Our book for April 2008 - Mister Pip by Lloyd Jones

"Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings." Heinrich Heine.

Last week, I attended a ceremony outside the Humboldt University commemorating how the Nazis burned books they deemed “un-German”. The words of Joseph Goebbels, recorded in 1933, boomed out over Babelplatz. Even the Nazis knew books and the stories they told are important. Here we are, 75 years later in Berlin, embracing the diversity that the Nazis sought to eradicate in books and people.

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Lloyd Jones shows the power of literature to change people. Talking about *Mister Pip*, we discussed the value of reading in our own lives. Through literature we are transported to other worlds. We escape ourselves through experiences of others. Books can have a powerful impact. We read for pleasure, for information, for inspiration, for education, for fun- for so many reasons. We agreed that Lloyd Jones brings to life the transformative power of fiction, that he is a truthful writer. Jones sees nothing in black and white, neither his heroes nor his villains. He shows the way that we build and repair our communities, and ourselves, with stories old and new.

*Said one group member:* “The map of my world keeps growing through the reading group”

Storytelling is common to every culture- in *Mister Pip* Lloyd Jones introduced us to a culture we knew very little about – a small tropical island Bougainville- in Papua New Guinea. We all had to check the map to find out exactly where it is located. And we were shocked to discover that there had been a civil war raging there for ten years in the nineties. The world had stood by and allowed atrocities to take place. We have usually at least heard of such places eg Darfur, Tibet, Rwanda, Biafra, Congo, Zimbabwe, Burma etc. It was as though Bougainville hadn’t existed.

Many of us asked- why had Lloyd Jones chosen to set his novel in Bougainville? We discovered that he had had personal experience of the island. He had covered the story of the blockade of Bougainville and had met the leader of the rebels. He very much wanted to put the plight of the island on the map. The worldwide success of *Mister Pip* has achieved that aim- so much so – that it is even becoming a travel destination. One member of our groups is planning to go there herself.

Lloyd Jones tells a dazzling 'story within a story' showing how books can change lives in very surprising ways. *Mister Pip* is a novel that affirms reading as a precious pursuit, as an act of survival, escape, renewal. The story is told through the eyes of a 13 year old girl Matilda. Reading enables Matilda to do all that.

The novel opens when eighty-six days have passed since Matilda's last day of school. War is encroaching from the other end of the island. When the villagers' safe, predictable lives come to a halt, Bougainville's children are surprised to find the island's only remaining white man, a recluse, re-opening the school.
Mr Watts, nicknamed Pop Eye, explains he will introduce the children to Mr Dickens. Matilda and her class are intrigued to think another white man, whom they have not met, is coming to meet them. They prepare a list of items – generators, fuel etc. – that he might bring them. But Mr Dickens is a Victorian. They “meet” him when Mr Watts’ reads aloud from Great Expectations.

Some of the group who haven’t read Great Expectations felt at a disadvantage. Wasn’t Lloyd Jones dividing us into first and second class readers. It was difficult for me to judge as I have read Great Expectations and it has always been my favourite Dickens novel. Others felt it didn’t matter and were inspired to read it later. We will read Great Expectations as our June book at the Saint Georges bookshop group.

While most were glad they had persevered, some struggled with *Mister Pip*. They found it lacked pace. This was a minority view. Overall *Mister Pip* proved to be one of our most popular choices. One lady loved it so much she said she wanted to take it with her to her grave!

The engaging and often understated writing was admired. The style was in keeping with that of an intelligent young person. It was intriguing that Matilda’s gender was not revealed immediately. We build a picture of life on the island through Matilda’s eyes. Although the islanders are isolated and ignorant of the world outside the island, we learn of the lush vegetation and abundance of food. It is one of the most fertile and beautiful places on earth. Life on Bougainville is simple but with a quality which is threatened civil war. Hints of the impending danger are introduced gradually.

Matilda is unaware of the approaching nightmare. She is puzzled why Mr Watts, the only white man, has stayed behind. The only reason can be his devotion to his wife Grace. The couple are an enigma to the islanders. Mr Watts pulls his wife around on a trolley and he wears a bizarre red clown’s nose. Grace is originally from Bougainville and was known to be very intelligent. Yet she has come back to the island from Australia with a white husband, but without the education and skills she had left the island to obtain.

The couple have lived a reclusive life. Until Mr Watts offers to teach the children, he has rarely spoken to anyone. We eventually learn that Grace has sunk into a deep depression, following the death of their daughter. By pulling her around on the trolley Mr Watts is trying to recapture times when they were very happy, acting together in an amateur theatrical production, when Grace played the Queen of Sheba. Matilda learns this much later from Mr Watts’ wife. We, the readers, had been equally puzzled and were relieved to discover the reason for this odd behaviour. We remembered that the Queen of Sheba was a very wise black woman who challenges Solomon. It had been a highpoint in Grace’s earlier, happier life, which Mr Watts tries to revive.

