

Book Club, January 25, 2012

BOOK: *Little Bee*

AUTHOR: Chris Cleave

Dody: admitted she had a reputation for odd choices ☺ but if she had to choose her favourite 5 books in the last 5 years this would be there. She read it so long ago that she had forgotten some of the points of the plot and once she started rereading it, she couldn't put it down. Almost every page had some passage of stunning writing, an insightful observation, or a clever metaphor. As we know by now, Dody has little truck with characters that wallow in their little problems. This was so much the opposite of that! It was an indomitable character getting on in spite of horrible events. Dody also recommends **Incendiary** by the same author. It is also written in the voice of an amazing woman. This woman's son is killed and the book is a letter to Osama Bin Laden and it puts a personal face to the tragedy of terrorism. She is giving it 9.5, just because she is not sure of the ending, not having finished the reread yet. Maybe it should be 10.

Mary: was horrified by the story. It was well-written, amazingly so but when she got to the scene on the beach she could hardly continue. She did and found the characters were wonderful. This is the real world, so she gave it 8 for the writing but only 4 for her enjoyment!

Marilyn: agreed. She wondered where Lawrence fit in. For her, he made it into a soap opera and lessened her respect for Sarah. After all, he leaves his wife and kids to move in with her only days after her husband's death. Marilyn wondered if the husband had suffered post-traumatic stress after returning from Nigeria. The very last comment on the book was Marilyn's thoughtful consideration on this question. She points out that Lawrence is the only one in the book who never went to Nigeria and he just wants to forget it and go on with his life as if nothing had ever happened there. He represents us. She gave it 8 for what she learned from it.

Coral: read it so long ago it was in a previous diary and she had not written much, only that she really liked it. It was the voice of the main character that drew it in and it echoed reality. The ending was also reality. Not every book ends happily. Then Coral said that she loved the description of the boy always wearing the Batman costume and we all joined into the discussion. Apparently, Cleave based this on his own 5-year-old. Coral gave it 9.

Brock: was only in chapter 2 and found there was a very good sense of language. We love to have you visit, Brock. Maybe you will send on your comments when you finish, but you know we never insist on that! I'd just like to hear what you think.

Alison: said it was not an easy read but the prose was amazing and evocative. It put us into the world of refugees seen from a courageous woman's point of view. However, for her it did not have the wow factor. Her cynicism came out when the little boy fell into the grave and the story became maudlin. The ending was very well done, leaving a chance for hope, and the characters were haunting, but she could only give it 8. It was well worth the read, though.

JoEllen: loved it and couldn't put it down. It was a profound topic and we now know that these things do happen. It made her ask what we can do. It should prod us but we don't know what to do. There was clever use of words as on p 46 where she is on the cargo ship and talks about her cargo as a metaphor. She gave it 9. It was worthwhile.

Anne: said that she was lucky enough to subscribe to the Manchester Guardian that Chris Cleaves writes for and will pay more attention to his column from now on. She quoted that Cleaves is a "nerves of steel storyteller". She was immersed in the book. She really liked the little boy and actually panicked when he got lost. Lawrence disturbed her. During the violent parts, she could hardly turn the pages and without book club may not have. The political issues were so well covered, but she pointed out that Africa is a large continent of 54 countries and they are not all the same. She lived in Ghana, a short distance geographically but there are 5 tribes between so a great distance that way. They had nothing but positive experiences in Ghana. She couldn't believe, based on her experience that an oil company would annihilate an entire village but it does really happen. She saw discrepancies in Sarah and thought Little Bee was so strong that she had hope for her at the end. There was humour as well. On page 160, "The cursor blinked and my lips parted and we kissed and kissed and kissed. I clung to him and whispered in his ear. Afterward, I retrieved my knickers from the grey carpet tiles..." Overall, the book presented moral dilemmas and made her sidetrack into researching more about Ghana which is what a good book does. She gave it 8.

JoEllen- We need to look into our immigration restrictions

Mary- and refugees, which are different again.

Marilyn- But that Rwandan stayed here for 15 years!

