

Portaferry Reading Group – Fiction Uncovered Review 2013

All the Beggars Riding (Lucy Caldwell)

All the Beggars Riding is an involving and poignant portrayal of a woman trying to confront and understand her past.

The first half of the book is about loss, death and grief and is the story of Lara, a lonely and unhappy woman in her late thirties. Following the breakdown of a long term relationship, Lara is provoked into exploring and examining her past. She relates her memories of her life as a child in London, including how, during a disastrous holiday at the age of twelve, she discovered that her father already had a “real family” living in Belfast. Shocked and confused by her parents' situation, Lara turns away from her father and becomes a troubled adolescent. But her father's sudden accidental death a few months later exposes the double life and sends Lara, her mother and younger brother's lives into turmoil. Her mother's death some years later triggers frustration and resentment that she did not discuss the situation more.

Through Lara's work as a carer, she attended creative writing classes and the tutor encourages her to write about her issues as fiction. So the centre section of the book is Lara's attempt to address her feelings about her mother by writing the story of how she imagines her mother and father met and what happened to cause the difficult situation they found themselves in. The final section describes Lara's decisions and actions two years later as she tries to deal positively with her memories and emotions to enable her to move on with her life.

This was an interesting and very readable book that draws the reader in, raising difficult but believable issues and generally revealing them well and gradually over the book. It focuses on the emotions felt by different people and family members and the effect of people's actions on others and on family dynamics. The book certainly provoked considerable discussion at our reading group and our members had a wide range of views. The author's descriptions of certain areas of London and her depiction of Belfast are excellent. She also made good use of imagery. The plot was interesting and the way the book was written was a clever way to introduce and consider some of the issues raised. For example, it highlighted the huge capacity for self-denial in Jane's knowing relationship with a married man and the focus on the effect of a bigamous relationship on the children was unusual and inspired. The book was lifted by the creative writing section of the mother's imaginary story. However, the portrayal of the son, with the use of local accents and colloquialism were a little exaggerated and did not ring true given his supposed economic and cultural background. In addition, some members felt that many of the characters were too self-absorbed, negative and selfish. We also felt that at times the plot was stretched a little, such as over the publicity when the affair came to light, and the Spanish holiday was distinctly odd. The book also felt unbalanced with too much time on the introductory section and (unnecessary) TV documentary trigger leading into her life story.

It is an absorbing read and generally well-paced. It reminds us of how what happens to us in our formative years can significantly affect the way we approach life and how we relate to others, and of how if we wish to move on, we have to let go of the past and learn to put our trust in the future.