

UC Book Club booklist 1990-2010
Karen S. Baker, San Diego

Mamma Day - Gloria Naylor (Mar90)
The Joyluck Club - Amy Tan (Apr90)
Breathing Lessons - Anne Tyler (May90)
The House of Spirits - Isabel Allende (June90)
Bingo - Rita Mae Brown (Jul90)
The Lyre of Orpheus - Robertson Davies (Aug90)
Look Homeward Angel - Thomas Wolfe (Sep90)
The Unbearable Likeness of Being – Milan Kundera (Oct90)
A Fan's Notes – Frederick Exley (Nov90)
Cat's Eye - Margaret Atwood (Dec90)

Tracks - Louise Erdrich (Jan91)
All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes - Maya Angelou (Feb91)
Gaia - James Lovelock (Mar91)
White Fang - Jack London (Apr91)
A River Runs Through - Norman MacClean (May91) US
Mists of Avalon - Marion Zimmer Bradley (Jun91)
The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love - Oscar Hijuelos (Jul91)
The Education of Little Tree - Forrest Carter (Aug91)
Annie John - Jamaica Kincaid (Sep91)
Sons and Lovers - D.H. Lawrence (Oct91)
Their Eyes were Watching God - Zora Hurston (Nov91)
Mrs. Dalloway - Virginia Wolfe (Dec91)

Final Payments - Mary Gordon (Jan92)
Angle of Repose – Wallace Stegner (Feb92)
Herzog - Saul Bellow (Feb92)
The Transit of Venus - Shirley Hazzard (Mar92)
The Big Money - John Dos Passos (Apr92)
The Road from Coraine - Jill Conway (May92)
Excellent Women – Barbara Pym (Jun92)
Howard's End - E.M. Forester (Jul92)
Couples – John Updike (Aug92)
Enemies, a Love Story - Isaac Singer (Sep92)
Jane Eyre - Charlotte Bronte (Oct92)
1000Acres - Jane Smiley (Nov92)
King Lear – William Shakespeare (Dec92)

The Bean Trees - Barbara Kingsolver (Jan93)
The Moons of Jupiter - Alice Munro (Feb93)
Midnight's Child - Salomon Rushdee (Mar93)
Palace Walk - Naguib Mahfouz (Apr93)
Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart – Joyce Carol Oates (May93)

Love in the time of Cholera – Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Jun93)

Fortunate Lives - Robb Dew (Jul93)

Waiting to Exhale - Terry McMillan (Aug93)

He, She, It - Marge Piercy (Aug93)

Barn Blind - Jane Smiley (Sep93)

Animal Dreams - Barbara Kingsolver (Oct93)

All the King's Men – Bernstein and Woodward (Nov93)

The Remains of the Day - Kazuo Ishiguro (Dec93)

Eva Luna - Isabelle Allende (Jan94)

Listening to Prozac – Peter Kramer (Feb94)

Three - Flannery O'Connor (Mar94)

Cowboy's are My Weakness - Pam Houston (Apr94)

Clear writing, good tone and phrases, good insight into adult world. Written with single voice throughout all the stories. Female generation X escape to the outdoors while struggling with traditional nonverbal male relationships in addition to dog companionships.

A Case of Curiosities - Allen Kurzweil (May94)

A timeless 18th century historical novel. A grant to write a first novel produced a well crafted piece of art. An enjoyable read at many levels. A picturesque bawdy salon of characters including an engineering bent watchmaker, an herbalist mother, an ex-abbey patron, a surgical collector of medical curiosities, a coach driver, a pornographer, a taxidermist and a wet nurse.

When Heaven and Earth Changed Places - Le Ly Hayslip (Jun94)

Worth reading for the content. Biography of a Vietnamese peasant woman during the Vietnam War. Intertwined is a description of a civil bridging of two cultures. The book fulfills our vow to learn from history and not to forget this War. We see through a Vietnamese peasant's eyes that there were no good guys or bad guys. Presents the belief that we are here to learn rather than to pursue happiness. Her personal growth toward independence balances with her family and cultural dependence.

Misalliance - Anita Brookner (Jul94)

Misalliance. Miss alliance. Missed alliance. Ms.Alliance. The spirits of this English writing are captured by the Beatles Eleneor Rigby "all the lonely people". Relationships explored; observations detailed; Greek allegories crafted. What's beneath the cold, remote, proper exterior? Focusing on plot one shouts, "Move on. Get a life. Isn't there any responsible joy for these cerebral explorers?" Yet it is more than a vicarious viewing of the life, specifically of the enduring qualities, of the quiet people.

