**SI Leeds Literary Prize**

First of all I want to thank the Leeds Soroptimist Club for inviting me to be a patron of this prize.
I studied English Literature at university and have always been an avid reader of classic and modern fiction and have huge gratitude for the skills and creativity of those who write novels and short stories. Listening to our shortlisted writers tonight has been a privilege and a joy.

Our organisation, Soroptimist International, is committed to a world where women and girls achieve their potential and we believe that education and leadership are the keys to overcoming the obstacles which prevent this happening. One aspect of this is to provide opportunities for women to demonstrate their skills and lead the way in their chosen fields.
This prize does just that.

Soroptimists also recognise that there are many reasons why women are not always heard, or heard as loudly as they should be, and so we use our lobbying skills to be a global voice for women whose own voice is seemingly silent.
Our members across every continent work together, and in partnership with other organisations, to promote a world where gender is not the determining factor for achievement in one’s chosen field. Our own membership reflects the richness of diversity. Many clubs run joint projects which cross cultural and country boundaries to work together on leading change for women. The Yorkshire Region has a longstanding link with our clubs in Zimbabwe through which much wonderful work is achieved. In a few weeks time, in Harrogate, women from Federation’s 29 countries will come together at our conference to celebrate all our project work in the last year and to plan for the future.

Tonight, the partnership between SI Leeds, Ilkley Literature Festival and Peepal Tree Press, has enabled the voices of these wonderful writers to be heard loud and clear. I want to say a very big thank you to everyone who has been instrumental in making this event happen.

The thing which I find perhaps most exciting of all about tonight is that these women writers do and will continue to give a voice to their thoughts, their hopes and their views through their fiction. They will contribute to changing how we all see the world. Through their work, they will lead and educate by providing role models for other women. Thank you all for doing what you are doing and I wish each and every one of you huge success in the future.

And now it is my pleasure to make the award for the readers’ choice, the entry which has been chosen by the Soroptimist members to be awarded their prize.