

Chichester u3a non-fiction book group

books we have read and discussed since 2023:

1. **The final invention by James Barrat**

Corporations and government agencies around the world have for years been pouring billions into achieving AI's Holy Grail - human-level intelligence. Once AI has attained it, scientists argue, it will have survival drives much like our own. We may be forced to compete with a rival more cunning, more powerful, and more alien than we can imagine.

First published ten years ago, *Our Final Invention* predicted much of the artificial 'intelligence explosion' that is now ripping through our culture. Now with an urgent new preface, James Barrat's landmark work explores the ethics, history and future perils of the heedless pursuit of advanced AI.

2. **Who are we now?** by Jason Cowley

Jason Cowley, editor-in-chief of the *New Statesman*, examines contemporary England through a handful of the key news stories from recent times to reveal what they tell us about the state of the nation and to answer the question, *Who Are We Now?*

3. **The antidote** by Oliver Burkeman

Is our search for happiness futile? Or are we just going about it the wrong way? In this fascinating new book, Oliver Burkeman argues that 'positive thinking' and relentless optimism aren't the solution to the happiness dilemma, but part of the problem. And that there is, in fact, an alternative path to contentment and success that involves embracing the things we spend our lives trying to avoid - uncertainty, insecurity, pessimism and failure. Thought-provoking, counter-intuitive and ultimately uplifting, *"The Antidote"* is a celebration of the power of negative thinking.

4. **Arabian Sands** by Wilfred Thesiger

Wilfred Thesiger, repulsed by what he saw as the softness and rigidity of Western life - 'the machines, the calling cards, the meticulously aligned streets' - spent years exploring in and around the vast, waterless desert that is the 'Empty Quarter' of Arabia. Travelling amongst the Bedu people, he experienced their everyday challenges of hunger and thirst, the trials of long marches beneath the relentless sun, the bitterly cold nights and the constant danger of death if it was discovered he was a Christian 'infidel'. He was the first European to visit most of the region, and just before he left the area the process that would change it forever had begun - the discovery of oil.

5. A home for all seasons by Gavin Plumley

Gavin considered himself an urban being... until he met his husband, Alastair. Together, they bought Stepps House in Pembridge, Herefordshire - on love at first sight. But then came the question: 'How old is it?' With its ancient beams, the date they'd been given seemed out by centuries. As Gavin traced Stepps House through various hands and eras, he saw a past emerge that resonates powerfully with our present. Mixing history and art, memoir and landscape, *A Home for All Seasons* is grand in its sweep and intimate in its account of rural life.

6. Eastern approaches by Fitzroy Maclean

Eastern Approaches is Maclean's classic, gripping account of the sybaritic delights of diplomatic life, the thrill of remote travel in the then-forbidden zones of Central Asia, and the violence and adventure of world-changing tours in North Africa and Yugoslavia. Maclean is the original British action hero and this is blistering reading.

7. Elizabethans by Andrew Marr

In brilliantly entertaining style and with unexpected insights into some of our sung and unsung heroes, Andrew Marr offers up a first draft of the history we are all living. This is our story as the new Elizabethans – the story of how 1950s Britain evolved into the diverse country we live in today. In short, it is the history of modern Britain.

8. The order of time by Carlo Rovelli

Time is a mystery that does not cease to puzzle us. Philosophers, artists and poets have long explored its meaning while scientists have found that its structure is different from the simple intuition we have of it. From Boltzmann to quantum theory, from Einstein to loop quantum gravity, our understanding of time has been undergoing radical transformations. Time flows at a different speed in different places, the past and the future differ far less than we might think, and the very notion of the present evaporates in the vast universe.

With his extraordinary charm and sense of wonder, bringing together science, philosophy and art, Carlo Rovelli unravels this mystery. Enlightening and consoling, *The Order of Time* shows that to understand ourselves we need to reflect on time -- and to understand time we need to reflect on ourselves.

9. The future of geography by Jim Marshall

Space: the new frontier, a wild and lawless place. It is already central to communication, economics, military strategy and international relations on Earth. Now, it is the latest arena for human exploration, exploitation – and, possibly, conquest. We're heading up and out, and we're taking our power struggles with us. China, the USA and Russia are leading the way.

From physical territory and resources to satellites, weaponry and strategic choke points, geopolitics is as important in the skies above us as it is down below. If you've ever wondered if humans are going back to the Moon, who will benefit from exploration or what space wars might look like, the answers are here.

10. The coming wave by Mustafa Suleyman

Soon you will live surrounded by AIs. They will organise your life, operate your business, and run core government services. You will live in a world of DNA printers and quantum computers, engineered pathogens and autonomous weapons, robot assistants and abundant energy.