Woman of the Inner Sea -Thomas Keneally (Aug94)

Exploration of a woman's self-discovery after release from an abusive marriage by the death of her children. An absorbing escape into the Australian outback was complete with kangaroo making the outside exploration totally different from Misalliance yet the inner exploration was amazingly similar. The metaphoric and actual thickening of

her body layered on till overdone whereas the rising and sinking of waters mirrored her depression effectively.

Bastard out of Carolina - Dorothy Allison (Sep94)

YET another lesbian Southern writer confronting it all: poverty, divorce, incest and betrayal. BUT engrossing presentations through language and memorable scenes of family dynamics and realism. Lack of justice clearly portrayed. AND it elicited good discussion as to whether Bone could really escape her origins. This author is definitely OUT of Carolina.

Shipping News - Annie Proulx (Oct94)

Good read;excellent discussion. Had to work to get through the first chapters. The range of language is impressive, expanding and contracting like the sea. The well thought out structure was enticing, bordering on contrived, KNOT! An interesting main character whose self-perception changed as his life evolved the way life does in small steps mixed with an unplanned randomness. A book full of Newfoundland, nature, crudeness, and small town simplicity. Vivid images: dirty overpriced hotel room, wind blown house on the ice, floundering boat, fresh baked bread, insurance as they live on the edge of chaos. Ends with optimism. Timeless yet quietly presenting 1994 politics, economics and social scene. Although one could say, "YET another non nuclear family with single father and lesbian aunt", one doesn't.

The River Why - David Duncan (Nov94)

A folksy storyteller describes the passage through late adolescence. No new conclusions but a consistently poetic, irreverent and intellectual voice of colorful language covering the breadth of subjects that are examined during these years. As Catcher in the Rye is to puberty, The River Why is for late adolescence. A versatility of focus from zooming in on the philosophical significance of the ant to the zooming out on the meaning of the river-ocean expanse. For part of the group it struck a funny bone throughout and for some it just struck out as they choked on the too clever. The noisy, studied flippancy of youth rather than peaceful, beauty of an adult memory.

The English Patient - Michael Ondaatje (Dec94)

A story woven such that the discussion started with "So what really happened?" Told in the first person then the third from Hanna's viewpoint then Kip's. A 15th century villa with crumbling walls in post-war Italy held the multi-national group in temporary isolation from traditional national divisions. People tiptoeing around the edges of life during this time of recuperation and assimilation before moving on. More than a love story with an unfortunate accident; more than an opportunity for Hanna to nurse a burn patient as no one had nursed her father. For all characters it is a period of detachment from and overview of past, family, passion, country and war. A historical novel with such variety of styles, themes and directions as to make reading difficult and another insight just beyond the next page.

Call It Sleep - Henry Roth (Jan95)

Story of David, a young Jewish immigrant at the turn of the century in lower East

side New York. His youthful observations are rich and specific yet global. The child's view of the adult world with its unspoken survival strategies and traditions is described as David struggles to piece together a coherent view from fragments of conversation and limited experience. A warm/giving/passive mother with an unhappy/non communicative/violent father provides the home focus around which a series of other personalities are developed. Roth, a well-trained writer and autobiographical observer, captures a period and its cultures, bringing them to life with well-written dialects in a valuable historical piece.

Christ Stopped at Eboli - Carlo Levi (Feb95)

Carlo Levi captures in frieze an isolated Southern Italian village with its timeless tableau of emotions when the inept, inbred ruling class rules over a tradition-bound peasantry. This autobiographical tale of his yearlong banishment during WWI fascist rule was written while in hiding during WWII. Although trained as a physician, Levi's life-long profession was painting interrupted by a few books usually politically inspired by his anti fascist beliefs. Discussion considered inner-city analogies with the isolation, poverty and lack of opportunities.

Robber Bride - Margaret Atwood (Mar95)

Excellent women's read. Good discussion. Delightfully well crafted story. The three main characters portrayed as the intellectual, the material and the spiritual are bound together by their history of involvement with Zenia, an embodiment of evil with a manipulative technique and haunting power. The female figures strike chords and have breadth. The male figures pale in comparison so that the saying "A good man is hard to find and even harder to find in women's literature" holds true. Further, the male-female relationships are downright painful to observe because of the female assumption of and acceptance of male non-understanding.

