Lynn Barber is an award winning British journalist. Famous for hard-hitting, insightful but sometimes harsh interviewing, her nickname is the Demon Barber of Fleet Street. In “An Education” she turns the spotlight onto her parents and judges them harshly. Many of us felt unfairly. But she is hard on herself too.

Some members of the groups asked why I had recommended her memoir “An Education.” I had several reasons. We are intercultural reading groups. Most members are German and like to learn about other cultures. Although not a great work of literature, “An Education” is sometimes funny, it gives a vivid account of childhood, adolescence and professional life in Britain from the fifties to the present day. Class attitudes and how they have dominated British life are at the heart of this memoir.

It is also zeitgeisty. On one of my visits to London last year, everyone was talking about the film “An Education” which has been very successful in the UK and is due to be shown in Berlin in mid-February. Nick Hornby has written the film script. Lynn Barber’s “An Education” was originally published as a short story for the literary magazine Granta. When Hornby read it, he could see its potential as a film. With Lynn Barber’s permission, he fleshed out one chapter which deals with the sixteen year old Lynn Barber’s relationship with an older, suave con-man. I’ve seen the film and enjoyed it. I felt the book had flaws but was worth reading for insights into British society.

My decision to recommend the book was also based on the kind of discussions it would prompt. Focus on class is so different in Britain from Germany. In Britain class is all pervasive and unavoidable. Brits on meeting each other can pigeonhole someone immediately by the way they speak and I’m not talking about regional accents, as in Germany. David Beckham is known throughout the world as a highly successful footballer but there is no doubt which class he is from. His accent is “common” and he is often grammatically incorrect. He often says “I done it well.” Rather than “I did it well.” He may be rich and famous, but he will always be pigeonholed as working class.
We all agreed that the most fascinating chapter is about Lynn’s childhood. Lynn’s parents are lower middle class with aspirations to move up into the more sophisticated middle - classes. In order to be accepted by this class, one must speak in a certain way - using the Queen’s English or the BBC voice. It was virtually impossible in the fifties, sixties and early seventies to have worked for the BBC with a regional or common accent. Most doors to senior jobs were closed without this “plummy” accent- that is, speaking as though one has a plum in one’s mouth.

Lynn’s mother gained a diploma as an elocution teacher. And Lynn’s childhood is somewhat dominated by her mother’s teaching of elocution at home and her desire to push Lynn into elocution competitions which she fails to win. Lynn learns that her talents lie not in speaking, but in writing. She recognises writing is her mother tongue. And through her own enterprise, writes a children’s column in the local paper, which is an early sign of her determination and independent spirit.

Many parents in the 50s and 60s sent ( and still today send) their children for elocution lessons - believing that they will have an advantage over other children if they speak with a posh accent. And often they will. But Lynn Barber feels that she has been left with a rather false, overly posh accent which she is not very comfortable with. Elocution lessons are rather a mystery to Germans. Of course good diction can boost confidence in public speaking but in Germany it is not necessary to rid oneself of a regional accent. (Although I’m told it can be a distinct disadvantage to come from Saxony or Berlin.) Regional accents are more acceptable now in Britain and are used today by the BBC but the least favoured is the Birmingham accent.

Lynn Barber describes the kinds of word exercises that elocution pupils learn to rid themselves of sounding common.
“I had to go to Homerton High Street, your honour, to acquire a hat.”
Dropping the aitches or pronouncing the letter h as haitch are clear indicators of being common. The trick with this sentence is that the h must be dropped from the word honour. The aim of elocution lessons is to eradicate common and teach shop-girls to talk like ladies. “ Would Modom care to try the larger size?”
We had fun saying out loud some of the tongue twisters Barber features:

“Behold he sold the old rolled gold bowl.”
“The sixth sick sheik’s sixth sheep’s sick”
“Six thick thistle sticks, six thick thistles stick”
“ An anemone, my enemy.”
“Unique New York”
“Red lorry, yellow lorry”
“The Leith police dismisseth us”

And then the dangerous pheasant plucker who could so easily lead one astray:

“I am not the pheasant plucker,
I am the pheasant plucker’s mate.
I am only plucking pheasants
Cos the pheasant plucker’s late.”

The chapters on Penthouse and Fleet Street were less interesting, listing too many details of her interviews, awards and successes. Many of the people she interviewed were unknown to a German readership. Unless one had a particular interest in British journalism, they were rather boring. Lynn Barber pioneered the style of writing interviews in the first person - that was intriguing. But I was tempted to skim read this part of the book and some of us admitted that they had.

