April 11, 2013

Dear Grade 11 students,

At the beginning of the semester, I asked you to choose a novel and read it, gathering observations and questions and quotes from the book. I have done the same and am excited to tell you about the novel I’ve just finished reading.

I chose the novel a summer ago while perusing one of my favourite bookstores on Mayne Island, where I asked the owner which book I should buy if I could choose only one book out of her collection. After much deliberation, she made her recommendation. My husband, unfortunately, got his hands on it first and so I waited a long time to begin (he doesn’t read particularly fast and he’s a busy man). In the meantime, other books got my attention and so it wasn’t until Spring Break that I finally had the chance to sink into *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese.

The novel is intriguing from a number of perspectives for me. First of all, it is set in Ethiopia, and not long ago, I listened to –an audiobook-- another novel set in that country and around the same time period: *Sweetness in the Belly* by Camilla Gibbs. I am always fascinated by stories from other places, so I was eager to compare the two stories. The novel is also fascinating because it is written by a medical doctor, and the medical details are very authentic and particular.

The novel is the story of “ShivaMarion”, a set of twins born to a nun in the mission hospital. The story is told from Marion’s point of view and tells of his life from birth to his training in New York City and back again to Ethiopia. Within the story, he weaves the history of Ethiopia and Eritrea, as well as a history of fistula surgery, liver transplants and the seedy life of women in Addis Ababa, the capital city of the country. Mostly, however, it is a story about him and his brother, the two wonderful people who adopt them, and the broken and restored relationships within the family’s time together.

I love how he begins his story: “We come unbidden into this life, and if we are lucky we find a purpose beyond starvation, misery and early death which, lest we forget, is the common lot” (6). His words caught me off guard, because I have lived such a sheltered and privileged life in North America. To realize that I, as a married woman with a gainful career, am a minority among women in the world made me both grateful and gave me pause for thought. Marion has to find his purpose in life and two things--love and commitment for the girl he loves and his medical career-- take up the majority of the book’s pages.

Although the story is told by Marion, my favourite character is a man named Ghosh, another surgeon who works at the hospital and who marries Hema, the woman who decides to adopt the boys. He is everything I would want in a husband and father: he is funny, he is wise, he is loving, and most of all, he is not perfect but he recognizes that about himself. He has “a maxim for every situation”, and whenever he hears a new one, he takes a small notebook from his pocket, a pen from behind his ear, and writes it down, so that he can use it in the right situation. For example, he loves the line from *Alice in Wonderland* when the king says, “Begin at the beginning and go on until you come to the end, then stop.” He says it so often people begin to recognize it as his line.

I found that I wasn’t all that interested in the political and historical details of the novel, impatient to get back to the characters, but now that I’ve finished, I am a little curious to do some research on the dictators who ruled Ethiopia for many years.

When I talked to my neighbour about the book, she was surprised that I wasn’t more moved by the story of the twins (I won’t tell you what happens because I don’t want to spoil that part of the book). She is a twin and the story impacted her tremendously. It made me think about what it would be like to grow up with a twin who is a mirror image of me but is still separate with her own interests.

I can’t talk about the book without including my very favourite lines. They are the words of Hema, the woman who adopts Shiva and Marion, when she is flying back to Ethiopia from India, where she is from. Her parents are not happy to see her leave them, telling her to find work closer to home. But she knows that“her skills [are] so rare, so needed for the poorest of the poor, and even at times in the royal palace, that she [feels] valued. Wasn’t that the definition of home? Not where you are born, but where you are wanted?” (95). I like that: home is where you are wanted.

I’m always sorry to part with a good book; it feels as though the characters have flown out of my life, and now I am alone again. Not to worry though. I have a stack of books beside my bed. I recently found the other book the book owner recommended. *Half-Blood Blues* is about black jazz musicians trying to survive in France and Germany during World War II, and a student has told me the narrator has a wonderful voice. I’m waiting for the weekend to settle into another story. I’m also working my way through a new anthology of Mary Oliver’s poems called *Red Bird,* finding new poems I want to memorize.

I can’t wait to find out what you’re reading, adding to my list of must-reads.

Happy reading,

Mrs. Unrau