Refuge - Terry Williams (Apr95)

A woman involving, resolving, dissolving rage while working through the cycles of death in nature (a Utah Salt Lake lost to natural causes) and in family (her mother lost to unnatural causes). A Female Mormon Scientist whose spirituality is centered by nature in spite of her sex, her religion or her profession. The book's focus on conflicts of women's limitations, religious tenets and nature's systems left portions of the literary landscape bare (including the men...see above). The evaluation of technical skill improved with the suggestion to consider the development as a poem with some artificial bridges rather than as a novel. Led to spirited women's issues discussions so interesting book although not a great read.

Bailey's Cafe - Gloria Naylor (May95)

More like a play than a book with the collection of miserable misfits that wanders into Bailey's cafe. Although she gave it a wrap at the close, we gave it more of a knock. Knock, knock. Who's there? Evil. Evil who? Evil you do and evil you don't. It missed the mystical being rather a forced collection of strange lives drawn together in a Twilight Zone-like gimmick of a potboiler.

How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents - Julia Alvarez (Jun95)

A close knit upper class family of the Dominican Republic with its protecting compound, Catholic schools, sexual awakenings and Haitian maid with voodoo becomes a middle class US immigrant family. Contrasting cultures shown through a series of stories about four sisters island childhood and immigrant college years. The political dictatorship is sketchy but powerfully felt through the children's filter. The female relationships transcend cultures depicting well the fighting and the support as well as the sexual awakenings and the father-daughter relationships that do not progress beyond father-child. OK book but not particularly well written with respect to style.

Quartet in Autumn - Barbara Pym (Jul95)

Of old-age English life doing what's suitable each day with an unwillingness to accept randomness or give up control much like Excellent Woman. Written by a cardigan clothed English observer chilled by the cold. The simple presentation is judgment enough of the loneliness due to carefully respected personal space. The quartet is shrinking, withdrawing into old age and death having already perfected the skill of choosing paths that permit lives of no risk and no messy relationships. So they are people with nothing large in their lives consumed and dominated by the minutia of how to deal with a mismatched milk bottle. The imposing and involved old gossip was a character relief to so many doing so much good of so little significance. Led to wide ranging discussions including consideration of quality of life and the age of old age.

Stone Diaries - Carol Shields (Aug95)

Generation view of ordinary lives showing the filtered memories that give a selected history cast in stone as we watch the first generation of rich, deep characters give way to the multitudes of fast moving lives that follow. All demonstrate process as important and yet all have an equal lack of understanding. Recommended for a good read although discussion meandered.

Reviving Ophelia - Mary Pipher (Sep95)

An excellent overview of adolescent views and problems. Written by a psychologist alarmed at the increased deviant behavior among her young female patients. Covering some parent vocabulary and considerations needed including the stealing of self by peers, the need for private space and the recognition of individuality. Concrete examples of the forces in today's society against healthy self-esteem are given. Threads of effective tools are presented including unconditional love coupled with discipline as well as the finding of something to reaffirm each child. A must read for parents of 11 year old in the perhaps false hope that preparatory reading and discussion may ease weathering the storm.

The Fifth Child - Doris Lessing (Oct95)

Quick and spare but sinister and disturbing parable/story about a goblin-child Ben in a philosophically communal family. Led to good discussion on how to deal with the seed of pure evil in society and the disintegration of the social fabric due to lack of acceptance of responsibility at an individual level. The destruction wrought by the mother's love for a damaged child brought to mind Clockwork Orange and our inability

to deal with internal rather than external problems. No happy ending here...still working on our local schools.

The Spectator Bird - Wallace Stegner (Nov95)

Fictional autobiography where the philosophical questions are captured. Stoic philosopher surprised by nothing re-examining as he enters old age the surprises of a past Midsummer night's relationship having chosen a career as well as a marriage of safety and comfort.

...Having never given up the dangerous illusion of infinite possibility.

...an old man...he feels like a young man with something the matter with him

...peace, perturb'd spirit

.... passing through a banquet room and ending up hungry on the other side

Stegner's just a very good writer who can turn a phrase and phrase a scene.

