**RAB - Recommend a Book Project, August 2021** [**Issue 7]**

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**Greetings -** Well the year hasn’t gone easier for us health wise. Tony is pretty much in-house and Barbara is slowly recovering from the February seizure. But we are helped by Sian, Adam and local friends. And we are sustained by the activities we continue to value even though face-to-face ones are only just restarting. We continue with our realistic hopes and impossible commitments: change the world for the better perhaps being the most ambitious. Anyhow books and ideas fit comfortably within these desires. And we do enjoy this process of sharing. So, 21 in A-Z of first name.

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

**Barak Obama ‘A promised land’ [2020]** - I’ve read his two previous books and admired much of his USA Presidency. I’ve also read Michelle Obama’s book. This book is apparently volume 1 of 2 – photos plus 751 pages. / He says in the preface that he wants to “offer readers a sense of what it’s like to be the president of the United States.” To show how being a person and being President fit together: there’s something about authenticity and gravitas here. And he has a great desire to encourage young people into public service. He’s talking about more than ‘the American dream’ or the [in my view ‘facile’] doctrine of ‘American exceptionalism.’ It is that he and Michelle lived lives which demonstrated that clever people, black people, mixed race people, men and women – can do this! And the ‘this’ is huge – it is to do with ambition on the grand scale. / It is enjoyable, deep-thinking, political reading full of detail and insights. Here are my personal reflections. [1] My personal involvement with Citizens UK [1990-1996 training in Los Angeles and then five years as a national Trustee on behalf of the Methodist Church] makes me value his early life as an organizer. [2] I’m also aware that the American political system [as ‘all’ institutions] is best understood and ‘played’ from the inside. [3] Finally – as the social media was emerging – you can see that the large moral questions were always present. [4] It is extraordinarily detailed and readable. The thing I found hardest to cope with was the fact that so many serious world-issues of the Obama years are still unsolved. [5] Barak Obama - “we will learn to live together, cooperate with one another, and recognize the dignity of others, or we will perish” [Tony Holden].

**Barbara [B A] Shapiro ‘The Art Forger’ [2013 - 2014]** - I’ve been re-reading this novel. It is a seriously fun read. Its 350 or so pages are all to do with uncovering an art mystery. You get insights into the American art world with its players, museums, galleries and art heists. The novel centers on Claire Roth’s perilous routes towards artistic success and personal freedom. On the way you get detailed accounts of art techniques in painting, copying and forgery. The key artist is Degas. It’s sharp on the passion and obsession of buying [of course you have to be rich enough or own a museum]. One person comments: “Once a piece of art crawls into your heart, you’ll never let it go.” It’s as much a ‘how was it done’ as a ‘whodunit!’ Usually, I’m slow to guess but I got it right by page 299. But the enjoyment was there for me from start to finish: OK the ‘art’ subject helped but it is a great story [Tony Holden].

**Claire Tomalin Biographies** [mainly published originally by Viking in hardback, Penguin in paperback] - For anyone who likes biographies I have greatly enjoyed a number of works by Claire Tomalin. They are always finely researched, vivid and compelling. She is good at setting them clearly in context, and writes with insight and sympathy. Titles include: ‘Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self’; ‘Jane Austen: A Life’; ‘Thomas Hardy: The Time-torn Man’; ‘Charles Dickens’, also another entitled ‘The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens [Angela Aldred].

**David Hockney and Martin Gayford ‘Spring cannot be cancelled’ [2021]** - If you are interested in art at all you will know of David Hockney and hopefully have seen some of his exhibitions as well as his TV programmes, books, gallery and [as here] writing with Martin Gayford. To make an obvious joke it doesn’t go well for me as a Lancastrian to praise a Yorkshireman but!!!! This is a fascinating book and well-worth reading. Let me share three personal memories. I recall the first time we visited Salt Mill [from 1987] to see his work and were ‘hit’ by this very loud opera music. Then there were TV interviews, as with Andrew Marr: “the world is mad and beautiful.” And then years ago I was sitting on a wall outside Tate Modern – and there in the distance I recognized Hockney and [quite out of character for me] I waved. And he saw me and waved back. It is a mark of what he and his work mean to me that I treasure that moment. All this and 142 illustrations [Tony Holden and see website blog 2021 05].

