

Cushendun Reading Circle

When the doors of Cushendun Old Church opened in the summer of 2019 on an array of lovely new possibilities for the life of the village, many people signed up for Pilates and Yoga, activities promising physical agility. Agile, supple minds were attracted to the Reading Circle.

As we emerge from the long, dark night of Lockdown, this seems a good moment to describe to the curious and to those tempted, or even half-tempted, to join us in September what happens in that group.

We have about twelve regular members, though in an average week there are a few absences, leaving us with just about the right number for lively, inclusive discussion. Membership of the (not-for-profit!) group costs just £25 per term, to cover the rental of the hall and the provision of photocopied texts. In December 2019, we had enough money in the kitty to enable us to adjourn to the pub, after a spirited discussion of the catastrophic Christmas dinner featured in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

From September to Christmas that year, we read and discussed a selection of short stories by Joyce, O'Connor, James Plunkett and Chekhov, and scenes from novels, among them *Hard Times*, *Emma*, *Mansfield Park*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Great Expectations*. Each story or scene is read aloud at the beginning of the meeting; there is no requirement to engage in any preparation, or even to contribute to the conversation.

Since the collective imagination was fired by our reading of Joyce, the group elected to stay with Ireland around the turn of the last century: we moved after Christmas to a group reading of O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* and *Juno and the Paycock*. Discussion of all our texts is fluid and wide-ranging, generally coming to rest on changing socio-economic context and unchanging human nature.

The Reading Circle is an unpretentious group, composed of people with very diverse interests. A few of us have been lucky enough to make a (modest!) living from our enjoyment of books, but everyone's contribution is equally valued. No-one is there to impress, or to dominate the discussion; everyone is listened to with respect.

If you would appreciate an opportunity to talk seriously about serious and important things (although, as Jane Austen might say, there is no preventing a laugh), and if you are dazzled by bright words, why not consider joining us in September? This year's programme will feature a selection of short stories by, among others, Tolstoy, Chekhov, de Maupassant and Flannery O'Connor; drama texts are *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* Arrangements for our meetings will be posted on the Old Church website and in various places around the village.

Fiona Lynch