

Death of Bees, by Lisa O'Donnell
Review for the MFC Book Club by Kimberly Mach

Death of Bees, by Lisa O'Donnell, was the final read of the season for the MFC Book Club. Like many of the books we have read throughout the years, our discussion of the novel helped us understand it, and encouraged us to think about the issues presented. This is why we Book Club.

A constant heard at MFC Book Club is, "I probably never would have read this book if it wasn't on our list," followed up by, "I'm glad I did." *Death of Bees* is one of these stories.

Death of Bees is a story told in multiple voices. Upon reflection, it follows the structure of a fairytale, albeit a dark and twisty fairytale. The characters live in Glasgow, Scotland, in the present day. Most of them live a life of poverty. Within poverty we sometimes find the quagmire of drug use, and within that dysfunctional families. All the issues that go along with the challenges of poverty, abuse, and drug use are also in the book. Yup. All of them. These are the obstacles our main characters, teenage sisters Marnie and Nellie, face.

Death of Bees is not shy. Be prepared if you decide to venture forth with this one that language, images, lifestyles and consequences cannot be ignored. The book will make you uncomfortable, but that's a good thing. You are human.

Marnie, the first voice we hear, is fifteen years old. Marnie has been acting as the adult in her home since the age of five. Marnie protects her younger sister, at all costs. When their drug addicted, abusive parents die on page one, Marnie pledges that she and her younger sister, Nellie, will stay together. Scotland has similar laws to the U.S. concerning minors. The girls, who are minors, have no other family they know of. With their parents gone they would be placed into the foster care system. For ease of placement they would likely be separated. If Marnie were sixteen she could legally care for her sister. Marnie is *almost* sixteen. If they could hide the evidence (the bodies) and pretend their parents are still alive until she reaches her sixteenth birthday....

And so the story begins, like a twisted fairy tale. The 'almost of age' teen is abandoned in a seemingly hopeless situation. But this tale has three voices: Marnie, her younger sister Nellie, and then a caring elderly neighbor, Lennie. He fills the role of the fairy godmother. He provides them with food and shelter, but also humanity. His natural kindness is the greatest and most lasting gift to them. The girls do not tell Lennie what is going on but slowly he figures it out, thanks in part to his curious dog. Despite all the shrapnel coming their way, as the consequences of their parents' drug use and tortured lives implode around them, Lennie provides a safe haven for the sisters. Slowly the girls let down their walls and begin to grow. Their potential is evident. Marnie is extremely bright and will do well in college, as long as she is given the opportunity to get there. Nellie is equally bright and a talented musician. The caring and help Lennie gives provides them opportunity to be something other than a statistic.

As twisted fairy tales go, there is a twisty ending as well. The appearance of an estranged grandfather thwarts the girls' progress and becomes the final

obstacle they need to overcome. He offers to them a new home, which turns out to be the poison apple in disguise. In the end Lennie provides, although by the time his gift is revealed he is gone from their lives. Through Lennie, the girls eventually find their way to a 'castle on a hill,' and find safety with a somewhat flawed savior or prince. Happily ever after does not work for modern fairy tales, but O'Donnell leaves her characters in a place where they at least have options that could lead to happiness.

This review is merely a snapshot. It does not go into all the characters, events, and their competing motivations. If you are interested in *Death of Bees*, read it, then be sure to talk to an MFC Book Club member. We'd love to know what you think. We Book Club because it stretches us as individuals and thinkers – and that strengthens our community.

The MFC Book Club will resume again on September 14, 2015 when we meet to discuss *Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt. This book, winner of a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, is described as an epic novel. There is travel, intrigue, growth, and personal discovery all narrated through the eyes of a thirteen-year-old boy. When Theo and his mother are involved in a terrorist attack at a museum, he clings to the picture they were viewing in the aftermath. It helps him to cope and connects him with his mother. Soon it launches him on a journey of self-discovery that takes him from his known home in New York City all the way to Las Vegas.

Please join us in September. The MFC Book Club is known for discussions guaranteed to make you think. We hope to see you there.