**Elif Shafak ‘How to stay sane in an age of division’ [2020]** – this is a 90-page contemporary political tract. It was written when deaths from the pandemic were estimated in hundreds of thousands not counted in millions. As a novelist and activist this British-Turkish female author digs deep into our human anguish, failings and sufferings. “We live in an age in which there is too much information, less knowledge and even less wisdom.” Given all her many insights and feelings – I especially respond to her: “A human being, every human being, is boundless and contains multitudes [referencing Walt Whitman].” I found it a very encouraging book and it uses the parameters of our everyday living to challenge and comfort. So, headings such as ‘disillusionment and bewilderment’ and ‘anger,’ ‘anxiety,’ and finally ‘information knowledge and wisdom’ are truly engaging [Barbara Holden].

**Helen. G. McKenny ‘A City Road Diary 1885-1888 - The Record of three years in Victorian London’ [1978]** - This diary is by the daughter of Rev McKenny, who as the Superintendent Minister of the City Road Circuit lived in the eighteenth-century house of John Wesley. The diary captures the life of end-of-century Methodism with its busy (endless?) rounds of church meetings which are enlivened by her honest and often critical comments. Living in the manse, the eighteenth-century home of John Wesley, meant a constant stream of visitors to see the relics (for example the John Wesley chair, the teapot and the clock) with the American Methodists a firm favourite of Helen’s. For Helen, this was the first time she was in close contact with the grim poverty of the time and her descriptions of the poor, particularly the elderly and the children, are very telling, as well as her practical interventions of offering food, clothing and coal tickets. She comments critically on the workers who swoop down from their heights to help the poor but then soar back to their West End homes. An interesting firsthand account of an area of London which is currently changing fast. See Virtual Tour - Wesley's Chapel and Leysian Mission <https://www.wesleyschapel.org.uk/your-visit/virtual-tour/> and <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3EC0AaQe3mLQTrdBkWqOUA> [Gillian Webster].

**John le Carré ‘Agent running in the field’ [2019]** - I decided to re-read this le Carré novel. For those who have read him over the years, or watch TV adaptations, the author’s name says most of it, if not all. Un-spy-like [he] is openly damning of Brexit, Trump and Putin. It’s a clever, layered, story with much to enjoy especially if you like badminton or intrigue! [Tony Holden].

**Jonathon Bate ‘English Literature – a very short introduction’ [2010]** - I’ve been re-reading one of the [usually interesting] Oxford ‘A very short introduction’ series. This by Jonathon Bate is an enjoyable survey and discussion of what ‘English-Literature’ includes and excludes. I first joined this ‘game’ at Leeds University [1958-1961]. There is much to enjoy and consider. Here’s a telling example - In discussing America in terms of its ‘unique destiny’ as a ‘melting pot’ [Zangwill 1908] he writes: “But is that destiny so unique? For two millennia, Britain has been a crucible into which Celts, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Norsemen, Normans, Huguenots, Dutch, Hanoverians, Jews, migrants, refugees, and former colonial subjects, all the races of Europe and far beyond, have melted and reformed. By bringing their own languages, they have immeasurably enriched the English language, and that is one of the principal sources of the unique richness and variety of English Literature.” [Tony Holden and see RAB2 issue 4 August 2020].

