

Meeting of 10th October. The Other Bennet Sister by Janice Harlow presented by Sandra.

Members present: Diane, Jackie, Sandra, Marina, Helen, Pippa, Sue, Jan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janice Vivienne Harlow born November 1957 in Lewisham is a former BBC TV executive. She was the controller of the BBC TV channel BBC2 taking over r this position in November 2008 having previously been controller of BBC4. At the beginning of March 2014 she assumed a new post within the BBC responsible for special projects and seasons. Hadlow's post was abolished when she left the BBC in 2016.

Her book, 'A Royal Experiment - The Private Life of King George 3rd' was published by Henry Holt and Co. in October 2014. Her first novel, The Other Bennet Sister was published in March 2020 and a film has been made by the BBC to celebrate the 250 year anniversary of Jane Austen. Her newest novel 'Rules of the Heart' is a sweeping Regency romance, featuring a real-life scandalous affair, due out next year.

She currently lives in Edinburgh with her husband and two sons.

THE BOOK

The Other Bennet Sister focuses on the life of the middle sister in Pride and Prejudice. Stuck between an older pair - beautiful, gentle Jane and pretty, sprightly Lizzie and a younger duo whose looks and sheer love of life compensate for a certain lack of decorum. Mary is bookish, awkward and plain.

In a family where the daughters only acceptable future requires them to marry well without the plump dowries that would make them attractive to men of their own gentry class, Mary's traits doom her (at least in her mother's eyes) to an unhappy and lonely spinster good. Even her scholarly father underestimates Mary, because she lacks wit and self-confidence that so distinguish Lizzie, his favourite.

Hadlow's given deep thought to what it would mean to grow up as Mary - what she wants, how she feels, which twists of fate and family turn into the character we meet briefly in Austen's novel. The Other Bennet Sister goes beyond Pride and Prejudice to imagine how the Marys of this world might find happiness, even in the early nineteenth century.

It seems the first third of the book has too much replication to *Pride and Prejudice*, Hadlow using great swathes of the original. It's only after this point that the book comes to life.

The appeal and was enjoyed especially by the members who love *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* and both novels are, in a way, reflected in Mary Bennet's story. The story being somewhat predictable.

Hadlow changes Mary's character into one who elicits sympathy and creates our hopes for her success.

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

- Effects of being a middle child.
- Mrs Bennett's vindictive attitude, putting beauty above everything.
- The need for all the girls to marry in order to have a home and a stable future.
- How inheritances were limited to a succession of heirs (Entails) usually male.
- Complex relationships.

QUOTES

' Our happiness depends on ourselves'

' Sometimes the very best stuff can seem plain, until one examines it closely. It is then that one sees the true quality '

COMMENTS

An enjoyable read. Initial doubts but felt it was true to the original Jane Austen book.

An easy read. Mary gave up competing with her sisters and grew in self-confidence. Inevitably there was to be a happy ending.

Not a fan of this era of social constraints and the restrictive way children were brought up. Jane Austen wrote her books in the vein of small village mentality. Mr Bennet hid behind his desk and seemed to give up on his wife and family, only nice to Lizzie, none of his other daughters. Appeared depressed, detached? He was neglectful. He didn't seem to have any occupation.

Really quite enjoyed Mary's character.

It flowed from *Pride and Prejudice* well. The first part of the novel was setting the scene and putting it all in context. The language was in keeping with *Pride and Prejudice*, but a much more palatable read. We found out more about the characters as they were further developed eg. Mrs Hill being more of a mother figure to Mary.

Mary was a sensible and wise character. Charlotte became jealous of her when she developed a relationship with her husband. Charlotte was determined and manipulative treating her husband badly.

Derivative of *Pride and Prejudice*, plagiarism. Jayne Austin would have grounds to sue. Very frustrating and slow. What would Jayne Austin make of someone writing this?

It's hard to write about someone so downtrodden. Mary being plain, disinherited, reflecting the times the novel is based in. Mary travels a journey and turns into a heroine. She is a deep thinker who pondered over solutions, finding knowledge unguided. Mr Collins assists her flowering.

OVERALL SCORE 7