

## A reader writes

(November 2007 by Anne Mulhare)

A rather phlegmatic friend of mine, Mary, has many times said, 'What I love about fiction is you can lose yourself in a story. Real life is often so shitty that it's a welcome substitute in emergencies.' I hope I have quoted her accurately. I used to say to her, 'Made up stories?! I'd rather watch a film for fantasy. Me, I love factually-based writing: biography, history, journalism, psychology...'

When I was younger, Mills and Boon 'romances' came to mind whenever I heard the topic 'reading fiction'. This was due to the one or two examples I encountered at school which must have been passed on by older relations to some of the students. I picked up one with my midteen hands. The lavender-hued cover with its 'Gone with the Wind'-style picture of heterosexual passion did not entice me. I was curious though and made myself read a page. An archetypal woman was all aflutter as her beau attached a new necklace about her fair neck... Shivers of pleasure yet to come... Yawn. I would have chosen double English with Dickens any time. What I was into at the time was Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *1984*.

As I progressed through the next decade and a half, my reading tastes were refined by a-few-bits-o-Real-Life. As I look at my current book collection there are still plenty of actual factual books present. A history of fighting women from the Irish Wars of Independence, the latest theories of physics, a biography of Johnny Depp, how to manage your money, how to eat well with limited kitchen facilities, and always newspapers; often opened on last night's crossword or sudoku awaiting completion. Other books, works of fiction, have started to populate my table as I have met and enjoyed them.

When I first joined SisterAct, one of the activities which attracted me was the Book Group. I came to the group seeking word of mouth inspiration. I listened to Radio 4 programmes, read the odd newspaper review, got enticed by nice covers and displays in bookshops – but it was not meaty enough for me. I wanted to contribute too: by encouraging a few women down my actual factual experience-drive reading route... I got my way sometimes. Just as I expected, being part of a group which discusses what it reads has widened my horizons. It has stretched me in consuming the writings of others and in my perspective on creativity and reality.