**RAB2 ‘Recommend a book e-mail project’ – Issue 1 - August 2019 edited Tony and Barbara Holden** **thbhholden@gmail.com** **[in A/Z order of first name of author]**

**Introduction to this issue and the next –** Well here we go. We hope you enjoy Issue 1 [summer reading]. We will ask for recommendations by the end of November for Issue 2 [ideas for Christmas!]. Meanwhile if you know anyone who would like to join the group please email us.

**This project -** is all about ‘recommending’ books. We need ‘author, title, publishing date’ and why you want others to read this book! Given the sheer impossibility of reading a tiny fraction of all that is published it’s what ‘grabs you’ [how you exercise ‘discernment’] that’s of value to other people. We’ve added a few links if you wish to plunge into the sea of books!

**C J Sansom ‘Tombland’ one of the Shardlake series [2018]** - The novel is set in 1549, largely in Norfolk, and Sansom's lawyer hero/narrator finds himself caught up in the peasants' rebellion - led in Norwich by Robert Kett. He goes to Norwich to investigate a murder, at the request (demand?) of Lady Elizabeth (later Elizabeth I). I was caught up in the action right from the start - and there is a lot of action! There are many grizzly scenes when the rebellious fighters take on, and also defend themselves, against professional soldiers. There is a pair of psychopathic twins, a man with one hand, traitors and spies (on both sides), liars, cowards, brave men and women, heroes - and an orphaned baby! It was particularly compulsive reading for me, as I simply love Norwich - and am on the cusp of moving there. The only caution I would make is that it is VERY long! 880 pages - I read it on my Kindle for ease of carrying it about! [Rachel Hobson].

**Esther Freud ‘Mr Mac and me’ [2014]** - Suffolk in 1914 as war begins and a story about Thomas a 12-year-old and his family and his friendship with Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh. It evokes memories of my Welsh mining village and the generations of belonging to a small focused community. Nothing gets by in a village of this size. Much of this story is to do with growing up and coping in your place and time whether as natives or regular tourists or annual herring girls. Much also is about the Macintosh’s as people and artists [they of the Glasgow Art School and the Willow Tea rooms]. Southwold was a likely invasion point and attacks by Zeppelins come alive. It’s a wonderful book and I found myself time and time again returning to my own memories. This is the story of a teenager in extraordinary times but then all our times are extraordinary. [Barbara Holden].

**Ian Mortimer ‘The outcasts of time’ [2017]** - Ian Mortimer is a historian and novelist. Here the place is Exeter but, as the epigraph has it, “Home is not a place but a time.” He takes us through the centuries from 1348 to 1942 in the company of two brother time-travellers. Not to give any ‘spoilers’ let us quote the cover: “they are given an unexpected choice: either to go home and spend their last six days [before they die of the Plague] in their familiar world, or to search for salvation in the future.” [1] This is an exploration of change in terms of progress and strangeness. [2] In each era he identifies one or more significant aspect - especially disease and wars with unerring historical detail. [3] He combines this with the ongoing narrative of a family’s life with all its faithfulness, joy and intimacy. [4] It is at once a [demanding] entertainment and an examination of how we humans struggle and give meaning to being alive. It is a marvellous and engaging story. [Tony and Barbara Holden].

**Man booker shortlist 2019** - <https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/blog/see-who-shortlist-2019-international-man-booker-prize?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIqpyDu9Ol4wIVmKztCh1w8AS-EAAYASAAEgLv4vD_BwE>

**Mark Sullivan ‘Beneath A Scarlet Sky’ [2017]** – this is a novel based on a true story...something I had to keep reminding myself as I read this astonishing tale. Set mainly in Milan and the surrounding mountains this story gives a new perspective on the second world war. A very personal perspective from the point of view of a teenage Milanese boy and his extended family. The ability of the teenage human spirit to take in its stride the challenges of war, and the expectations of adults within that teenager's life - adults in the family, adults in the church and adults in roles of authority from within the military and government - is quite incredible. Apparently it is being made into a movie. I haven't seen it. I can't imagine it would be as good as the book, but who knows. [Victoria Williamson].