Ellen Foster - Kaye Gibbons (Dec95)

A solid first novel about an eleven year old girl that you find yourself rooting for because she's a symbol of the good in human spirit surfacing from an abusive family. The child dialect captures vividly the visual details of daily life and presents the rage kept within bounds by a flattened language. There is an optimistic strategy of waiting in the channeling of emotions for survival in this book filled with rural Southernisms. (Gibbons "Charms for an Easy Life" excellent)

An Angel at my Table - Janet Frame (Jan96)

Autobiography of a literary woman, a contemporary master of metaphor judged sane/creative within inner world of imagination and insane/inept from outer world in reality. She writes from her misdiagnosed years in a mental hospital in New Zealand "a trap is also a refuge". Janet Frame saw her job or her doom to forever watch and listen and to pursue poetry. Extremely shy, she is obsessed with writing and does it well. Stimulated discussions.

Lolita - Vladimir Nabokov (Feb96)

A story of obsession by a driven man focused on nymphets. A parable for the male-female relationship? A how-to for pedophiles? A story of a man deceiving himself even more than he deceives the rest of the world. A world so unrealistic that he believes his victim would choose to return once she escapes his web. The writing is as careful and quiet as the observations of the young girl by a man who has retreated to live in a one-dimensional world of unhealthy love/lust/greed/control. Amazingly written in English by a Russian.

Snow Falling on Cedars – David Guterson (Mar96)

An enjoyable read that quietly explores a surprising number of major themes: love, innocence, war, friendship, chance, isolation, Japanese American culture, bigotry. The sense of place gave an immediate presence to the strawberry fields and the fishing village of the Northwest. With the guilt of war deaths folded into his life, Kabu accepts silently any judgment, as he becomes a part of this island's parade of history. The mystery is not so much what the largely bigoted jury will decide, but rather whether

Ishmael, burdened by both war chaos and lost love, will do what is morally right and thereby regain his wholeness. There was a beauty to the Japanese mother's advice on preparing her children to get through the war without losing their self as well as to a husband high on the scale of human excellence wearily declaring to his bigoted wife that they just weren't right for each other.

How to Make an American Quilt – Whitney Otto (Apr96)

A quilt is two-dimensional as the story with each element planned into a women's group of stories. Spanning generations, there were individual insights but the literary structure patched artificially or maybe we've just had too many games (Joy Luck Club), knots (shipping news) and curiosity cases (a case of curiosities). A pleasant American read with small town strength.

Under the Frog – Tibor Fisher (May96)

Life from 1940 to 1956 in Czechoslovakia as seen by an adolescent aware of his powerlessness while living in a country where life is unreliable. A book of contrasts that is difficult to read because of its discontinuities.... discontinuities in language and time. Like the black humor of Catch22 or Mash but about the oppressive coping through adolescent humor with one's own culture, not a war outside the native home. Best viewed as a series of short stories, the masterful use of language adds to the difficulty and the joy of reading.

The Bone People – Keri Hulme (Jun96)

Three sensitive but culturally adrift people with dark undercurrents are drawn together. Violence ultimately sends them each off on separate retreats ending with an individual saving experience from the Maori spirit. In her first novel, perhaps an autobiographical catharsis, Hulme gives a word portrait of a New Zealand quite different from that of Janet Frame. It is a New Zealand dominated by "any-minority" difficulties in becoming part of another developed civilization. The book demonstrates the poverty of soul when the native spirit is missing. The main character with a most symbolic artist's block retreats within a British cultural insularity separating her from her community Maori heritage. The physical abuse cycle, impacting the odd yet wonderful child Simon, is well explained and unusual with some voice of sympathy. Slow development at times and use of Maori terms too extensive for easy reading.

Of Water and Spirit - Malidoma Some (Aug96)

An African Dagare man able to derive the good from larger experiences leaving the negative aside. As he strives to meld diverse elements within himself, he brings the West a message concerning the need for personal and cultural spirit in order to live contentedly and fully. He embraced God (well, with some skepticism... p103) despite missionary hypocrisy and abuse and yet melded with his society's mystical and ancestral tradition. Of course, the need for a yearly cleaning in his home community is revealing. The book deals with the male, community culture and the superiority of silence without addressing (next book?) female or sexual relationships. Illustrates the acceptance of the intangible spiritual experiences for their impact and value. More satisfying than the Bone People because we learn from his culture. Excellent discussion.

Sophie's World - Jostein Gaarder (Sep96)

The story of Western Philosophy presented as mysterious chapters sent to a 15yr old Norwegian girl. The fiction, less developed than the polished overview of philosophy, glues the essays together and makes it readable. Prompted a multitude of discussions about cultural viability, definition of philosophical projects and relationship of religion to philosophy. Evident are beliefs in intellectual progress, cultural impact and feminism.

