**Recommend a Book Project - Issue 5, December 2020 - Edited Tony + Barbara Holden @** **thbhholden@gmail.com** **see our website -** **www.tonyandbarbaraholden.com**

This project ► is all about ‘recommending’ books. We need ‘author, title, publishing date’ and why you want others to read this book! Preferably from 50 to 250 words. ‘Discernment is all’ might be our slogan. We are aiming to ‘publish’ by e-mail and on our website in April, August, and December.

**Greetings** – Who would have thought back in April that covid-19 would still be bossing us all and causing threat, grief and loss to so many! As we are changing how we live; looking for good things to do in-house; wanting to strengthen friendships and networks - books and reading play their part. In this issue we have 29 recommendations from a wide variety of friends and family with their many interests. We hope you find something to add to your Christmas list.

**► In A/Z of author first name.**

Afua Hirsch ‘Brit{ish}’ [2018] - race in the UK. [Philip Holden].

Alastair Campbell ‘Living Better: How I Learned to Survive Depression’ [2020] - This is a tough, lively and intensely personal account of living with depression. Alastair Campbell doesn't flinch from sharing his personal experiences as well as the impact on loved ones. Whilst he shares his long-term personal journey, his foreword on Brexit and covid taps into the unique and pressure-cooker emotions of 2020. [Siân Newton].

Angie Thomas ‘The Hate U Give’ [2017] – this, young adult novel, is a really informative book that gives a detailed, personal perspective. [Joanna Newton].

Bernadine Evaristo ‘Girl, Woman, Other’ [2019] - As I expect you remember, Bernadine Evaristo shared the 2019 Booker Prize with Margaret Atwood, making her the first black woman to win it. The book is made up of 12 vignettes of different women, most of whom live in and around SE London, whose lives interweave and overlap in sometimes surprising ways. I saw her being interviewed on TV a while back, and she said that she got fed up of the black female stereotypes in fiction – single mum, drug user, prostitute….well, there are certainly some very different characters here! / I started off really loving the book, often recognising the people Evaristo describes. But to be honest, I found the array of characters a bit confusing towards the end of what is a very thick book – three fewer protagonists would have been helpful. I found the ending rather contrived and thus disappointing, as all the lives of the 12 characters came miraculously together, but then I’m an old cynic! [Louise Williamson].

Bernardine Evaristo ‘Girl, Woman, Other’ [Winner British Book Awards Fiction Book of the Year 2020] – This vivid book follows the lives and struggles of twelve very different characters. Mostly women, black and British, they tell the stories of their families, friends and lovers, across the country and through the years. / It deserves the accolades. It is funny, insightful and moving. The various characters each get a section of the book with a few chapters giving their backstories and how they interact across the generations. It is especially good at drawing the contours of sex, gender, politics, friendship and love, fears and regrets, the complications of success, the difficulties of intimacy. / It is worth getting the audiobook as this allows you to hear the tone and accents of African and Caribbean voices so cleverly portrayed, the prejudices and snide remarks, sometimes openly expressed, sometimes not. / A great “read” with a nice twist at the end. [Paul Regan].

Bridget Riley ‘The eye’s mind: collected writings 1965-2019’ [2019] - I’ve liked Bridget Riley’s work for many years. My earliest exhibition catalogue is 1980 my most recent 2003 though I went to the exhibition in 2010 at the National Gallery. She has always commented on her life; the process of modern and abstract art; and how she herself works. So, I bought these collected writings. They are in three sections: autobiographical, development as painter, on art and other artists plus a foreword, an introduction by Robert Kudielka and notes. They are lucid, engaging, energising. She is impressive as a person and artist. And her words are a great encouragement. She makes me think and feel – I won’t be distracted by the avalanche of information; by people’s violence and stupidity; by the noise of other lives – I will keep going and do my own ‘work: live my life. She writes [page 78]: “Drawing is an exercise in looking: one finds out what can be seen and at the same time one finds oneself having to organize the visual and emotional information extracted. How to sort out and clarify this confusing wealth?” [Tony Holden].

