

CANTERBURY ROTARY BOOK CLUB

Notes of a meeting held on 25th November 2022 chez Pauline

1 PRESENT: Neil, Biddy, Judith, Peter, Viv, Chris, Brian Pauline (briefly)

2. APOLOGIES: Georges, Caroline, Gill, Viv, Rosemary, Sue

3. BOOK: "American Dirt" by Jeanine Cummings. The story begins with the massacre of some 16 people almost a whole family while they are enjoying a party in the garden of Lydia's mother in a suburb of Acapulco, Mexico. At the time of the murders, Lydia and her son, 8 year old Luca, are in the shower room as he had needed the toilet, leaving everyone else, including Sebastian, Lydia's husband, to be gunned down. It soon emerges that Sebastian is a reporter who has written an article about a drug cartel - Los Jardieros - who terrorise the area. It emerges too that the leader of the gang - Javier - has befriended Lydia by calling in regularly to her bookshop. She knows of his criminal activity, but thinks their friendship will keep the family safe.

Lydia realises she and Luca must get away at once - she is offered help by the police, but most of them are in the pay of the cartel. After a terrified night in an hotel, the two try public transport but soon realise that is too dangerous. In the course of their journey, Luca, apparently for the first time, displays an encyclopaedic knowledge of Mexican geography with detailed facts and figures on places on their route - rather in the manner of Dustin Hoffman's autistic man in "The Rainman". They meet decent people who help - and others who are rogues - but mostly there's no one to trust. They try a long-distance bus, but soon discover that it is too dangerous - there are roadblocks manned by the gangs stopping buses going into Mexico City so they have to walk. After getting shelter from a doctor friend (at great risk to him and his family) Lydia realises they are going to have to try jumping onto moving freight trains - "La Bestia" - like thousands of real migrants from other parts of Latin America. While they are weighing up the best way of doing that, they meet 2 beautiful young sisters - Soledad and Rebecca who have evolved their own system of boarding the trains, and eventually the 4 start travelling together.

After a series of horrific train rides, including one where all are forcibly removed from a train by men in policemen's clothes who may well in fact be part of a cartel, and who rob them they are shepherded across the border by a "coyote, acting for a fee. The party has for some time included a young man - Alfonso - who carries the tattoo of the Jardieros on his neck, but who claims he has finished with them. During the crossing of a desert in the US, he tries to rape Rebecca but is shot dead by Soledad. We had previously learned from Alfonso that Javier's assault on Lydia's family was prompted by the suicide of his only daughter, a pupil at an exclusive Swiss school, her fatal act apparently triggered by learning of her father's true metier from Sebastian's article about him, which she has seen on social media. After Alfonso's death, Lydia finds his mobile and uses it to call Javier from the desert. She uses the phone to show Javier that the stooge he had used to track Lydia and Luca is dead. Javier protests that he would never have hurt her, and Lydia throws the phone into the air, causing it to land in the loose desert soil - hence the book's title, "American Dirt". The story ends with Lydia, Luca and the girls living a precarious life in the Arizona countryside, with the suggestion they may be able to regularise their position there.

Did the author ease up enough on the horror to make the tale credible? Biddy thought the story hung together and was credible and was sympathetic to the migrants. Neil produced figures for the numbers of violent deaths in S America and spoke of the part really played by the US in creating the market for drugs and closing its borders. and spoke of the shock of the massacre at the outset. The book was naive in only giving the migrants' case. Chris thought the intention was to play to the N ~American market and that the author's purpose was to, make a lot. of money. Judith pointed out the publishers had accepted the book. She liked the way the novel went forwards and backwards in telling the story. Peter thought the intention had been to highlight unfairness. Judith felt US Americans have access only to the gated area at the border and no idea what happened elsewhere than at the walled area.

Chris had found the highlights on Kindle and thought the author got the effect of the cartel wrong. Had the book affected our view of the effectiveness of Trump's wall? - Judith thought a ban on drugs more effective. Neil talked of the reliance of the US on Mexican servants - there were 16m Mexican immigrants in the US. Chris felt there was a need for novels like this to expose the self-satisfaction of the Americans. and Neil that the book shows there is crime everywhere

What of the mixture of poet and killer in Javier? For Chris the book was a feminist fantasy. Biddy loves books by male strongmen. For Neil it was a reflection of a true situation, and he said there had been 60 murders of lawmen in the last 12 months in Mexico. He also compared top Nazis in Germany who were sometimes also art and music lovers and the same applies to Javier - psychopath and poetry lover. Judith thought the poetry part of Javier's wish for another life and Peter pointed out it was Javier's ability to write poetry that attracted Lydia to him

Is Luca believable? Judith did not think him introduced very well, but Biddy thought that rather than an autistic, he just had a photographic memory, which made his situation compatible with the practical advice he gave.

Neil felt that the US was` destroying Mexico by the low price it was prepared to pay for goods, encouraging crime and the book reinforced his view
Judith said reviews of this book changed as more S American authors published similar themed books

Peter was able to find a hopeful sign in that the migrants eventually got through (well, some of them)

Scores - Chris didn't like it 3/10 and I agree but Biddy fell asleep listening to it - 8/10, Judith - 4/5 is there a difference - Neil 8/10. I think we all agreed it a page turner

4 OTHER READS:

Chris "Before the coffee gets cold" - - Penguin short stories by Japanese Kawaguchi Neil "White Gold" by Milton Giles about Barbary Pirates, , Flight or Fright - Stephen King - science fiction, "No Plan B" - Lee Child, and an interesting biography of James Hunt.
Biddy "A Town like Alice" - Neville Shute she praises him as a great writer; - and also by him, "No Highway" - never boring and "Pied Piper" - an elderly man chaperones a group of children to England at the start of WW2. Also "Pagan Britain" by Ronald Hutton- archaeology, history and folklore and a non-fiction book about paganism in ancient Britain but she does not say who wrote it
Judith - Dick Francis - "Under Orders"; Lucinda Riley The Moon Sister", "The Sun Sister" and "The Missing Sister" phew !, Plokyh Serhii "The Lost Empire - the final days of the Soviet Union"; Graham Swift "Mothering Sunday"; and Wolteeland? ; Patrick McGuiness - "Throw me to the wolves"; Matt Haig - "?The Humans"; Bella Mackie "How to kill your family"; Claire Douglas "The couple at No 9"; Jonas Jonasson- "The Girl who served the king of Sweden"; Eric Ambler "Uncommon Danger"; Jane Gardam "Last Friends" me "Anna Karenina" Tolstoy , Tristram Hunt - Biography of Josiah Wedgwood-; Peter - S King "The Shawshank rebellion" - . Peter has also been helping someone get back from Germany

5. DONM: Thursday 19th January 2.15pm chez Pauline; book - "A Cast of Hawks" by Richard Frankland

and finally, a big thank you to our hostess Pauline who had to attend a funeral but allowed us to use her house nonetheless