

Room To Read Book Group

The Other Side of the Bridge by Mary Lawson

Report by Celia Chapple

I must not give too much away in this review. The book is a complex story of family life in a close community, loving and not loving, fidelity, guilt and revenge, all interwoven in Lawson's flowing narrative. The setting is the remote Canadian outback and in two timespans, 1930s and 1950s. There are teenage brothers: Arthur, quiet, unambitious, a hardworking farmer; in contrast, his brother, Jake, academic, lazy, spiteful, unreliable and spoilt. His capricious mother loves Jake whilst she depends on Arthur to look after Jake in addition to providing their livelihood. Jake torments Arthur for his own enjoyment by putting Arthur in socially embarrassing and audacious situations.

The prominent 1950s adolescent character is Ian, who feels the community's pressure to follow his father as the local doctor. Ian is attracted to Laura, Arthur's wife, and takes a summer job on the farm to be near her. Ian's deeper feelings and desires are displayed to us as though we are in his shoes.

Guilt and revenge are carried throughout the story after Jake creates another reckless, dangerous act. It is one too many crises for Arthur to bear - a lifetime of anger and frustration boil up and he doesn't attempt to save him. Guilt dominates the rest of Arthur's life and is carried along in the story until the tragic end.

This story charmed us all with its depth of characters, storyline and moral issues. Lawson vividly describes the Canadian landscape. It raised discussion on whether it is possible to have such contrasting children in one family; why Jake behaved as he did; Jake's likely paternity; adoption and its effects on children. The group voted 4.9/5 on 'recommendation to a friend' and 'a good reading group book'. This novel, published in 2006, was long-listed for the Booker prize. **Next meeting: Wednesday 20 August *The Offing* by Benjamin Myers.**