Yellow Raft, Blue Water - Michael Dorris (Oct96)

Three generations of a Native American family unfold into Rayona, Christina and Ida's intertwined lives. Many women's moments remarkably captured by this male author. Nominally about escaping but enlarges to understanding and encompassing. No natural beauty or Indian spiritualism relieves the clan poverty rift with unfulfilled potentials. Skillfully written and a pleasant read.

House Keeping - Marilyn Robinson (Nov96)

A cold but lyrical written book about tidiness and detachment. Drifting through life, the frailty of the human relationship is evident. This exploration of the disintegration of a family envelops the reader in a disturbingly unanchored reality.

A Prayer for Owen Meanie - John Irving (Dec96)

The devoted narrator details well the heroic scale of 'Owen Weenie'. Irving tells a powerful story laced equally with vision and humor bringing to mind the tone of his past work 'The World According to GARP'. The reader's attention is held although with pauses to consider the elements of faith, courage and friendship that are a part of what causes Owen to affect all those around him. Owen is a dwarfish boy with memorable voice whose story moves from a little league foul ball death through the rough tumble English prep school with headmasters and pageants and on to mysticism and martyrdom. Exploration of religion and politics are a part of the essence. The book captures well our recent US history. A good, not too light read although LOUD WITH OWEN SHOUTING HIS EVERY LINE.

Beach Music - Pat Conroy (Jan97)

Interesting coverage of almost too many contemporary themes including family, childhood, the South, suicide, Vietnam War draft, and the Holocaust. The main character's development beyond his initial views begins with a quiescent period transplanted to an Italian piazza with his young daughter after his wife's suicide. Upon his return to the South he discovers his roots and the significance of past war issues. With maturity comes the realization that communication difficulties are not just due to externally imposed situations. Although lacking the polish of a well-written work, it's a good story that covers even more topics than the Prince of Tides.

Another You - Ann Beattie (Feb97)

A book that doesn't quite make an interesting read until you've finished it and look back. There are well-written scenarios and interesting relationships, but the whole

story does not hold together solidly. The main character is a college professor whose float through life is annoying since he functions as a child-man in an adult world. He reacts rather than setting course. The contrast with his wife who works through some fantasies and moves on is cut short as the plot develops in a more bizarre direction of contrived connections.

Shes Come Undone-Wally Lam (Mar97)

A coming of age period piece from the 60's. Using a layer of fat to insulate from failures, repression and sexuality, Dolores' goodness and spunk eventually surface leaving the reader with an awareness of how circumstances can set one off a traditional path, result in wide ranging variances and subsequently recover a meaningful life. With tattoo saloon matron Roberta, with Ruth and Larry dropping in then out and with Dante's descent through circles followed by Thayer's rise, it's a good read with images that linger.

Corelli's Mandolin - Louis De Bernieres (Apr97)

A rich novel that is a pleasure to read. The initial descriptive pace gives no hint of the grand sweep of ideas to be covered. The Greek island doctor tries to write an objective history of the Greek Island of Cephallonia when in fact his own life and that of his daughter serve as the vehicle to address life's issues wrapped up in island life, family, love, World War II, poverty and prosperity. A natural disaster, an earthquake, unexpectedly takes us to an even loftier vision of survivors.

Tortilla Curtain - Boyle (May97)

The book's characters are stereotyped with all the problems associated with illegal Mexican immigrants stuffed within this slim volume, but the pieces provide good discussion. There are no answers so the satire often leaves one angry rather than amused as the negative impacts for both cultures gather to a cliched finale. The writing of individual scenes was subtle and the vision lasting so it's quick, unsettling but important read.

One True Thing - Ann Quinlin (Jun97)

Women's roles unfold as a career woman comes home to take care of her dying mother. There ensues a much delayed passing of mother skills to daughter bringing comfort to both amid the pain of examining family dynamics. The 50's defined the father hiding behind an academic image, which inhibits any subsequent growth for him or his facilitating wife. Often written in a journalist style, the book captures the struggles of the last months of terminal illness bringing thoughts of past reads like Final Payments and Refuge. This story broadens to our society's ability to deal with death as a court examines the question of whether the father, the daughter or the mother herself administered a lethal dose of drugs.

