

Parents' Reading Group

We met for the last time this academic year on 19th June to discuss two books set in the Middle Ages: *The Wool Pack* by Cynthia Harnett, a former Carnegie Prize winner; and the new book by Philip Reeve *Here Lies Arthur*, which has just been awarded this year's Carnegie Prize.

We all enjoyed both books. *The Wool Pack* was first published in 1951, and the difference in pace to the newly-published Reeve was very obvious. Some of you may already have read it. It is the story of Nicholas Fetterlock, son of a wool merchant who lives at Burford in the Cotswolds, who does not like the look of the Italian lord, Messer Antonio Bari, who comes to visit his father, nor does he much like what he sees going on when he spies his father's wool-packer, Master Leach, and Messer Antonio's secretary, 'Toad-face', examining something in the doorway of the barn where his father's wool is stored. He learns to be suspicious whenever he sees Master Leach's piebald mare standing on its own, but his father won't hear anything against Messer Antonio and it falls to Nicholas and his best friend Hal, the shepherd who he grew up with, to solve the mystery.

The book is a mine of information about life at the end of the 15c – it is very precisely set in 1493 and there is background information woven into the story about the Pazzi conspiracy and the goings on in Florence – and we learn about sheep and the wool trade with Flanders and France and banking and corrupt practices and sarplers and wool-fells and fairs and marriages: Nicholas is stunned to discover that his father has arranged for him to marry – when she comes of age – the 11 year-old daughter of a business partner; he thinks wistfully and enviously that Hal, being of a lower social class, 'could at least choose his own wife' and 'need not marry at all if he did not want to' and if he did he would go courting, whereas boys of Nicholas' class had their marriages arranged for them, were 'tied up for good and all at their parents' orders and to suit their parents' convenience'. An interesting scrap of awareness for today's teenagers! Cecily, his betrothed, turns out to be a good sort, however - at their first, accidental, meeting she is perched in a tree -, and all is well.

At one point, as they are travelling on horseback rather slowly, the author remarks that "they plodded on at a walking pace", and it was felt that this described the pace of the book as well; one of us was concerned that the meticulous and detailed historical description might put off some readers today, but there is so much interesting information in it that it was still thought a worthwhile recommendation to KS3 readers. The narrative flows smoothly and the book is illustrated by the author with vignettes to show details of medieval life which really help to bring it to life.

The second book, *Here Lies Arthur*, is not, as its author states in a note at the end, a historical novel, nor did he set out to portray "the real King Arthur", which caused concern to some younger readers who like their Arthur to be the proper hero of the legend: dashing, upright and honourable. The tale here is reworked, still from the old myths and legends, but depicts a boorish, power-hungry West Country warrior with a band of similar intent on destroying the (small) armies of Saxons who were fighting their way westwards. His brother Cei (Sir Kay) is there, as is Merlin (Myrddin in this story), Peredur (Sir Perceval) who was brought up as a girl and never quite lost it; Bedwyr (Sir Bedivere, but whose story becomes that of Lancelot in later versions);

and the Lady of the Lake, who is Gwyna, the narrator of the story. (There is a useful guide to the pronunciation of names at the back of the book – only our Welsh-speaking member could do it properly!)

The pace is quite different, fast and rollicking, but this is a tale of power-seeking and battles, of lust (Gwenhwyfar – guess! – and Bedwyr) and illusion. The opening of the book was really enjoyed where the narrator escapes from the house where she lived, which had been set ablaze by marauders (Arthur's men), by swimming underwater down a fast-running stream until she is found by Myrddin, who takes her in, dries her off and immediately realises what a brilliant illusion he can create in Arthur's favour by having this young girl hide in a pool and produce a sword from under the water as Arthur comes by. Arthur can wade in, in view of his men, pluck the sword from her hand before she scuttles up for air, and a myth can be created... This is Myrddin's mission: to create 'King Arthur' as a mighty force to defeat the Saxons, and the story is less one of Arthur as of the power of story-telling: we thought of today's spin-doctors. It is certainly not a story of chivalry although the attraction of Gwenhwyfar to Bedwyr is delicately dealt with. We also felt we could happily recommend this book to KS3 readers.

Our meetings continue next term and we have chosen two books for the first meeting: *Against the Storm* by Gaye Hicyilmaz, published by Faber at £5.99; and *Aztec (The Goldsmith's Daughter)* by Tanya Landman, published by Walker Books at £6.99. We have not yet set a date for our first meeting but it is likely to be in the two weeks before half-term. Look out for the letter of invitation to new parents in the first mailing of next term.

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