Kingsolver

Most provoking – *The Girl on the Landing* by Paul Torday

Next meetings:

Wednesday 19 February *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville

Wednesday 18 March *Sea Stories* by A S Byatt