

## Orkney by Amy Sackville

Discussed by "Books in the Bath" August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013

It's always helpful if the book you are given to read is attractive to look at and this one certainly is. The dust jacket is beautiful with images of the sea and the islands, very atmospheric.

Most found it a relatively quick read and even if they were put off by the "adult magic" description, they were drawn in by the beautiful descriptions of the islands, landscapes, sea, topography etc. which brought back memories of holidays in the Northern Isles for at least one member of the group. The descriptions were sometimes lyrical but often wordy and overwritten which was the most common criticism we had. However the descriptions were very evocative of Orkney, which presumably is, what the author intended and led to much discussion in the group. Language is obviously important to Amy Sackville, because as well as the descriptions of the landscape, there are the word games the characters play with each other (some thought these tedious) It is unsurprising given they are both literary professionals that they would do this however.

The plot was limited in that it covered the two week island honeymoon of Richard and his new young wife whose name we were never given, with some looking back to how they met intertwined with the present. Richard is a 61 year old English don and his wife an ex-student 40 years his junior. They are an unlikely pair even given the age gap. She seems to be a silver haired free spirit whilst he is a possessive, slightly grouchy bachelor, jealous and obsessed with his age. Was it also significant that they had slightly different memories of events (e.g. purple cardigan and lobster eating with licked fingers)?

It was her idea to honeymoon in the Orkneys as that is where she was born and her father, who she was very close to, drowned. Did she have a father complex? Some thought so. Maybe this is the root of her obsession with the sea which she dreams about constantly as well as being drawn to the water itself. As she is obsessed with the sea, so Richard is obsessed with her. He watches her constantly, needs to know where she is always and is very possessive (e.g. when she talks to the boy in a holidaying family about going to university.) Richard is supposedly writing a book about 19<sup>th</sup> century literary sirens but spends his time watching his wife watching the sea! There were indications that she was almost a sea creature herself, in that she had webbed fingers and toes, silvery hair and loved mermaids. Several members of the group were expecting her to become a mermaid at the end of the story. Ultimately there are no answers to the questions about their relationship. Is she real? Does she really exist or is she only in his imagination? Was she a mythical creature?

The ending was disappointing; we felt maybe the author didn't know how to end it. It may not have been to everyone's taste but we admired the descriptions of Orkney and it certainly raised a lot of discussion in the group. We were glad of the opportunity to have read it.