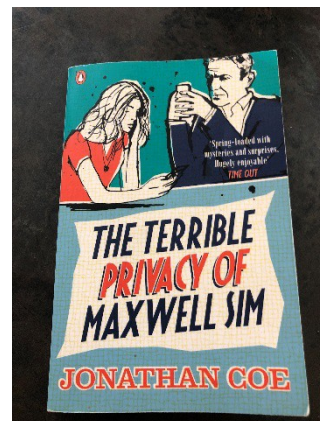


BOOK WORMS – The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim” by Jonathan Coe

At our July meeting, we enjoyed a beautiful summer’s evening and a lively discussion about ‘The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim’ by Jonathan Coe which was published in 2010. Most of the story is told in the first person and we first meet Max in Australia where he has been trying to form a relationship with his estranged father. He then flies home and we learn of his clinical depression and feelings of isolation and loneliness. He has been on sick leave for six months following the break-up of his marriage but gets a new job for a toothpaste manufacturer. This involves a journey to a remote chemist in the Shetland Islands during which he visits various people from his past. He continually tries to work out why he feels so alienated from the world and all the people in it. He suffers a nervous breakdown on this journey but this is not the end of his story!



We all enjoyed the book and some of us mentioned the exploration of serious themes such as depression, alienation and marriage breakdown. Others noted that technological devices such as social media and mobile phones which should facilitate social connection somehow fail to do so in Max’s case. Arguably, the most significant relationship Max develops is with Emma his Sat Nav! He feels at one with her, free to be himself and able to accept her calm reassurances that he is on the right path.

Emma is one of the comedic set pieces in the novel and we found her laugh out loud funny. We all mentioned other episodes which we found hilarious. There was one sequence, for example, where everyone was speaking at cross purposes and Max was trying to keep up. Near the beginning of the book Max is telling the man sitting next to him on an aeroplane the story of his life. He really feels he is making a connection only to realise at some point during the conversation the man has actually died of a heart attack.

A long discussion took place about the ending of the book. Some of us felt the ending undercut the whole novel and we felt cheated. We tried to work out what Coe was trying to do with such a bizarre ending. Others of us weren’t that bothered by it and just ignored it as it was such a good story.