

## Meeting Minutes of The Novel Club May 2019

The May meeting of the Novel Club met on May 7 at James Saunders' stately and elegant home in Shaker Heights (which was originally owned by his parents and where he spent much of his youth). The meeting was hosted by Mr. Saunders and Jane Hammond, and there was an abundance of enticing hors d'oeuvres and beverages for all to enjoy. After some time socializing, the members were called to order around 8:20 p.m. The following guests were in attendance and introduced by their hosts: Jonathon Froelich, Tom Mester and Rose Kelley.

The Treasurer (Andy Fabens) reported that the club's current account totaled approximately \$1,200, and that he anticipated an expense of about \$380 for next year's calendar. A discussion ensued regarding the possible donation of funds to a charitable cause, but it was decided to table this suggestion until the annual meeting next year.

Bob Brody moved to change the format of the annual meeting back to a "pot luck" dinner, rather than spending money on a catered dinner. The motion was seconded by Tom Slavin. There was discussion of the complications regarding planning a pot luck dinner, and the members ultimately decided to table the discussion until a future meeting. There was a further discussion of making name tags available at future meetings, which the members favored. We then began the substantive discussion of *The Dark Flood Rises*, by Margaret Drabble.

The biographical paper was delivered by Bob Targett. Bob related his particular interest in Dame Drabble because his wife, May, studied economics at Cambridge at the same time that Margaret Drabble attended, and both were members of the Cambridge Amateur Dramatic Club. It was there that Margaret Drabble met Clive Swift, whom she married upon graduation in 1960, having achieved a double-starred first, the equivalent of summa cum laude. An aspiring actress, she joined the Royal Shakespeare Company but appears to fairly quickly have moved on to writing. Her first novel, "A Summer Bird Cage," was praised as giving voice to the female experience of college life, and from there she launched her very productive career, publishing 20 novels, along with several short stories and biographies.

Her marriage to Clive Swift lasted until 1975, and she had three children. She later married another writer, the biographer Sir Michael Holroyd. Margaret Drabble obtained her title of Dame in 2008 (the female equivalent of "Knight"). Dame Drabble's sister, A.S. Byatt, also attended Cambridge and became a celebrated post-modern novelist, although the two sisters are not close.

There is, unfortunately, very little detailed information regarding Margaret Drabble's life, as there has been no published biography, and she has maintained a private personal life. Perhaps we can learn the most about her through her novels and other written work, which focus on her characters' moral growth and attempts to define "the self," in a milieu of social change. Her work reflects a strong feminist inclination, having been among the first to focus on female characters divided between personal and professional ambitions. As in *The Dark Flood Rises*, her characters have often reflected her own age and circumstances. She is concerned with social trends and issues of change, and the moral questions behind those forces. Now in her late 70s, she continues to focus on the same themes as they manifest themselves in today's world.

The critical paper was delivered by Molly Berger. Molly began with an excerpt from the D. H. Lawrence poem ("The Ship of Death") that is the source of the title for *The Dark Flood Rises*,

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and which reflects the overarching theme of the book, death and dying. Molly observed that in the course of the novel, the author chronicles more than 30 deaths, but also manages to make the novel engaging and frequently humorous. Her occasional stream of consciousness narration – which delves into tangential memories and seemingly irrelevant details – keeps the reader interested and amused. The novel takes us on a wide-ranging exploration of the life and experiences of the main character, Fran, along with several of her family and friends, as well as others connected in some way to one or more of them. Fran and the other characters are encountering death and dying in various manifestations, including senior living homes like Cambridge's Athene Grange, where Fran's good friend Jo and her friend Owen England live. In Fran's view, Athene Grange is too synthetic and dull. It is contrasted with Fran's high rise apartment, as well as her ex-husband Claude's flat, her friend Teresa's home, and her son's acquaintances Bennett and Ivor's house in the Canary Islands overlooking the sea.

Although the book explores difficult and awkward topics involving aging, death and dying, it is often done with a light touch that is wryly amusing. However, we reach a moment of reckoning when Fran's best friend Jo, among the most healthy and productive of the older characters in the book, dies suddenly in her bed. As Molly observes: "All the funny business in the prior three hundred pages has set us up for the harsh reality of death, of losing a best friend, of death's unpredictability, of being blindsided by deep heart-wrenching loss. This death for Fran, like that of Hamish's, is too serious for tears." Jo's death, like other circumstances described in the novel, is in the end inexplicable. The issues are explored with humor and grace, but the author does not provide the "why of it all."

