

CANTERBURY ROTARY BOOK CLUB

NOTES OF A VIRTUAL MEETING ZOOMED BY VIV WITH RICHARD'S CONTRIBUTION ON 19TH AUGUST 2020

1. APPEARANCES: Peter W, Jennifer, Judith, Deborah, Viv, Georges, Caroline, Alan, Brian. Brief guest appearances from Leo, the Siamese, and Richard, whose chair rotated slowly for some time after he had vacated it to see his daughter.
2. APOLOGIES: Margaret, Neil, Richard, Gill
3. BOOK: "The Poisonwood Bible" by Barbara Kingsolver. Written in about 1999, this novel opens in 1959 when Nathan Price, a Southern Baptist minister takes his wife Orleanna and daughters Rachel (16), Leah and Adah (hemiplegic from birth) both 14 and Ruth May (5) to a mission house in the village of Kilanga in the Belgian Congo. It was a time of unrest and change, with Belgium about to give up its colony, and the trip is against the advice of the Baptist administration. Advice on what to take seems to have been in short supply, and some of the many hilarious vignettes feature the completely inappropriate cake mixes, vegetable seeds and clothing that accompanies them - all items of the latter being worn on the journey in circumstances of great discomfort to save on excess baggage charges. The last part of the journey is accomplished in a small plane, piloted by the unscrupulous Afrikaner, Axelroot,

The story is told through the voices of the girls and their mother in a succession of short chapters. They paint a very vivid picture of the jungle, the village and its inhabitants. Nathan comes across as a zealot, obsessed with the Bible, violent to his family. His grasp of the kikongo language is incomplete, and what was intended by him to be "Jesus is most precious" at the end of each sermon is instead rendered as "Jesus is poisonwood" - a reference to a local tree which does pretty much what it says on the tin. The Revd Price's popularity with the villagers is not improved by his determination to baptise them in the river, which they resist out of concern that the crocodiles might join in the fun. The Congo becomes independent, with Patrice Lumumba being elected PM, the villagers voting by putting stones in a tin. Having got the hang of elections, they vote in the same way on the popularity of Jesus vs the local witch doctor, which the latter wins handsomely.

The situation in the Congo is deteriorating rapidly, with the defection of the mineral rich Katanga instigated by the Belgians and the CIA, but Nathan refuses to leave, even though the family has virtually nothing to eat. Lumumba is arrested, and eventually executed in a CIA plot. The crisis for the family comes when the witch doctor plants a green mamba snake, which fatally bites Ruth May. Orleanna then takes all the mosquito nets to form a shroud for her, and walks out with the girls, leaving Nathan. She and the remaining girls are eventually saved by the intervention of Anatole, the school teacher and Congolese patriot.

The later parts of the book see Orleanna back in the US, living alone, Adah, also in the States and a prominent virologist, "cured" of her hemiplegia but apparently preferring her previous state, Leah and Anatole married with 4 sons, living partly in the Congo, part in Angola, and part in the States. Anatole has spent periods in prison at the pleasure of the notorious Mobutu, who succeeded Lumumba. Rachel, after numerous matrimonial adventures, is the proprietor of a luxury hotel in the jungle, and clearly the great survivor. Almost at the end of the book, Adah speaks of her admiration for viruses and how the race between humans and their parasites becomes "exquisitely neck and neck".

We predicated a number of questions.

