

Room to Read Group October 2023

Report by Kate Bailey

'In the Midst of Winter' by Isabel Allende

Some of the group were interested to read this novel, having enjoyed Allende's 'magical realism' debut 'House of the Spirits' (1986). However, with a choice of almost 30 novels and memoirs by this Chilean-American author, we did wonder whether 'Midst of Winter' was worth the effort of reading to the end. Two immigrants to the US describe their terrifying journeys across borders, with the undocumented Guatemalan refugee Evelyn Ortega ending up working for a gangster's family in New York. When, after an accident in the snow-bound city involving a taciturn academic Richard Bowmaster, she discovers a body in the boot of her employer's car, she appeals to him and his Chilean lodger Lucia Maraz to help her.

All three main characters are anxious, fearful people and their sad stories are told in considerable detail. Political corruption, vicious drugs gangs and violent repression of indigenous people in Guatemala left teenage Evelyn with no option but to flee, leaving behind her beloved grandmother. Lucia's story of a bigamist father and a brother who vanished after the military coup in Chile (that resulted in the death of the author's uncle - President Salvador Allende - in 1973) led to her exile in Venezuela. Richard's melancholic thoughts are mostly of his own failures as a son, husband and father.

The shocking accounts of terror, violence and people trafficking in South/Central America and the economic and social struggles of immigrants to the USA are timely, in terms of current events around Europe and the Middle East, but difficult to read. The back-stories of the female characters feel like a series of geo-political lectures that don't hang together very well. Potentially interesting secondary characters, including Lucia's daughter Daniela and Evelyn's disabled charge Frankie, are barely sketched out and, after the body is discovered, the plot becomes increasingly unlikely. Towards the end the focus on the less appealing older characters leaves no space for an optimistic picture of young Evelyn's future life in Miami.

The group had mixed feelings about this book - some that it is unrealistic, not at all 'magical' and generally depressing; others that it provides a learning opportunity for readers who know little of South America's turbulent history. The final scores were 3.5 for a book group and 3 out of 5 for a recommendation to a friend.