

Room to Read Book Group Report by Ruth Lapworth

The Offing by Benjamin Myers

This book divided our opinion. It was published in 2020 and is the second novel written by Benjamin Myers. *The Offing* is set in the North East just after the Second World War and evokes a sense of place in a very different era. The story revolves around a boy, Robert Appleyard, who leaves his pit village in Co. Durham one summer and walks south towards the sea. He comes across an elderly lady, Dulcie, living with her dog in an isolated ramshackle cottage. They strike up an unusual friendship, with Dulcie providing exotic foods and drink in exchange for the odd jobs Robert undertakes around the property. While renovating an old studio Robert unearths a collection of poetry by Romy Landau, which provides a window into Dulcie's past. He discovers that the two women had been lovers and Romy had hidden the poems from Dulcie before she committed suicide by drowning in the sea.

Eventually Dulcie faces up to the past and decides that the manuscript should be published. It is a commercial success and Robert, finding that he cannot return to life in his mining village, eventually goes to University and becomes a writer himself.

The Offing in the context of this story is the furthest reach where the sky and sea meet but is also a metaphor for Robert's transition from adolescence to adulthood. The book split us equally into those who hated it, finding the style of writing profoundly irritating; and those who liked it after an unpromising start. The problem for half of us was the sentimentality and the unlikely nature of the story combined with overblown language and an excessive use of adjectives. The rest of us liked the local setting and the fact that an elderly female mentor was responsible for Robert finding his vocation. We all liked the poems (presumably written by the author) but were often perplexed or annoyed by some of the detail and inaccuracies in Benjamin's long descriptions of the natural world.

Due to the book's divisive nature we had a fairly robust discussion awarding it a score of 3 for book group but only 2 for recommendation to a friend.