



WHAT HAVE WE BEEN READING...?

Top picks from around the groups 2015.

Stoner by John Williams

9.5/10

The son of a midwestern farmer, William Stoner comes to the University of Missouri in 1910 to study agriculture. 'Stoner' tells of love and conflict, passion and responsibility against the backdrop of academic life in the early 20th century.

A perfect novel.

Nothing much happens!

Shakespeare on Toast by Ben Crystal

9/10

Actor and author Ben Crystal brings the bright words and colourful characters of Shakespeare's work to life, to reveal the Bard and his plays as modern, accessible and uplifting drama.

Lots of interesting facts. Members found it good to dip into

Restless by William Boyd

9/10

What happens to your life when everything you thought you knew about your mother turns out to be an elaborate lie? Ruth Gilmartin discovers the strange and haunting truth about her mother, Sally, during the long hot summer of 1976.

Oxford setting

The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes

9/10

Tony Webster and his clique first met Adrian Finn at school. Sex-hungry and book-hungry, they would navigate the girl-less sixth form together, trading in affectations, in-jokes, rumour and wit. They all swore to stay friends for life. Now Tony is in middle age and he is finding that memory is imperfect.

Die Happy by John Gregson

8/10

The new Lambert and Hook mystery - When the committee members of the Oldford Literary Festival all receive anonymous letters telling them to resign or die, it marks the start of an unusual case for Chief Superintendent Lambert and DS Hook. All of the members identify one man as being capable of such a thing: Peter Preston, a self-important snob who is in disagreement with the head of the festival over what he sees as the dumbing down of the events programme. But could such a disagreement lead to murder? It's not long before Lambert and Hook have their answer . . .

Good old-fashioned whodunit!

Sacred Hearts by Sarah Dunant

8/10

1570, Ferrara, & the convent of Santa Caterina is filled with noble women who are married to Christ because many cannot find husbands outside. Enter 16 year-old Serafina, ripped by her family from an illicit love affair & determined to escape.

Lovely story/No men!/Beautifully written

A Short History of Nearly Everything by Bill Bryson

8/10

Bill Bryson describes himself as a reluctant traveller, but even when he stays safely in his own study at home, he can't contain his curiosity about the world around him. This book is his quest to understand everything that has happened from the Big Bang to the rise of civilization.

A bit much to read in one go, but fascinating to dip into. Lots of engaging human stories among the history and science.

The Pedant in the Kitchen by Julian Barnes

8/10

This work is an elegant account of Julian Barnes' search for gastronomic precision. It is a quest that leaves him seduced by Jane Grigson, infuriated by Nigel Slater and reassured by Mrs Beeton's Victorian virtues. For anyone who has ever been defeated by a cookbook.

Very light, quick read that everyone enjoyed.

My Family and Other Animals by Gerald Durrell

As a self-described "champion of small uglies," Gerald Durrell (1925-1995) devoted his life to writing and the preservation of wildlife, from the Mauritius pink pigeon to the Rodrigues fruit bat. *My Family and Other Animals* was intended to embrace the natural history of the Greek island of Corfu, but ended up as a delightful account of his family's experiences that were, according to him, "rather like living in one of the more flamboyant and slapstick comic operas".

As a 10-year-old boy, Gerry left England for Corfu with "all those items that I thought necessary to relieve the tedium of a long journey: four books on natural history, a butterfly net, a dog, and a jam-jar full of caterpillars all in imminent danger of turning into chrysalids". Durrell's descriptions of his family and its many eccentric hangers-on (he stresses that "all the anecdotes about the island and the islanders are absolutely true") are highly entertaining.

Hugely enjoyable

Silkworm by JK Rowling writing as Robert Galbraith

7.5/10

When novelist Owen Quine goes missing, his wife calls in private detective Cormoran Strike. At first, she just thinks he has gone off by himself for a few days - as he has done before - and she wants Strike to find him and bring him home. But as Strike investigates, it becomes clear that there is more to Quine's disappearance than his wife realises. The novelist has just completed a manuscript featuring poisonous pen-portraits of almost everyone he knows. If the novel were published it would ruin lives - so there are a lot of people who might want to silence him. And when Quine is found brutally murdered in bizarre circumstances, it becomes a race against time to understand the motivation of a ruthless killer, a killer unlike any he has encountered before.

Very dark!

North and South by Elizabeth Gaskell

7.5/10

Milton is a sooty, noisy northern town centred around the cotton mills that employ most of its inhabitants. Arriving from a rural idyll in the south, Margaret Hale is initially shocked by the social unrest and poverty she finds in her new hometown. However, she soon starts to see Milton in a different light.

Score doesn't reflect how much enjoyed by most! Led to great discussion.

Foreign Country by Charles Cumming

7.5/10

Six weeks before she is due to take up her position as the first female head of MI6, Amelia Levene vanishes without a trace. Former MI6 officer Thomas Kell is called out of retirement and ordered to find her. With only days before the story leaks to the press, Kell must begin to piece together Levene's final movements.

Went down a storm!

The Sanctuary Sparrow by Ellis Peters

7/10

In the Spring of 1140, a young man, pursued by a lynching mob, claims sanctuary just in time to save his life. Brother Cadfael believes the boy is innocent and sets out to prove it.

Part of Brother Cadfael stories, as seen on TV.

The Last Dance and other stories by Victoria Hislop

7/10

In these stories, Victoria Hislop takes us through the streets of Athens and into the tree-lined squares of Greek villages. She brings to life a host of unforgettable characters, from a lonesome priest to battling brothers.

Very light and enjoyable.

Past Imperfect

7/10

The bestselling author of 'Snobs' and award winning writer of the screenplay for 'Gosford Park' and Downton Abbey with the story of a wealthy man who embarks on a quest to find an heir to his fortune. Damian Baxter is dying. He doesn't think he has any children, but then a letter from an old girlfriend leads him to think otherwise.

Warm hearted romp through memories of 1960s/70s. Wise and witty!

Thirty-nine Steps by John Buchan

7/10

May 1914 and Britain is on the eve of war with Germany. Richard Hannay is living a quiet life in London, but after a chance encounter with a mysterious stranger he stumbles into a hair-raising adventure - a desperate hunt across the country and against the clock, pursued by the police and a cunning, ruthless enemy.

Short read and lots to talk about.

Just Me by Sheila Hancock

7/10

This is the moving, honest and absorbing account of how Sheila Hancock has dealt with her life since the death of her husband, actor John Thaw. Inspired to 'live dangerously', she decided to embark on a series of journeys.

Interesting, but not as good as The Two of Us.

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie by Muriel Spark

6.5/10

Miss Brodie is a teacher who exerts a powerful influence over the group of 'special girls' at the Marcia Blaine Academy. Each is famous for something & are initiated into a world of adult games & extra-curricular activities they will never forget.

Lots of good chat about school, teachers and the prime of your life!

