

## The Stroud u3a READERS GROUP, 2024–25

The group reformed very late after Covid: there were only three remaining members. We acquired several new potential members early in September 2024 and have been able to meet since then.

For the first few meetings we looked at a number of extracts of various ages and genres before we decided to read a famous Victorian novel, *John Halifax, Gentleman*, by Mrs Maria Craik. Once we had finished reading and discussing the book, which we did by choosing at each session a part to talk about next time, we agreed to write an update report before we began on the next choice, which is *Cider with Rosie*, by Laurie Lee.

One reason for our choosing both books was local interest: we soon noticed that John Halifax is based on the Gloucestershire area round the mysterious town of S\_\_\_\_\_, while *Cider with Rosie* is set not far from and includes Stroud.

One member said: I read JHG a while ago now and enjoyed it; its style made me want to read on; I invested in the characters. I liked the local history elements with references to places around the area, encouraging us to identify them and where geographically they are in relation to each other in reality. The female characters were well drawn and not just there to move a plot along; they had real influence. We have learnt that "fictional stories" can often be based on real facts – and can add to our knowledge of real local history. Living close by to Amberley "Enderley", "Rose Cottage" and "Dunkirk Mill" it has been most interesting to see the story including these places within walking distance of Watledge, Nailsworth. As my professional career was as a "Civil/Water Engineer" I noted the Severn Flood of 5 Feb 1795 (and the damages caused; chapter IV) – reminding us that "Climate Change extremes" today have had previous precedents, although now appearing to be more frequent!

A written submission from a member for this report also was interested in the language and visual effects within the story. The member says: The author maps the journey from street boy to gentleman and the solid, coherent life style of John Halifax and his wife, For instance, when the frantic Lady Caroline landed on their doorstep, about to run away with her lover, they gave her hospitality. When the author makes them aware of the reason for her flight, she doesn't take them down the path of self-righteousness and rejection. Together they take her home on their horse and explain that she has spent the day with them and their family. This was all they could do to try to reinstate her socially in the small town life of Norton Bury (Tewkesbury). The rest was up to her.

Another member wrote: I read JHG a while ago now and enjoyed it; its style made me want to read on; I invested in the characters. I liked the local history elements with references to places around the area, encouraging us to identify them and where geographically they are in relation to each other in reality. The female characters were well drawn and not just there to move a plot along; they had real influence.

One member, who said that they enjoyed the book, was keen that we should stress how well the outdoor scenes were written.

There was another comment, slightly tongue in cheek: In the curious topography of the fictional area people manage to walk, mainly on footpaths, between what is basically Minchinhampton and Dowdeswell, east of Cheltenham, in about two hours, possibly without going through the mythical town of S\_\_\_\_\_, and easily walk back again.

One important feature is the extreme religiosity. No modern author would allow this form of ideological expression; modern readers would be bothered by it. That included at least one of our group. In 1856 it was fashionable to suggest that 'common sense' meant that you belonged either to the master or the servant class; it meant that property defined who you were; being 'at liberty' meant a shared religion and morality, including the notions of everyone with property – and until the early nineteenth century that had included owning people. Mrs Craik believed in this 'what we all believe in' frame of reference. For the nineteenth century English reader, this attitude implied 'everything has always been like this'. It is relentless and of course didactic. It also implied frequent statements about God as a character in the background of everybody's life. On the other hand, the morality is simple, and the author is keen to show that the main characters, Phineas, John and Ursula, though they follow a strict code, are forgiving and loving people. In addition, the author insists on opposing both political immorality and anticatholicism. Both were historically prevalent in the early nineteenth century. The end of the story follows the ancient (or strictly, medieval) theme of 'Holy living and holy dying'. You can't feel sorry for the deaths in JHG, though of course they are sad, because everyone (except perhaps the Brithwood family) is going to Heaven when they die.

I think that, although it may have been a bit hard going at first, we all came to enjoy reading John Halifax Gentleman.