

Room to Read Group report by Marilyn Normanton

A Change of Climate – Hilary Mantel

This is a novel that engendered differing opinions among the group, varying between enjoyment, equivocation and actual dislike. Most of us saw it as a rather sad tale, peopled by unsympathetic characters lacking in warmth even towards their own families and driven by perceived duty rather than fellow feeling.

Moving between the past and present, the story of the Eldred family gradually unfolds as we learn the secrets and betrayals that have shaped their lives. The change of climate comes about as Ralph and Anna Eldred leave their home to work in Africa as missionaries, a career that Ralph has been blackmailed into by his bullying father. Though not really religious themselves, both come from narrow-minded and deeply religious families. They head to Africa with a vague idea of doing good but have no real understanding of African culture and little idea of whether their work is of any value. After being drawn into South African politics, the couple are arrested, jailed and forced to leave for a new posting. It is in Bechuanaland that the heartbreaking tragedy central to the novel occurs.

Deciding to suppress the truth of what happened in Africa, the couple return to Norfolk to bring up their children, who are perhaps the most normal characters in the story. (This did lead to a discussion among the group as to what exactly constitutes ‘normal’. The jury’s still out!).

Doggedly continuing their good works the Eldreds offer temporary sanctuary in their home to waifs and strays, categorised as “Good Souls” or “Sad Cases”. The novel comes to a head with a further betrayal, yet there is hint that Ralph and Anna may find a way to continue their lives together through a shared purpose.

Whilst the Eldreds are fictional, the tragedy that devastates the family is based upon actual cases researched by Hilary Mantel when she lived in Africa.

We were all in agreement that Hilary Mantel is an exemplary novelist, perhaps due in part to her own extraordinary life. Her evocation of the stultifying conformity of the religious households in Norfolk, and of Africa as a place with strange, dark undercurrents, are masterly. There are sharply-observed flashes of humour too, which serve as light relief.

Scores out of 5 as a book group = 4.5; as a recommendation to friends = 3