

CANTERBURY ROTARY BOOK CLUB

Notes of a meeting held chez Jennifer on 17th February 2022

1. PRESENT: Jennifer, Judith, Peter, Rosemary, Gill,, Deborah , Brian.
2. APOLOGIES: Neil, Biddy, Georges, Margaret, Caroline, Pauline, Tony , Diana
3. BOOK: "Zorba the Greek" by Nikos Kazantzakis. It is not long after dawn in Piraeus in a little seamen's cafe, smelling of sage and human beings, raining , with condensation sliding down the window. It is probably in the early 1920s and the unnamed narrator has just seen his dear friend depart to help repatriate Greeks, and is now travelling himself to start operating a lignite mining concession in Crete. He becomes aware of a very tall lean stranger looking at him who asks if he is taking him with him - and, asked why he should ,says he is a very good cook who makes soups the narrator has never heard of - and so we are introduced to Zorba, who tells him he does all kinds of work, and last worked in a mine.

Together they travel to a small coastal Cretan village and decide to stay in the "hotel" of Madam Hortense - a "sort of blonde and glistening walrus" who, in her young days, had been in cabaret in Paris, the toast of admirals with 'scented beards," who now waddled a long on her bandy legs , plastered with powder, and whose "rolling buttocks" mesmerise Zorba. Her hotel consisted of a row of old bathing huts, joined together, the first being a shop , then 4 more as dormitories, behind wash house , hen house and rabbit hutches , the whole place surrounded by bamboo and prickly pears "planted in the fine sand" , the whole place smelling of "the sea, excrement and urine" but, from time to time M Hortense passed by and "the air changed its odour...as if someone had emptied a hairdresser's bowl under your nose" An austere countryside of granite and very hard limestone ..dark carob and silvery olive trees, figs and vines, orange groves , lemon and medlar trees near the shore ..' life appeared all at once like a fairy tale or the opening scene of the Tempest.. "

"The boss" as the narrator is always referred to by Zorba spends his time writing about Buddhism while Zorba organises the miners , eventually returning to the hotel where he does the cooking for both of them. At first things go quite well, but then a gallery collapses , luckily without personal injury, but bringing the mining to a halt. Zorba has been conducting an affair with Dame Hortense, whom he calls Bouboulina. It is decided to extract timber from the woods in the hills above the mine , transporting them to the coast by an overhead ropeway, and Zorba departs to the big town of Cania to buy the necessary equipment for the ropeway with cash from the Boss. Unfortunately his eye is diverted by a nubile young woman he meets there, and on whom the money is spent. The Boss meanwhile re-assures M Hortense that Zorba is buying items for their marriage - even pretending a letter he has received from Zorba contains protestations of love! Eventually Zorba does return with the equipment which is erected in accordance with a plan supposedly revealed to Zorba by the Virgin Mary in a dream - shades of similar interventions by the Gods in the Odyssey?. The Boss and Zorba visit a monastery high in the mountains to negotiate the concession for the timber and, whilst there, there is a shot causing a commotion in which the pathetic abbot seeks refuge in their cell, revealing his whole life to have been spent trying to find the answers to 3 nonsensical questions and collecting epigrams, while the monastery is set on fire by a renegade monk whose inner being likes all the perils of the flesh denied to his outer self.

All this enables Zorba to regain money to the equivalent of that squandered by him on the girl - presumably by blackmail - and the ropeway is set to work before a gathering of monks , workmen villagers and local worthies, a feast of roast lamb being laid on for all concerned. There is an hilarious scene when large trees are sent down the ropeway, joy at the achievement and prospect of feasting turning to alarm and flight when the whole thing goes wrong and collapses.

Meanwhile the Boss, who we suspect of homosexual tendencies, has succumbed to the attractions of a widow ,who is vilified by the villagers and eventually killed because a local youth has drowned himself over his unrequited affection for her. Zorba tries to save her but unsuccessfully. M Hortense becomes ill and dies in a long scene in which the villagers gather

about her hotel , taking her possessions and feasting on her chickens before she is dead, the professional mourners starting their dirge whilst she is still alive.