Independence Day - Richard Ford (Jul97)

After the death of a son and the breakup of his marriage, we float with Frank Bascombe through his Period of Existence where he thinks widely but does not act or move beyond unsettled. Becomes frustrating to watch his failure to make wise choices. Although Frank does not have the drinking problem of A Fan's Notes main character, he

brought to mind Updike's exploration of ineffective behavior. Excellent craftsmanship in painting well-detailed vignettes on dreaming of reading Thoreau with your son to real estate deals gone bad.

Longings of Women - Marge Piercy (Sep97)

Made for a good discussion of what it is Lilea (the professor/wife), Becky (the climber/murderer) and Mary (the homeless cleaning lady) were seeking as women. Interesting read despite artificial bridges and contrived situations. It's 'long on women' with visits to minor themes such as the 'belongings of women'. There were numerous illustrations of the inadvisability of reliance on outside support without independent structure of one's own, leaving rather weak roles for the men. The striving for security was constant, but the view of what constitutes security changed. All characters had difficulty stepping back to recognize decision points.

Stones from the River - Ursula Hagi (Oct97)

A small-town dwarf is an insider as well as an outsider by birth. Her desire to collect stories begins as a need for participation, develops to a desire for power and matures to an acceptance of human weakness as she casts out her stones of anger for the river to flow around. We coined "Trudiesque" for that strength of character that drives Trudi to probe past the web of silence moving from observer to controller to friend as we watch her develop emotionally if not physically. One of the most well written books we've read in some time. Subtle in capturing nuances including how WWII incidences built making it also a call not to let our rights erode.

Rain of Gold - Victor Villasenor (Nov97)

A generation saga that can be compared with past reads: Mists of Avalon, House of Spirits, Palace Walk or Yellow Raft Blue Water except this one is non-fiction. Derived from oral histories, the family tale spans the Mexican Revolution in a small canyon town in Mexico through to the Hispanic American cultural mix focused by matriarchal efforts ending in purchase of a rancho in Oceanside. The author, intersperses Spanish terms to evoke the interfaces, but truly has success with vignette descriptions such as hungry, cold days in a border camp or the depth of connections in a series of mother-son conversations. Some inconsistent writing and threads but still a good, solid, page-turning read.

Atticus - Ron Hansen (Dec97)

A Colorado rancher investigates his son's death where mystery and murder are wrapped in the world of bohemian philosophy and artistic natures. The solid self-contained father's focus on trying to understand his son launches bookclub discussions considering the not-so-uncommon prodigal child, whether they are male or female.

The Sparrow - Mary Russell (Jan98)

Searching to understand today's culture, Mary Russell has turned out a very readable science fiction story set in the near future which considers interface with an extraterrestrial culture. The classic considerations of religion including "how can a God take all of the credit but none of the blame". Not so coincidental that the recent movie

Contact, produced in tribute to Carl Sagan, also opened with astrophysics, telescopes and cybertools culminating in receipt of a signal from space of math/engineering/spaceship plans (for Sparrow: music). Wrapped within the story are explorations of family relationships, male/female roles and cultural drivers. The main character, a Jesuit priest, has a way of summing up his wonderment through understatement: "but we meant no harm" when his landing party destroys the balance of a two species planet through introduction of a small personal garden. The garden contents did not spread, but the concept of gardening did. On the theme of cultural survival, Daniel Quinn (author of Ishmael) would be quick to place the book in perspective: although it represents the 10,000 years of our culture begun by development of agricultural control (gardening!), there are many other cultures on earth and 50,000 years of cultures prior to our current one that appears on a track of self destruction.

Angela's Ashes - Frank McCourt (Feb98)

Brutal Irish poverty. Day after day of cold, tired, hunger. Tea and bread and plodding. The book captures visually the sense of Ireland from a child's view. With an alcoholic father and an ineffective mother and siblings who die one by one, we witness the disillusionments of youth in an autobiography chronicling a child's support of family before his escape to America.

House of Curl - Lorna Landvik (Mar98)

Small-town characters plot stays at a slow pace unless one accepts the superficial cast as caricatures and comedy. Patti Jane and Harriet turn in the most meaningful relationship as sisters united around which the outrageous events occur from Ione's half-baked misunderstandings to Anvel's endless optimism to Chuckee's native American sensitivity to Thor's architectural birdhouse wonders. The writing was in the stand-up comic vein so discussions turned to plans for casting for a movie version.

