**RAB2 issue 4 August 2020 -** ‘Recommend a book e-mail project’ edited Tony + Barbara Holden @ thbhholden@gmail.com and do subscribe [free] to our website to receive notifications of new items - www.tonyandbarbaraholden.com

**Greeting –** during our times of being in-house, in lockdown, being shielded many people have said how they have got into old or new pleasures! Reading no doubt is one such for many of us. Thank you to all who contributed. We hope very much that you will enjoy the 23 recommendations: do keep them coming, Tony and Barbara.

**This project** ► is all about ‘recommending’ books. We need ‘author, title, publishing date’ and why you want others to read this book! In say from 50 to 250 words. ‘Discernment is all’ might be our slogan. We aim to ‘publish’ by email in April, August and December [and add to the website].

**In A/Z of author first name**

Amanda Brown ‘The Prison Doctor’ [2019] - Dr Amanda Brown was a GP in a village in Buckinghamshire who, in 2004 disheartened by all the bureaucracy and targets, resigned from the practice. She vented her fury in a magazine and was contacted by someone who was recruiting doctors to work in prisons. Amanda took up the challenge and first worked in a young offenders institution and then spent seven years working in Wormwood Scrubs. As you can imagine, this work was challenging, exciting and heart-breaking at times and the reader is drawn into sharing the joys and despair of working in such difficult and terrible circumstances. / Dr Brown now works in Bronzefield, Middlesex, the largest women’s prison in Europe, and this is the subject of her second book. / I found the stories she told so moving and I’m full of admiration for the people who care and work so hard to help these disruptive but mainly vulnerable members of our society [Jean Hobbs].

Andrea Levy ‘Long Song’ [2010] - I had read and loved Andrea Levy's ‘Small Island’ [2004] even before she won three prizes. I also enjoyed hearing her doing a reading. This is such a treat: so touching, beautifully told, amazingly informative historical novel. It is so deep but so harrowing. It is so sad but so playful at the same time. The story-line is both tragic and comic, full of love, hate, betrayal, wisdom, compassion and hope. / The book is the story of slavery in Jamaica through the eyes of July. Her father was a white man, an overseer who raped her mother, Kitty. She was taken from her mother whilst still young to become an entertainment, a pet and then a maid-servant to Caroline Mortimer, the sister of a plantation owner. Most of the novel is the story of July's early life on this plantation called, Amity. / July tells us the beginning of the end of slavery in Jamaica, and at the centre of the novel is the historical episode of the 1831 Baptist Rebellion, when Jamaican slaves rose up and fought to seize their freedom for 10 days. / Caroline's brother dies, and a new overseer, Robert Goodwin, arrives with good intentions and a Christian upbringing. He seems determined to prove that following slavery the plantation can be managed on humane lines, but he ends up being just as cruel as all the other "massas" / plantation owners. / It is a very good historical fiction novel about slavery. It is not surprising with a story-line like this that it makes uncomfortable reading at times ,and I would never imagine that I could enjoy a book about such dark times and such dreadful and brutal acts but July's wit and spirit made it worthwhile. It is certainly not only about brutality, violence and misery but more about hope, love and resilience. Can I also suggest that if you struggle to get into July's patio-style of speaking don't get frustrated and give up as you get used to it quite quickly if you persevere. I would recommend this book strongly and I hope you enjoy "Miss July's " amazing story as much as I did [Olcay Aniker-Lumley].

Carlos Ruiz Zafon ‘The Shadow of the Wind’ [2001/2004] - May I recommend a book I read in 2010, in turn recommended by my Spanish daughter-in-law, brought to mind as the author Carlos Ruiz Zafon died recently. The first of three set in Barcelona [Suzanne O’Shea].

Christy Lefteri ‘The Beekeeper of Aleppo’ [2019] - Nowadays I listen to a book being read; it keeps me engaged during my morning walks and overcomes the issue of old age sight. ‘The Beekeeper of Aleppo’ has been aptly described as ‘powerful’ and ‘compassionate’ where in adversity of ‘darkness’ the characters demonstrate ‘courage.’ Simply, it is the story of a young couple who, after everything they cared for has been destroyed and their son murdered, come to accept that it is time to escape Syria. The husband Nuri is a beekeeper; he dreams of joining his cousin, a former business partner and refugee, Mustafa in the U.K. His wife, Afra, an artist is blinded by the bomb that fell in their garden killing their boy. Her thoughts are in the paintings she continues to colour and in her silence which tells more than words can. Starting from their life in Aleppo, through Turkey and a horrendous experience in Greece, the author weaves blurred facts, fantasies and fiction into text revealing the couple’s fears, expectations and hopes. As a listener, I heard ‘A moving testament to the human spirit.’ What struck me and induced me to put thought to paper has been the fact that while listening, I did not travel with the author but lived every glimpse of optimism, pain and loss with Nuri and Afra [Hasan Deveci].

