

CANTERBURY ROTARY BOOK CLUB

Notes of meeting held on 6th October 2022 chez Pauline

1. PRESENT: Neil, Biddy, Viv, Chris, Peter W, Sue, Pauline, Brian

2. APOLOGIES: Georges, Judith, Deborah, Caroline, Gill,

3. BOOK: "The Island of Missing trees" by Elif Hafak. Viv led us through this ingeniously related tale which is based on the violent racial disturbances between Greeks and Turks on the island of Cyprus at the end of British rule. Hafak makes something of a speciality of dramatising real historical events, and it is perhaps helpful to remind ourselves of those as they affected Cyprus. For many years, the island was part of the Ottoman empire, but in 1878, the UK was granted a protectorate by Turkey. The Greeks hoped the British would help them reunite the island with Greece itself, as they had done with the Ionian Islands, but that did not happen - in fact the British ruled without any representations from the islanders, and imposed heavy taxes. In 1914, the Turks sided with the Germans and Cyprus was annexed into the British Empire under military occupation until 1925, when it became a Crown colony, Britain imposing repressive measures. The Greeks started a movement for union with Greece in the 1930s (enosis) which did not meet any official encouragement and the Greeks burned down Government House.

At the outbreak of WW2 some of the repression of the island was relaxed and Cypriots joined the Allied forces. Attempts were then made by Britain after WW2 to introduce a constitutional form of government but without union and without success.

In 1952, Greece and Turkey joined NATO, Greece began supporting the demand for unity and the movement for enosis became led by Archbishop Makarios. Defeat in the Suez campaign meant that Cyprus became the HQ in the Middle East for the UK. International pressure on UK had no effect and that led to a campaign of violence against the UK organised by EOKA, led by Col Grivas. This morphed into violence between the communities. Eventually, in 1960 the island was granted independence from the UK with both communities being recognised and Britain guaranteeing the settlement but being entitled to retain bases on the island. Even that did not resolve things, and following a Turkish invasion in 1974, Greeks fled the North of the island and Turks the south. The government of the South is now under the control of the internationally recognised Government of (nominally) the whole of Cyprus, and of the North the unrecognised Government of Northern Cyprus, which was declared by the Turks. There is a buffer zone between.

Against that background Defne, a young Turkish girl, has fallen in love with Kostas, a young Greek (both still at school) and they meet furtively, mostly at The Happy Fig, a taverna in what became the buffer zone area, where Kostas works part time. The taverna is run by 2 homosexual men, one Greek and the other Turkish, who quietly encourage the romance, and at its centre is a fig tree, which, surprisingly, becomes the narrator for part of the story. When things become too dangerous, Kostas's parents send him away to his uncle in London. He writes to Defne, but she never replies.

Years later, Kostas, who has become a botanist, returns and finds Defne, who has become an archaeologist, specialising in researching atrocities from the troubles. Defne has given birth to their child, which has died. They go to live in London, Kostas growing a new fig tree from a cutting taken from the old one (which was dying) in his North London back garden, burying the whole thing in winter. The new tree takes over as narrator. Kostas and Defne have another child - Ada. Defne dies, and her sister turns up in London and helps resolve the problems which Ada, now a 16 year old, is having, and via her occult powers solves the mystery of the 2 proprietors of the Happy Fig and whose bodies turn out to be those thrown down a well at the outset of the story.

Though set down more or less chronologically here, the tale is actually told starting from a screaming fit suffered by Ada at her London school and we go through the trauma suffered by parents and children whose actions go viral on social media

We talked of the odd way the book takes us back and forwards in time and Sue found it quite hard to do this and hold on to the story. She'd wanted to bring a fig leaf to restore a bit of reality (I thought Aphrodite also did that) Chris thought the whole book was a kind of metaphor to enrich the plot and Viv thought the business of burying the tree was a fill in. For him the tree took the part of the chorus in classic Greek drama. Sadly the tree didn't do anything for Biddy while Peter thought it was like a ghost. We couldn't decide if you could really bury a tree to protect it from the cold but according to Viv, U Tube says you can.

Neil asked himself what had happened in the first 100 pages or so - not much, but the author had made it different by putting the tree in. Chris found this a book for creative writers and quite poetic but Biddy thought it too contrived and clever by half - it will go down well in America. Sue was quite enchanted by it and stuck to it for a couple of days - having read it all in that time Peter thought the tree and the switching times a literary device - a book for children and Viv thought it would make a good A level subject. The concept of memory being "inherited" by different generations interested Chris and Viv - do the painted lady butterflies (and Monarchs) possess this - their migrations are completed by different generations from those who started

Viv was interested that Ada was brought up shielded from knowledge about Cyprus. Sue reminded us that Ada was actually the second child of Kostas and Defne, the first having died of malaria caused by a sick mosquito

Neil reminded us that Greeks and Turks have fought each other for 100s of years - sectarian conflicts divided Nicosia. The author had spoken in Canterbury Waterstones and was very good speaker. The author's "Architect's apprentice" about an elephant given to Suleiman the magnificent is like this book in taking real historical events. Sue liked Merryem, the sister who came with Turkish proverbs - especially the one about the man with his beard on fire. Neil thought 10 minutes and 38 seconds a strange word about a murdered prostitute - and so would I if I could remember what that was. Peter thought it sad we had not learned to avoid wars. Viv thought the book brought out well the problems of social media. Ada was bullied at school as she was seen and half muslim, half christian. Viv found it surprising that the other pupils were nice to her - Chris felt that was because she was then perceived as being from the outside. Chris's own daughter (who is half Japanese) was picked on at school because of her eyes. His grandmother's brother was killed in WW1 and for that for her the only good German was a de

Viv thought the author had given a good understanding of what Ada and Merryem thought but not Kostas - it was not clear why he acted as he did

Neil thought the book worth 7/8, Pauline might read it, having heard about it, Peter thought the ending a bit childish - but we all liked the cover. We gave some thought to other books in which trees have personalities - the "Day of the Triffids" by John Wyndham - and The Ents in the Ring series come to mind

4. OTHER READS: Viv The Kaiser - Steve Berry ; Me - Anna Karenina - Tolstoy and J B Priestley "English Journey. Chris - Isaac Adam " Foundation of earth" - psycho history but the TV series is better.,

Biddy - "American Dirt" - Jannine Cummings - great book about people coming from Mexico. - ghost stories "Gothic Stories" Neil "The Island" - Ben Voes; USS Indianapolis - true story of the ship that transported the first atomic bomb that was later torpedoed and sunk in shark infested waters; "Bitterwash Road" - Gary Disher, "The Mirror and the Light" - Hilary Mantel. Pauline - Richard Cole " Murder before Evensong" - very good vocabulary but she does not always get the jokes easy reading also "American Dirt" . She also went to see "Mrs Harris went to Paris" - she enjoyed it but it's not a man's film and has been to see Les Misérables. Peter - nothing extra read but he had been to The Brick Lane Theatre - an old building run by the Water Rats - old style music hall

5. NEWS: Our friend Jennifer McKone has moved into 87, Edgewood Drive, Poole Dorset BH14 8EU phone 01202039782

6. DONM: Friday 25th November 2,15pm chez Pauline. Book "American Dirt" - Jannine Cummings