Bryan Stevenson ‘Just Mercy’ [2015] - This was a book I couldn’t put down! Bryan Stevenson, a black lawyer, describes how he takes on the American legal system, in particular the horrors of death-row and the incarceration of children as young as 13 given life sentences without parole. He shows how the legacy of slavery permeates the US justice system and the frightening move to mass incarceration. He is not only an impressive lawyer but also a great story-teller. His compassion, persistence and resilience permeate the book. / One of his many skills was his use of existing networks. I was particularly interested in his account of approaching church-networks, both black and white, to build support for his work. / Despite the terrible injustices it is above all a book about mercy and hope. [Gill Webster].

Christy Lefteri ‘The Beekeeper of Aleppo’ [2019] - The first time I met a Syrian family was in 1987. It was through my community education work in an East London Secondary School. I remember it so clearly as she brought me flowers because my mother had died. This book is about a husband and wife who, like most refugees, had reluctantly left their homeland in order to raise their child safely. The novel is both a hard and rewarding read. It’s hard because their plight is so dire – the daily decisions of who to trust; what practical choices to make; how to make sense of different cultures. It’s rewarding and life-affirming in extreme circumstances and personal loss. And at the heart of it all is the sense that life is to be lived. Reading Philipp Ther ‘The Outsiders – refugees in Europe since 1492’ [2019] was a very different experience. In contrast ‘The Beekeeper’ was heart-wrenching and beautiful. [Barbara Holden].

Clive James ‘The Fire of Joy – roughly eighty poems to get by heart and say aloud’ [2020] – https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/sep/27/he-returned-to-what-he-really-was-clive-jamess-daughter-on-his-poetic-farewell - I’d read some Clive James TV reviews, journalism, memoirs and poems. I bought this after reading the Guardian review by family-friend Rachel Cooke. She wrote: “In the last years of his life, Clive lived in the house adjoining [daughter] Claerwen’s in Cambridge, a permanently open door connecting her kitchen to his sitting room, a realm that became his entire world at the end. // And there, they made the book together.” Three things stand out for me. [1] Another human’s life. [2] His life-long love of poetry. I also read English Literature [at Leeds]. So, I’ve always read poetry – though cautiously when I’m trying to write my own. But these ‘roughly eighty poems’ in chronological order are definitely worth engaging. Of course some inspire and some don’t but his astute comments offer a great deal. [3] And - how to say it? – the fact and manner of his dying. Rachel Cooke quoting daughter Claerwen: “It is a privilege, an enormous one. He was sort of incandescent, really. It felt like he had passed through something. At the end, you’ve passed through all the lies you tell yourself about what life is about, and what you might accomplish. You know what’s coming. He just appreciated everything in this astonishing way, and because I saw everything through his eyes, it was as though we were feeling the same things.” [Tony Holden].

Elizabeth Strout ‘Olive Kitteridge’ [2008] - "An extraordinary rich and detailed portrait of both a marriage and community" / Set in a small costal town in Maine, each of the 13 chapters details a different character, life or event as seen through the eyes of Olive. An indomitable figure, plain speaking and, at times, harsh, other times hilarious, she sees into the hearts of those around her, their triumphs and tragedies. As Olive ages, she tries to make sense of the changes in her life and even admits to a certain vulnerability. / I think the book is a worthy Pulitzer prize-winner, well-constructed and written, with Olive as the unforgettable "thread" / I believe a film has been made. A follow-up ‘Olive Again’ (2019) is now out in paperback - on my Christmas list! [Suzanne O'Shea].

Frances Hodgson Burnett [first published in book form in 1911 recently a new TV version] ‘The Secret Garden’ – This is a heart-warming story of friendship and growth. [Joanna Newton].

Georges Simenon ‘Inspector Maigret Penguin Classics Omnibus 1’ [1930/3 translation 2013/14] - I have a strange historical link with Simenon. In 1973 I was all set up, as a modern father, to be present for the birth of our twins. In the event [to my relief!] they judged fathers and twins didn’t mix so I spent the birthing time reading a Simenon novel! Earlier this year I read John Lanchester in London Review of Books V42, 11: “Simenon’s colossal output [more than 400] includes the 75 Maigret novels, dozens and dozens of shilling-shockers in a variety of genres, a number of outright masterpieces in his ‘romans durs’ [hard, or harrowing], and many autobiographical books of an even-tempered but strangely sinister candour [‘The Home Life of Inspector Maigret’].” So I asked son Adam to get me ‘some Simenon’ and he selected this which includes four novels dated 1930/31. My sense is that the story, setting, characters are all carried by his extraordinary detail. Would you enjoy them? I have no idea. [Tony Holden].