Ann-What about our First nations?

Here everyone pitched in to ask about the \$90 million that hasn't helped them out of poverty and why not and what about the money directly from De Boers and mining companies or the revenues from casinos?? Part of the huge amount from the government, and a large part, goes to pay for the government administration, which arguably does little for its cost. Part is the fault of the chiefs who keep more than they should. An Indian who wants to start a business cannot because they cannot borrow because they don't own land! When suggestions to move are made, there is the NIMBY (Not in my back yard) response, although Marilyn pointed out that there are successes such as Temagami. Paulette had a girlfriend who interviewed murderers and a lot were natives who said that the spirits had told them to kill someone, usually a family member. Who is responsible? All have behaved badly but the children on reserves have not chosen to live in such poverty!

Ann: didn't know what to add. It was hard to start the book but then it was so vivid it was just like watching a movie. Even today, Nigeria is in the news. She thought the fact that Little Bee had played at the edge of the unknown jungle helped her when she had to cope in London. Ann wondered if Sarah's sacrifice had done any good. She was touched by the story of how Batman was lost. He was such a wonderful little guy! She wondered how the book would have been without Lawrence! She would like to reread it and gave it 9.5!

Leola: liked how Little Bee survived, that she dressed as a man, etc. She deserved to survive. With her mastery of English, she could have been a spokesperson for her people and Leola hopes and thinks she survives. She didn't like Lawrence because it was because he made Little Bee make the call she got caught. She liked the boy and compared this part to **Room** which we discuss next month. She liked the connotations of "giving the vigilantes the finger".

Loretta: thought it was sad that Little Bee and her family lived without hope. She also didn't like Lawrence. She found it incredible that the men let Little Bee go at the beginning. In fact, there was a lot that was hard to believe, but she was glad she had read it and gave it 8.5.

Paulette: repeated that it was hard to read and yet she couldn't put it down. In French, she reads a lot of sequels, (number 2, and number 3 and so on that come after number 1) and she hopes there is one here. She was not happy that Sarah would take her son back to Nigeria with her but she has done a lot of outrageous things so it is in character. Paulette's grandson kept pretending to be someone else, Sydney Crosby for example. Little Bee worked really well with Charlie and got the Batman costume off him. Paulette thinks of the journalists there and all the other dangerous places they are in today. She gave it 8.5 but it will be 9 if there is a number 2!!

Pat: said she was too tired to remember well, but she related to the book because her brother-in-law has been a consultant in a lot of dangerous countries and Nigeria was the only one that he ever had to flee, leaving his belongings behind. She stressed that it was an important book as well as well-written and gave it 9.

Betty: found it extremely moving. The scene on the beach is one you will never forget and you ask what we can do to help these people. Little Bee is portrayed as very mature and very brilliant and stressed how her life just wasn't fair! Betty never taught a 14-year-old that was as kind as she- to her sister, to Charles (the little boy), and who was mature enough to walk away from what she could not change. It was a book definitely worth reading! She gave it 9.

Dody said that she had just read another book about a child soldier that was eventually rescued and that these books make you care and understand that things like this really do happen. It is important!

Paulette said that we didn't have to go so far away to do something! She volunteers at the food bank and Castleholme and even working at the Bingo for the hospital helps the community.

Martha: just thanked Coral for bringing the book to her attention two years ago and to Dody for choosing it for book club. She had saved the quote from p 264, "I understood that he would be free now even if I would not. In this way the life that was in me would find its home in him now. It was not a sad feeling. I felt my heart take off lightly like a butterfly and I thought, *yes*, this is it, something has survived in me, something that does not need to run anymore, because it is worth more than all the money in the world and its currency, its true home, is the living. And not just the living in this particular country, but

the secret, irresistible heart of the living. I smiled back at Charlie and I knew the hopes of this whole human world would fit inside one soul. This is a good trick. This is called, globalization.”

I just want to close with the Nigerian proverb at the end of the book:

“If your face is swollen from the severe beatings of life, smile and pretend to be a fat man.”