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Lamorinda Reads - "A Hologram for the King"

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Jeanine, Susan, Dick, Beth Girshman and Paula came to share their opinions of "A Hologram for The King." Photo Sophie Braccini

When asked why the three Lamorinda librarians chose Dave Eggers's book, "A Hologram for the King," for this year's Lamorinda Reads program, Orinda librarian Beth Girshman explained that they were looking for a newly released book by a local author that would be relevant to residents and would trigger wide discussions.

At the Feb. 7 Lamorinda Reads discussion group at the Orinda Library, everyone agreed that "A Hologram for the King" fit the bill. The events continue through the month of February, culminating in an evening with Eggers on Feb. 28.

"A Hologram for the King" is a quick read and the latest production by Eggers, who also wrote very well received books such as "What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng" and "Zeitoun." Editors of The New York Times Book Review named "A Hologram for the King" in its 10 Best Books of 2012 list, "after we chose it for our program," said Girshman.

Lamorinda's three libraries obtained 750 hard cover books that were given to the first who came in and asked for them. "Everything was gone within a week," said Girshman, "but we have other books in regular circulation that people are borrowing and circulating." She added that the three Friends of the Library organizations contributed

generously for this purchase, and that they were able to buy the books at a good price.

At the Feb. 7 book discussion organized at the Orinda Library, readers had a lot to say about the book. Susan noted that the book reminded her of two previous reads, Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" and Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman."

"The book evokes those themes, the whole issue of 'is God dead?'" she said. She added that in this book the 'God' they're waiting for is a King who will finally end up with the Chinese, "which is what is happening to us now, and God is not choosing America anymore," she said with a smile.

All the readers around the table agreed that the book is a very good allegory to what is happening to this country. "What is interesting, too, is that the main character is not even selling reality or objects anymore but a hologram," said Paula.

"This is such a lampooning of Dubai," added Dick. "There is nothing tangible, and the main character (Alan Clay) gets so many signals that this is going to fail, but he does not do anything; he is such a loser."

Others did not agree with him. Patsy thought that Clay simply lacked any form of faith. "He had no foundation throughout his life to base his decision on," she said. "He is always looking for approval from others; he has no inner strength or code."

"This is what our modern world values; you are as good as what you can sell," added Susan.

Two of the readers, Dick and Paula, had experience in the Middle East where the book takes place. They both commented on the accuracy of the depiction of that society.

"My husband went to another middle-eastern country in the '90s with a group of Berkeley professors to evaluate the programs of a newly constructed university," Paula said. "While there, they realized that they could not deliver any comment of substance; that they had been asked there just for show." Paula brought a picture of the group of scientists and local officials in front of the building; it looked just like one of the sites in the book.

Although there is no trace of redemption at the novel's end, all of these participants enjoyed reading the book and they are looking forward to the discussion with the author at 7 p.m. Feb. 28 at the Lafayette Veterans Memorial Building. "There are no reservations, seating will be available on a first-come basis," said Girshman.

Other upcoming Lamorinda Reads events include Telling Your Story: A Memoir Writing Workshop from 1 to 4 p.m. Feb. 19 at the Orinda Library. "We organized this event because Eggers and educator Ninive Clements Calegari co-founded 826 Valencia, a nonprofit writing and tutoring center for kids ages 6-18 in San Francisco in 2002," said Girshman.

Two more book discussions are scheduled at 7 p.m. Feb. 21 at the Orinda Library and at 6 p.m. the same night at the Moraga Library. For more information, visit: guides.ccclib.org/lamorindareads.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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