Guardian Weekly - My life-long interest in politics began in our home listening to the radio among adult calls to ‘keep quiet whilst we are listening to the news.’ During these long months of being in-house we decided to subscribe to Guardian Weekly – delivered to your door for about £3 a week. It is an excellent second or third voice to TV and social media. The first section gives world news in paragraphs. The second section is of critical longer articles. The third is on culture. [Barbara Holden].

Lana del Rey ‘Violets bent backwards over the grass’ [2020] - poetry book. [Philip Holden].

Laura Cumming ‘The Vanishing Man - In Pursuit of Velasquez’ [2016 / 2017] - I really enjoyed reading this book, which was recommended on a radio programme on BBC London. The author skilfully gives the reader an engaging, interesting and informative combination of mystery, history of art, and art-appreciation spanning four centuries. It is well-written and scrupulously well-researched. I won’t risk a ‘spoiler’ - so I recommend that you read it and find out for yourself! [David Hobbs].

Maaze Mengiste ‘The shadow king’ [2020] - This book was longlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize and I’m not surprised – it’s extraordinary. Set in 1930s Ethiopia, it describes the armed struggle against Mussolini’s troops who had invaded – an armed struggle that involved women as fighters, and not only as those who brought food and drink to their forces and tended the wounded. It’s not a read for the faint-hearted, as atrocities by the Italians are described in gruesome detail. / The interesting thing about the story is the way that different levels of oppression are revealed – that of the invaders is obvious towards the Ethiopians. But then there is the aristocratic leader Kidane who tries to subjugate his wife Aster and their servant Hirut, and Aster who cruelly subjugates Hirut. And then there’s the Italian army photographer who hates what he does when he’s ordered to record the commanding officer’s cruelties, but obeys nevertheless. / There was a discussion of the book on Radio 4’s ‘Front Row’ a few weeks ago which included the author. Mengiste got the idea for the book from stories her grandmother told her of enlisting to fight during this period. She decided she needed to learn Italian so she could access the archives of Mussolini’s fascist army, so the book took 9-10 years in the writing. [Louise Williamson].

Martin Camroux ‘Keeping alive the rumour of God – when most people are looking the other way’ [2020] - is the extended title of a new manifesto of liberal theology by Martin Camroux, a minister in the United Reformed Church. His sub-title echoes what John Habgood used to say, that a sense of the absence of God somehow demonstrates that God is! There is so much ‘evidence’ of the reality of the spiritual. I might add a quote from Marilynne Robinson: "The human sense of the sacred is a fact. ... It is a given, a powerful presence, whose reality it is perverse to deny on the basis of a model of reality constructed around its exclusion". Taking this basic approach further, the well-known affirmation of Bishop David Jenkins is one of Martin Camroux’s core texts: ‘God is; God is as God is in Jesus; therefore there is hope’. This sums up the underlying message of this book. Martin is a fine preacher and it shows: the argument is persuasive and liberally (!) laced with relevant quotations from a very wide range of writers including a particularly helpful reference to Tillich’s ‘God above God’. As Martin says: “religion as such is not the answer to our spiritual crisis” for “religion is not a proof of the intangible but a system of meaning expressed through metaphor, symbol and story, validated by the experience of living it, and by poetry, art, music, love and our experience of what it means to be human, by reflections on the wonder of life.” [Peter Brain].

Matthew Kaemingk ‘Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear’ - The book I'd most like to recommend is the one I reviewed on the William Temple Blog 4 September 2020 - “In our latest review, Greg Smith finds much to recommend in Matthew Kaemingk’s book on the relationships between Muslims, Christians and secularists in the Netherlands and the USA.” - https://williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/blog-review-christian-hospitality-muslim-immigration/ - [Greg Smith].

