



Parish of the Nativity of the Lord

Book+Circle - June 2020

***Autobiography* by G K Chesterton**

***The Bridge of San Luis Rey* by Thornton Wilder**

About the books

In *Autobiography* Chesterton describes his happy childhood, the intellectual 'doubts and morbidities' of his youth and his search for a true vocation. He includes many (often lengthy) anecdotes about his literary friends, including Hilaire Belloc, Henry James, George Bernard Shaw, and H G Wells; central to his story are his quest for religious conviction, his encounters with inspiring priests and other people of faith, and his conversion to Catholicism.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey is a novel centred on the collapse of an ancient bridge over a gorge in Peru, hurling five people into the abyss. The event seems a meaningless human tragedy. But one witness, a Franciscan monk, believes the deaths might not be as random as they appear. Convinced that the disaster is a punishment sent from Heaven, the monk sets out to discover all he can about the travellers. The five strangers were connected in some way, he thinks. There must be a purpose behind their deaths. But are their lost lives the result of sin? Or of love?

Most readers had read both books, and shared their observations by email.

How did the books make us feel?

Autobiography:

Many readers approached this with some trepidation based on previous experience with Chesterton's writing (apart from Father Brown novels), but were happily surprised by his lightness of touch, self-effacement and humour throughout. Chapters' titles such as 'How to be a dunce' and 'How to be a lunatic' give a flavour of the fun contained in them. Readers were also taken by the author's tendency (unusual in an autobiography) not to bother much with dates or chronological presentation of facts about himself, and to spend so much time talking about his contemporaries; the sources of his literary and spiritual inspirations are shared in a roundabout and nuanced way. The book is full of references to political, literary and social figures of those days with whom most readers were not very familiar, not being that well versed in the history of Chesterton's lifetime (1874-1936); however, this did not

necessarily detract from enjoyment of how he wrote about them. Chesterton's exploration of his childhood was found to be intriguing. The lack of content about his wife is unexpected; however, it may be due to the fact that he wrote the book at the end of his life (finishing it only a few weeks before his death) to satisfy the insistent demands of his friends and admirers, and so he probably included the parts of his life that were of interest to them (in particular, his spiritual journeying), while maintaining his wife's privacy.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey:

Several readers rated this as a beautiful 'gem' about love, grief, loss and redemption: profound, sad and wise. For some it was a quick read, while others found it took them time and effort to get into the story because of the style of Wilder's prose. Although the book essentially starts off as a series of short stories about the five characters, which wasn't to every reader's taste, the stories gradually become interwoven and this increased readers' interest in knowing where the overall story was going. The poor monk's demise was not popular, but was perhaps in keeping with the 'realism' of the overall account.

What did the group think were the books' main strengths and weaknesses?

Autobiography:

As could be expected of such an established author, the book is very well written, although it took some readers a couple of chapters to get into the Chesterton style (which can be somewhat wordy) and era. Chesterton's ability to relate aspects of himself in childhood with how he thought and behaved in adulthood contributes to a satisfying sense of 'coming full circle'. His observations on hypocritical and illogical Victorian values are unflinching and timeless; they are in keeping with what Jesus taught 2000 years ago and what Pope Francis teaches today. One reader observed also how much contemporary relevance there is to Chesterton's statement 'the cries, catcalls, jokes and jeers of the mob at a public-meeting were very much wittier and worth more hearing' than the politician speaking to the meeting. The last chapter provides an excellent case for the sacrament of Penance, and the importance of being grateful and not taking things for granted, a doctrine very dear to Chesterton's heart.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey:

Readers liked the way the story is narrated, in a detached and non-judgmental style. One reader pointed out that this chimes with the author's view that the job of a writer is not to answer a question but to pose the question correctly and clearly. The book has a powerful ending, giving a strong sense that God has a plan and it is playing out, but not in the way the monk expected: instead of people dying because of the evil they did and their lack of goodness/piety/usefulness in the world (which was his theory), it appears that the transcendental power of love rather than punishment or death wins in the end. Several

readers especially liked the closing paragraph, and in particular the last sentence: 'There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.'

Would we read another book written by the same authors?

Possibly.

Would we recommend this book to someone else?

Autobiography:

Yes, to someone interested in the history, politics and literary characters of Chesterton's time; also to anyone who likes a good gossip with someone who shares similar values (including a liking for self-deprecation and distaste for hypocrisy).

The Bridge of San Luis Rey:

Yes, to someone looking for an interesting, quick read. A reader observed that she had read the book a few years ago, and again this month, and had quite different experiences of it, being at different life stages; this might be a factor in choosing people to whom we might recommend the book.

Next book

The Name of God is Mercy, by Pope Francis and Oonagh Stransky

Date of next meeting

Friday 7th August, 10.30 am, in the Retreat Café, PNL St Joseph's, Redhill, to be confirmed.