

Suffolk Humanists Monthly Bulletin

Our November event:

"War Art"

November 12th: 'War Art'

Following last year's successful meeting on 'War Poetry' to commemorate Armistice Day, our meeting on 12th November will be on 'War Art'. George Bethell will give an illustrated talk showing some of the ways in which war is portrayed in paintings and how styles and messages have changed over time. Venue: upstairs at the Thomas Wolsey pub, St Peter's Street, Ipswich. 7:30 pm onwards.

The Tuesday Takeover

We were invited to take part in Radio Suffolk's Tuesday Takeover last week. This is a 150 minute programme where various community groups are encouraged to come into the studio to discuss their views and share with the listeners. Last week's topic was 'All faiths and none'.

The programme interspersed themes with pre-recorded snippets of views, our studio reactions and music tracks selected by those present. Themes discussed included "What is spirituality?", 'The sanctity of life', 'Why my religion is important to me' and ended up with discussion of the 'Golden Rule'. Given that the programme was billed as a prelude to interfaith week I had expected a Christian, Moslem, Jewish representation so was a bit surprised to find that initially there were only four of us in the studio – myself and Peter Wells (Humanists), Barbara Richardson-Todd who described herself as a 'post theist' Quaker and Martin Spettigue of the Ipswich Hindu Samaj. For the final half hour another Quaker and a Sikh joined us but it was bit odd that no mainstream religious groups came along. All in all it was a convivial get-together albeit a rather atheist dominated prelude to interfaith week! Denis

Suffolk Hate Crime Conference

This half day conference was hosted by the Suffolk Constabulary and was primarily a series of presentation addressing the growth of hate crime nationally and locally and indications of how the police are tackling it. The general message was that numbers were both increasing and spreading into areas such as attacks on those with disabilities. By far the most impressive part of the conference was a short but moving performance by 'Alter-Ego' who acted out how it felt to be a victim of hate crime. Some of the audience were in tears. I was left feeling that to take this to schools, colleges and community groups would probably do more to reduce hate crime than all the legislative actions combined. Denis

October meeting – Book review.

The meeting this month was a book review and as expected it showed just how broad (some might say strange) our interests are. Rather than attempt to summarise what was said each of the contributors has produced a brief summary.

'The Last English King': Julian Rathbone

An historical novel loosely based on events around 1066 involving Watt, who's a Houscarl to Harold Godwinson, King of England. It's a tricky time in English history. Watt's journey which takes him through the period before the Battle of Hastings, to the battle itself where he is badly injured, but not killed. He then suffers greatly from guilt at not having died in defence of his Lord, and begins his meandering journey across Europe and the Middle East, to Jerusalem. On the way he meets Quint, a Monk of sorts, who acts as his friend and counsellor,

and who draws out much more of the story and the personal details of Watt's life. Fascinating romp through history with pretty of elaboration of fact, though the depiction of William as a psychotic thug is probably correct. Good book for boys and history buffs who enjoy a flight of fantasy. (Review by Peter Wells)

'Home Fire' & 'Milkman'

For my book choice I chose two books! Kamila Shamsie's Women's Prize for Fiction winner, 'Home Fire' and the 2018 Booker winner 'Milkman' by Anna Burns. The first is a gripping story about home-grown terrorism and the second a complex and revealing account of The Troubles told from the point of view of a young woman. Not only are both beautifully written but they are also highly relevant to the UK today. Home Fire features a right wing Home Secretary of Asian descent. Ring any bells? Milkman, on the other hand, reminds us of the deep, long-standing sectarian divides in Northern Ireland at a time when Brexit plans once again put the spotlight on the sensitive issue of 'the border'. Both are recommended. (Review by George Bethell)

'A humanist's decalogue': Ronald Fletcher.

My selection was not a book but a magazine article. It was from New Society dated May 2 1963. As a young person already sure that I was a humanist, I was interested that Ronald Fletcher, a lecturer in sociology at Bedford College, London, should suggest a reply to teenagers' questions such as "What ought we to do? What rules of conduct do you offer us?" Fletcher's answer was "A humanist's decalogue" – Ten Commandments! But humanists don't have commandments or a creed, you say. Well, no, these are non-commandments, a base from which to start. Shouldn't we have an answer when a young person asks for advice? Or are we going to rely on a "cloud" of ethical knowledge from which ideas are somehow absorbed?

A humanist's decalogue:

Never accept authority
Base your conduct upon simple humane principles
Strive to eliminate war

Strive to eliminate poverty, and work for greater material prosperity for all

Do not be a snob

In sexual behaviour, use your brains as well as your genitals, and always in that order

Enjoy family life and marriage

Keep the law

Commit yourself to active citizenship

Have confidence in the modern world and in your powers to improve it

Fletcher expands all of the above precepts over his four-page article.

In our group discussion it was said that some of these suggested "rules" showed their age. Greater material prosperity begins to sound like a recommendation for ever more financial growth. Enjoying family life and marriage would need heavy qualification these days. But the question remains: when asked about ways to behave, do we remain vague and non-prescriptive, or do we try to suggest directions to explore? (Review by John Palmer)

'Educated': Tara Westover.

