

Account of CITYREAD 2013:

A discussion in Gujarati on Sebastian Faulks's novel 'A Week in December'

Although the event went very well and the discussion was very lively and interesting, attendance was not as big as I would have liked. We were 10 in all, including Sarah Parker from Cityread. Her presence made a difference as I asked her questions about Cityread - what? why? funding? why synopses in other languages? etc. And later on she added some more details from the novel which enhanced the discussion.

In the beginning Vipool Kalyani, Gujarati Literary Academy's President welcomed all and set the scene by saying how similar to Dickens' novels was 'A week in December' as it depicted the life of present day London, just like the life of 19th century London in Dickens' novels. He said Faulks had been inspired by Dickens. He also talked about exploitation of immigrants by Asian traders comparing it to the greed of Veals in the novel.

I then started by introducing Sarah and asked her questions about the purpose of the Cityread.

I read the account about the life of Sebastian Faulks and highlighted his multi-skills as a teacher, reviewer, promoter of literature, a bilingual person, journalist and finally a writer. How all his other experiences made him a good writer.

I then read the synopsis, often reminding the audience who each character was.

During the discussion, we compared the events of explosions in Boston, USA with Hasan's attempt at bombing in the novel. We compared the life of London to the life on Ealing Road and challenged some Gujarati writers to perhaps write a novel about this part of Brent as it would be similar to the theme of 'A week in December'. We compared some of the classic Gujarati novels like 'Saraswathichandra' where the author Tripathi had given names to his characters appropriate to their nature and abilities, just like Faulks had given Jenni the surname 'Lucky', and she is the most liked character in the novel. We compared the way Veals had brought down a bank - killed economy - to the way Hasan wanted to kill people. We talked about multiculturalism & racism and the way Naseem, Faruq's wife, is treated at the dinner party.

I had listened online to Faulks' conversation with Steven Gale at the British Library so was able to talk about how he had 'educated' himself with help from friends expert in this field to describe banking and the financial crash so vividly in his novel. We talked about today's youth illustrating their feeling of invulnerability, yet being the most vulnerable group of society by examples of Finbar, Hasan and the cyclist, who broke all traffic rules. We talked about the feeling of loneliness comparing it with what some people in the audience had felt when they first arrived in Britain. We discussed escapism leading to alcohol and drug addiction and how money & the material world has affected some Asians.

Referring to the Circle Line train where Jenni was the driver, we talked about how London, although so spread out, was linked together, just like the wide range of characters in the novel, who although outwardly disconnected, unknowingly affected the lives of each other.

We compared the ferris wheel [chakdol] in the Gujarati novel 'Malelan Jiv' by Pannalal Patel to Jenni's Circle Line. Vipool Kalyani once again talked about the buses that ran along Ealing Road, that had witnessed so much change since the arrival of the first East African Asians in 70s and how travelling on these buses and listening to the conversations of the passengers on them gave one enough material for a novel. He quoted two excellent stories in Gujarati written by members of GLA about the life on Ealing Road, which were very pertinent to the theme of Faulks' novel and may be Cityread could consider including some literature written about London in languages other than English in their future programme!

One member questioned how the people of such wide walks of life were invited to the dinner party. We had no answer except that Sophie Topping had selected them purposely to increase the popularity of her husband Lance Topping, an up-and-coming MP. It is believed that we never meet strangers without a purpose. Sarah's presence at the event was an example I quoted.

Sarah Smith & Sarah Parker, both will be pleased to learn that as a result of the discussion, some members were inspired to read the novel and borrowed it from the library.

I circulated the questionnaire Sarah had sent me by email to the members who were present and have requested them to send it back directly to her.

I enjoyed running the session and hope the group enjoyed it as much. Sarah Parker's views will be welcome.

We thanked Brent Libraries & the staff at Ealing Road, Cityread and Sarah and the audience and ended the event around 4 pm.

Bhadra Vadgama
Facilitator for the event
Secretary General
Gujarati Literary Academy, UK

Dear all,

Bhadra - thank you so much for the detailed account! It was a truly wonderful experience to be there on Saturday, thank you so much for welcoming me so warmly.

I managed to follow the discussion despite the synopsis being in Gujarati - Bhadra communicated the story in such an animated way that I could easily follow which characters and events were being narrated. The discussion was moving - Bhadra and Vipool encouraged the attendees to connect the novel's themes of loneliness, alienation, interconnectedness and fate with their own experiences. Many of them spoke about their experiences of first coming to England, not knowing anyone and perhaps not speaking the language.

We compared the characters of Hassan and Finbar as parallel products of modern life, trying to escape through different methods (e.g. drugs, joining terrorist groups). We also talked about how Veals's actions can be compared to Hassan's potential terrorism, as they are utterly destructive in their own way.

Attending the event really underlined for me the importance of translating Cityread texts, so that the widest possible amount of people can understand and interact with them. These kinds of activities are the whole point of Cityread - the connect as many people as possible via one particular London novel.

Feel free to use this account in your blog if you wish!

All best wishes,
Sarah

Sarah Parker
Cityread Intern
Stellar Libraries CIC