Dani Shapiro ‘Inheritance’ [2019] - Who am I? Why am I here? And how shall I live? Having grown up sure of her Jewish identify, Orthodox family and her beloved father, Dani Shapiro shares her remarkable, sometimes painful, personal story - a memoir of genealogy, paternity and love. / It all starts when her husband asks her if she also wants to join him in doing an ancestry.com DNA-test. The results shake her understanding of who she is. With immense good fortune and astonishing speed she discovers the circumstances around her conception and the identify of her biological father, and then tries to make contact with her new family. / I'm deliberately limiting spoilers. This is a lovely and thought-provoking book. It raises questions about ethics, medicine and technology (then and now), faith, identity, memory and the importance of family. Shapiro carefully exposes and considers the enormous contrast/shift in attitudes from the 1960s to our contemporary world and its interconnectedness (emails, Google and Facebook). / It's well worth a read [Siân Newton].

Dea Birkett ‘Off the beaten track – three centuries of women travellers’ National Portrait Gallery [2004] – Given self-isolation travelling seemed a good idea so I went back to this lovely gifted book. These are short illustrated accounts by some amazing women. It reminded me, of course, of my travels - to India twice [1982 and 1989] on study tours and most recently [2015] to Istanbul on a holiday. The book also reminded me of our many visits to the National Portrait Gallery in London. The last time I was there with two of our granddaughters I especially valued their ‘excitement’ as they realized how few women were represented in some of the galleries – so international women’s day and suffrage are working their way through our generations! A lovely book and a great place to visit [Barbara Holden].

Edna O’Brien ‘Country Girl’ [2013] - Whilst laid up with a broken ankle, a while ago, I read the autobiography of Edna O'Brien - she was and still is, quite a girl [Suzanne O’Shea].

Geraldine Brooks ‘Year of Wonders’ [2001] - This was a recent choice in my book group. It is set in the village of Eyam Derbyshire during the Great Plague of 1666 and is based on a true story. The villagers decided to go into quarantine to stop the disease’s spread, and no-one was allowed in or out of the village until there were no new cases. There were many deaths. Communication with the outside world took place in the form of messages and goods left at the Boundary Stone, still in place today, with no physical contact with outsiders. / Sounds familiar? Well, there were many parallels with our current situation in terms of the emotions experienced by the villagers and their varied responses: compassionate, fearful and selfish. I’m amazed that the author, who has not lived through a pandemic herself, could imagine herself into the villagers’ situation so well. / The story is told through the eyes of Anna Frith, a young lead-miner’s wife, who assists the vicar’s wife in caring for many of the sick. I found the account of life in the village very believable, but I’m afraid it seemed as if Geraldine Brooks ran out of steam and didn’t know how to finish her story – it ended with a very unconvincing (for me) change of scene to Oran in Algeria! But overall, a very interesting read [Louise Williamson].

Haruki Murakami ‘Colourless Tsukuru Tazaki and his years of pilgrimage’ translated from Japanese to English by Philip Gabriel [2014] - The main story is to do with five friends: what has happened to them; why Tsukuru was banished; and what is happening to him. As the cover has it: “The reason why death had such a hold on Tsukuru Tazaki was clear. One day his four closest friends, the friends he’d known for a long time, announced that they did not want to see him, or talk with him, ever again.” He uses sparkling and incisive detail. He is strong on dialogue, visual images, narrative: he has a way of switching pace. He is explicit and emotionally demanding. He is superb on the dynamics of relationships and groups: universal but within Japanese culture. From the outset there is a sense of threat and disquiet. It isn’t such as to make reading unpleasant but it draws attention to a strangeness in all that is happening. It makes you ask yourself: ‘in what reality is all of this taking place?’ And there are many answers – Japan, an English translation, a writer’s story, dreams, and the reader’s imagination. [Barbara Holden].

Hilary Mantel ‘The mirror and the light’ – part three of ‘The Wolf Hall trilogy’ [2020] - One of my clearest memories of this three-volume, ten-year, enterprise is a TV programme about Hilary Mantel. At one point we were introduced to Diarmaid MacCulloch: Professor, TV series, writer of ‘A history of Christianity’ [2009]. He has also written on Thomas Cromwell and in this programme, he was lavishly praising her novelist’s historical accuracy. I don’t easily imagine myself into history. But this trilogy is extremely engaging storytelling. Her wonderful writing has already won the Man Booker Prize twice. This huge [883 numbered pages!] continues an exploration of Henry 8’s Kingdom between 1536 and 1540. It begins with the execution of Anne Boleyn and ends with the execution of Thomas Cromwell. And, in between, there are worlds - not least of violent power-plays; cruelty and torture; and above all vivid personalities and historical detail [Tony Holden].