1. How credible was the book as a description of the life of a missionary at that time, and how effective was the writer in painting the lives of ordinary people in W Africa? Jennifer - Colin went to Tanzania in 1959 and she went in 1962. Colin did go on some kind of course first but some of his colleagues never did adapt to the conditions. Although Kingsolver had never been to Congo, her descriptions fitted her own recollections - the clothes they wore having so many holes in them you didn't know which were for heads and legs etc. All crops beds were raised up, just as she

described, and she recalled a potato growing 4 inches in an evening. Once when she got on a plane, one African lady was wearing 4 hats. There was lots of humour. Deborah thought it right in showing male chauvinism but sad he did not get to baptise Ruth May. Other people just did not conform to what he thought they should be. Judith thought it right in that the women did not have a say. Viv thought the previous missionary in the post was shown to be much better adapted to the task and locals - Nathan sexist and racist. We wondered if there was something in Nathan's upbringing that accounted for his attitudes - but perhaps it was down to his having been injured in WW2. Georges noted the abused women - white and black - could not get away - and that the way Nathan behaved (he dies when he is burned climbing a tower) was a 20 year suicide note. Viv as a 9 year old was in W Africa with his father (a mining engineer) in 1959 and it rang very true to him. He remembered the ants in huge 12ft high nests swarming across everything and how his family's beds had to be surrounded with kerosene to stop them - Georges said there was something like that in Indiana Jones. Judith pointed out that the Underwoods, who organised the missions on an area basis and arranged the pay etc had all the luxuries that this family did not. She mentioned that there was a kind of reverse mission in her local church in Crewe, where the priest in charge was a black Nigerian. Peter had not realised how big and powerful the green mamba is until he googled it. Alan was living at Tervuren outside Brussels at the time depicted where there was (and still is) a large museum commemorating the occupation of the Congo which "whitewashed" its brutal nature. This museum has since received a makeover with at least some of the atrocities being recognised. Peter and Georges were struck by the brutality and had not previously appreciated the involvement of the Americans, including plotting the death of Lumumba (which the book links with Eisenhower)

2. How effective was the technique of telling the story through the 5 female voices with short chapters? All agreed very good. Jennifer thought each of the voices brought her own take on what was happening. Georges thought it a very long novel, and towards the end that he must have reached the finish - but turning the page found he hadn't. He had noticed that with American authors - Europeans with a narrative point to make tend to be much shorter. Whilst that was a criticism of this book, he had enjoyed it. The book has been compared with "Little Women" - which also has 4 sisters of whom one dies, but there is one voice. He thought Adah the most interesting character, especially the way she spoke in palindromes, but did not feel her "cure" feasible or necessary for the story. However, this did lead us into a discussion about viruses. Peter said Bill Gates was clear about the viruses, but it was the politicians who muddled the message. Viv said we had had lots of warnings about pandemics when he worked for the local authority - but nothing much was done. Georges thought the solution was not a vaccine but very quick testing and tracing. Robert said what nearly killed him was sepsis and that the number of people really badly affected by coronavirus was minimal - with steroids and effective treatment

3. Was there enough character development? Peter - Rachel was an unpleasant character - Judith thought she was her father's daughter. Deborah thought Nathan was in a vulnerable state when he went to Africa - he had had a culture shock but Rachel was a great survivor. Anatole was interesting - why did he go back to Africa from living a safe life in Atlanta? Caroline said Atlanta would not have been so good for a black person - and anyway he was a patriot.

In all, we greatly enjoyed this book - 9/10

4. OTHER READS. Judith - The Power - Naomi Alderman; C P Irvine "Remember Me" parts 1 & 2; "The Dentist" - Tim Sullivan. Arts Society virtual lecture by Tim Sullivan "The Brief Story of Wine: ". Excellent U3A talk about Concord - and an interesting trip to Howletts. Viv - Barbara Kingsolver "Unsheltered"; Catherine Bailey "Black Diamonds"; Martin Cruz Smith "Havanna Bay" Brian Ann Patchett "The Dutch House", William Dalrymple "The Anarchy" - history of the East India Company and "the Davington Light Railway" - story of the metre gauge line constructed across Oare marshes to carry workers to the huge explosives industry there. Robert "Happy Valley" Nicholas Best - about Kenya

5. DONM: Wednesday 23rd September 7.30pm by Zoom. Book - "Three men in a boat" - Jerome K Jerome

Finally, many thanks to Viv and Richard for the Zoom