Alias Grace - Margaret Atwood (Apr98)

Another high quality Atwood novel quite distinct in material covered and writing methods employed. Letters arrived from Mother and doctor, which provided humor to what might have been some otherwise dreary dialogue. This pre-civil war book about a female servant making her way portrays the times laced in with the rustle of corsets reminding us of why and where feminist issues sprung. We witness a spirited young woman cross from brave to pragmatic to psychotic in this work of fiction based upon a true story of a Canadian woman accused of murder in 1840. The title implying that Grace is not what she appears was the only determining factor all agreed upon in the discussions of guilt versus innocence.

Brief Lives - Anita Brookner (May98)

Writing about an age of inactivity brings an examination of interior thoughts and human interactions. The lack of development or decision in these gray carpet lives lulls the reader until small plot movements develop concerned with a woman accepting the wisdom of meeting her own needs. Fay gets to know herself as the years pass having married her first love only to have it develop into a lifetime relationship without love. In this story of aging and friendship, Fay never does share her thoughts, her

disappointments, her anger, or her minor accomplishments. In the end she exerts herself to escape her friend Julia's dominance. Fay quietly makes us somewhat uncomfortably reflective about our own aging.

Einstein's Dreams - Alan Lightman (Jul98) [Good Benito-Alan Lightman]

An unusual series of thought experiments presented as brief tales with lofty consideration of the alternative ways time might develop. Combines a creative history of Einstein's ideas on relativity with their implications for time illustrated with delightfully mundane examples of the everyday world of Bern. Presents the beauty and nonlinear development of scientific theory as does Good Benito where we meet another independent physicist who is elegant in his exploration of the beauty of the physics behind life but inept in his dealings with everyday reality.

Two Girls, Fat and Thin - Mary Gaitskill (Aug98) [The Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood-Rebecca Wells]

The two girls, fat and thin, were as unhealthy as the title suggests. Although reference to the Ayn Rand type philosophy 'Definitivism' was interesting, the main characters were not likeable as you waded through the life upsets from which they never recovered. Such an interesting irony to have their behavior justified on the basis of the Any Rand analogies with their Anna Granite character. A sordid contrast to the Southern gaggle of female friends described in the Ya Ya Sisterhood that in a burst of warm friendship spirited the reader's enthusiasm and spontaneously ignited some glad-to-be-alive sensations.

Last Orders - Graham Swift (Sep98)

Hard to get into and then hard to leave. A book of unremarkable men isolated with their own insightful but unspoken thoughts. Because men don't talk. Technically and smoothly constructed. A book of 'what ifs' focused on the things that do and the things that don't get told. Four English small town war buddies whose journey to spread the ashes of one of their own is a quiet, humorous, poignant parable with Jack the butcher who thought of being a doctor, Ray/Lucky the insurance man who thought of being a jockey, Lenny the fruit/vegetable man who thought of being a boxer, Jack's son Vince the garage man who thought of not being a butcher and Vic the undertaker who accepted life with dignity. So Jack's last orders are discussed at the Coaches' Last Orders in an English turn-up that gives all their lives some last order.

Atlas Shrugged - Ayn Rand (Oct98)

When one view's life in black and white, Ayn Rand's objectivism philosophy based upon reason, integrity, the work ethic and creative thinking, is the basis for a very readable (although long-winded) story. One slips into a world where there are caricatures of good and evil that can be cheered and boo'ed. As the development veers toward comic stereotypes, one can marvel at the successful attempt to put a philosophy into words. The simple statements of the value of work, money and self are mixed with the reminders that there are truly evil people deriving power from good people and that evil is powerless without the sanction of the victim.

The God of Small Things - Arundhati Roy (Nov98)

Difficult to get into the rhythm, but once you do you can see and feel the South Indian village in Kerala in the 1960's. With the lyrical approach of Morrison or Rushdie, the command of language is used to highlight the powerlessness of the characters. They focus on the small things because the big events like caste systems, loss of innocence or professional opportunities are too hopeless to consider. The story is told from the point of view of the twins, Rahel and Estha, as they try along with their half cousin Sophie Mol with her half-English go-go bag spunk to understand their uncle Chacko, protect their mother Amma and learn from the untouchable Velutha.

As We Are Now - May Sarton (Dec98)

A quiet observer of both interior and exterior landscapes, May Sarton captures the details of the closing chapter of an every-woman's life. A quick but poignant read.

