The Sky Beneath us by Fiona Valpy

At the meeting when the book was discussed the great majority praised The Sky Beneath us. The book was described as well written, engaging, well-paced, thought provoking, thoroughly well researched, with a captivating plot and a suspenseful narrative. Below are some of the reviews and comments made by the group members:

In 1927 Violet McKenzie-Grant is embarking on her dream of studying at the Edinburgh School of Gardening for Women. She doesn't yet know that it is a journey that will take her to Katmandu and beyond, deep into captivating landscapes and cultures that are worlds away from everything and everyone she will leave behind in Scotland.
In 2020 Daisy Laverock has dreamed of retracing the footsteps of her great-great-aunt Violet ever since discovering her long-lost journals, whose accounts of plant hunting in the 1930s inspired Diasy's own career. Divorced, and facing an empty nest, Daisy decides to embark on the trip of a lifetime. She arrives in Nepal, ready to start trekking in the shadow of Everest, But fate, and the pandemic have other plans. Stranded and alone Daisy must fall back on the kindness of strangers, taking inspiration from Violet' determination and resilience to keep going in the darkest times. As she gradually pieces together fragments of Violet' story and uncovers long-held serets, can daisy finally reveal a path forward for her own future?
Margaret

I enjoyed this book. It was a quick and easy read for me. I thought the descriptions of the scenery in Nepal were magic; the terrifying heights and unsubstantial bridges, the grandeur of the incredible sacred mountains, the myths surrounding them and the amazing Sherpas and their families coping with whatever was before them. Sherpas who, I have always thought never got enough recognition; it was always them that had the expertise to conquer Everest. The phases of the moon and the way of life of the Sherpas…
The context of the time when Violet wanted to become a gardener, when it wasn't considered a suitable life for a well brought up young lady, although lots of quite well off ladies did become quite famous gardeners.
I thought the descriptions were beautiful especially the ones in Violet's letters to her sister – making us imagine the chugging of the letters.
The book also brought back memories of the Covid epidemic – all of which had become quite dim in my memory
Ann M

…after my initial confusion by the varying time frames of the 2 stories running parallel, I must say that I found it to be a most enjoyable read.
Violet's journal reflected the trials of introducing your likely life partner to unimpressed parents…
From the book I also learned much about the superstitions surrounding Halloween…
I was very impressed by the numerous anagrams. My favorite was: SILENT – LISTEN…
A very enjoyable read. Violet's comment on her changed life: "We are getting by and like my own daughter, I have learned to stand on my own two feet"…
I was left with the philosophy that our lives would be like trudging across a flat featureless plain if we didn't have mountains to climb.
William

Definitely a good read.
I enjoyed the book for many reasons and it reminded me of how much i simply loved Alexandra David Neel's "Voyage d'une parisienne à Lassa". She became my hero and years later I managed to go to Nepal in 1970 before Katmandu became what it is today. Although I managed to get a glimpse of Mount Everest while trekking from Katmandu to Nagarcot many decades ago, I always dreamt of going to Tibet but the high altitude of Lhasa prevented my husband and I to travel to such places in our later life...

Other reasons for thoroughly enjoying the book:
The narrative and general story lines of the 2 main characters Violet and Daisy
The trekking of the 2 women
The locations of Scotland and Nepal
The historical events including Nepal before and after Edmund Hilary's conquest of Everest in 1953 - which made me appreciate and revisit in my head the Paths of Glory - and how it changed the socio-economics of Nepal. And later the impact of Covid 19 pandemic. Also, the references to women's place and freedom in the early 20th century compared to 21st century. Communications: Letter writing V the use of mobile smartphone
The determination and endurance of the 2 women.
The botanical contribution of brave explorers discovering, studying plants and the importance of preserving and recording endangered or difficult of access species.

Of course, the book over romanticised the story of Violet and even more Daisy's. However, I loved the clever way of writing their story in parallel lines. It never confused you, and yet picked on their similarities; their travelling alone, their quests, their ability to be made welcome by the locals...

Violet's diary and letters to her sister Hetty were very credible to me.
I found the development of the novel when Daisy's encounter with Dr Walker at the Library of the Royal Botanic Garden of Edinburgh, leads to Daisy and her daughters making a journey to Phortse in Nepal where thanks to their fund raising huge greenhouse is erected, a little farfetched in how it all ends well for everyone. But it makes for a happy ending and a feel-good read.
Sabine