

## **Room to Read Book Group. Report by Hilary Clarkson**

### **'The Bees' by Laline Paull**

This well-researched fantasy about animals was playwright Paull's debut novel and has been hailed as 'the Watership Down for the Hunger Games generation'.

The story revolves round the life and experiences of Flora 717, a humble worker bee hatched into the lowest rank of hive life. By demonstrating intelligence and bravery she survives internal massacres, religious purges and a wasp attack. All the bees are expected to sacrifice everything, even their lives, for the Queen. Flora was hatched too big and too ugly, yet through acts of bravery she works her way up the rigid hierarchy of honey bee life. Eventually she reaches the exalted position of tending the newly hatched eggs and serving the queen.

The mantra of the hive's totalitarian regime is 'Accept, Obey, Serve'. In many ways Flora follows this doctrine, but once she has produced an egg that develops in its cell she defies all the rules and demonstrates a strong maternal instinct. Later on she rebels against authority and her daughter becomes the queen of the new colony when they flee the hive.

Laline Paull has researched the lives of honey bees thoroughly, and her descriptions of their behaviour, hierarchy, and the dangers they face are very true to life. Honey bees undoubtedly have a fascinating life story, although their lives appear to be nasty, brutish and short.

Unfortunately the amount of anthropomorphism in the story was felt by our reading group to be excessive. The concept of bees having a religion was a step too far, and the sexual scenes were somewhat nauseating. Most of the group didn't manage to finish reading the book and some described the story as 'drivel'.

It will be no surprise, therefore, that the scores were 1.5 for group discussion and 0 for recommending to a friend