Molly asked to consider six questions. First, Molly noted that Drabble teases us at the outset by letting us know that Fran Stubbs, Claude Stubbs, Bennett Carpenter, and Simon Aguilera are "all dead now." Molly asked whether it matters that the author does not tell us how or when?

Most felt that this revelation of the ultimate end for the characters was not a detraction and did not matter to the telling of the story. The story was a meditation on aging, including the uncertainty and despair, but also small pleasures, that it brings. It did not matter that Drabble reveals that the characters ultimately die in the end. It was noted that despite Fran's interest in the "last words" of various deceased people, the author does not inform us of Fran's last words.

Molly's second question asked us how the circumstances of Jo's, Sara's, Teresa's and Aunt Dorothy's deaths compare, and how do their deaths affect the lives of their loved ones and how they think about death?

There were a variety of reactions to this question. It was observed that Fran did not seem to change significantly in response to the deaths of her friends and acquaintances, although she certainly reflected on them in various ways. Also, it was noted that Jo's death seemed especially tragic because there had been no opportunity for her friends and family to say goodbye, as contrasted with Theresa's death, which was the result of a long-term terminal illness. Death itself seemed less of a concern to many of the characters than the process of growing old.

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The third question related to the settings of the novel – wet soggy England and the dry beautiful Canary Islands. Molly asked how Drabble employed these contrasting climates/locations to support her ruminations on life and death?

Several of our group noted that images of a “flood” were used in various contexts and seemed to be intended to explore the notion of aging, dying and death as a “dark flood.” A flood engulfs Fran as she travels to her inspection visit to a senior facility, and the facility grounds she visits are specially designed to withstand a flood. Even the dry Canary Islands are experiencing a “flood” of immigrants, and there are apocalyptic visions of the ultimate demise of the island through a volcanic explosion and decimation by the surrounding ocean.

There was substantial discussion of Molly’s fourth question, regarding whether all of the tangential stories and details provided by Drabble were a help or hindrance to the novel?

Most believed that the details were helpful to the book, making it more interesting and amusing, and giving the book a more modern quality. It was observed that the random thoughts were evocative of how people actually think, and they were helpful to “take the edge off” the serious issues of death and dying. The author’s classical references were also noted as giving meaning and depth to the novel. However, some felt that the random nature of the stories and details that were shared were occasionally frustrating – some stories seemed to be started but not finished and others seemed to have no relation to the plot or themes in the book. But several of our group responded to this criticism by pointing out that a theme of the book is that life is full of large and small mysteries, and that real life is full of details that don’t all fit together. The poem of Jo’s student was cited as an apt metaphor: it describes someone who gets lost on a staircase and does not know if they are going up or down.

For her fifth question, Molly asked whether our group agreed with the opinion of several reviewers who accused *The Dark Flood Rises* of not having a plot?

Most who responded felt that the book did have a plot, which centered on the lives of various people who are dealing with aging and death under various circumstances. But a few believed that the book did not have a plot as such, since the characters did not change or overcome any significant problem in the course of the book. In this sense, it was more of a “slice of life,” that would be in the nature of a short story. However, it was pointed out that there were numerous themes explored, including the generational character of people who were children in the 1950s. It was also noted that although the events of the book take place over approximately two months, we get to know many characters very well through the author’s narrative, making the book more like a novel.

Molly’s sixth question asked us to consider whether Fran’s assessment of her life at the end of the novel was fair, and what were her expectations for a life well-lived. Fran says: “her life has been full of failure and defeat and triviality and small concerns, and at times she fears it is ending sadly. Her courage is running out, her energy is running out.”

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Our group disagreed with Fran's assessment about her life. She had a good life and remained productive into her old age. Several of us wondered whether the author included this simply to show Fran in a temporary moment of despair, but did not intend it as the final word on how Fran really felt about her life. There was agreement that this did not seem to reflect Fran's overall outlook and that it was not a fair appraisal of her life.

Overall, there was a broad consensus among our group that the book raised interesting questions about aging and death, that the use of seemingly random details made the book more compelling and affecting, and that it had been a worthy choice for discussion by The Novel Club. We thanked our hosts and our presenters for a very pleasant and enlightening evening.