On Common Ground: International Perspectives on the Community Land Trusts [2020] - is a collection of twenty-six original essays, written by forty-two scholars and practitioners from a dozen countries, tracing the growth and diversification of the international community land trust movement. / Fifty years ago, African-American activists in Albany, Georgia extended their political fight for civil rights into the economic realm by creating New Communities Inc. They had come to believe that owning land was essential to securing greater independence for their people. But landownership was out-of-reach for most African-Americans in the Deep South of the 1960s and too easily lost if they did acquire a small farm, a plot of land, or a house in town. The visionary founders of New Communities concluded, therefore, that community ownership would be a more secure form of tenure. Community-owned land could be combined, moreover, with the individual ownership of newly built houses, offering low-income people an opportunity to become homeowners. Community-owned land could also provide a platform for the cooperative organization of various enterprises, offering low-income people a chance for economic prosperity. There are now hundreds across the world. / David Ireland, Chief Executive of World Habitat, says in his Foreword: “This book is published at a time when people’s fundamental rights to safe and secure housing is under huge pressure – through financialisation, austerity and the climate emergency. / But many of the solutions lie with communities taking control themselves and proves that people are stronger when they work together. Their strength is magnified when they collectively control the land where their housing is built. Through legal rights they can resist threats from predatory land-developers and they have the financial strength to insulate people from the affordability jeopardy caused by financialisation. It also gives communities the strength to commission and design better homes that meet people’s needs and that are capable of withstanding the dangers wreaked by an increasingly unpredictable climate.” / For readers in the UK chapter 20 is about how the first Urban Community Land Trust was developed in East London on the site of St Clements Hospital. This was the work of London Citizens CLT Ltd of which I was privileged to be the chair for 13 years until this September. It is just one of the amazing stories celebrating what ordinary people can achieve when they work together. [Paul Regan].

Peter Brain ‘The Knowable God – a fresh look at the Fourth Gospel’ [2019] - John’s Gospel is both accessible and deep. So a reading of the gospel that deals directly with the text can take readers to a good depth, without a fog of scholarly cross-reference. Peter Brain has done some weighty academic reading, and has learned much from doing so, but he does not flaunt this constantly. Instead he lets us encounter St. John’s gospel story, with its layers of meaning, its light and shadow, and its use of language, place and character to highlight the significance of Jesus. Occasionally Peter reflects on ways in which Christians might respond to the gospel and take its claims into their framework of faith; yet he does so in ways that allow us to make that response for ourselves. His writing style is articulate, logical and clear; he is a good explainer. This book arises from long and serious engagement with John’s Gospel. It would work well for thinking church members – people who are educated, but not especially educated in theology – who want to use their minds to deepen their faith. It could be read for personal growth and interest, or to inform the discussions of a house-group, or in preparation for preaching from the gospel. [John Proctor, former General Secretary of the United Reformed Church and, before that, a New Testament teacher at Cambridge University – with permission from Peter Brain].

Peter Geoghegan ‘Democracy for Sale (Dark Money and Dirty Politics)’ [2020] - A well-researched and disturbing read for anyone concerned about the future of democracy. The author outlines many of the ways in which the inadequate 'safeguards' which exist to ensure clarity and fairness in the political process are bypassed with impunity by those deliberately seeking to undermine the democratic process. The author critiques the destructive use of social media by often anonymous and devious power brokers. The most concerning factor being that the perpetrators appear to hold the democratic process in any kind of regard, high or otherwise. It's a well-written book which required all my attention which was well rewarded. As Anne Applebaum, writing in appreciation says, 'Everyone should read it.' [Ron Smith].

Rachel Kadish ‘The Weight of Ink’ [2017] – This is a novel which interweaves life in London's Sephardic Jewish refugee community in the 1660’s with that of an early 21st century ailing academic. The two main characters are women of remarkable intellect who have chosen to go against the norms of their social groups and their time and devote their lives to study. / It’s a riveting read, which wrestles with big themes like the question of what we mean when we talk about God. The author navigates compassionately the impact of the Inquisition on Portuguese Jews, who fled first to Amsterdam and then to London and explores how their understanding and experience of God is influenced by their sufferings. / It is written beautifully and with attention to accurate historical detail. I really recommend it. [Peter Musgrave].

