Dear All,

Our choice for August was "The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox" by Maggie O'Farrell. A hauntingly sad portrayal of a lost life. Esme has been locked away in a mental institution for sixty years. At the age of sixteen she was sectioned by her father—mainly because she was perceived as behaving hysterically and bringing shame to her family.

We asked—could such a thing have been possible? Yes, it seems that it could. Towards the end of the 20th century, when the old prison-like asylums were being closed down, some elderly patients—they seem usually to have been women—came blinking into the daylight, perfectly sane. O'Farrell has Esme emerge from the twilight, old now but tall and upright, neat and courteous in a "flowery frock" Iris, a reluctant great-niece, finds herself taking the dignified old woman back to the family home, now made into flats, where Esme, who has complete recall, caresses every familiar door-knob. Her behaviour seems normal, her memory is intact. She certainly seems to have all of her faculties.

Many sane, intelligent, gifted young women were and are accused of being mad during the course of their lives, especially by their families. Maggie O'Farrell has taken this as the core to The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox, an exploration of powerlessness, heredity and sanity through two generations of a family.

At the centre of the story is the relationship between Esme and her older sister Kitty. As small children growing up in India, they are close, even though six years apart in age. Then tragedy strikes and their little brother Hugo dies. Esme is alone with him, holding him dead in her arms, for three days. Her parents and sister have left Esme behind with her allah and the other servants—who die of typhoid. Her mother never forgives herself for being away at the time. Or Esme for being there. The family, in despair, move back to Scotland.

Once in Edinburgh, faced with the restraints of polite society, Esme rebels and Kitty conforms. Esme is a free spirit, living before her time. She has no desire to be married off and wants to go to university and to be independent. Kitty is more conventional and is desperate to find a husband. Some of Esme's "crimes" seem ridiculous to us now—refusing to wear gloves and hats, having no desire to go to dances, being outspoken. Her granddaughter Iris is all of the things that Esme would have liked to be. Free, living alone, running her own business, having relationships independently with men, not bound by convention. The main difference between them is that they were born in different times. Iris can be herself. Esme was not allowed to be.

The timeshifts are masterfully portrayed—multiple viewpoints and time shifts are combined. Iris, appealingly sensitive and off-beat, does not need any further complications in her life for, despite her affair with a married man, she is really in love with her half-brother Luke. Their union was prevented by the bad fairy of the novel, Kitty—Iris's grandmother and Esme's sister. How they get together again, and why Esme was committed to the asylum are intertwined in a story that shuttles between past and present, sanity and insanity. We learn that Kitty is suffering from Alzheimer's—her streams of consciousness—dipping in and out of the past and present—are effective tools for telling the story.
We didn't all agree on these methods of O'Farrell's working. Some of us were irritated and confused by the shifts in time and the constant thoughts and memories of the sisters. But we were united in our horror at the way in which the birth of Esme's child was brutally conducted. And at the betrayal of her sister by stealing her son and thereby committing her sister to a life in an asylum.

A summary of our comments and points we discussed:

For me it was one of the most feminist novels that I have read. I was reminded of "The Handmaid's Tale" by Margaret Atwood.

The writing was brilliant- very spare but powerful.

It was gripping and disturbing- especially the twist at the end.

I found it hard to follow- I couldn't really understand the changing thoughts of the characters- it was confusing.

At first I found it implausible that Esme had been in an institution for 60 years- but after our discussion I was convinced that it was plausible.

Too much was packed into a short novel- there were too many stories in parallel.

I was more interested in Iris and Alex's relationship than in Esme's story.

I really, really liked it. I was fascinated by Esme's story. How could such a smart, gifted woman have suffered such a fate?

I related to the sibling rivalry- I have had a very difficult relationship with my own sister- sparked by an unfair jealousy over a man.

When I woke up in the night I was delighted to have an excuse to keep reading it!

The deception was immense- Iris had not been told of the existence of her own grandmother.

Family secrets can be very damaging and very shocking.

I just found out that my father was a twin. My brother told me that my father's twin sister had died a few days after being born. My father is no longer alive and I can't imagine why I hadn't been told this before. I would have liked to talk to him about it.

Had Esme killed her sister at the end? Had she smothered her with a cushion? It seemed understandable that her anger would have been so overwhelming that she couldn't stop herself from doing it.
I couldn't put it down- I was very moved by Esme’s story.

We all have moments of misjudging reality- who is sane and who is insane is a fine line.

We have progressed in our understanding of mental health but there is still a stigma. It is not easy to be entirely open about it.

Until the 1950s a father or husband could have his wife or daughter sent away with just one GP’s signature.

The injustice to women, until so recently, is very upsetting. There have been examples of mistreated women throughout history and in literature Putting sane women( perceived as immoral ) away for life is a form of honour killing.

I visited an old people's home in London in the 70s- all the women there had spent their whole lives in institutions- for the "crime" of being unmarried mothers. Like Esme, they were remarkably sane.in the circumstances.

"Care in the community" is not necessarily the answer. More help and provision should be made to assist ex patients in adjusting to life in the community.

I particularily liked this quote from the novel  " we are all just vessels through which identities pass: we are lent features, gestures, habits, then we hand them on. Nothing is our own. We begin the world as anagrams of our antecedents."

Amidst the gloom of Esme's life are flashes of humour eg “They are girls who have spent their lives in nothing more than a cotton dress, and here are liberty bodices, vests, stockings, socks, skirts, underskirts, kilts, Fair Isle sweaters, blouses, hats, scarves, gaberdines, all seemingly, intended to be worn at once. Esme picks up woollen combinations and asks where they go in the baffling order of things. The shopgirl looks at the grandmother who shakes her head.  "They are from the colonies", she says.

We may not all have been gripped from beginning to end but we all agreed that “the Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox” told a powerful and disturbing story. As independent women living in the 21st century, we surely must be touched by the contrast in Esme’s fate with our own. And be grateful for the times that we are living in.

All the best and good reading!

Jan