Dear All,

In January we read "The Secret River" by Kate Grenville which was shortlisted for last year's Booker Prize. Our choice this month actually won the prize, so I was curious to find out if we felt it was a worthy winner.

Our views were quite mixed. Overall it was thought that "The Inheritance of Loss" had deserved to win. But not everyone had really enjoyed reading it. There was a general sense of obligation to finish the book rather than a pleasure in reading it. Some of us had found "The Secret River" a more gripping read and had preferred the style of Grenville's writing. It's often said that the winner of the Booker prize is the result of a compromise between the judges. "The Inheritance of Loss" was a surprise winner and maybe the judges' second choice rather than the first. Indeed, some members of our groups had not been engaged by the book at all and had given up reading it.

But to be fair we found that the book had many qualities. I will bring together the main points from our three discussions to highlight the positive aspects.

We admired the ambitious scope of the novel- showing the impact of colonialism and globalisation on Indian culture. The main characters all have something in common. They have lost touch with their Indian heritage or have chosen to adopt or attempted to adopt another culture. Or they have lost loved ones.

The judge has been educated in England and no longer fits into his own community when he returns. He becomes an Anglophile, even though he was treated very badly in England.

Bijou, the cook's son, is sent to the States by his father to make his fortune but cannot adjust to the more materialistic world he finds himself in. He eventually comes back to India penniless but with his integrity intact.

Sai, the judge's granddaughter, has been educated by English nuns and is struggling to find her place in her world. She has also lost her parents and is desperate to find love.

The cook is ashamed of being a servant to the judge and pretends that the judge is a more generous and respectable employer than he really is. He has lost his son but through his own ambitions. He encourages Bijou to go to New York, to take up the opportunity of gaining more status and wealth. In the meantime he transfers his affection to Sai and gives her the love her grandfather is incapable of showing.

Gyan, Sai's tutor and boyfriend, is tempted for a while by the superior lifestyle Sai appears to have. But ultimately joins the insurgents battling for independence for Gorkhaland.

Kiran Desai is most successful in portraying the dreams of poorer people. People in the West are scarcely aware of the overwhelming feeling of humiliation that is experienced by most of the world's population. And
how this can lead to resentment and in some cases to terrorism. Desai uses her experience of living in India, Britain and the States to promote the cause of the disadvantaged. But it has to be said that she comes from a very privileged background and probably has no direct experience of such poverty. The division between the rich and poor in India is extreme. But she reveals a sympathetic empathy with their lives.

The plight of the illegal immigrant is sensitively drawn. Bijou's inability to embrace the American way of life is contrasted with his friend Saéed Saeed's adoption of American values. (Saeed Saeed proudly acquires twenty five pairs of shoes.) Bijou searches for work where he will not have to serve beef. (against his Hindu principles) He finds the Gandhi Cafe but even here he is badly exploited by one of his countrymen.

Bijou's longing for family and friends is constant. The long distance telephone conversation with his father is one of the most moving passages in the book. They are unable to express their feelings for each other and talk about trivialities but their love is simmering under the surface. It is his love for his father which draws Bijou back. And it is the love between them which gives an optimistic note to the ending.

We discussed at some length how it feels to be living away from our homes, how it is to be different. What a relief it can be to just fit in and not to have to be anything other than ourselves and to speak in our own languages. We agreed that it doesn't have to be living in a different country to feel alien, it can be within the same country for example, living in Berlin rather than Bavaria, If we felt this way, we imagined how it must feel to be totally unlike everyone else.

The struggle for India to regain its own path, following its independence from the British, was shown very well. The educated higher castes mostly clung on to their Englishness and were more English than the English. eg Noni and Lola's desperate attempts to retain normal English customs during the 1986 riots. It mattered to them to buy tinned ham roll in a rice and dal country. Trollope, the BBC, Marks and Spencers knickers and chocolates filled with kirsch were important parts of their lives. Gyan, from a lower caste, is determined to cast off the influence of the British. He is even prepared to betray Sai's family for his political beliefs.

The romance between Sai and Gyan symbolises the conflict between the old and the new India. Sai lives in a ramshackle, once very grand house built by a Scottish colonialist. Now full of spiders and termites and falling down. Gyan's family home is "moderate in its meanest form, brand new one day, in ruin the next." It seems inevitable that their romance is doomed but there is a hint that it may be rekindled. But Sai considers her options and decides that she must leave. She will follow her first tutor Noni's advice to make something of herself.

Most of us agreed that Kiran Desai is a talented writer. But we nearly all thought that the over -flowery metaphors were too much- even too arty. The many group members who didn't like "The Inheritance of Loss" had been severely put off by the style. "The characters were not developed" was another common criticism. "Where was the plot?" was another. "I didn't feel engaged. I didn't care what happened. " "I couldn't be bothered to read it -or- it was too depressing" were other comments.

How do I summarise the conclusions of the three groups?
"It was very clever but not very enjoyable" is a fair reflection of the groups' opinions. A view often heard about the winner of the Booker prize. But thank goodness we all have different tastes in reading. And that's what is so fascinating about the discussions we have.

WORDS OF THE MONTH

a.. loomed- p 2-- appeared suddenly as seen through fog (in this context)

b.. jittery--p 3-- in a nervous way

c.. grudging- p 4-- resentful, unwilling

d.. wishy-washy p 33- pale, watery, lacking in character

e.. thwacked-- p 34-- beaten into shape

f.. smidgeon-- p 55-- a small amount

g.. garbled--p 55-- mixed up

h.. waddled--p 143-- walked with short steps- like a toddler

i.. razzmatazzed--p 151-- never seen before as a verb- probably from razzle-dazzle- a showy exhibition

j.. whizzing over- p 285 -- flying over quickly

Until next time, good reading!!

Jan