

CANTERBURY ROTARY BOOK CLUB

NOTES OF THE FIRST REAL MEETING SINCE 15TH APRIL 2020! HELD AT THE HOME OF JENNIFER

1. PRESENT: Viv, Pauline, Judith, Diana, Caroline, Margaret, Peter W, Biddy, Neil, Jennifer, Brian.

2. APOLOGIES: Richard, Gill, Georges, Deborah, Tony

3. BOOK: "The life and times of the Thunderbolt Kid" by Bill Bryson. This is an autobiographical account of the writer's childhood in Des Moines, Iowa, where he was born in the early 1950s, and we used some of his experiences to stimulate memories of our own childhood.

- a) Bryson gives the impression he had lots of freedom to roam. Judith said that from about the age of 7 she was able to go out with her friends. The roads were quiet of traffic and she recalled a skipping rope right across the street. Jennifer cycled to Chestfield with a friend. Diana lived at Aynesford and played in the grounds of Lullingstone castle- they found bits of old pottery and where they played was later found to be a Roman site. Margaret grew up in Durham which was not bombed - she believed because a German officer knew how magnificent the cathedral was. Her father "indulged" her wandering to play - she recalled "Swallows and Amazons" round a little river - but not her mother. Pauline recalled listening to Uncle Mac on the wireless and went out with her brother collecting shrapnel after raids- but her grandchildren were taken round in cars. Viv had liberty without supervision, but didn't really wander that far. He spoke Welsh exclusively until he was 9. Neil grew up near Maidstone and played round a lock - but his children were taught not to go roaming. Biddy remembered being worried about traffic and murders. Caroline grew up in Oldham and played in big municipal parks and went to libraries. For Peter, kids had to find their own way - parents had no time. He grew up in a New Town where there was more community. Jennifer said how she had appreciated the recent clapping for NHS and VE celebrations as the result of which she had got to know more people in her street.
- b) We compared the position for children and grandchildren. Pauline thought them over-protected - her great-grandchildren do all sorts of things but are taken around in a car. Diana's daughter had said how much her children were glued to computers.
- c) Bryson talks about the plethora of American household appliances. Pauline spoke of her first washing machine - a Hoover - which always flooded the kitchen and Peter spoke of his parents' Bendix which had to be bolted to the floor (as was my mother's). Judith's mother's washing machine problems were such she was always in a bad temper on washing days - Judith keeping out of the way! Viv recalled feeling no envy for American goods, but recalled his father walking round the house with the TV aerial, trying to get a picture, and several recalled the "snowflakes" on the screen of early sets. Diana's father kept bees during the war and only after a few encounters was it discovered he was allergic to them. Unlike the American scene, several of us remembered queuing up with coupons.
- d) The book has a good deal about the atomic bomb - the various tests and exposures to it - and about the fear of communism. Jennifer, a pupil at the Langton in the 50s recalled a man coming to talk about taking shelter. Neil thought that until the 60s, people generally trusted governments and thereby understood Bryson's calmness on these subjects. Judith thought the Press had been much more deferential in her young days- until Walter Cronkite stated categorically that the war in Vietnam was not going to be won by the Americans. Polio was another fear - Caroline recalled people keeping children in and Judith recalled people whose children were in hospital with polio climbing ladders in order to speak to them through the windows. Peter caught TB through London housing and was hospitalised for a very long time. He recalled being tied to a hospital bed to stop him from escaping. He lost a lot of education as a result of this. Caroline said the present fear was not communism but terrorism. Margaret pointed out that communism still existed in China (and N Korea) - she had visited China about 10 years ago however, and had found people friendly and interested in this country.
- e) Very little is said in the book about black people. Neil thought that probably due to the fact that the black population of Iowa is very low, although apparently Des Moines now has about 25% black. Peter and Biddy were struck by how few black faces they found in Kent when they first came here from London and Birmingham respectively. There was only one black person at Judith's school and Pauline saw none in hers. Biddy remarked what a bad time black youths are having in London and contrasted her experience of a lot of black professionals in

America. Viv agreed that in this country we do have a problem with race and thought it was because we do not expect to see them. Biddy mentioned an incident in Plymouth when 2 white men stood up and left a bar rather than sit down with a black woman

Generally this book was enjoyed and made us laugh, although Bryson would have been too young to have remembered at first hand some of the incidents he describes as within his experience and therefore is relying on others. We gave it 7 - 8 out of 10.

4. OTHER READS: Judith - C J Box "Shots Fired" - short stories, Leslie C Chang - Factory Girls, Jo Nesbo - Cockroches, , Evan Connell - Mr Bridge and Mrs Bridge (we have read these - excellent), Adichie - Americanah (also one of our reads and very good), Andy McNab - Firewall. Judith also suggested Clare Chambers - Small Pleasures.. Viv - Ali Smith "autumn" -, couldn't get on with it (I read it too - parson's egg), Jo Nesbo - Head Hunters, Pat Barker - Toby's Room, Caroline "History of China" - Michael Wood, Margaret "Thursday Murder Club" - Richard Osman - she liked this very much. `` Georges "The Silence of the girls" - Pat Barker - The Iliad from a woman's point of view (it sounds like The Penelopiad by Margaret Atwood), "the Road home" - Rose Tremain, "The Chimney Sweeper's Boy" Margaret Vine - intriguing but too many words. , Deborah "V2" Robert Harris, Neil - "Archive 17" - Sam Eastland, "The Strange Death of Europe" - Douglas Murray, "The Liar" Steve Cavanagh, "Below Zero" - C J Box, "City of Ghosts" - Ben Creed, "Burning Bright" Nick Petrie, Brian "The Old Man and the Sea" - Hemmingway, Austen "Emma", "Autumn" Diana "A Hole in my Bucket" Roy Tolkien, Biddy Shuggie Bain Douglas Stuart Jennifer 6 Peter May books about a detective in France

DONM: Monday 13th September 7.30 chez Jennifer. Book "My Brilliant Friend" - Elena Ferrante

AND FINALLY it was a huge pleasure to be back together at 1 Harkness Drive - and many thanks to Jennifer for her kind hospitality