

On sickness and health

The Plague is for fans of philosophical debate only, warns the Society of Young Publishers. **Harriet Dennys** reports



The Society of Young Publishers Book Group took on a challenging read in *The Plague* by Albert Camus—a study of the stages of a fictional plague epidemic that strikes the Algerian city of Oran. The novel describes the physical stages of the disease and the corresponding mental and emotional states of the townspeople. For the group, this was “more of an essay than a story”—a fact that was the source of its beauty for some, but its downfall for others.

Clearly structured in five parts in the style of a Greek tragedy, the book effectively portrays the distinct stages of an epidemic: build-up, climax, lull and aftermath. Although the majority of the group felt that the ends of the sections were inconclusive, resulting in a lack of excitement and pace, the climactic line “close the town” marked a turning point in enjoyment—from this point onwards, the group found itself pulled into the story.

“The disease itself is well-documented and the very structured writing style lends itself well to the dispassionate discourse,” spokesperson Emily McLeod says. “The plague is an all-pervasive character but it shows no emotion or pity.”

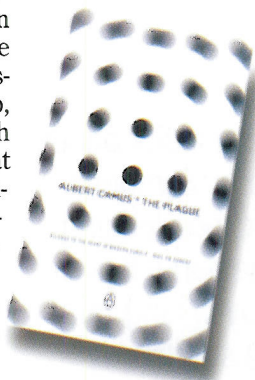
Central to the novel are the moral questions that present themselves to ordinary people in extraordinary situations. As such, the characters in the book are not well-rounded individuals but vehicles for philosophical discussion; some readers found this high level of emotional

detachment “frustrating and impenetrable”—it made them want to put *The Plague* down and forget all about it. McLeod says: “Many readers felt that the lack of emotional attachment was a huge flaw; some of us really didn’t care what happened to Oran and its people.”

Other readers, however, described the anonymity of the book as a “refreshing insight into human nature on a larger scale free from distractions”. These readers appreciated the build-up of the town as a whole falling into depression and low-lying anger, and the depiction of the loneliness of suffering as the characters try to survive in their own individual worlds.

Another talking point was the dialogue in the novel, which some readers found “very stilted” because it was “clearly manipulated for philosophical discourse and never intended as a genuine portrayal of everyday conversation”. McLeod says: “The reader has to accept that Camus’ dialogue will never be run-of-the-mill talk.”

Overall, the group decided that *The Plague* is “definitely worth the effort required”—but only for readers with an interest in morality and philosophical debate. McLeod says: “The reader needs to devote time and energy to this book to match the intellectual engagement demanded by the author. It would be impossible to give *The Plague* a mark out of 10, as we were so divided in opinion.”



The Plague: “only for readers with an interest in morality and philosophical debate”

Rewriting the Rules of Culture and Commerce

THE LONG TAIL

How Endless Choice is Creating Unlimited Demand

CHRIS ANDERSON

More to life than bestsellers

A short, animated trailer for Chris Anderson’s *The Long Tail* has proved popular online. **Aislinn McCormick** reports

The Long Tail, a book that tells us to forget the big hitters and concentrate instead on the apparent misses, was launched last month with online and offline publicity. Described as “the big idea” of the year by *GQ* and “a brilliant book—as intelligent as it is entertaining”, by the *Times*, the Random House Business Books hardback has shifted 2,098 units so far.

A UK author tour ran from 2nd to 9th July. Author Chris Anderson, who is editor-in-chief of Silicon Valley e-zine www.wired.com, also participated in online question and answer sessions, and book signings with Amazon and Google.

Events targeting the book’s potential readers included a signing at a “geek dinner” in London for those who eat, sleep and drink technology. The author also used his blog at www.thelongtail.com to plug the book. The site links to Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com.

Adam Humphrey, marketing manager at Random House’s CHA division, says: “This provided online chatter for the title before it launched.” Amazon.co.uk is offering 40% off the £17.99 r.r.p.