

## Lifting Uplifting Books

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The *Observer* (5 April, 2020) featured a number of authors recommending uplifting books for the times that are in it. Here are a few I thought were especially appealing.

Our own Sebastian Barry suggests *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius. Maybe not on everybody's bookshelf, but Barry is persuasive. Marcus Aurelius was Roman Emperor some 2,000 years ago. Plague was, apparently, a recurring catastrophe during his reign. According to Barry, Marcus took as a given that troubles are constant, but, 'the weapons against them are courtesy and compassion and to do the work that is allotted to you'. Courtesy is, I think, a much underestimated virtue, a quiet civility which connects us with our fellow citizens and from which flows compassion.

Hilary Mantel, who also has Irish connections, suggests *The Women in Black*, about salesladies in the 1950s and set in Sydney. The novel was written by Madeleine St John and published in 1993. Rachel Joyce also favours a book set in the 1950s. This story appeals to her because it supplies flair, compassion and a good dose of humour'. Written by Elizabeth McCracken, the story, which is set in Cape Cod, features a giant and a librarian. Joyce writes, '*The Giant's House* is about learning to welcome the unexpected miracle, and the strength of choosing to love in a world that makes no promises. A small masterpiece.'

Kazuo Ishiguro, author of the 'exquisitely subtle' *The Remains of the Day*, recommends *The Fortnight in September* by R C Sherriff. The novel was published in 1931 and is, according to Ishiguro an 'exquisitely subtle' account of an ordinary, not privileged London family going on holidays to Bognor Regis. Ishiguro admires Sherriff's characters for their 'instinctive decency towards one another and for their 'beautiful dignity' – qualities which make his own work so distinguished. Sherriff will be better known to some as the author of *Journey's End*, a play based upon his time in the trenches. It was championed by G B Shaw and became a great success. A film version has been made recently.

Elif Shafak takes inspiration from the Canadian musician Leonard Cohen. His biography, *I'm your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen*, written by Sylvie Simmons is, apparently, 'terrific'. Shafak admires Cohen for his humour, humanism, melancholy. Though perhaps we might also recall that he had quite a witty side – as her own quote reveals; 'Darling, I was born in a suit.'

Colm Toibin laconically recommends Conrad's *Victory* as 'the best novel I know about social distancing. Toibin, a considerable master of style himself, though apt to occasional delinquency in punctuation, admires Conrad's 1915 novel for its unusual technique – 'many scenes are narrated twice, [comma supplied] from the perspective of two different characters. Though, of course, it might be a subeditor who has removed the comma and Mr Toibin may be fulminating still about this travesty.

David Peace appeals to 'anyone missing sport'. He recommends *McIlvanney on Football*. I am sure this is a delightful tome, but I am perhaps more taken with Peace's terrific suggestion of reading aloud to a loved one. A rather forgotten art, well worth reinvigorating.