**Laura Imai Messina ‘The Phone Box at the End of the World’ [2020]** - is a beautiful book that tells a story about the aftermath of a disaster; of how people come through and build something else afterwards. Following the Tsunami of 2011, in the northeast of Japan, a man installed a disconnected telephone box at the end of his garden. The telephone box carries voices into the wind, a place where visitors speak to those whom they lost, originally to those carried away in the 2011 tsunami, later to include all loses – no matter how and when, whether it be to death, other people, ambition or the vicissitudes of life. The messages are as varied as the people that deliver them. There always is love, longing, but also anger, bafflement and hope; prayers and ordinary everyday things that that were never told and will never get told again. / Yui is a radio presenter. She hosts a talk show which is how she comes to hear about the telephone box. She is alone in the world and still dealing with the aftermath of losing her mother and daughter in the Tsunami. On her way, she meets Takeshi, who still has a daughter and a mother, but is mourning a wife lost to cancer. His daughter hasn't spoken since her mother was taken from her. Takeshi goes into the phone box and talks to his wife. Yui walks in the garden and doesn't talk to her mother or daughter. They continue to visit, and a friendship grows and grows into something deeper. This isn't a love story as such, it is love for a child, for a parent, for a friend lost - a story of how we deal with loss [Hasan Deveci].

**Madeline Miller ‘The Song of Achilles’ [2011/ 2012]** - I have been reading ‘the song of Achilles’. Wikipedia has: “The Song of Achilles is a 2011 novel by American writer Madeline Miller. Set during the Greek Heroic Age, it is an adaptation of Homer's ‘Iliad’ as told from the perspective of Patroclus.” It is very good, and I do recommend it [Philip Holden].

**Maggie O'Farrell ‘Hamnet’ [2020]** - Hamnet is a fictional account of Shakespeare's only son, who died in 1596 at the age of 11. Packed with historical detail of both rural Stratford and Tudor London, it is a story of the bond between twins and of a marriage pushed to the brink by grief. It is also a story of a kestrel and its mistress, a glovemaker's son who flouts convention in pursuit of the woman he loves and a flea that boards a boat in Alexandria. Four years after Hamnet's death, with his parents still questioning “where has he gone?” Shakespeare writes one of his most celebrated plays - Hamlet. It is a gentle, calming read, although a little sad, which I thoroughly enjoyed and recommend. Maggie O'Farrell won several awards for this in 2020 and I will be searching out some of her previous novels. [Suzanne O’Shea].

**Margaret Busby [editor] ‘New Daughters of Africa - an international anthology of writing by women of African descent [2020]’** - This book is a tome: 931 pages in the paperback edition. It is an astonishing treasure trove of writing by women of African descent. Interestingly the collection is arranged in chronological order, beginning with some important entries from the 18th and 19th centuries, and thereafter in decades. / The writings are short pieces, often extracts, and few longer than 1 to 3 pages, so never overwhelming. The book brings together a wide range of genres including memoir, biography, short stories, novels, poetry, humour, journalism, essays and speeches. / I cannot recommend this anthology highly enough. Of course, I haven’t finished it yet, but I certainly will. I find it a wonderful opportunity to hear the diverse voices of women of African descent. One reviewer wrote “It is a fantastic global literary encounter”, but it is far more than that [Angela Aldred].

**Michael Rosen ‘Many Different Kinds of Love - A Story of Life, Death and the NHS’ [2021]** - One time Children's Laureate, Michael Rosen hovered between life and death suffering from the Coronavirus. A notebook was placed at the end of his bed with an invitation to those who treated him during this time to write their comments, assuming, of course, that they had time. This beautifully written and moving book describes the author’s slow journey to recovery. It includes many of the carer's words with several references to the beloved 'Bear Hunt'. In reflecting on the painful reality of his not being able to go over it, not being able to go under it but having to go through it Michael Rosen has written a beautiful albeit painful account of his journey. One in which he was accompanied by human kindness. A joyful, moving and soulful 'Bear Hunt' for grown-ups [Ron Smith].

**Michael William Davies ‘This is Not Normal: The Collapse of Liberal Britain’ [2020]** - Davies, a Professor of Political Economy at Goldsmiths and a regular writer for The Guardian is one of the most astute commentators on affairs political and economic in the UK today. This book is a collection of articles from several journals and newspapers and covers affairs in the UK between 2016 and 2019. To quote the fly leaf, the book “takes stock of a nation that no longer recognizes itself. Davies finds the narrative sense behind apparently chaotic and irrational events, extracting their underlying logic and long-term causes. This is an essential book for anyone who wants to make sense of the current moment.” Granted, this is publisher's blurb, but this reader concurs wholeheartedly. [Pauline Fielding].

