



Parish of the Nativity of the Lord

Book+Circle - October 2020

***In This House of Brede* by Rumer Godden**

About the book

This novel is a portrait of Catholic religious life in England in the second half of the 20th century. While it centres on Philippa Talbot, a highly successful professional woman who leaves her comfortable life among the London elite to join a cloistered Benedictine community of contemplative nuns, the novel provides a rich tapestry of characters and their complicated lives, both within and outside the walls of the cloister. It begins in 1954 as Philippa enters the monastery, Brede Abbey; it continues through her solemn vows in the post-Second Vatican Council environment; and ends as she accepts the call to lead a new Benedictine foundation in Japan, where she spent part of her childhood – all this within the context of the Abbey community's complex and changing personalities and fortunes.

How did the book make us feel?

Readers unanimously enjoyed the book, and found it a 'gripping' read, with the plot unfolding at a good pace while still giving a sense of the stillness and quiet of the enclosed life. Expectations that a description of life in a cloistered Benedictine community might, though peaceful and ordered, be a bit boring were turned on their head with the book's clear depiction of how, wherever people are and whatever their life choices, everyone still experiences emotions, conflicts, guilts and needs. The power of prayer, which gives the community such purpose, and the power of God's presence in our midst at all times, comes through strongly.

What did the group think were the book's main strengths?

The book is very well written, helping the reader to feel they are present in the monastery community watching and listening to the individual characters.

Many excellent insights are given: into the deep meanings of a vocation and its discernment; the realities of a life of prayer, humility and obedience; the challenges of this life, especially for a mature woman like the main character Philippa who has entered it from a position of authority and achievement in the commercial world; and the very different challenges facing the Abbess as head of the community, and responsible for the care of its finances and bricks-and-mortar as well as the spiritual and moral lives of all the women there. All these things were illustrated in an interesting way through the incidents recounted throughout the book. In particular, the decisions reached by the Abbess often challenged how readers might have addressed the same situations, and impressed by how steadily she worked to keep a Christ-centred, respectful and dignified approach to the faults and failings of others while feeling sometimes overwhelmed or irritated herself.

Any questions email Anne or Teresa

astjohnhall@gmail.com OR teresaroux@bdifferent.co.uk

This book is a testament to the value of religious community life, and a reminder of God's constant guiding hand to help us follow our true path in life. Its varied and textured pictures of the reality of religious life for so many different individuals give depth of understanding of that life and the different ways people can engage with it. The description of how much the community members' reactions to the Second Vatican Council differed is a case in point, showing how disagreement can co-exist with respect for others and faithfulness to a shared life in a stable community.

And what were the book's main weaknesses?

Although there were a couple of sections that were hard to read (e.g. the description of what happened to Philippa's son), no weaknesses were found in the book itself, only in the layout: while the list of characters provided at the beginning of the book is very helpful, given how many there are, reading the book on a Kindle made it difficult to refer to this list easily. Given that the book was written long before Kindles were invented, this is not the fault of the author; perhaps those who transferred it to the Kindle format could bear such things in mind for future editions.

One reader wondered whether it felt as if the book rushed to a conclusion because she didn't want it to end.

Would we read another book written by the same author?

Definitely.

Would we recommend this book to someone else?

Yes, to anyone intrigued by how other people live their lives, and especially those interested in people who live such a dedicated life as the Brede community. Readers have already started handing the book on to others.

Next books

Healing: Bringing the Gift of God's Mercy to the World, by Mary Healy (best price is available online at www.abebooks.co.uk)

(For anyone who finishes this with time to spare, another new book particularly suited to Advent is *Light in the Darkness, Exploring the Path of Christian Hope*, by Peter Sills)

Date of next meeting

Wednesday 9 December 2020, 8 pm, to be confirmed