Raynor Winn ‘The Salt Path’ [2018] – This is a true story of a couple, who through no fault of their own became homeless in their fifties, and Moth, her husband was diagnosed with a terminal illness. They had nothing, except each other, and an indomitable spirit, and decided to walk the South West Coast Path. It is an amazing account of their fortitude in overcoming the wind, sun and rain, and the ups and downs of life in the raw, pitching their tent wherever they could. If you know some of that path, you can appreciate Raynor’s descriptions of the terrain, of the varied wildlife they came across, not to mention some of the fascinating characters they met on their travels. Two years later, defying the diagnosis, they are living in a cottage, courtesy of a lady they got chatting to the night before they finished the path, in a small Cornish coastal resort. I am told she is writing another book, and I am looking forward to that when it is out in paperback. [Barbara Martin].

Richard J Crisp ‘Social Psychology - a very short introduction’ [2015] – another in this useful and stimulating Oxford series. “Social psychology is all about the social universe, and the people who populate our everyday lives.” “I’ll tell the story of social psychology; its history, pivotal moments, and major theories.” As all disciplines and sciences [including the human sciences] it has its own language. So, as often in this series, it may be short, clear and expert but you have to work quite hard. We are concerned to understand our world in order to predict and control – and to make human lives and human groups more kind and less prejudiced, aggressive and oppressive. The idea that stays with me is that we understand humans from many viewpoints and sometimes the detail and sometimes the distance give important insights. [Tony Holden].

Richard Osman ‘The Thursday Murder Club’ [2020] - It shot up in the reading charts so I thought I would give it a go. I’m loving it. A gentle way of looking at the ‘elderly’! A cheerful book during this worrying time! I shall buy his next one which I think he is in the process of writing now. It’s so nice to have a book with nothing nasty in it. [Ros Pike].

Saul David ‘Zulu Hart’ [2009] - I have acquired books from my charity shop which have kept me going. My favourite is ‘Zulu Hart’ which is not to everyone’s taste. I also have been clearing some old books off my shelf and am re-reading ones that I haven’t read for years. [Barbara Wilcox see issue 4].

Sebastian Barry ‘Day without End’ [2016] and his sequel ‘A Thousand Moons’ [2020] - Barry’s work was new to me when I read the first novel. It is concerning the experiences of a young Irish immigrant to the United States, Thomas McNulty and his Canadian soulmate, John Cole. It’s an engrossing story written in a poetic prose. They enlist in the U.S. army and fight in both the Indian Wars of the 1850’s and the Civil War. Their experiences include the adoption of a Lakota orphan whom they name ‘Winona’. She is the major character in the sequel as the three settle in Tennessee during the period of Reconstruction. Both recount a moving story of love, acceptance and tolerance that resonates with the same need for this age of nationalism, fear and rage against ‘the other.’ [Leslie Powner].

Stephen Chbosky ‘The perks of being a wallflower’ [1999] – A fiction book about growing up and life of a teenager. [Philip Holden].

Wendell Berry ‘Stand by me’ [2020] - I love this author! Some years ago I read his book ‘The memory of Old Jack’ and marvelled at the way he had got inside the head of a very old man in a small town in rural Kentucky in 1952 – how could he have known the way a retired farmer of 92 gradually withdraws from the life around him, making sense of his life as he nears death, unless Wendell Berry himself has spent a lot of time with old people? And it turns out he is himself a farmer, a poet, an early environmentalist. / ‘Stand by me’ is a collection of short stories linked to each other by people (including Old Jack Beechum) and the place they live and farm ranging from 1888 to 1981. Berry’s deep love of the countryside shines through and his understanding of what makes people tick is profound – their joys, sorrows, griefs, hopes and fears. There are parts that are really very funny, and others that made me cry./ I borrowed this book from the library, but it’s going on my Christmas list as I know I shall want to read it again. [Louise Williamson].