**OLD BAGGAGE** MEETING: WEDNESDAY, JULY 29, 2020

**By Lissa Evans** 1:30 PM or 7:00 PM

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**1. What did you like or dislike about this book?**

**2. If this book is "timely" as some reviews suggest, what do you make of Mattie's response to Jacko's nostalgia for their fight for suffrage? Is it in the past? What work is yet to be done? "I'm not in the business of nostalgia, Jacko. The lecture is supposed to be a clarion call to those who think that feminism is safely in the past. / "Well, isn't it? Aren't there other fish to fry?" (40)**

**3. What do you do when, after fighting for the right to vote, you realize you don't like any of the options? "Mattie hesitated, rather as she's hesitated in the polling booth in 1918, the ballot sheet before her, a pencil in her hand. The grand and glorious fight had shrunk to this: three choices on a scrap of paper, three parties who had consistently lied, prevaricated and backtracked on their promises to women, three potential governments who would make laws which she, Mattie Simpkin, would then be obliged to obey, under threat of further imprisonment. It was as if the sun had risen after an age-long night only to illuminate a landscape littered with traps." (43)**

**4. Have you ever sat down with an old comrade, someone you went to war together, only to find them now on a path you can't follow? "Which organization? / "The Empire Fasciti." / There was a sharp clink as The Flea set her cup down.... / "I shan't leave before my steak arrives," said Mattie, "but that's solely because I'm hungry." (45-6)**

**5. What do you make of the Flea's assumption of antisemitism, broadened to outsiders -- at the beginning and end of the book? "And whenever they talk about the "enemy", they always mean Jew -- "outside influences" means Jews, "Bolshevik" means Jews, "foreign" means Jews, "wealthy" means Jews." (49) "Almost every other house on the lane was sporting Balfour's card in their front window, and the Allard-Browns had a poster showing a respectable lady and gentleman being throttled in the coils of a giant snake labelled 'SOCIALISM' while a Jew, a woman in a tie and a girlish-looking man stood by and laughed. 'As usual,' said The Flea, 'the enemy consists of those who do not fit the mould.'" (284)**

**6. Could you be an Amazon? First, "name three great women of history." (56) Next, "name a personal ambition -- a career or an achievement that might currently seem to you no more than a daydream." (67) Then, aspire to "javelin throwing, archery and the use of the slingshot." (78) Finally, among other things I've left out, "think of an historical personage to whom we would like to have spoken and decide what we would have asked them." (168)**

**7. Had you already judged Mattie as being past her prime when Jacko accuses her of "dabbling"? ("The mimsy, ephemeral implication of dabble was almost unbearable; it was a word that walked hand in hand with trifle and dilly-dally, flirt, toy and tinker -- terms that could scarcely be uttered without an enervated sigh. And, of course, that accusation was untrue, completely untrue. Was it possible, though, that she had lost a degree of momentum...?" 50)**

**8. Why, for God's sake, nickname a woman "The Flea"? What does that mean -- for Mattie, for Florrie?**

**9. What do you think of the image Mattie paints of the traditional women's sphere? When she lists her reasons for refusing Pomeroy, she says, "And neither did she choose to share the reason that underpinned it all -- a kind of horror at the idea of standing still, of choosing a single existence, as if life were a sprint across quicksand and stasis meant a slow extinction. Long ago, as a child in a pinched and stifled century, she had seen her own mother gradually disappear." (85)**

**10. How much of this is factual? The Amazons and the Empire Youth League are fictional. Some background from Wikipedia:**

**"Women's Suffrage in the United Kingdom": Founded in 1903, the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) was tightly controlled by the three Pankhursts, Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928), and her daughters Christabel Pankhurst (1880–1958) and Sylvia Pankhurst (1882–1960).[16] It specialized in highly visible publicity campaigns such as large parades. This had the effect of energizing all dimensions of the suffrage movement. While there was a majority of support for suffrage in parliament, the ruling Liberal Party refused to allow a vote on the issue; the result of which was an escalation in the suffragette campaign. The WSPU, in contrast to its allies, embarked on a campaign of violence to publicize the issue, even to the detriment of its own aims.[17]"**

**11. Were you transported to 1928? I wondered only about the use of the word "treadmill" on p.140 "She walked fast...using the uphill path as if it were a treadmill." Still, Dictionary.com claims that the word treadmill dates from 1815-1825. Otherwise, I believe completely that Lissa Evans's writing sets us squarely in 1928.**

**12. What do you make of the plot device of giving Angus a lost daughter -- to both connect Mattie's past and present AND to give her a connection to Jacko's group? Brilliant? Or too neat?**

**13. What do you make of The Flea? Has she found satisfaction in her life? "And she loved Mattie. Living with her in simple friendship might be akin to dancing the Charleston when what you really ached for was a slow waltz -- but the music still played; it was, in its way, still a dance." (122) And at the end, "as she walked along the passage toward the kitchen, she could still feel herself being swung through a waltz, the world a bright blur, the music playing." (291)**

**14. How did you react to Mattie's transformation with Inez's arrival on the scene? Flea's observation: "There had been several occasions lately when she had witnessed Mattie missing a chance to educate or to quote or explain; her friend's focus seemed to have narrowed, as if previously she had scanned the horizon with the naked eye and was now using a telescope." (152) Do we each of us have an Achilles' heel?**

**15. What do you make of the contrast between Ida and Inez? Is the author commenting on the necessity of education across all social lines?**

**16. Do our memories change when we fix them to the page? When asked why she didn't finish her memoir, Mattie writes, "I found the task...counterproductive.' She could remember the precise moment that she had stopped writing. Angus, propped up on pillows, had slipped sideways, and she had risen to help him and had seen, revealed by his disarranged pyjama jacket, the burn on his shoulder incurred by a childhood accident. She had written about that accident just days before, her recollection of it both detailed and panoramic, but now, she realized, now, she could recall it only from the single angle of her prose; in a moment of horrid clarity, she saw that each memory she had pinned to the page had become fixed and lifeless, the colours already fading. She was narrowing her past to a series of sepia vignettes, her brothers as footnotes to her own life." (163)**

**17. Do we get any say in how we're remembered? Mattie brags about Mrs. Pankhurst early on, but on her deathbed, other ladies spew venom, "she betrayed us...joined the Tories. And opened a teashop. In France." (166)**

**18. "It is never too late to be who you might have been." (276) What do you make of this sentiment? How does it apply to Mattie?**

**19. What is this book about? Inspiring a new generation of women? Or about nurturing present day friendships over past obsessions? "Besides, she thought, as her torch beam slid through fallen leaves, besides, I have a close, true family of my own." (277)**

**20. What does the title mean?**

**21. Did you have a favorite quote?**

**22. What do you make of the final image of Mattie and the boy using the summer house to follow the sun?**

**FROM:** <https://www.evenincambridge.com/book-club-blog/old-baggage-by-lissa-evans>

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