Jon Sopel ‘A Year at the Circus’ [2019] – In each chapter the BBC correspondent uses the famous White House rooms such as the Oval Office and the Cabinet Room to provide a framework for his new book. By looking at the past events and occupants of these famous rooms Sopel demonstrates the complete break with the past of the Trump Presidency. His insights into the machinery of the US government, the bizarre events, the never ending drama, all described with Sopel’s trademark dry humour, left me better informed but even more horrified by the chaos and sheer perversity of the Trump administration [Gill Webster].

Jonathan Bate ‘A very short introduction to English literature’ Oxford series [2010] - I read English Literature, including some Anglo-Saxon, as part of my arts degree at Leeds [1958-1961]. I was just 18. I sat in a large lecture-hall with a couple of hundred other students. The names I remember are Arnold Kettle, Norman Jeffares, Jon Silkin, Geoffrey Hill [who, if memory serves, gave us two-person seminars Oxbridge style]. Certainly, I don’t recollect any women teachers in any of the four and then three disciplines I studied. My arts education from A-level and on was varied – but somehow, I never lost [broke free] from the grip of English Literature. In 2012 a friend gave me Jonathan Bate on John Clare [2003] – no doubt spotting the Loughton connection - and I enjoyed it very much. And, in this overview by Jonathan Bate I wasn’t disappointed – he covers the ground and interprets with imagination and insight [Tony Holden].

Judith Butler ‘The force of non-violence – an ethico-political bind’ 2020 - Son Adam gifted me this 210-page book. It is a specialist [academic] read. She ‘painstakingly’ examines ideas and values that are very important to me. Judith Butler is Professor of Comparative Literature and Critical Theory at the University of California-Berkley. She has her own very individual writing-voice. She uses the language and insights of many academic disciplines and writers as she ‘deconstructs’ ‘violence’ and ‘non-violence.’ She also gives contemporary accounts of individuals and groups whose lives are damaged by violence “Some lives are not considered grievable - The reasons for this are many, and they include racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and the systemic disregard for the poor and disposed.” I won’t attempt to summarize let alone critique the book. I’m pleased to engage with someone who brings the sharpest insights of thinking to bear on issues to do with suffering, violence, oppressions and in so doing makes non-violence a possible strategy [Tony Holden].

Michael Leese ‘Going Underground’ [2017] - The concept of an autistic detective, Jonathan Roper, was a refreshing and original take on a police procedural. The author, whose son is on the autistic spectrum, breathes new life into the genre by imaginatively exploring the advantages of Roper’s gifts in such a setting. There is also an engaging relationship between Roper and his boss, humour and a page-turning plot. Two provisos: first, this is not a guide to ASD, and secondly, It needed a better proof-reader [Gill Webster].

Oswald Wynd ‘The Ginger Tree’ [1977/ 2003] – This was a choice in my book group, and one I enjoyed. I really like novels that, as well as a good story, tell me something about places or times I don’t know much about. This has all three! / The story is told by Mary Mackenzie and begins as she travels to China in 1903 to marry the British military attaché. This is just after the Boxer Rebellion – about which I have the haziest of memories from school history lessons. Somewhat surprisingly she has an affair with a Japanese solder/diplomat and becomes pregnant by him. When her husband finds out, he makes it clear that their daughter (four years old) will be brought up by his family in England away from her bad influence, and that she has to leave. / Mary flees to Japan and tries to make a life for herself and her son there. I won’t say more about what happens to them, to keep you in suspense, but the description of life in pre-WW2 Japan is fascinating, in particular the attitude of most Japanese towards foreigners. / One of the best things about this novel is the way in which the author describes the emotions and challenges of being a woman in this very different culture. Oswald Wynd knows about Japan from the inside, having been brought up there himself, but I’m not sure how he gets so well into Mary’s mind! I’m very keen to read more of his writing now [Louise Williamson].