**Michael Ondaatje ‘Warlight’ [2018]** - When I chose this book the young assistant told me I had ‘very literary tastes’ – I wasn’t sure how to take that. He is the same assistant who insists on placing this book in the Africa section although neither the author nor the book has anything to do with this continent. This is what I call a slow read, meaning there were many sentences to be reread and thought about. I could include them but I think it best you find those that have something special to say to you. The story meanders and for quite a while I wasn’t sure we were going anywhere in particular but was enjoying the journey but slowly the mist cleared and although some things were never clarified, the bits of one life fell into place. As this character says “We order our lives with barely held stories. As if we have been lost in a confusing landscape…….” The story takes us through parts of the WW2 and dealt with damage and hurts and the strength of the need to deal with these, something I’d never really given any thought to. I am downsizing and pruning bookshelves and deciding which books are ‘keepers’. This is a ‘keeper’. [Snoeks Desmond].

**Richard Powers ‘The Overstory’ [Winner of the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction]** - This is a huge book - literally and in scope. It draws you in with parallel, vivid, vignettes of individual lives that are gradually, skilfully intertwined. It circles again and again on the human struggle to find meaning and life amidst death and the small-ness of human life. It inspires with the vastness, complexity and ancient existence of trees (nature), whilst focusing in on our central and urgent question: ‘are humans willing to amend our consumption/use of resources/treatment of the environment?’ There is pain and tragedy. I fear for how the story will end but - as with life - will proceed with hope. [Sian Newton].

**Rory Stewart ‘The Places In Between’ [2004]** – worth reading [Carol Aplin].

**Shoshana Zuboffe “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power” [2018]** - In a world of artificial intelligence and big data corporations like Google, Facebook and Microsoft, do we even know what it happening around us and to us? / Zuboff, Charles Edward Wilson Professor Emerita, Harvard Business School, has been studying the impact of big data on our lives for over 30 years. She describes the activities of these corporations as being like a one-way mirror. They see everything we do, but we cannot see what they are up to. But not only do they see what we do, but they utilise all of our online interactions to build up a picture of who we are and what preferences and choices we display every day. Using unimaginable computer power, AI is able to detect patterns in our behaviour which allow them to predict our future choices with great accuracy. / This ability allows them to sell to advertisers very precise information about what products we will likely purchase. It also allows them to sell similar information to those seeking our votes at election times, or our political inclinations at any time, and we do not see how they are influencing our responses. / We outlawed subliminal advertising. But we do not even know how to legislate against this subliminal form of manipulation which Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism. This is a long read and detailed in its examination of her subject. It is much needed oif we are to understand where power now lies in our global society. [Paul Regan].

**Tayari Jones 'An American Marriage' [2018] -** This book won the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2019. 'A moving portrayal of the effects of a wrongful conviction on a young African-American couple' is the quote from Barack Obama on the cover. I haven't finished reading it yet, but I am gripped! There are three people in this marriage, and two sets of parents who, in their own way, try to do the right thing for their children. What would life be like if you (if you're the male in this marriage) are unjustly imprisoned for a crime you didn't commit? Or you (if you're the female) to be apart from your husband, who is in prison for five years whilst innocent of the crime? What sort of marriage would you have when his conviction is finally overturned? 320 pages of great reading! [Rachel Hobson].

**Toni Morrison died 5 August 2019 –** She was a powerful voice and one of the first black women writers I read. I so admired her storytelling - her epic ‘Beloved trilogy’ - as well as her unwavering commitment to justice and telling truth to power. I recall her words: “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” See for comments and tributes [Sian Newton] - <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/06/rest-toni-morrison-you-were-magnificent-leading-writers>