



HADLOW DOWN BOOK CLUB

'You're only young once, they say, but doesn't it go on for a long time? More years than you can bear.'

In December we read an early novel by Hilary Mantel - *An Experiment in Love* (1995).

Set in 1970, in Carmel McBain's first year at London University, it looks back to her Catholic upbringing in Manchester and makes a contrast between her stark loveless homelife and the comparative freedoms she then enjoyed in her Hall of Residence, Tonbridge Hall.

She was an only child with a weak father and a domineering mother who had little understanding of education herself but who poked and prodded her daughter into working hard for a scholarship to a prestigious Catholic grammar school and then to university. Home life was bleak and cold and Carmel was a misfit at grammar school where she was almost the only working class pupil, but from the time she started infants school she was thrown together with Karina and the novel follows their ambivalent relationship right to the bitter end. Mantel's strength is in evoking atmosphere and the reality of life in a harsh environment through the use of detail and well-chosen language. The home life is well-conveyed and, in many ways, reminiscent of Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*. She is scathing about the Catholic schools and the means by which the nuns bullied the girls; beating in the primary and sarcasm in the grammar school.

I really enjoyed the account of life in the student Hall of Residence. It brought back my own memories of the '60s: the shared bedroom, the chat over cocoa, the morning trips to the bleak bathroom, mealtime routines and smuggling in the boyfriends; even the two evangelical girls and their gospel weekends. But in 1970 life darkened as the miniskirt lengthened. Carmel was driven even harder to study and unable to afford food to supplement her meagre hostel rations causing dangerous anorexia. The novel ends with a sudden startling tragedy.

There were mixed receptions from the book club members: some loved it and recommended it to friends, others found the ending unsatisfactory and the novel as a whole only 'nice enough'. It can be compared with Muriel Sparke's *Girls of Slender Means* (1963) and *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988); perhaps warmer but less polished.

Over Christmas we had free choice and the following are member's recommendations.

- Charles Dickens *Barnaby Rudge* (1841): one of his earliest less well-known novels about the Gordon riots of 1780. Took a while to get into it but in the end the reader couldn't put it down.
- Julian Barnes *Arthur and George* (2005) A true-life novel about a long-forgotten mystery 'the Great Wyrley Outrages'. It features the young Conan Doyle. Well-researched and enjoyable.
- Sarah Moss *The Fell* (2021) A novel about the lock-down experience and a woman who has to get out and onto the hills and has a fall. The novel is in the form of a stream of consciousness of the four main characters. Perceptive and poetic but not such an enjoyable read as *Tidal Zone* (2016) which we read a few years ago.
- Yaa Gyasi *Homegoing* (2016) a semi-autobiographical novel by a Ghanaian American writer which follows the family histories of two half-sisters over 300 years to their slavery origins. Harrowing at times but an engrossing and positive read.

- Jokaha Alharthia *Celestial Bodies* (2018). Translated from the Arabic by Marilyn Booth. Follows an upper class Oman family over three generations and their transition between the old and the new world. We have decided to make this our book for next month.
- Lucy Maud Montgomery *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). A comfort read of a childhood favourite still giving great pleasure.

- Heather Mines