

THE BODECIA BOOK CLUB REVIEW

The Great Lover by Jill Dawson

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The year is 1909, and the English poet Rupert Brooke has not yet achieved the fame that will result from his chronicles of the First World War. He is still relatively unknown, living in Cambridgeshire at the modest Orchard Tea Gardens, a "Quiet and Select Up-river Resort on the Banks of the Granta, close to the Mill and offering Breakfasts, Light Luncheons and Teas for large or small Boating or Cycling parties".

Seventeen-year-old Nell Golightly is forced to seek employment at the Orchard after the sudden death of her bee-keeper father; with both parents now dead, it falls to Nell as the oldest girl to support her younger siblings. She is intelligent and hard-working, and makes excellent progress at her new place of work – until, that is, the arrival of the charismatic and dangerously impulsive young poet who is to upset her sheltered world.

In *The Great Lover* Jill Dawson switches between two narrators, that of Brooke (through which she splices real passages from his letters), and of Nell Golightly, a housemaid in Grantchester, where Brooke stayed as a guest near the Old Vicarage. So that we alternately hear the voices of Nell and Rupert - this is a particularly effective technique, as often the same event is seen from two differing perspectives. How different such an affair would have been told with modern day email and friendship sites – letters are hardly received anymore and perhaps the romance has been lost with time.

The author is skilful in creating two convincing voices; Nell must deal with constant hardships, such as the harrowing stillbirth of her young sister's baby, while Rupert's life is concerned entirely with love, poetry, and ensuring a steady supply of cream for his tea.

Brooke is a perfect subject for novelisation: a recognisable name about whom relatively little is widely known: war poet; 'think only this of me'; died young; 'is there honey still for tea'; er, that's it ... oh yes ... he was also good-looking, referred to by Yeats as 'the handsomest young man in England'. It is his poetry and his sexuality which stand at the centre of the book.

The Orchard Tea Gardens in Grantchester still exists and well worth a visit! ... and perhaps take the book to read!

We gave *The Great Lover* **5 / 10**, which currently stands as 10th on our books reading list.

The book we are now reading is **What to do When Someone Dies by Nicci French**.

Don't forget the first rule of Book Club!