

## CANTERBURY ROTARY BOOK CLUB

Notes of a meeting held chez Jennifer on 4th November 2021

1. PRESENT: Neil and Bidie, Viv, Judith, Jennifer, Deborah, Gill, Peter, Brian
2. APOLOGIES: Diana, Caroline, Georges, Pauline
3. BOOK: "The spaces in between" by Rory Stewart. Stewart, born in 1973, has had a very varied career, starting as a soldier in the Black watch for a year or so and then joining the diplomatic service., which he left to undertake a 2 year walk across Iran, Pakistan, India Nepal and Afghanistan. The Afghan part of the journey was delayed until the Taliban were pushed out by the coalition, but in the winter of 2002 he set off intending to walk alone 600km from Herat to Kabul, largely following in the footsteps of Babur, who became the first Mughal emperor of India. The book is an account of Stewart's journey across a very hostile environment, sparsely inhabited by various tribes, often with no common language, whose poverty in many places had been reduced to abject by the brutality of the Taliban, interleaved with some of Babur's experiences 600 years before. One of the tribes Stewart encountered was the Hazara of whom there are apparently over 3m, who had suffered particularly badly from slaughter by Taliban, who then torched whole villages.

Quite early in the journey, someone gives Stewart a huge mastiff type dog whose ears and tail have been cut off to make him a more effective fighter. Confusingly, Stewart names him Babur, and they complete most of the journey together. Something of a bond is formed, and arrangements made for Babur to accompany Stewart to Scotland, but the dog succumbs to an ill advised but well meaning meal of lamb chops.

The climate, weather, terrain, poverty, illiteracy ignorance, casual violence and complete lack of trust coupled with the here today and gone tomorrow attitude of most of the western "experts" make for a gripping read - and appreciation of the hopelessness of trying to convert the country into even a half failed state.

Judith thought the dog the most interesting character and Deborah that the concentration on him an English thing; she has an old university friend who met Stewart on an aeroplane and got to know this curious character who, after Afghanistan, became a politician, was in government (and put up to be PM) and now is an academic, teaching at Harvard, and living in Jordan. Indeed, he has now bred successfully in captivity.

We noticed the book mentions no women by name - indeed, apart from a few brief mentions when they bring in food etc, they are not mentioned at all. Viv mentioned that when in Brussels at an Islamic event, women were not seen. Peter thought the women might be seen as a threat to male dominance. Neil asked us to compare UK before WW1 when there were few chances for women and Deborah said that expectations were low for women in Sittingbourne in her time! Bidie thought women had little chance of influencing men. Neil was reading a book about the Russian occupation of Afghanistan when their troops were tortured by Afghans, but Viv reminded us that during the Dark ages in Europe, learning was kept alive by the Arabs. Deborah thought the emancipation of women was linked to poverty.

We talked about the origin of Taliban, and Neil said it was created by the CIA to attack the Russians, the problem being interference in the affairs of other countries by the Americans (and British). Bidie linked problems in Afghanistan with the penchant for drugs by Western upper classes. We agreed the book made us better informed about Afghanistan, though Neil thought the west would now largely ignore it. Viv thought it difficult to foresee what the country might be like in 50 years. Should the west send in food aid to the Taliban? - we thought so, on a non-political basis. Viv reminded us that the Taliban were allowing polio vaccination now - in contrast to what happened following the death of Osama Bin Laden, when doctors were killed because

they were suspected of betraying his whereabouts to the US.No scores, but book generally enjoyed.

#### 4. OTHER READS:

Neil - Trafalgar - how sailors lived (is this the eyewitness account by Robert hope recently discovered by the Nat Maritime museum?) and Joseph Finder - "The Switch" - a thriller about a man who ends up with the wrong laptop. Jennifer - Victoria Hislop - "Those who are loved" - sequel to "The Island" . Bidie "Us" by David Nichol about a man's wife who leaves him. Viv Annabel Venning "To War with the walkers" about how a middle class family was affected by WW2— also Reginald Hill "A lms and the woman " - really well written and "Why the Germans do it better" - John Kampfner - a very interesting book and easy to read. Judith - Andy McNab - "Firewall". William Boyd "Any Human Heart" (I think we have read this), Jenny Holmes "The Air Raid Girls" , Ulrich alexander Boschwitz- "The Messenger" , David lodge "Small world" , , Anne Youngson "Meet me at the museum", Rose Tremain - Merivel, Kazuo Ishiguuro "When we were orphans" , Sebastian Barry " A nnie Dunne" , Dinah Jefferies " The Planter' wife" Brian "Why the germans do it better", , Sayeed Ali "In a place far from home " - non fiction - in 1928 a Bengali sets out for Kabul by train to go to a teaching job - part hilarious, part as horrific as Stewart as there is a revolt against the Afghani king who wanted to westernise, Virgil - The Aeneid wip

5.DONM: We agreed Monday 10th January at 2.0pm BUT since then we have been told Roger Clarke's memorial service is to be held at 2.30pm the same day, andi imagine some members will want to attend that.How would you fancy , say Monday 3rd or wed 5th jan at the same time of 2.0pm?. Book - Hiislop The Island