

Room To Read Group Report – March 2020

This month's book, postponed from last month, was *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville.

It tells the story of a man who was sentenced to death in the early days of the 19th century but whose sentence was commuted to transportation to Australia, where he and his pregnant wife arrived after a yearlong sea voyage, and then were put to work for many years until he was seen fit, with his wife as guarantor, to be a free man. He claimed land, and became a settler desperately struggling to keep his family on what he could earn as an oarsman and the crops he could grow. The aboriginal inhabitants of the land had the cheek to think they could help themselves to whatever was available on the land, as they had always done, not quite figuring out that the white man had supreme rights over everything. This inevitably raised tensions building to a vicious hatred with dire violent consequences, which were inevitably more dire for the aboriginal population who had spears not guns. The novel reaches an uneasy conclusion where family rifts develop because of different ways of seeing things (like Brexit?).

We thought this a very good book group read. One of our number noted that it had been on the GCSE syllabus for some years, and it was one of those books that from the most to the least able, could evoke some insightful and empathic discussions. One of the things that the book does well is build a sense of menace, and tackle the universal themes of the precariousness of life and the primeval power of tribalism. As for recommendations to friends our immediate response was that in a challenging time with the wretched virus doing its best to quash our joie-de-vivre probably not.

This led us to consider what we might recommend. Here are some of our ideas: *Olive Again* by Elizabeth Strout. I absolutely love this writer. Her warmth and understanding in observing humans in their small town life, warts and all, is second to none. *The Old Filth Trilogy* by Jane Gardam, a mixture of pathos and laugh out loud daftness that is Gardam's hallmark. *The Lacuna*, by Barbara Kingsolver, will keep you going through many a long day of social isolation. Anything by Ann Cleeves, but particularly the *Shetland* and *Vera* novels. *Dead in the Water* by Penny Farmer, and the *Maisie Dobbs* novels by Jacqueline Winspear, are easy-going page turners for a lighter read.

Happy reading and please let me know via forumeditor@teesdaleU3a.org if you have recommendations for good reads in turbulent times.

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Sent from my iPad