None of us are prepared.

As co-founder of the pioneering AI company DeepMind, part of Google, Mustafa Suleyman has been at the centre of this revolution. The coming decade, he argues, will be defined by this wave of powerful, fast-proliferating new technologies.

In *The Coming Wave*, Suleyman shows how these forces will create immense prosperity but also threaten the nation-state, the foundation of global order. As our fragile governments sleepwalk into disaster, we face an existential dilemma: unprecedented harms on one side and the threat of overbearing surveillance on the other.

11. Justice, what's the right thing to do? by Michael Sandell

Michael Sandel's *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* invites readers of all ages and political persuasions on a journey of moral reflection, and shows how reasoned debate can illuminate our lives.

Is it always wrong to lie?

Should there be limits to personal freedom?

Can killing sometimes be justified?

Is the free market fair?

What is the right thing to do?

Questions like these are at the heart of our lives. In this acclaimed book Michael Sandel - BBC Reith Lecturer and the Harvard professor whose 'Justice' course has become world famous - gives us a lively and accessible introduction to the intersection of politics and philosophy. He helps us think our way through such hotly contested issues as equal rights, democracy, euthanasia, abortion and same-sex marriage, as well as the ethical dilemmas we face every day.

12. Koh-i-nor by Anita Anad and William Dalrymple

The history of the Koh-i-Noor may have been one woven together from gossip of Delhi bazaars, but it was to become the accepted version. Only now is it finally challenged, freeing the diamond from the fog of mythology that has clung to it for so long. The resulting history is one of greed, murder, torture, colonialism and appropriation told through an impressive slice of south and central Asian history. It ends with the jewel in its current controversial setting: in the crown of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, which was deemed too contentious to be used by Camilla, the Queen Consort, in King Charles's coronation.

13. Do no Harm by Henry Marsh

"Do no harm" offers an unforgettable insight into the highs and lows of a life dedicated to operating on the human brain, in all its exquisite complexity. With astonishing candour and compassion, Henry Marsh reveals the exhilarating drama of surgery, the chaos and confusion of a busy modern hospital, and above all the need for hope when faced with life's most agonising decisions.

14. The invisible doctrine by George Monbiot

We live under an ideology that preys on every aspect of our lives: our education and our jobs; our healthcare and our leisure; our relationships and our mental wellbeing; even the planet we inhabit – the very air we breathe. So pervasive has it become that, for most people, it has no name. It seems unavoidable, like a natural law.

15. The only gaijin in the village by Iain Maloney

In 2016 Scottish writer Iain Maloney and his Japanese wife Minori moved to a village in rural Japan. This is the story of his attempt to fit in, be accepted and fulfil his duties as a member of the community, despite being the only foreigner in the village. Told with self-deprecating humour, this memoir gives a fascinating insight into a side of Japan rarely seen and affirms the positive benefits of immigration for the individual and the community. It's not always easy being the only gaijin in the village.

16. A pocket history of the Irish famine by Fiona Briggs

The Great Famine, an Gorta Mór in Irish, was a period of mass starvation, disease and emigration in Ireland between 1845 and 1852. Often referred to as the Irish Potato Famine, particularly outside Ireland, as around forty percent of the population were reliant on this crop. Over a million people died and over a million more emigrated, often in appalling circumstances.

This book explains what happened before and during the Famine, with an account of the consequences of this epic tragedy.

17. The salt path by Raynor Winn

Just days after Raynor learns that Moth, her husband of 32 years, is terminally ill, their home is taken away and they lose their livelihood. With nothing left and little time, they make the brave and impulsive decision to walk the 630 miles of the sea-swept South West Coast Path, from Somerset to Dorset, via Devon and Cornwall.

18. Hellish Nell by Malcom Gaskill

One of the last criminal trials using the 1735 Witchcraft Act was, improbably, in London in 1944. The accused was Helen Duncan, a middle-aged Scotswoman. This is her extraordinary story.

19. How to live, a life of Montaigne by Sarah Bakewell

This question obsessed Renaissance nobleman Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533-92), who wrote free-roaming explorations of his thought and experience, unlike anything written before. Into these essays he put whatever was in his head: his tastes in wine and food, his childhood memories, the way his dog's ears twitched when it was dreaming, events in the appalling civil wars raging around him. The Essays was an instant bestseller, and over four hundred years later, readers still come to him in search of companionship, wisdom and entertainment - and in search of themselves.