This autobiography is a remarkable story of a young woman overcoming almost incredible obstacles to become a highly respected academic and historian with a degree from Brigham Young University and an MPhil from Trinity College, Cambridge. Tara Westover was born in rural Idaho, USA in 1986 into a Survivalist Mormon family awaiting the End of Days. Despite being made to undertake hard manual work from a very early age, and being raised in an abusive and dysfunctional family, her thirst for knowledge gave her the determination to educate herself. Her drive is even more impressive when you read that she was not permitted to attend school and she was ignorant of world events to the extent that she was unaware of the World Wars or the Holocaust. The book is extremely well written without any self-pity or recrimination. The fact that she repeatedly returned to her family was never really explained, but her lack of judgment for the harsh treatment does her credit. This should be a depressing read, but instead it is inspirational and an insight into how some families are still living in this enlightened age. (Review by Charlotte Meadows)

'The Demon-Haunted World': Carl Sagan.

This book has a sub-title which I think better describes it: Science as a candle in the dark. Written in 1996, the year that he sadly died aged 62, it is a beautifully written combination of autobiography and to a greater extent a dissection of irrational beliefs and how to counter these. Topics addressed range from abduction by aliens to political matters, religious visions, and conspiracy theories. I particularly like his chapter titled The Fine Art of Baloney Detection, which lists a set of 'tools' to help you spot dubious reasoning, with lots of real life examples. To quote from the book (chapter 11): What skeptical thinking boils down to is the means to construct, and to understand, a reasoned argument and, especially important, to recognize a fallacious or fraudulent argument. The question is not whether we like the conclusion that emerges out of a train of reasoning, but whether the conclusion follows from the premises or starting point and whether that premise is true. (Review by Mike Whybray)

'Galileo's Finger': Peter Atkins

Galileo, one of whose fingers is preserved in a vessel displayed in Florence, did much to point the way out of medieval ignorance. Peter Atkins uses this symbolic finger to reveal the nature of our universe, our world, and ourselves by gathering together ten central ideas of current science. From evolution and the emergence of complexity, to entropy and energy, to symmetry and the quantification of beauty and from cosmology to spacetime he starts each topic at a very simple level and then gently builds ideas. Despite superb clarity of writing this is not a book to be read in one go. I found I needed to read and re-read parts to let them sink in before moving on. That said it is probably the best book I have come across that communicates the key ideas of modern science in a very accessible way. (Review by Denis Johnston)

'The Flavour Thesaurus': Niki Segnit.

Not the usual sort of book meant to be read from start to finish....but as it says a thesaurus. To dip into perhaps on the basis of what is in the fridge. The book is an exploration of 99 flavours giving

4,851 possible pairings.!!!

All pairs are cross referenced.

The entries elaborate on each of these pairings...drawing on flavour science, history, culture chef's wisdom ...and some humour thrown in. A great starting point for creative food, with the addition of interesting information ...but be aware that it is definitely not a recipe book. (Although there are some recipes). The book is also in a nice binding and would make an excellent gift for a cook's collection. (Review by Barbara Wells)

'Sarum': Edward Rutherford.

'Sarum' is a story of five families through 100 centuries. It all centres on Old Sarum and Salisbury from beyond recorded time to the present day. It tells of revenge and rivalry between the families, but also of the creation of Stonehenge and the old, and new, Salisbury Cathedrals. The author combines well researched history with gripping story-telling. He has written similar novels based on London, Ireland, New Forest, Russia - all excellent reads, especially for lovers of history. (Review by Marion Palmer).

'Human Errors': Nathan H. Lents

This most interesting book explains that we have genes that are broken, muscles attached to nothing and pointless bones too! If we had been designed by an engineer things would be different. Details that are incorrect include sinuses in the wrong place. This is mainly because as our primate ancestors evolved we became less reliant on smell and more on vision – our snouts & nasal cavities got squashed into a more compact face and making room for bigger brains didn't help either. As well as explaining our many problems because we now walk upright (problems such as a 'slipped disc' are unheard of in other primates) the book covers our inability to make enough vitamins etc. for ourselves which is why we must have a varied diet. We adapted haphazardly and errors are inevitable. Natural selection resulted in a rapid increase in our brain capacity and size but other parts of our bodies have not adapted. Random mutations that don't help are not easy to fix! (Review by Edna Salmon)

In case you missed it ...

1. John Humphrys on "Thought for the day"

Retiring from the BBC after 32 years John Humphrys has said the Today programme should scrap its Thought for the Day feature because it is discriminatory against people without a religion.

On ITV's Good Morning Britain, he illustrated this elegantly by pointing out that host Piers Morgan would be able to deliver his Thought for the Day because he is Catholic but that he (Humphrys) would not be allowed to because he is an atheist.

2. Humanists UK petition

HUK have had more than 17,000 sign a petition calling on advertising regulator to allow criticism of religion and belief in advertising even if it causes offence.

(Thanks to Edna Salmon for pointing these out)

Upcoming talks and events

November:

Tuesday 12th November 'War Art' with George Bethell, Thomas Wolsey pub, Ipswich, 7.30.

December:

Currently we have three events scheduled for December but the announcement of a General Election may well throw a spanner in the works.

Thursday 5th December 'An evening with Ipswich MP Sandy Martin' at Friends Meeting House Fonnereau Rd. 7.30.

Tuesday 10th December 'Midwinter Festivals', with Robin Herne, Course leader for Religious Studies

and Ethics, West Suffolk College and local author.

This will be at 7.30 on 10th December in the Thomas Wolsey pub Ipswich.

Saturday 7th December at 7.30 'United Nation Association Annual Celebration of Humans Rights', Ipswich Buddhist Centre, 4 Friars Bridge Rd, Ipswich IP1 1RR.

This year's theme will be based on Article 18 - Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Monthly lunchtime meetings

Our next monthly lunchtime meetup at the Duke of York will be on November 30th at 12.30.

There will not be a lunchtime meeting on December 28th.

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