

NOTES OF A VIRTUAL MEETING OF CANTERBURY ROTARY BOOK CLUB

Held on 12th April, 2021

1. PRESENT: Georges, Deborah, Viv, Neil, Biddy, Judith, Caroline, Margret, Peter, Richard, Gill, Jennifer, Brian. Bartlett and Leo (observers)

2. APOLOGIES: Diana, Pauline

3. BOOK: "Our Man in Havana" - Graham Greene. Published in 1959, months before the Castro revolution, this book, classed as an entertainment by Greene, pokes fun at the British secret service when Wormold, a failing vacuum cleaner salesman, is recruited as an agent by the exquisitely clad Hawthorne, and begins inventing contacts and sub agents, whose existence is believed by the be-monocled "Chief" in London, where his drawing of the works of the "Atomic" vacuum cleaner is also accepted as being of a secret weapon. Wormold's wife has departed, leaving him to bring up Milly, a provocative 17 year old, who is fancied by Seguras, Captain of police who believes people agree to be tortured, and with whom Wormold plays checkers rather eerily - but Caroline pointed out that torturers would say that

Georges couldn't really say why but didn't like the book, but preferred the film (which Greene had in mind in writing) which starred Alec Guinness, but Peter thought the read hilarious - like a Brian Rix comedy with people who didn't exist floating in and out and loved the checkers played for scotch. Jennifer thought it amazing. Viv compared the style with 3 men in a Boat and mentioned Noel Coward played Hawthorne in the film.

Caroline, who worked for BT, where there was deep secrecy on technology, could believe that no one would speak out about the secret "weapon". Richard, former BT accountant, told of an engineer whose work was so secret no one knew what he did. Apparently the engineer claimed he was taken, blindfolded, to a pub in Yorkshire for briefing, and that he kept drawings of the equipment in the huge plans chest which accompanied him to meetings secured by a giant combination lock, like the safe Wormold installed in the vacuum cleaner shop. Like Wormold, the engineer claimed expenses on the basis of his stories, which no one was prepared to challenge, until the day he was escorted from the premises by "heavies" and the chest found to contain a few stale sandwiches. For Caroline, Wormold made a good spy as he was believed, Neil reminded us that all secret services "turn" agents from the other side.

Deborah said that Greene, who was bipolar had worked for the secret services. Viv spoke about a radio programme that day dealing with the Cuban missile crisis, and how, by mistake, a Russian nuclear sub had been about to fire its weapon in Cuban waters when, due to a mishap, its navigator got stuck in the conning tower hatch and, as a result saw a message from an American destroyer (which he would otherwise not have done) apologising for the action which had triggered the Russian action - and so a nuclear war was just avoided. Georges said how his reading of War & Peace showed war as a total shambles. Peter thought the Americans had been made to look foolish in the Bay of Pigs episode. Neil said that the Russians had used, but not subsidised, the Cubans

The book poses the question whether one should favour loyalty to friends over that to the country - some of us agreed that should be so, and Viv felt the organisation of armies into platoons was sensible since that would give loyalty to one's platoon mates. Richard said his father had leaned towards communism (though not so his mother) and that many of the upper classes were pro nazi.

Had Milly's mother left her to be brought up by Wormold like a cuckoo chick- or did she have real affection for him? Deborah thought she was fond of him - but ran rings round him & got what she wanted (a horse, in particular). Viv thought her a silly girl - but no more than that, though she did show firmness with the captain.

In the book much is made of sex and seediness in Cuba. Caroline visited it about 3 years ago and found although there was much poverty, Castro had closed the brothels and established a good health care service, with Cuban doctors serving in other countries too

How does Greene compare with Le Carre and the Smiley books? Georges thought them quite different - Le Carre all smoke and mirrors - you never know where you are Peter agreed and said Smiley had respect for his opponents

At one point Wormold attends the European Traders' Lunch, where he is to make a speech, but is terrified of being poisoned there. The scene where the only plate with carrots is rapidly passed from hand to hand and ends up back in the kitchen was compared by Judith and Jennifer to Fawlty Towers, but the denouement comes when Max, the head waiter's dachshund expires after lapping Wormold's spilled scotch. Some of us were sceptical that the dog would drink alcohol - but Gill assured us she had had a budgie that liked cider.

The old German, Dr Hasselbacher, is kindly and pathetic. For Judith and Jennifer it was unclear for whom he was working, but after appearing in his over-tight pre 1914 colonial helmet and gear, he succumbs to one of the "they" who turn out to be all too real. Beatrice has been sent out by the "Chief" in London to reinforce Wormold and Judith explained she was necessary to the plot to ensure that Wormold would be found out - but she turns out to be just as keen to take the taxpayers' money as he is - and the two eventually couple up. Georges explained how big sins are more rewarded than little ones - apparently he and his sister were at University at the same time: by the end of term, he had amassed an overdraft of £50, she one of £1,000. Both were called into the bank manager's office: she got a cup of tea and a chat: he a dressing down.

Margaret talked about the Chief and told us she had known a man who, like him, wore a monocle - and mentioned that, as so often happens, Wormold had been "rewarded" for his treachery by a job! It was a class thing, and some of us compared the eulogising of the Duke of Edinburgh. Viv had been shocked by the way the radio and TV programmes had been scrapped summarily when the Duke's death became known, and compared that with what might have happened in N Korea

All in all, a good read = say 8 - 9 /10

4. OTHER READS: Viv - "One Perfect Lie" - Lisa Scottline, "The Last Drop of Blood" - Graham Masterton; "I know a Secret" - Tess Gemiston - grisly but good; "Girl, Woman, Other" - very good. Deborah - "Lucky Jim" - Kingsley Amis - not keen; "Hamnet" - Maggie O'Farrell

- enjoyed and good read. Georges - "The Midnight Library" - recommended. Judith "Warlight", Michael Ondaatje, "Bonkers - my life in laughs" Jennifer Saunders; "Olive Kitteridge" Elizabeth Strout. Brian - "Our Mutual Friend" - Dickens - too much of it

5. DONM: Monday 24th May 7.30pm. BOOK - Hamnet - Maggie O'Farrell - available from Amazon, in paperback for £4.50

Many thanks to Viv for zooming us in