

Book Club Meeting

February 5, 2015

Host: Manfred Schlösser, MPIMM, Bremen

Participants:

Carmelita Görg <cg@fb1.uni-bremen.de> (starting the minutes)

Manfred Schlösser mschloes@mpi-bremen.de

Jana Stone <jstone@marum.de>

Alice Lefebvre <alefebvre@marum.de>

Dorothea Brückner <dorothea.brueckner@uni-bremen.de>

Pippa Goldschmidt <pippagoldschmidt@hotmail.com>

Joan Haran <HaranJ@cardiff.ac.uk>

Heather Johnstone <hjohnstone@marum.de>

Uwe Spörl <uwe.spoerl@uni-bremen.de>

Beatriz Noriega-Ortega <bnoriega@mpi-bremen.de>

Uwe Schimank <Schimank@uni-bremen.de>

Please send your comments to the next one in the list above and always CC it to Susan (smgaines@uni-bremen.de), so that she knows when the minutes are finished or have gotten lost somewhere.

Other Participants:

Sonja Fückler <sonja.fuecker@uni-bremen.de> (recording the meeting)

The meeting started with the question of who liked the book; the result was that everyone liked the book with the exception of the entomologist. For the entomologist the location in the Appalachians, where the butterflies were migrating to instead of their usual site in Mexico, was not plausible due to the continental climate.

As the discussion was going back and forth I have tried to structure the minutes by identifying topics that were discussed and adding comments to these, so that others can add and correct comments as well as topics.

Title of the book:

- **The English title of the book (Flight Behavior) is much better than the German one (Das Flugverhalten der Schmetterlinge). The English title can be interpreted in several ways, e.g. meaning both the *flight of the butterflies* and the *flight (and development) of Dellarobia*.**
- ***The title also suggests "flight" as in the meaning of "escape".***

- *Flight also means Swarm of pigeons*
- *Flight also means Squadron (of military jets)*
- *'Flight behaviour' is very detached, it is the way a scientist describes the behavior of the butterflies, it sounds like we are invited to disinterestedly observe Dellarobia's behavior under pressure (HJ)*
- ...

Social Background of the characters in the book:

- Most characters are from the Appalachian community, most of them not well-educated, poor and struggling with everyday life.
- In contrast to this you have the well-educated scientist Dr. Byron (African American from the American Virgin Islands) which results in a kind of culture clash. The character of Dr. Byron seems to be a mixture of two scientists (Wilson, entomologist from Harvard and ???) Dellarobia describes him to her girlfriend as being like "Obama".
- Dellarobia, and in a way also her son Preston, are the only ones that try to bridge the gap.
- Dellarobia is not totally believable, the way she rises above the others, her father a carpenter, her mother a seamstress, on the other hand she had good teachers in high school, but getting pregnant at 17 she was no longer able to develop her talents.
- Other characters that show a development over the course of the novel: Hester and a little bit also the husband of Dellarobia.
- Eventhough the mother in law of Dellarobia was also in this social-economic surrounding, she was quite an interesting character, who had very good knowledge of "veterinary" and seemed to be a very smart woman and at times surprisingly open minded.
- Pastor Bobby seems to be "a light bulb" compared to the other characters, very sincere, ...
- Contrast: African American well-educated and well-to-do on the one hand and the "Appalachians" white, poor, uneducated "hillbillies" on the other hand.
- The story is located in the South of the US, part of the former Confederate States of America. Black people had and still have a very hard time there. So a black scientist like Dr Byron would be there a very exotic character like someone from Mars.
- The author does a very good job at describing the feeling of living in such a community, probably because it is also where she lives.
- The typical village people in the US are very religious which seems strange to a European audience.
- The description of motherhood and having to deal with young children is good.

Characters (cont)

- The description of Hester as a mother with her favoured perfect son Bobby and less-favoured son Bear, who she seemed always to be criticizing was interesting (HJ)
- The butterflies have a character, but they are silent. They are beautiful but represent disaster (HJ)

Pace of the novel:

- The novel develops very slowly (for some it seemed too slow), but in any case at the end it accelerates too fast.
- The ending does not really fit with the novel, it overexaggerates Dellarobia's development.
- The author's style is overdramatic both with respect to people and climate change.
-
- ...

Science in the book:

- The science in the book seems well researched (see also Afterword and Kingsolver has a bachelor and master's degree in this area).
- Setting of scientist explaining the science mainly to a housewife and a child is a well-known technique setting for the novel to explain the science to the reading audience.
- Some liked the idea of telling a science novel from the point of view of a housewife.
- Sometimes maybe a little too obvious for the reader, but on the other hand most scientists like to explain their work if they are asked to.
- The reader gets a good impression of what is involved in the field and lab work, how tedious it can be etc.
- The character of Dr Byron seems a little unrealistic in that he is emotionally invested in his research 'we like these butterflies you know'. The more average reaction to something very unusual happening is great there is a nature paper or two in this, who will I name this phenomenon after, or can I get it named after myself (HJ).
- ...

Climate Change:

- It was discussed whether or not the concern with climate change of the author is too strong.
- How would the novel work for someone that does not believe in climate change? All of the participants of the book club believe in climate change.
- Clash of "preserving nature" on one hand and the necessities of life and selling the lumber to survive, (growing trees as their crop to be harvested) → here it was discussed how close the farmers are to nature (e.g. Hester with her traditional knowledge about the native flowers)
- Americans care a lot about the monarchs, so it seems to be a good topic to choose something that is so beautiful and that people care about, having school projects etc. for such a topic, involving the public in keeping track of the migration by gathering data (e.g. also done for birds in Europe).
- Literature (Novel) as a means for a broader audience.
- For a broader American audience? Would German readers have to be convinced that climate change is happening?
- It is not clear whether or not the book really distinguishes between *climate (long term)* and *weather (short term)*.
- Open Question: Will the butterflies survive?

- **Open question: Will Dellarobia and her family survive, or at least recover from the disaster enough that they can carry their plans forward? I think the end of the book was interesting in that we are invited to believe that everything will be ok, but actually it could be a complete disaster. In losing the house, perhaps they went over the 'tipping point' (HJ).**
- **How does the novel compare to other novels on climate change? (not many have been read so far, Solar is quite different)**
- ...

Media in the book

The way the media misrepresents or selectively represents things was well described (HJ)

There is no quality control on the internet (HJ)

Other observations and questions:

- **The only beautiful thing in the novel is the butterfly.**
- **Humor is woven into the novel, e.g. in the conversations between Dellarobia and her girlfriend, a way for them to cope with their daily catastrophes. But humor is also found in other places and in general adds to the pleasure of reading the novel.**
- **Discussion about correlation and causation, for some the hypothesis for the science is missing in the book, on the other hand for unforeseen events there need not be a hypothesis from the beginning, gathering the data will also be valuable to test future hypotheses at a later time.**
- **For some the book is much too long.**
- **The author shows the failure of the US American school system where someone gets a high school diploma without basic knowledge of math, physics and biology.**

Conclusion

The book carries some messages to the readers:

There is a climate change

Climate change is man-made

Consequences of climate change affect animals and humans

We need well educated scientists to study this topic

Everybody can help