

A Single Thread

This is the title of the book that I wish I had written. The author is Tracy Chevalier and I had enjoyed reading “The Girl with the Pearl Earring” and one or two of her other books before I discovered “A Single Thread”.

It is set between the two world wars and tells the story of Violet, who like so many other women of her generation, lost her fiancé in WW1, and so knew that she would not be leading the life that she had previously anticipated.

It is a vivid depiction of life for a single woman of modest means at that time, exploring both the limitations she endured and the opportunities available to her. Violet’s brother is married with a family, so assumes that she will continue to live with their widowed mother and manage her household. However Violet has other ideas and is even more determined to find some independence as her hateful, embittered mother treats her so badly.

The book follows her as she navigates the necessary steps towards independence, which is no easy matter, and the adventures she has on the way. One of the things I enjoyed was the detailed look which the author allows her readers to take at the complex skills of both church bell ringing and liturgical embroidery. Violet moves to Winchester and so the life of a cathedral city takes us into these areas.

The book also observes the many and varied relationships which Violet has, both at work and in the rest of her life. Tracy Chevalier is a gifted writer, who is able to convey the nuance of a look, gesture or feeling in very few words. Her descriptive passages flow with a clarity that fiction writers do not always achieve, and her dialogue brings her characters to vivid life.

As the story continues Violet encounters prejudice at every turn, but fights back with a calm determination and does enjoy some fun, some passion and some enriching friendships. She also acquires some new skills, which in its turn, helps her self-confidence.

I found this book a real pleasure to read and it left me feeling very glad that I had been born into the generation that came after both world wars. By the time I was an adult, I and my contemporaries could benefit from the changes that had come for women since Violet’s time.

Jan Rees March 2022