The Boss and Zorba part - Zorba for further adventures recorded in letters , the Boss to write the story of Zorba.

We thought from the references to leading Greeks back to Greece that the book was set at the time of the forced repatriation of Greeks and Turks just after WW1, Rosemary thought the book was really about Zorba's soul - a simple man with straightforward views . Jennifer thought it too clever by half and she didn't like his view towards women. Judith thought all the men had the same attitude towards women. Zorba had a quite profound philosophy- better in that respect than the narrator. Peter thought it odd that at one point Zorba and the narrator cuddle up on the beach , but we didn't feel that indicated anything homosexual - the Greek men generally seemed to have a more physical relationship than we are accustomed to - witness the dancing with men- and relationships anyway seemed to be man/man . Judith thought Zorba was shown as a very kind person. Deborah said the narrator realised Zorba had got more out of life than he had. Zorba kept doing things even when they didn't work - witness the attempts to build the gallery in the mine and carrying on sending the logs down the ropeway even when it was collapsing - her own father was rather like that . Peter had found some of it hard going with various obscure items - Deborah sought the connection between soul, sea, cloud and perfume. None of us understood where Buddha came in - Rosemary thought the author just had to give the narrator something to do and Peter that the author was the narrator.

We discussed religion - some of the nastiest characters were in the monastery and Zorba had little time for religion - compare the Greek orthodox with recent shenanigans in the Roman Catholic church. Gill compared Zorba's chasing women with men on a building site (which one, Gill?). None of us could work out exactly how Zorba came by the money to replace what he had spent. We talked about M Hortense's death scene; Judith was repelled by the way people behaved by taking her things etc while she was still alive - but in our culture too this happened I am sure we have read of something similar in one of the C19 authors -? Middlemarch. Judith was surprised Zorba concealed his tears for Hortense from women but not men - but Gill and Deborah thought this part of the societal differences - men were the principals, women effectively commodities - we compared their status with the Afghan women today

What did we get out of the book ? A very lively discussion - Peter found it philosophical; Rosemary was taken back to the 1960s, when she had been to Zorba dances and parties in London . We were intrigued by his santuri - apparently like a dulcima with bells though we had not seen one. Neil , with cold. had written to say the boo was not really for him and Biddy with a style a bit tired and dated but the descriptions of the characters and Crete. were good - and made them want to go on holiday there

4. OTHER READS: Judith - Merle Nygate " The Righteous Spy", Nick Petrie " Burning Bright" , Bernadine Evaristo " Girl, Woman, Other", Faith Hogan " The Ladies ' Midnight swimming Club", Lesley Pearce " Liar", Emma Batten " The Impossible dead" , Nancy revell " The Shipyard Girls" , Rachel Hope " A Beautiful Spy". Neil; Ben Coes " Coup d'Etat" by an ex US Presidential script writer; Tim Marshall " The Power of Geography " - importance of geographical position, C J Box - now a favourite author of Neil - " The disappeared". . Brian " Mrs Dalloway" - Virginia Woolf.

5. THINGS DONE: Rosemary - Peru Exhibition at the British Museum; Jennifer - exhibition of Dame Laura Knight paintings at Milton Keynes art gallery; Judith - " Private Lives" with Nigel Havers at The Marlowe - very good. Gill and Deborah (separately) Nutcracker at the Marlowe and Gill and Brian had seen separately "Belfast"; Brian and Caroline - free art exhibitions have resumed at 2 Temple Place - this year clay pottery, mostly African and Caribbean art and culture including many photos at Tate Britain; Peter "The Boy"

6. COMING UP: Marlowe - 1 & 2 March - Acosta Danza - Cuban

7. DONM: Thursday 31st March 7.30pm chez Jennifer - book "Pastoral England " by James Rebanks - recommended by Georges, who said it made him cry. Jennifer announced she had

just sold her house to someone with a Silver Cross pram !- so next time may be the last there and many thanks for all the times we have had with our benign hostess