

CANTERBURY ROTARY BOOK CLUB

Notes of a meeting held on 15th September 2018 at the home of Alan and Diana Forrest

1 PRESENT: Alan and Diana, Neil, Gill, Viv, Brian

2.APOLOGIES: Judith, Caroline, Georges, Richard, Tony, Jennifer and Colin

3. COLIN: Brian had been in touch with Jennifer and Colin that day. Colin had been far from well, but had just received a large transfusion, which was expected to bring about a major improvement. Everyone joined in wishing him the very best recovery, and that he and Jennifer would soon be enlivening our discussions again.

4. BOOK: A Gentleman in Moscow by Amor Towles. It is 1917, and Alexander, a Czarist Count, has returned from Paris to Bolshevik Moscow. The book opens with the formal record of a Tribunal which has tried him for allegedly writing a subversive poem (which he does not deny) , and which has sentenced him to life house imprisonment in the luxurious Metropole Hotel, in the centre of Moscow, where he had been living for some time. If he leaves the building, he will be shot. At first he assumes he will return to his multi-room suite, but instead he is put into a tiny attic room, taking just a few items of his furniture. However, he is very resilient, making the room as comfortable as he can, and increasing his living area a little by breaking through the back of his wardrobe into some adjoining attic space. Among the items of furniture he has taken is an old chair, the legs of which have been hollowed out and contain a fortune in gold Catherine the Great roubles, which we presume are used to maintain him.

Much of the early part of the book is concerned with describing his daily life, with the old pre-Revolutionary service and style, the old staff maintaining their deference, though he seems remarkably egalitarian. Things gradually change , especially when a doltish waiter becomes manager and an apparatchik, but there is much to amuse - for example when it is decreed that in the interests of uniformity, only red or white wine is to be offered, all at the same price, and weeks are spent steaming the labels off thousands of bottles! In all, he remains in the hotel nearly 40 years, which gives an ideal opportunity to introduce a whole kaleidoscope of characters in a way worthy of Tolstoy, although the author is American, and there is a vaguely American air to the book. The plot unfolds slowly. The count meets a 9 year old , the daughter of a Party official, and together they explore the back areas of the hotel, as well as eavesdropping on top Party meetings in the ballroom. He gets a job as the head waiter. The girl leaves and, after some years re-appears with a 5 year old daughter of her own, who is committed to his care while she travels east to find her husband, who has fallen into disfavour - never to re-appear. Alexander now has the job of bringing up the 5 year old , who becomes his surrogate daughter and a concert pianist, while he also meets, and is seduced by, a tall willowy film actress who has 2 wolfhounds. An old friend ,who turns out to be the true author of the poem ,appears and re-appears, vanishing for good after unwisely testing the patience of the authorities, while the count, now in his 60s, concocts an elaborate scheme whereby his daughter claims asylum from the US Paris ambassador, and he apparently flees to Finland, but somehow doubles back to the village near his old family mansion, now a ruin, where a willowy grey-hated lady awaits him - a risky procedure.

Although he felt the book was not simply Russian history from 1917, Neil felt the outlines of it were clearly felt in the book. Alan thought the disappearances were gentle ciphers for Stalin's purges, and the corruption of the party members represented by the KGB colonel's getting French lessons from the count.. Gill thought the writer displayed a lot of knowledge of Russia. Viv, who had mistakenly gone to Colin's house, throughly enjoyed the book. Diana had not read it. Alan had inadvertently read the first chapter of Towles's other book, about St Petersburg, which is printed at the back of this one, without at first realising it was not part of the story - and this gave the opportunity for him to tell us about the offer the Club had had to visit St Petersburg, which was turned down by the President of the day on the ground it would be much too expensive to invite them back! We thought it a bit unlikely that the Count could have been confined to the hotel for such a long time or, if he had been, that he would only have been tempted to commit suicide once.

However, while it did not really get discussion going, we all thought the book well worth reading - 8.5 out of 10.

5. OTHER READS: Viv - "The History of Bees" - Maja Lunde excellent; Val McDermid - "Out of Bounds", Lee Child - "The Dark Web", Isobel Charman - "The Great War" - the story of about 7 characters based on real letters - exceptional. Neil - Philip Kerr - book about a German detective in the 40s and 50s. Also reading "Murder city" - Chris Boden - drugs trade in El Paso with profits of \$250k pw also "Extreme Risk" - Chris Hunter - about bomb disposal in Croatia and Anthony Beevor - "Arnhem". Brian - "The History of Bees" and John Faulds - "The quickening Maze" - based on the true story of John Clare's incarceration in a lunatic asylum the same time as the brother of Alfred Tennyson - very good descriptions of woodlands and meetings with gypsies there.

6. THINGS DONE: Gill - lots with the Mini Group's study Exchange - and films "Mama Mia", "Cold War", "The Calendar Girls" and "Lamentation". Visit to Malling Abbey with Rotary (also Brian and Alan). Neil - holidays in Croatia with 8 mile walks each day. Also, interesting walk with Whitecliff Ramblers to Fort Bourgoyne, built in the 1850s in the White Cliffs just N of Dover Castle to deter the French - now owned by Landmark trust and worth a visit. Alan - holiday in Portugal in N of the country an hour from Oporto. Though apparently the French are now the greatest drinkers of Port, Alan did this best to seize back the title, and all present confessed to a liking for it. He particularly liked the Portuguese people, who were very friendly. Went up the Douro - land alongside reclaimed; walked part of Pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela; didn't like the Algarve. Picasso 1932 exhibition in Tate Modern. Kent Sinfonia concert in Collyer Fergusson as part of the District conference featured excellent 17 year old soprano. Viv - hol in Switzerland with a lot of walking and visited the tunnels in Ramsgate. Brian - MGSE, re-issue of "The Piano" - we discussed the amazing shots of NZ, "The Children Act" - brilliantly acted by Emma Thompson, "Blackklansman" - directed by Spike Lee - well worth seeing with up to date messages about Trumpism, Dist Conf.

7. THINGS TO COME: Alan - Patrick Heron - abstract artist coming to Turner centre at beginning December: "The Seagull", an American version of Chekov coming to Gulbenkian; 1st Oct - Waterstones - Patrick Hastings talking about his book on Vietnam War. 23rd Oct - Rotary speaker about disused wheelchairs for Africa - does anyone have them?

8. DONM: Thursday 8th November 7.30pm CHEZ ALAN AND DIANA - book - "The History of Bees" - Maja Lunde - a good read but not a long one. Some of us may also read Simon Mawer - "Prague Spring"

AND FINALLY - many thanks to Alan and Diana for their kind hospitality