

## Room To Read Book Group report by Annie Clouston

June's book was *Tinkers* by Paul Harding, a short novel that, unusually, none of us liked. The novel, which has no discernible plot, starts with a description of the hallucinations of George, a mender of clocks, as he lies dying with heart and kidney failure. In his mind everything is collapsing around him, but at times is lucid enough to have conversations with his loving family, gathered around his death bed, and recollections of his childhood.

The novel describes vividly rural Maine: the poverty of its inhabitants, its harshness in winter, its lushness in summer, and the quality of light in the landscape. In different voices – his father, his grandfather, a horologist – passage of time is jumbled and obscure, so much so that the reader is likely to struggle to sort it out. The most striking character in the book is Howard, George's father, who eked a living as the eponymous tinker, leaving early each day to sell to his isolated rural customers – mainly women - with a wagonload of goods and services; trinkets, pots, pans, mending stuff, on occasion delivering babies, pulling teeth. (I conjured in my mind the peddler-man's travelling wagon from *Oklahoma*.) It is an unrelentingly burdensome way of life, made perilous by his grand mal epilepsy, not understood at the time, and joyless by his miserable and resentful wife and mother of his four children. Realising that his wife has arranged for him to be committed to an asylum because of his epilepsy he leaves for work one day and doesn't come back.

There is occasional humour, as in this exchange with one of his customers:

*Where's the soap?*

*This is the soap.*

*The box is different.*

*Yes, they changed it.*

*What was wrong with the old box?*

*Nothing.*

*Why'd they change it?*

*Because the soap is better.*

*The soap is different?*

*Better.*

*Nothing wrong with the old soap.*

*Of course not, but this is better.*

*Nothing wrong with the old soap. How can it be better?*

*Well, it cleans better.*

*Cleaned fine before.*

*This cleans better – and faster.*

*Well, I'll just take a box of the normal soap.*

And so on...

This book won the Pulitzer Prize in 2010 and we couldn't quite get why. Being a graduate of the great writer Marilyn Robinson's Masters programme in Creative Writing might help to explain it, and there is certainly some similarity of style to be found in the writing. The scores we gave the novel were 3/5 for book group discussion – we did enjoy not enjoying it – and 1/5 for recommending to friends.