

Parents' Reading Group October 2008

Our first meeting of the new term was held on Thursday 16th October when we discussed *The Goldsmith's Daughter* by Tanya Landman and *Against the Storm* by Gaye Hicyilmaz. Although classified as Junior Fiction, and therefore perceived to be suitable for girls in years 7-9, we felt that the subject matter of both books lent themselves to mature and confident readers, although they may still not be the best books to 'read at bed-time!'

The Goldsmith's Daughter is set in Tenochtitlan in sixteenth century Mexico. The book's heroine, Itacate, believes herself to be cursed after her mother dies in childbirth and the priests foretell a future of ill fortune and misery. While Itacate is trained for a life of domesticity, her twin brother Mitotiqui, for whom the gods foretold a prosperous future, is sent to school with the children of nobles. When their father tries to pass on his skills as a goldsmith to Mitotiqui, it is Itacate who proves to have the greater skill, much to her brother's annoyance. When Itacate falls in love with a Spanish invader, she places not only her family but the whole of Tenochtitlan in danger, as Cortés and his men threaten the end of the Aztec empire.

The book was a very involving read, portraying a great deal of detail with regards to the lives and times of the Aztec people. It did seem a little unbalanced in places however, with the first half of the book being rather slow paced in describing Itacate's childhood, and the second half being full of action. Although there is a great deal of violence in the book, both with the Aztec sacrifices and the Spanish attacks, it is covered in a very calm, almost detached manner, which acts to negate its effect somewhat. Even the most traumatic and personally affecting deaths are narrated by Itacate as mere events rather than life-changing circumstances. The romance between Itacate and Francisco was felt to be very genuine and well thought out, occurring amidst the worst possible circumstances. The inclusion of the historical notes at the end of the book was welcomed as a means to set the book in a wider context as well as determining fact from fiction.

Our second book, *Against the Storm*, had a similar emphasis on the cultural lives of its main characters, although here the story takes place in the all-too-modern world of refugees. Mehmet and his family move from their small village in the Turkish countryside in search of a better way of life in the city of Ankara where Mehmet's Aunt and Uncle have become rich. Initially helped by their wealthy relatives, Mehmet's parents soon find themselves being exploited and Mehmet finds himself increasingly at odds with his spoiled cousin Hakan. Keen to re-establish contact with his friend Hayri, who moved to the city some months previously to attend school, Mehmet befriends street-wise Muhlis, and the pair find work gardening for a wealthy lady in the city - Zekiye Hanim. When Mehmet finally finds Hayri, homeless and severely ill, it is Zekiye Hanim who takes him in, reluctantly leaving Mehmet and Muhlis to fend for themselves in the slums.

We found the book to be a rather depressing read at times, with Mehmet and his family forced to cope with one disaster after another. The tentative romance between Mehmet's sister Ayse and Muhil's older brother Ramazan was only briefly touched upon whereas the harsh realities of slum-life were all too often described in detail. We found the inclusion of a glossary and list of main characters to be an especially useful addition to the book, especially in regards to pronunciation.

Our next meeting will be on **Thursday 4th December at 4.30pm** when we will be discussing *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer and *Montmorency* by Eleanor Updale. We look forward to seeing you again then.