

## CANTERBURY ROTARY BOOK CLUB

### NOTES OF A VIRTUAL MEETING ZOOMED BY VIV ON 29th JUNE 2020

1. APPEARANCES: Viv, , Gill, Judith, Richard, Jennifer, Pauline, Caroline, Peter, Brian

2. APOLOGIES: Neil and an honorary apology from Alan who really did want to take part but somehow got the date wrong.

3. BOOK ; "The Woman in the Photograph" by Stephanie Butland. This novel is woven round the lives of 2 second wave feminists - Leonie Barratt, campaigning journalist with a comfortable middle class background , and Veronica ("Vee") Moon , a local press photographer from a working class home when we , and Leonie first meet her. The story unfolds against the background of the preparations for a prestigious exhibition of Vee's work connected with the feminist movement , assembled by Erica, Leonie's niece, which takes place many years after Leonie's premature death.

Many of the chapters begin with one of Leonie's articles or a description of the taking of one of the photographs - the camera, film and so on - starting with a picture that Vee presciently takes of a postman being turned back by the picket line at the 1968 seamstress's strike at Ford Dagenham factory - the strike that eventually brought about the 1970 Equal Pay Act. Among other events, we visit the disrupted 1970 Miss World competition and the Greenham Common demonstrations. Leonie takes to drink and dissipation, has an abortion, and a baby - Erica - who she first offers to give to Vee and then passes off as the child of her sister, who brings her up. Vee becomes famous for her photographs, in one chapter taking Margaret Thatcher , cleverly getting movement into the shot by giving her a scarf which, unlike the Iron Lady's cast iron hairstyle, waves in the breeze, and who Leonie dismisses as just as patriarchal as anyone in the House of Lords. Cleverly, she contrasts this confrontation with an encounter with fictitious DJ , Vic Whistler, leering with shirt open to the waist , and who gets polite short shrift from Vee.

There are many flash-backs and time-line lists at the end of chapters, listing real events that have taken place, but the narrative changes perhaps 20 years before the chronological end of the book, when Vee visits Leonie, now run prodigiously to fat, and is taking some pictures of her when, suddenly, Leonie dies and one of Vee's pictures , subsequently accidentally processed, shows her after the moment of decease. Vee gives up her work, and makes another fortune from rented property. She also undergoes an operation for the removal of a brain tumour, which, at the time of the exhibition, has regrown - but she attends the exhibition, which is a triumph, before dying. Through her work on the exhibition, and contact with Vee, Erica realises her true parentage and comes to understand the importance of the feminist movement. She also realises the importance of her marriage.

In reply to the question whether, for her, the Dagenham strike was about feminism or just another of the many industrial disputes of the time, Jennifer said it was Barbara Castle who intervened on behalf the women, and got a rate of pay that was 8% lower than men's , true equality not being achieved until 1974. To her, it was just one of the strikes - it was also feminist, but at that time there were very few women in positions of power. She also remembered the later film "Made in Dagenham" which was about the strike.

Richard spoke about the time lines at the ends of chapters - that was a good idea - any photographer would do that rather than weave the real items into the story. Judith also felt the time lines reminded the reader that we were also going round the exhibition.

Leonie has no interest in children - she has an abortion, gives away her child, and expresses disgust when Tanya feeds her child at Greenham. Pauline thought she had a chip on her shoulder because of her attitude to everything. She let her second pregnancy go too long to have an abortion, but had the brilliant idea of passing the child off as that of her childless sister. It is quite common not to have any maternal feelings or want children. However, it was interesting that she went on seeing Erica until she died - she was a feminist, but there was some sort of bond with her child.

Gill did not think the book made clear why the feminist movement became involved especially in Greenham - men were also involved in the demonstrations there. She thought the way the women behaved there was disgusting. Viv said that 2 of the women who worked for him took part in the Greenham demonstrations as part of the women's rights movement. Richard reminded us that the nuclear weapons at Greenham threatened to annihilate the World, hence the interest of women as creators of future generations , and he was proud of Cora when she took part. At

about that time, he was intending giving up his job as an accountant to become a photographer that would enable him to take part in the cause - but decided it wasn't him.

Peter saw the connection between mothers and the potential annihilation of their children by the bomb, but did not feel that the Greenham demonstrations did the feminist movement much good. However, he did find the book fascinating and it helped him see feminism from a different point of view - attitudes have certainly changed over the years to feminism. Viv saw parallels with the black rights movement - he too was brought up to regard men as superior. On the general question of the female position, Deborah recalled that when she went to medical school, she was asked what would happen if she married whilst still doing her course. Although some women did less caring for the children than in the past, it was still true that the caring tasks were not shared equally.

Caroline said that she did not find the frequent references to the detailed taking of photographs very interesting or adding to the story. She had been to exhibitions of Susan Sonntag who was photographed when dead. Generally, she had found the book rather dull.

Viv thought the verbal description of Thatcher's photo confirmed what most people had thought of her at the time - "constipated headmistress" - something of light comedy. He got the feeling Vee was not a fan of her. Vee and Leonie represented different extremes of feminism - Leonie was not appealing, but shook things up. Trump was mentioned - Pauline thought she was better with words than him.

We thought whether feminism had run its course. Caroline thought it still had challenges, as in the recent cases involving J K Rowling. Deborah thought women were still criticised. They still adopted male attitudes but were expected to have everything "right" - contrast Johnson with hair all over the place.

We talked of the last photo of Leonie - Vee must have wanted it developed, though Judith found it strange it was developed after death.

At the end of the book, Erica and Marcus meet an old woman who asks the sex of their new child, and Marcus just says "baby" - we wondered if that was supposed to be significant, and that opened up a discussion on the extent to which boys and girls do instinctively adopt sex-specific preferences. - Deborah said that research shows they do, at least when they reach about 6. With the glorious exception of Caroline, most of us felt we had learned something from this book - but of course, we are all different!

OTHER READS: Neil - Philip Kerr "The One from the other" - entertaining and informative detective story; Simon Kerrick - "Stay Alive" - crime - good writer; Steve Cavanagh "Thirteen" - courtroom drama - very impressed by this writer and he has bought 4 more of his books. Jennifer - Kate Atkinson - "Big Sky" and "Case History". Debra Owen "Where the Crawdads sing", Anna Meir "Textiles". Judith - Margaret Graham "Practising wearing black"; Lee Child "Three", "Tripwire", "The Fourth man" and "Blue Moon" - impressive, but there were plot similarities between 1 and 4. Pauline "The Poisonwood Bible" - Barbara Kingsolver. Max Tegmark "Life 3.0" - fascinating. Judith had even found time for (real or virtual) trips round church buildings with her old Crewe pals. Viv - really liked Poisonwood Bible - also Steve Richards - reflections on Prime ministers from Wilson to May; Anna Cleeves "Wildfire". Caroline "The descent of man" - Grayson Perry. Brian - "The Plague" - Albert Camus - wish I had read the afterword first.

DONM: Wednesday 19th August 7.30pm by zoom. Book - the Poisonwood Bible - Kingsolver

Finally - many thanks to Viv and Richard for the zooming