Oxford: ‘A very short introduction’ series - Over the years I have read books from this series. During these months I bought three or four and indulged. But what to choose? There are some 650 titles with new ones each month. You have to home-in on your subject of interest [poetry, psychology, art] not [number theory, nationalism, animal behaviour]. As I go through the list on the website I note the date it was written or given a new edition. Sometimes ‘I know’ or look up an author. But it’s the subject and the short, dense, usually well-informed accounts that make me value this series [Tony Holden] - https://www.veryshortintroductions.com/

Peter Fryer ‘Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain’ [1984] - I don’t need to describe the current climate regarding anti-racism. The Black Lives Matter movement and the world-wide response to it give cause for a hope that significant change is possible. In the light of this I recently re-read Peter Fryer’s book. Over the years the book has survived several culls of my book-shelves. On finishing it I realised why. Apart from having referred to it during that time I was reminded that it is that rare combination of a splendidly researched and readily accessible document. / The author outlines the presence of black people in Britain from Roman times onwards. The book begins with the sentence, ‘There were Africans in Britain before the English came here’. Bearing in mind the period covered it’s not a long book at around 500 pages for the story which the author has to tell. Page after page describes both the deep racism experienced by black people in Britain as well as their courage and wisdom. Harrowing descriptions of the slave trade, slave ports and the dehumanising which existed are matched by reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge-Taylor, Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano and others / In the preface Fryer himself asks the question as to whether or not ‘such an account can be written by a white writer in a way that is acceptable to black readers’. For obvious reasons I can’t answer that question. What I am clear about it is that this is a book that we white people need to read and still to take very seriously, even after 34 years. [Ron Smith].

Richard Holloway ‘Waiting for the Last Bus: Reflections on Life and Death’ [2018] - I’ve thought a lot about death and dying lately. It’s been hard not to given the current coronavirus pandemic. Given this inevitable occurrence Holloway asks: is death something we do or does it just happen to us? His response is honest – not looking ahead to some future life but looking back whilst there is still time, with gratitude for the life experienced. He is imaginative and hopeful recognising that many of us step on-board the last bus without really acknowledging who we are, having spent most of our lives auditioning for roles we fancied and failing to embrace the one scripted for us. He has wonderful use of illustrations which stay in the mind and shows a wide appreciation of literature and culture generally. He speaks wistfully of walks with his dog and, as a life-long and keen walker, he hopes that he will have time to put on his boots as the last bus approaches. I felt my doubts affirmed in a positive way after reading this book for the second time. I’m sure I will read it again [Pauline Fielding].

Robert Yarham ‘How to read the Landscape - A Crash Course in Interpreting the Great Outdoors’ [2010] - I have read, or dipped into, many excellent ‘landscape’ books and the general thrust is to treat the subject on a regional basis. This pocket-size book deals with features. For instance, if on a walk you are in a valley and wonder how this was formed, take the book from your pocket, and look up "Valleys". There are several references each leading to pictures and diagrams enabling you to identify your valley and showing how it was formed. Good for indoor browsing too [Bill Richardson].

Sarah Perry ‘Melmoth’ [2018] – It’s not often you come across a book that is just unputdownable (sorry). But ‘Melmoth’ is just such a book. Hard to describe, about wrong doings witnessed across generations and the inability to escape one’s conscience. Perry’s powers of description are superb and haunting. Another from Sarah Perry, ‘The Essex Serpent’ [2016] is also excellent. [Pauline Fielding].

Saul David ‘Zulu Hart’ [2009] - I am enjoying this book very much but it is quite a large book so it is taking some time to read. There are many facets to this story which makes it very interesting. George Hart wants to honour his family and serve his Queen, which isn’t very easy as he doesn’t know his father and mother are half-Zulu and half-Irish. Soldering is in his blood but is he fighting for ancestry or Empire? I know this review is longer than I meant to write, but we all seem to have plenty of time for reading! Take care [Barbara Wilcox].

Steven R Grundy ‘The Plant Paradox’ [2017] audio book - Basically, it argues that eating the wrong food, including some supposedly 'healthy foods,' is the cause of numerous illnesses. The miracle is ‘change your diet to end your illness and enjoy years of healthy life.’ ‘If only,’ it certainly punches hard and high. The word 'Ataxia' appears only once, But true or not his 'success stories' include MS and Parkinson sufferers. / One may dismiss the book as simply another dietary-plan but the author is a former professor of paediatrics in cardiothoracic surgery, with a bank of restorative medicine behind him. Most of what the author argues makes sense and, as far as current circumstances allow, I intend to follow the advice initially for 3 months. / I commend the book for your consideration [Hasan Deveci].

Tom Nancollas ‘Seashaken Houses: a Lighthouse History from Eddystone to Fastnet [2019] - This is a history of rock-lighthouses around the coast of Britain related, in nearly all cases, through a series of personal visits by the author. I embarked on this book with some trepidation but found it engrossing. The plates are a little disappointing as may be expected in a paperback, but the difficulties of construction, maintenance and life ‘aboard’ are captured strikingly [Bill Richardson].