20. Mindf*ck by Christopher Wylie

The book is a first-hand exposé from Wylie, a key insider and the former research director at Cambridge Analytica (CA), who became a whistleblower. Readers appreciate this unique, insider perspective on how data was weaponized for political gain

21. Material World by Ed Conway

Salt, iron, copper, oil and lithium. They built our world, and they will transform our future.

These are the six most crucial substances in human history. They took us from the Dark Ages to the present day. They power our computers and phones, build our homes and offices, and create life-saving medicines. But most of us take them completely for granted.

In Material World, Ed Conway travels the globe - from the sweltering depths of the deepest mine in Europe, to spotless silicon chip factories in Taiwan, to the eerie green pools where lithium originates - to uncover a secret world we rarely see. Revealing the true marvel of these substances, he follows the mind-boggling journeys, miraculous processes and little-known companies

that turn the raw materials we all need into products of astonishing complexity.

22. Rising Down by Alexandra Harris

When Alexandra Harris returned to her childhood home of West Sussex, she realised that she barely knew the place at all. As she probed beneath the surface, excavating layers of archival records and everyday objects, hundreds of unexpected stories and hypnotic voices emerged from the area's past. These electrifying encounters - ranging from those with the painter John Constable and the modernist writer Ford Madox Ford to the lost local women who left little trace - inspired her to imagine lives that, though seemingly distant, are deeply connected through this shared landscape. By focusing on one small patch of England, Harris opens vast new horizons.

23. The house by the Thames by Gillian Tindal

Just across the River Thames from St Paul's Cathedral stands an old and elegant house. Over the course of almost 450 years the dwelling on this site has witnessed many changes. From its windows, people have watched the ferrymen carry Londoners to and from Shakespeare's Globe; they have gazed on the Great Fire; they have seen the countrified lanes of London's marshy south bank give way to a network of wharves, workshops and tenements – and then seen these, too, become dust and empty air.

24. Raising Hare by Chloe Dalton

Raising Hare is the story of their journey together. It chronicles an extraordinary relationship between human and animal, rekindling our sense of awe towards nature and wildlife. Their improbable bond of trust reminds us that the most remarkable experiences, inspiring the most hope, often arise when we least expect them.

25. Black Wave by Kim Chattas

In Black Wave, award-winning journalist and author Kim Ghattas argues that the turning point in the modern history of the Middle East can be located in the toxic confluence of three major events in 1979: the Iranian revolution; the siege of the Holy Mosque in Mecca; and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Before this year, Saudi Arabia and Iran had been working allies and twin pillars of US strategy in the region - but the radical legacy of these events made them mortal enemies, unleashing a process that transformed culture, society, religion and geopolitics across the region for decades to come.

26. The Garden against time by Olivia Laing

When Olivia Laing began to restore a walled garden in Suffolk, an overgrown Eden of unusual plants, the work drew them into an exhilarating investigation of paradise and its long association with gardens.

27. Mudlarking by Lara Maiklem

Lara Maiklem has scoured the banks of the Thames for over fifteen years, in pursuit of the objects that the river unearths: from Neolithic flints to Roman hair pins, medieval buckles to Tudor buttons, Georgian clay pipes to Victorian toys. These objects tell her about London and its lost ways of life.

28. Autocracy Inc by Ann Applebaum

All of us have in our minds a cartoon image of what an autocratic state looks like, with a bad man at the top. But in the 21st century, that cartoon bears little resemblance to reality. Nowadays, autocracies are run not by one bad guy, but by sophisticated networks composed of kleptocratic financial structures, security services and professional propagandists. The members of these networks are connected not only within a given country, but among many countries. The corrupt, state-controlled companies in one dictatorship do business with corrupt, state-controlled companies in another. The police in one country can arm, equip, and train the police in another. The propagandists share resources—the troll farms that promote one dictator's propaganda can also be used to promote the propaganda of another—and themes, pounding home the same messages about the weakness of democracy and the evil of America.

Unlike military or political alliances from other times and places, this group doesn't operate like a bloc, but rather like an agglomeration of companies: Autocracy, Inc. Their relations are not based on values, but are rather transactional, which is why they operate so easily across ideological, geographical, and cultural lines. In truth, they are in full agreement about only one thing: Their dislike of us, the inhabitants of the democratic world, and their desire to see both our political systems and our values undermine.

That shared understanding of the world—where it comes from, why it lasts, how it works, how the democratic world has unwittingly helped to consolidate it, and how we can help bring it down—is the subject of this book.

