

Allison's Book Corner

February 2021

The Dig by John Preston (Other Press, 2016)

The Dig (Simon Stone (director), Moira Buffini (screenplay) 2021)

I have the perfect book and movie for your snowy winter days. At first glance, this book and film may not seem to appeal to everyone. *The Dig* will be thoroughly enjoyed by those who love reading quiet British novels and watching the same type of films. Not everyone's cup of tea, but it sure is mine. And please give me a refill in your best china teacup with a blueberry scone on the side. However, if the reader and moviegoer are patient, there is a wonderful piece of history for all of us to unearth.

A quiet story reveals a lot of depth if you look beneath the surface, quite similar to the quiet, shy people one may know. And this novel is based upon a true story which touches upon the



readers' and the viewers' humanity. Not only that, the treasures from this 1939 dig are displayed at the British Museum today, 82 years later. I find that fascinating, even thrilling on some level.

The author has focused on an important historical event that took place on the eve of England's entrance into WW2 (September 1939). The country is preparing for war when wealthy widow Mrs. Edith Pretty hires an excavator/amateur archaeologist away from the local Ipswich Museum to dig up the mysterious mounds dotting her vast Suffolk property, Sutton Hoo. Mrs. Pretty is convinced that there is valuable treasure within the mounds, one in particular.

Our amateur excavator is Mr. Basil Brown, played in the movie by Ralph Fiennes in the most understated, perfect way. Mr. Brown is a Suffolk native and knows its soil very well. His way of speaking is not that of the privileged class. He is a middle age,

simple man with a very specific skill. Indeed, upon making his first discovery of treasure, Mr. Brown recognizes that the treasures date to the Anglo-Saxon period.

Each chapter is told from a different character's point of view. The screenplay is wonderfully written and follows the book closely. Two scenes occur in the movie that do not appear in the book, added for dramatic effect. The acting, the scenery, and the music in the movie are so good that I forgive the screenwriters for taking a few liberties.

The 1,400 year-old site of the remains of an 88-foot ship with a burial chamber full of treasure eventually involves two museums with the dig, as well as two renowned married archeologists, Mrs. Pretty's cousin Rory, and Mrs. Pretty's young son, Robert.

Of course, where there are people, there is drama. Mr. and Mrs. Piggott are the married archeologists, and there is some tension between them. Rory has enlisted in the Royal Air Force and will be called up soon. Young Robert is a curious little boy who is very excited about the dig, unaware that his mother is ailing. There are complicated life stories surrounding the dig. Mrs. Piggott observes, "It seemed an especially cruel sort of joke that we should be unearthing the remains of one civilization just as our own appeared to be on the brink of annihilation."

Mrs. Pretty (played by Carey Mulligan) and Mrs. Piggott (Lily James) are the only women involved with the dig. Theirs is a platonic friendship that can only happen between two women full of hidden emotions. The complex interactions between everyone involved with the dig are very interesting to read and then see come alive on the screen.

At the time, the spectre of war overshadowed the amazing discoveries at Sutton Hoo, and in fact, lent great urgency to completing the excavation. Thankfully, the treasure was safely hidden from the Nazis in the London Underground during the war.

When I finished watching the movie, I was overwhelmed with wanting to visit the British Museum and view the Sutton Hoo collection. I am very happy to report that we do not all have to go to London. The notable pieces from the collection can be viewed on the museum's website. There is even a delightful curator who shows us two pieces of interest in a detailed discussion.

The Sutton Hoo dig is a piece of history I knew absolutely nothing about before I read this book and saw the movie. I can honestly say that my life is richer with this new knowledge. I invite all of you to learn about this historic discovery and the people who were involved.