**Minouche Shafik ‘What we owe each other – a new social contract’ [2021]** – Minouche Shafik is Director of the London School of Economics since 2017 following years working in international development and for major financial institutions. [1] She writes: “By social contract I mean the mechanisms for pooling risks and investing in social benefits mediated through the political process and subsequent state action.” [2] It is about how we humans live with individual and corporate needs. How we manage changes. How we find ways through to agreements that break free from anger and disappointment to a negotiated social contract. [3] She identifies key issues: “This book is organized around the stages of life that most of us experience – raising children, going to school, getting sick, finding work, and growing old.” [4] Her three broad principles are: security for all; maximum investment in capability; and efficient, fair sharing of risks. [5] I ‘felt,’ and this is not a criticism of her or her life’s work, that we all too often underestimate the damage done to people by the misuse of power and our ‘wickedness’ towards each other. There is a huge difference [in viewpoint] between those who are living through suffering and tears [or say being campaigners] and any [pulled-back] explanation of economic options. [6] I found this a greatly enlightening book: worth reading and trying to understand. [Tony Holden].

**N. K. Jemison ‘Broken Earth Series (Fifth Season, The Obelisk Gate, The Stone Sky)’ [2015, 2016, 2017]** - This is an excellent, Hugo-award winning, sci-fi series written by American Nora Keita Jemison. It's got a lot: engaging characters, tense and unexpected plot and fast-paced writing in an accessible style. It explores what it means to be different, the dangers of othering those we share the planet with, environmental chaos, love and loss and our need for connection and purpose. Having read the first book for my book club read, I was caught up, swiftly reading books 2 and 3. Well worth checking out [Sian Newton].

**Richard Elliott Friedman ‘Who wrote the Bible?’ [1988]** - This is the most entertaining of my theological ‘re-reading’ during lockdown! You might suppose that such a daring or cheeky title points to a speculative or even fanciful book. But the Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture at Oxford, no less, commends it “for the general reader no less than to the professional biblical student”. Dr Friedman unravels the strands of writing, edited often clumsily in our Old Testament, known as J, E, D and P, and brings to life the process and personalities behind each strand. There are useful chapters on the historical context of each stage of writing and then almost dramatized accounts of how each version of tradition and history came to be written, and why. Sometimes he diverts into more scholarly dispute but, even then, very readably. He almost answers his own question with a couple of key names of probable compilers - but no spoilers from me. And, as you may deduce, there’s nothing about the New Testament! [Peter Brain].

**Roderick Floud ‘An Economic History of the English Garden’ [2020]** - Don’t be put off by the title thinking this is a book just about economics, it is so much more and a fairly easy read. It is written by an historian who is enthusiastic about gardens but who wants to know all about them. For example, who commissioned them, designed them and how much they cost then and in today’s money! Where did the plants come from, who supplied them, who planted them and what tools and technology of the age did they use? It begins mid-17th century to the present day and looks at royal gardens, gardens of the elite, parks and kitchen gardens. It makes you think how much time and money we spend on our own gardens! As so much money is spent on gardening and its supplies, the author asks: ‘why is it not part of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP)?’. A good question as this hobby contributes a lot to the economy as well as to our happiness. A very interesting and thought provoking read. [Di Rhodes].

**T M Logan** - I’ve been reading some of T M Logan and enjoying them very much. Obviously, we can’t guess other peoples’ likes and dislikes but these are worth trying if you don’t know them: <https://www.tmlogan.com/about> [Ros Pike].

**Traidcraft international calendar of women [2021]** – All the lives are interesting but the one who impresses me the most is Kristal Ambrose on the environment. She makes good points about activism – namely that people in poverty don’t have the time, energy, or resources to be activists. So, to quote Kristal Ambrose: “If you don’t know better how can you do better, how do you reach communities that are more focused on feeding their families than refusing to use a [plastic] bag?” [Joanna Newton].

**Ulrica Nordström ‘Moss’ [2019] -** this is the best book I have read recently. It was very informative and has some really nice pictures. There is also good advice on how to grow different types of moss and its uses [Joanna Newton].