

## THE BODECIA BOOK CLUB BOOK REVIEW



### The Thread by Victoria Hislop

Thessaloniki, 1917. As Dimitri Komninos is born, a devastating fire sweeps through the thriving Greek city where Christians, Jews and Muslims live side by side. Five years later, Katerina Sarafoglou's home in Asia Minor is destroyed by the Turkish army. Losing her mother in the chaos, she flees across the sea to an unknown destination in Greece. Soon her life will become entwined with Dimitri's, and with the story of the city itself, as war, fear and persecution begin to divide its people. Thessaloniki, 2007. A young Anglo-Greek hears his grandparents' life story for the first time and realises he has a decision to make. For many decades, they have looked after the memories and treasures of the people who were forced to leave. Should he become their next custodian and make this city his home?

The tortuous political history of Thessaloniki in the 20th century is drawn out through the deeply involving story of two families, and the friends – Jewish, Christian, Muslim – that surround them. Victoria Hislop's usual formula in her books was there – that being there was a bad man and it all worked out in the end, with added sewing and weaving! We were really getting into the history and were left wanting more and we felt trivial facts about sewing and weaving was left in. We enjoyed the history so much we had more discussion on this than the book, there's still a lot of bad feeling about the war, especially what is currently going on with Angela Murkell and also the collapse of the banking system.

*The first record of Jews in Thessaloniki dates back to 52AD, but it was in 1492 that significant numbers of Sephardic Jews (broadly meaning those from the Iberian Peninsula, today's Spain and Portugal) made the city their home following their expulsion from Spain. Jews had lived in Iberia since Roman times and had thrived under the region's Muslim Moorish rulers. But times were changing and Islamic Iberia was systematically being reclaimed for Christendom by its new Catholic Monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand. The pair had made their suspicions of their Jewish subjects clear in the brutal Inquisition of the 1480s, but in 1492 they issued a decree forcing Jews either to convert to Christianity or to leave Spain. Offered protection by the Ottoman Empire, Jews flocked to its major urban centres – including Thessaloniki – to the extent that by 1519 they represented 56% of the city's population, rising to 68% in 1613 and earning the city the nickname *la madre de Israel*, 'the mother of Israel'.*

*Over the next three centuries the Jews of Thessaloniki participated in all areas of economic life from the wool trade to shipping, representing all social classes from merchants to fishermen and factory workers. But in 1912 Thessaloniki was returned to Greece and the Jewish majority began to decline as Greeks of other faiths swelled the city's population and the Great Fire of 1917 – as well as a ripple of anti-Semitism – forced Jewish families out for the first time in generations. By the outbreak of World War Two Jews accounted for just 40% of the population; by the end of that war almost the entire Jewish community – some 60,000 people – had been deported and subsequently exterminated in the Nazi concentration camps.*

Most felt this book was an easy read, there was a lot of unnecessary “fluff” – sewing and weaving and we really wanted more about the history. We also felt when the lead character marries for no good reason, without any particular necessity that this was not explained fully and we wanted to know why. Then when she finds her true love is still alive she fattens her husband up to cause him to have a heart attack and conveniently to die! Then she can marry her lover and it's all plain sailing after that, never mind all the loose ends. Hislop covers all of this in just a few pages!

We did enjoy the book and what part of history it did tell. We gave *The Thread* by Victoria Hislop an **OK**