

## CANTERBURY ROTARY BOOK CLUB

### NOTES OF A VIRTUAL MEETING HELD ON 24TH MAY 2021

1. PRESENT: Margaret, Viv, Judith, Caroline, Gill, Deborah, Diana, Jennifer, Brian, Leo
2. APOLOGIES: Neil, Biddy, Peter W, Richard, Pauline, Bartlett
3. BOOK: "Hamnet" by Maggie O'Ferrall. A boy, who is never named, but variously referred to as the tutor.. the husband ..the father, whose own violent father is a glover, disgraced for some sharp practice, in a Warwickshire town identifiable as Stratford on Avon, as a teenager falls in love with the much older Agnes when he visits the home of her well-to-do farmer father to teach Latin to her younger half-siblings. She fascinates with her kestrel and combination of illiteracy with knowledge of the countryside lore and herbalism.

The way out of their dead-end existence involves setting things jingling in the potting shed, resulting in a shot gun wedding and twins - Hamnet and Judith - who, in the confusing way of things, appear, aged 11, before anyone else in the book. The father is always away pursuing his important career in London, the mother out collecting herbs, when the girl is struck down by what turns out to be the plague, and the frantic boy cannot find help. Full of self-guilt, the boy wills himself to take his sister's place and dies, while she survives, a sickly invalid. Father, who has made his fortune writing plays and installed his family in the best house in the town, returns too late to see the boy alive.

The death largely destroys the family relationship and the mother resorts to her occult powers in a vain attempt to conjure the voice of her dead son. She finally persuades her brother to ride with her to London and, in one of the most memorable and imaginative parts of the story, they make their way through the city to the father's deserted modest lodgings and thence to the theatre, where she stands, spellbound, through a performance of his latest play, Hamlet, and, through the ghost, hears the voice that has eluded her.

Viv's knowledge of Shakespeare came mostly from the TV series "Upstart Crow" by David Mitchell, which he found very funny., but the book was harrowing. Judith knew he married Anne Hathaway when she was pregnant, and that there was a real Danish prince Hamlet who died. Deborah reminded us we had to treat the book not as an historical account. Essentially it was a love story that twisted and turned and she loved it. It was not just a woman's book.

Judith admired Agnes for the determined way she led her life and thought her very feisty.. Lots of children died young in Tudor times; She did not know why Agnes kept referring to the cut over Hamnet's eye but it had nothing to do with his death. She reproached herself for neglecting him.

Jennifer found the story very sad. The changes of names from those associated with Shakespeare was confusing - the name William was never mentioned - but it was common (Hamnet and Hamlet apparently meant the same). For Deborah, Shakespeare was a shadowy figure, brought to life by what the people in Stratford said. The large amount of detail of herbal cures was very interesting. Both thought Agnes going alone into the woods for the birth of her children showed mystical beliefs. Judith thought it showed she wanted to be close to nature and compared "Where the Crawdads sing"

Gill found Agnes bizarre - her method of birthing not understood. It was a handfast wedding because Agnes wanted to get away from her stepmother.

Caroline liked the descriptions - interiors of the houses and household tasks. The story of how the plague was spread from a glassworks in Venice via a flea was imaginative. No proper roads or coaches then so they would have to ride. Viv thought the brother gave Agnes protection on the journey - he had status as landowner. We all thought Agnes must have been saddle sore and exhausted by the ride. Pauline had written in to say she thought Agnes had probably had a pony as a child hence her skill as a horsewoman as in the book she walks everywhere and there is no mention of riding.

Diana and Margaret liked the richness of the language used and descriptions , but Judith didn't care for the slaughter of the goose. The way the glover added accommodation to his house for the new family pleased Viv and Jennifer thought the author showed a lot of imagination.

The suggestion that this was a book written by a woman for women was not taken kindly and Viv felt the concepts of some books do appeal more to women than to men. When the girl was very ill but the boy dies showed a world apart - but Deborah felt this just shock. . It was true that twins were closer than other siblings and Judith said she knew of a case where a boy twin felt the pains of labour when his sister had a child.but

Peter had written saying he felt that in its detailed style, the book was more suitable for women. The dearth of Hamnet , his preparation for burial by his mother and aunt were particularly well done but on the whole he would have preferred either a truly historical novel or one that was more thought provoking

Was the attendance at the Globe for the performance of the Hamlet and hearing her dead son's voice in that a masterstroke or pure Hollywood? We didn't agree but gave it scores between 7 & 9.

4. OTHER READS: Judith - Vanessa Green - "The Seafront Tea Rooms"; Matt Haig " The Midnight Library"; Marian Keyes "Grown Ups"; Donna Leon - "The Waters of Eternal Youth". Biddy - "The Wych Elm" - Tana French - literary suspense/crime:"The Beach" - Alex Garland; "Black Narcissus" Rumer Godden; "The secret History" - Donna Tartt. Neil - "Free Fire - C J Box; "V2" - Robert Harris; "A Time for Mercy" - John Grisham; "We can see you" - Simon Kernick. . Brian " Midnight Library" ; "Emma" - Jane Austen - wip; Roosevelt's Secret War" - Joseph Persico

5 DONM; Monday 5th June 7.30pm AT JENNIFER'S HOUSE. Book - Matt Haig - The Midnight Library

AND FINALLY - many thanks to Viv for operating Zoom