The relationships between Matilda, her mother and Mister Pip are central to the drama which unfolds. As Matilda becomes enchanted by the story of the young orphan Pip in Great Expectations, she feels that she is gaining a friend. She starts to imagine life beyond the island – even if it is to dream of England in the nineteenth century. Dolores her mother senses she is growing apart from her. She blames Mr Watts for this. On discovering that he does not believe in God – she challenges him. How can one believe in an imaginary fictitious character and not believe in God?
We all agreed on our favourite part of the book. Mr Watts invites the relatives of the children into the classroom to share their wisdom. Here Lloyd Jones skilfully weaves the oral tradition of storytelling into the modern Western tradition. Some of the islanders’ stories are enchanting. Others are funny. One or two are moral. Some are practical.

One of our favourites came from Gilbert’s Mum. “To kill a pig, get two fat uncles to place a board across its throat.” Mr Watts asked how big those uncles should be. She replied “Fat ones. Fat is good. Skinny no bloody good.”

We loved the contribution of Daniel’s grandmother, who described the power of blue. “Blue is the colour of the Pacific. It is the air we breathe. Blue is the gap in the air of all things, such as the palms and iron roofs. But for blue we would not see the fruit bats. Blue also has magical powers. You watch a reef and tell me if I am lying. Blue crashes onto a reef and what colour does it release? It releases white! Now how does it do that?”

We shared some of the “pearls of wisdom” we would pass on, if we were invited as relatives to talk to a school class. They included:

- don’t judge people but accept them as they are.
- find work which allows you to follow your passion
- always see the glass as half full and not half empty.
- learning to read at the age of five felt marvellous and opened a whole new magical world of independence.
- having parents from two different races brings lots of advantages and some disadvantages - choose to make the best of the advantages.
- have dreams but beware if they become reality.”

Some Berliners would have liked to share with Matilda’s class their own understanding of being islanders. Before the wall came down, they too felt cut off and isolated from the world, surrounded by watch towers and unable to live with their families in east Berlin and vice-versa.

Dolores uses her time in the classroom to emphasise the necessity of faith. She is determined to show the Bible as the Good Book - to undermine the influence of Great Expectations. She eventually steals and hides the only copy of Great Expectations with disastrous consequences.

The understated descriptions of the sudden violent deaths of Mr Watts and Dolores were very shocking and unexpected. We were very moved. The images of their bodies being chopped up and fed to the pigs are haunting and unforgettable. They are based on reality. Rebels were thrown from helicopters to their deaths. One or two of us felt that these scenes were too unemotional. But it felt right to me that Matilda was still so traumatised by what had happened that she was unable to state more than the bare facts.

Mister Pip can seem a slight novel – short in length and simplistic in style. Yet it is deep and complex and challenging. Being avid readers we all liked the message of the power of literature.
There are profound questions asked as to the nature of identity and faith and intercultural understanding and migration. We all bring our own experiences and views with us when we read. Some of us chose to examine the nature of identity, others did not.

Mr Watts tells the children what it means to be a moral person. He says “to be human is to be moral, and you cannot have a day off when it suits.” Both Mr Watts and Dolores prove themselves to be “moral people.” One is the atheist, one the believer. Both are extremely brave and follow their principles to protect others. Not taking the day off for them results in death. Yet they are not perfect human beings, both are exposed as flawed.

Matilda discovers in her research that her beloved Mr Dickens was flawed too. Instead of finishing her thesis on Dickens she chooses to tell her own story of Mister Pip.

As so often happens in the groups, not everyone liked the way the novel ended. Some felt that Matilda’s visit to England seemed unnecessary and others would have preferred the novel to have finished with the visit to Mrs Watts in Wellington.

“Mr Watts was as elusive as ever. He was whatever he needed to be, what we asked him to be. We needed a teacher, Mr Watts became that teacher. We needed a magician to conjure up other worlds, and Mr Watts had become that magician. When we needed a saviour, Mr Watts had filled that role. When the redskins required a life, Mr Watts had given himself.”

The final chapter to some seemed superfluous. To others, it was inspiring, showing how Matilda eventually finds her own voice and “that whatever else happened to us in our lives our voice could never be taken away from us.”

Matilda decides to try to return home- she would try where Pip had failed. Emerging from the horror of her past she has become a strong, emancipated, independent woman with the ability to move between cultures.

She can go anywhere, be anyone, she has “great expectations” and she is going to use them wisely.