

Notes of virtual book club meeting on 11th March 2021

1. PRESENT: Viv, Judith, Peter W, Jennifer, Leo, Diana, Caroline, Gill, Deborah, Georges, Pauline, Brian

2. APOLOGIES: Neil, Bidy, Richard, Margaret

3. BOOK: "Home Going" by Yaa Gyasi. The book begins in the Gold Coast, W Africa, in the 1760s. Effia has just been born in a Fante village to the chief, Cobbe Otcher, and, ostensibly, his first wife Baaba, on a wild night when fire sweeps the area. Baaba is cruel to Effia, and it eventually emerges that Effia is not her daughter but the child of Cobbe and a housegirl who has absconded. Effia grows into a beautiful young woman, promised to the handsome Abeeku Badu, but she attracts James Collins, a British Army officer in command of a coastal fort. Collins has a wife and children in England, but he wants a "wench" and marries Effia; Abeeku, who has other wives, withdrawing philosophically as he has trade with the British. Effia and James live in the castle.

The action shifts to the dungeon of the castle where 15-year-old Esi is being held prisoner with many other captives in foul conditions, all awaiting shipment as slaves across the Atlantic. Esi reflects on her previous life, and it emerges she is the daughter of an Asante warrior, "Big Man", and his third wife Maame. Big Man has many victories to his credit, and presumably enslaved others, but things go wrong for him in a battle and his daughter is carried off. Subsequently, it emerges that Maame was the house-girl who left Cobbe, and thus Effia and Esi are half-sisters, the only symbol of their relationship being identical stone ornaments which each have. Esi and other captives are piled on top of each other in the dungeon and she is repeatedly raped by a white soldier, eventually being taken off by boat to America, where she is slave labour on a cotton plantation and has a child, Ness, who is sold off as a child.

The book then falls into a pattern of short stories, each concerning successive descendants of Effia and Esi. Effia's descendants live in W Africa, through the independence of Ghana, until Yaw, a teacher, whose face was badly burned when he was a baby, very late in life goes to live in the USA - but we only know this through the story of his daughter, Marjorie. It is a characteristic of the book that descendants of whom we have not previously heard are abruptly introduced to complete or add to the tale of their parents - a potentially very confusing situation that is alleviated by a family tree to which we all had recourse. Marjorie finally meets Marcus, the descendant of Esi, and together they return to Ghana for a trip and the stones are compared.

Viv remarked that the book showed British military were directly involved in the slave trade - a castle such as the one in the story is still there. Peter thought the slaves were merely considered a commodity rather than humans and to Georges it was industrialisation of slavery but it was world wide - and in this country at the same time we were sending our own little children down mines. Viv pointed out that slavery had always existed - the Arabs were trading them long before us - but slavery was an inefficient use of labour. We thought about the slaves' children - they automatically belonged to the slave owner - in this book, Ness would do anything to let her son go free, and in "Beloved" by Toni Morrison a slave kills her own child rather than she suffer as a slave. He felt slavery still exists as in the E

European women traded as sex slaves, and Viv thought the thrust of the book was the prejudice against colour.

Caroline talked about the triangular trade - cotton from America to England, manufactured goods from England to Africa and slaves from Africa to America. Peter had read the book twice and felt it helped explain why black people feel as strongly as they do. Deborah and Gill were struck by the depiction of women - having babies when only 12/14 years old, treated badly yet still very strong characters. This also comes out particularly in the sections of the book set in C20 America where the men are weak creatures, going from woman to woman and into drugs, while the burden of the children is borne by women. Nonetheless, Deborah felt she saw some hope at the end of the book, as did Jennifer.

Jennifer told us that Colin had worked in Ghana in the 70s and on one occasion she and he were invited to have a drink with him and his wives and children in the bush. A gourd was passed around everyone and she found a little ?? scratching her arm to see if she was black underneath.

Caroline reminded us of how in probably C19 or 20, Ohene has promised Abena he will marry her as 2nd wife when his crops improve - but they fail for several years. The salvation for the crop is to grow cocoa - but to get cocoa seeds he has to promise to marry another woman instead.

The style of the book - Judith thought much was true to life. The writer was born in Ghana and now lives in US. Georges thought it a clever book that could have been the basis of a Phd thesis. Good that it almost began and ended with a big fire - the last by the sea. Some of it was hard to believe - for example when they had to carry water 10 miles from a stream - but someone pointed out that there would be crocodiles making living near to a stream risky (but what about a compromise?). Some of us felt it was over-ambitious to try making a single narrative stretching over 200 years, and that it might have been better as a series of short stories only loosely connected. We agreed with Viv though that it was very colourful in both a real and figurative way. Pauline wanted something a bit more cheery though.

Score - Gill and Jennifer 9/10 but although the rest thought it a good effort as a first book, 7 was more appropriate.

4. OTHER READS: Judith - "Night School" and "The Affair" - Lee Childs, "What does Jeremy think?" - non-fiction by Susan Hayward, widow of Jeremy Hayward, civil servant. Viv - "One Perfect Lie", Lisa Scottline; "The last drop of blood" Graham Masterton; "I know a secret" - Tess Gerriston - Viv describes this as a "grizzly thriller" - are there bears or did he mean grisly?; "Girl woman other" Bernadine Evison - no punctuation - Viv didn't expect to enjoy it but did very much. Brian - "The Architect's apprentice" Elif Shafak - the colour of the Arabian Nights - and have finished James Joyce, Ulysses

5. NEXT MEETING Monday 12th April 7.30pm by zoom - book Our Man in Havana - Graham Green

Many thanks to Viv for Zooming us through.