At the centre of her adolescence is her relationship with her parents and her two year affair with the much older and sophisticated Simon. Until she met Simon, her parents’ ambition for her was to go to Oxford. Very bright and determined, Lynn Barber also wanted to go to Oxford. It was not just her parents’ wish. We were puzzled that her parents were so taken with Simon. But he had wooed them with wine and flowers and won their approval with his flattering attentions. Lynn Barber’s father is reassured that Lynn met him at the Richmond theatre (one of Lynn Barber’s many lies.) And how many teenagers have not lied to their parents?
Lynn Barber admits that she did not even like Simon very much. But she liked to show off to her school-friends about their trips to Paris and expensive meals. She does not enjoy sex with him. Her loss of virginity is part of the deal. How much was it about teenage rebellion? We could remember experimenting and doing crazy things ourselves. But she seemed cold and calculating about using Simon. Of course there is something creepy about an older man’s interest in a sixteen year old. Both exploited the other. But she knew what she was doing and he didn’t force himself on her.

It was 1962, before the days of feminism. Her parents were thrilled that she appeared to have found herself a rich husband and encouraged her to give up the idea of Oxford and to marry him. We found it hard to understand that they would have given her permission to go away with him for weekends. He seemed to have conned them into trusting him. They were unaware of his association with the notorious landlord Peter Rachman ( also featured in the novel we read last year by Linda Grant- The Clothes on Their Backs.) Simon appeared to be a successful businessman. When Lynn discovers he is married, her parents are as shocked as she is.

What did Lynn Barber learn from him?
About expensive meals and luxury hotels and foreign travel, antiques and Bergman films and classical music.
But also not to trust people, not to believe what they say but to watch what they do. To suspect that anyone and everyone is capable of living a lie. That ultimately people are unknowable.

Having tasted this grander lifestyle was useful when she went to Oxford. She could read a menu, recognise a finger bowl, follow an opera, she was not a complete hick. She had been cured of her craving for sophistication.

The chapter on her life at Oxford is short. She admits frittering away many of her academic opportunities, hardly ever going to lectures or to the library. Lynn Barber also discovered that there were lots of students more intelligent than her. Her main focus was on partying and studying men and she freely admits that she slept with fifty different men in her second year. She also had to have an abortion. One or two members were very shocked that she could
get away with this sort of behaviour at such a respectable university and still get a good degree.

Her honesty about herself is refreshing. She often confesses that she is not a good person and that she tends to be very selfish. None of us warmed to her and most of us said we wouldn’t like to have her as a friend. She was very lucky in her choice of husband. We all warmed to David. Handsome, kind and supportive - he seemed almost too perfect a husband. The account of his illness and eventual death was very moving. We couldn’t fail to feel their emotional connection and her pain at his loss. Her guilt at her inability to be the perfect wife, to stay by his bedside when he is dying, is candid. Her suspicion that he has been unfaithful to her, when she is sent a photograph of him laughing lovingly into the camera, is an example of her belief in the unknowability of people we are closest to.

The portrait of their thirty year marriage is vividly drawn. Theirs was an unconventional one for the times. Both of them worked. David in media studies and Lynn as a journalist. But, David cooked and looked after much of their domestic life, while Lynn was the higher wage earner. As she said, he was the best thing that ever happened to her. But even so she took him for granted. Maybe that is inevitable after thirty years.

“Our marriage had become like a neglected allotment where no-one had bothered to do any weeding for a long time.”

It is only when David is diagnosed with a life threatening illness that they take time to remember why they’d fallen in love in the first place. They take an idyllic holiday together in Cornwall - retracing their steps – holding hands along the cliffs - laughing at each other’s fears and delighting in each other’s knowledge. A salutary lesson to us all to live in the moment.

“An Education” was engaging but oddly superficial. There were so many unanswered questions. Lynn Barber is experienced at interviewing others, but not so able to look inside herself. Her children are hardly mentioned. At times she seemed like she was bored with her own story. She definitely hated being a stay at home mother but that is not unusual. She becomes most passionate writing about her work. She was obviously a trailblazer, fighting for success
in a male dominated world. As a working mother, without David solidly in the background, she would not have been able to achieve so much professionally. She is clearly a tough cookie and a very determined person. Most felt she was brave to reveal so many bad things about herself in an unflattering way. One or two thought this was manipulative.

Her publisher probably suggested that she should produce a book to tie-in with the film as a money-spinner. “An Education” started well, dipped in the middle and then picked up again. It was like eating a meal that tastes good at first but then leaves you feeling slightly unsatisfied.

**Recommended**

An entertaining read. A true story of a woman born into a lower middle class British family with social aspirations. Revealing insights about the class system in Britain. Not to everyone’s taste, but very funny at times.

The film “An Education” is definitely worth seeing.

It’s worth googling Lynn Barber and reading some of her interviews, especially the one with Marianne Faithful.

**Berlin intercultural reading groups  Jan Bild**