29. Return of the king by William Dalrymple

In the spring of 1839, Britain invaded Afghanistan for the first time. Nearly 20,000 British and East India Company troops poured through the high mountain passes and re-established on the throne Shah Shuja ul-Mulk.

On the way in, the British faced little resistance. But after two years of occupation, the Afghan people rose in answer to the call for jihad and the country exploded into violent rebellion. The First Anglo-Afghan War ended in Britain's greatest military humiliation of the nineteenth century: an entire army of the then most powerful nation in the world ambushed in retreat and utterly routed by poorly equipped tribesmen.

Using a range of forgotten Afghan and Indian sources, William Dalrymple's masterful retelling of Britain's greatest imperial disaster is a powerful parable of colonial ambition and cultural collision, folly and hubris. *Return of a King* is history at its most urgent and important

30. Travels with Epicurus by Daniel Klein

Our society worships at the fountain of youth. Each year, we try to delay the arrival of old age, using everything at our disposal, from extreme exercise and Botox to Pilates and cosmetic dentistry. But in the process, are we missing out on a distinct and extraordinarily valuable stage of life? Asking whether it is better to be forever young or to grin toothlessly and live an authentic old age, bestselling author Daniel Klein journeys to the Greek island of Hydra. There he draws on the lives of octogenarian Greek locals, as well as philosophers ranging from Epicurus to Sartre, to discover the secrets of ageing happily. An escapist travel memoir, a droll meditation, and an optimistic guide to living well, this is a delightful jaunt through the terrain of old age, led by a witty and uniquely perceptive modern-day sage.

31. The righteous mind by Jonathan Haidt

Why can't our political leaders work together as threats loom and problems mount? Why do people so readily assume the worst about the motives of their fellow citizens?

In *The Righteous Mind*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt explores the origins of our divisions and points the way forward to mutual understanding. His starting point is moral intuition - the nearly instantaneous perceptions we all have about other people and the things they do. These intuitions feel like self-evident truths, making us righteously certain that those who see things differently are wrong.

32. Year of the rat by Harry Shukman

The British far right is working to dismantle our democracy. This shocking, eye-opening undercover journey reveals who they are, how they operate and how they are normalising extreme ideologies including eugenics. In summer 2024, riots swept England in the biggest wave of far-right violence in the post-war period. But far-right activity takes many other forms as well, all of them dangerous.

Journalist Harry Shukman knows the dangers all too well: he'd gone undercover to infiltrate these groups. For over a year, he carefully attached his hidden lapel camera and pretended to be an extremist named Chris.

33. The story of a heart by Rachel Clarke

One summer day, nine-year-old Keira suffered catastrophic injuries in a car accident. Though her brain and the rest of her body began to shut down, her heart continued to beat. In an act of extraordinary generosity, Keira's parents and siblings agreed that she would have wanted to be an organ donor. Meanwhile nine-year-old Max had been hospitalised for nearly a year with a virus that was causing his young heart to fail. When Max's parents received the call they had been hoping for, they knew it came at a terrible cost to another family.

This is the unforgettable story of how one family's grief transformed into a lifesaving gift. With tremendous compassion and clarity, Dr Rachel Clarke relates the urgent journey of Keira's heart and explores the history of the remarkable medical innovations that made it possible, stretching back over a century and involving the knowledge and dedication not just of surgeons but of countless physicians, immunologists, nurses and scientists.

34. Dominion by Tom Holland

Christianity is the most enduring and influential legacy of the ancient world, and its emergence the single most transformative development in Western history. Even the increasing number in the West today who have abandoned the faith of their forebears, and dismiss all religion as pointless superstition, remain recognisably its heirs. Seen close-up, the division between a sceptic and a believer may seem unbridgeable. Widen the focus, though, and Christianity's enduring impact upon the West can be seen in the emergence of much that has traditionally been cast as its nemesis: in science, in secularism, and yes, even in atheism.

That is why *Dominion* will place the story of how we came to be what we are, and how we think the way that we do, in the broadest historical context. Ranging in time from the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BC to the on-going migration crisis in Europe today, and from Nebuchadnezzar to the Beatles, it will explore just what it was that made Christianity so revolutionary and disruptive; how completely it came to saturate the mind-set of Latin Christendom; and why, in a West that has become increasingly doubtful of religion's claims, so many of its instincts remain irredeemably Christian. The aim is twofold: to make the listener appreciate just how novel and uncanny were Christian teachings when they first appeared in the world; and to make ourselves, and all that we take for granted, appear similarly strange in consequence. We stand at the end-point of an extraordinary transformation in the understanding of what it is to be human: one that can only be fully appreciated by tracing the arc of its parabola over millennia.