Big Rock Candy Mountain - William Stegner (Jan99)

A good solid read by a good solid writer. Insight into personality types served up with lively tales firmly planted in the Gold Rush times. A wife examines her own role as enabler to a family of the-next-scheme-we'll-make-it-big husband and two working-for-stability children. The communication chasm widens for fathers and sons. Mom is able to appreciate their different motivations but not able to bring them all together. Her strength is flexible as she continues to grow and discover herself along the way.

Memoirs of a Geisha - Arthur Golden (Feb99)

A slow start in this autobiography builds with consistency to a solid finish as it wraps up stories of one of the more fortunate life paths that a poor female is dealt in prewar Japan. One sees what participation brings, both passive and active as a geisha's life quietly unfolds. Appreciation is heightened for the limited opportunities in Japan as well as the impact of even one or two proactive moments.

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down - Anne Fadiman (Mar99)

The difficult interface between a Hmong child and her American doctors is explored with a thoughtful presentation of the Hmong culture and history giving insight into the actions and reactions of one relocated family. Over a period of years, the family mixes the standard operating procedures of American medicine with the traditional medicine of a Hmong shaman. The former treatments are available free to refugees in Merced, California while the shaman's services are available only at high cost. Given the very real cultural and linguistic barriers, the refugees find American medicine ineffective in the treatment of their sick child. There is no blame assigned but rather a demonstration of the failures, which will inevitably happen at a cultural interface like this one.

The Poisonwood Bible - Barbara Kingsolver (Apr99)

Powerful read about an American white family's missionary work in an African village and the consequent impact on the family itself. Each family member develops a distinctly different relationship with Africa. Father blindly follows his passion abandoning first his family and subsequently reality itself as he passes from the state of fanatic zealot to one of psychotic/obsessive delusion. We witness the father's descent

from four quite different perspectives as Kingsolver clearly captures the diverse development stages of his three daughters and his wife. One is faced with the failures at cultural interfaces as demonstrated in last month's book "The Spirit Catches You" as well as with the Western missionary attitude regarding the superiority of their religion in particular and their culture in general.

Children of God - Mary Russell (May99)

Mary Russell writes comfortably in this continuation of "The Sparrow" storyline. We have a chance to revisit the otherworld Ruin culture with its two-class system, the elite meat eaters and the bovine grazers. Took discussion awhile to realize the alien civilization was a balance of ecological and political factors without any religious elements so cultural moral values differed significantly. This simplified and highlighted the earth's missionary party beliefs.

I Know This Much is True - Wally Lamb (Jul99)

A long story detailing trials and tribulations of a cast of sleazy characters with an antihero searching, denying, and accepting himself. The evolution of Ray is somewhat reminiscent of another male looking to order his life in Independence Day. Written by the author who wrote with good insight from a woman's point of view in She Comes Undone. Knowing the whole of his dark heritage liberates Ray from his worry of genetic weaknesses as he faces Life Questions including abuse, sibling rivalry, twin issues, SIDS, HIV, alcohol, sexual dysfunction, racism, mental illness, eastern philosophy, psychology, cultural interfaces, family conflict, government agencies. A mosaic of detail on life, love, forgiveness and humbleness using a variety of literary techniques to build to a too-tidy triumph of human spirit.

Ms Dalloway - MOVIE planned (Aug99)

The Hours - Michael Cunningham (Sep99)

Intertwined stories of women creating lives for themselves and balancing contemporary demands. Developments are anchored in the first chapter to Virginia Woolf's last days before her 1941 suicide. The stories do converge, but the stories real beauty is in the strength and clarity of individual lines. The power and ease of selected sentences is worthy of a read.

Open Heart - A.B.Yehoshua (Oct99)

Memorable scenes of driving through Israel's desert and of the teaming rivers life and death in India. We witness an emotionally detached physician's attempt to reach beyond his hospital world of understanding. Rich in interior life, he unfolds as a shortsighted opportunist. A book about death because he didn't know how to deal with life. With a variety of themes including husband-wife dependencies, personal relationships of Israel, and oedipal developments with his boss' wife Dori.

Native Speaker - Chung Rae Lee (Nov99)

A good read; an excellent write. A glimpse into the mind of a second-language Korean immigrant as he remains an observer of American culture because of his

undercover intelligence gathering (i.e. spy) job. Surprisingly, it's a thoughtful unfolding of a husband-wife relationship.

Dessa Rose - Shirly Ann Williams (Dec99)

A scholarly chronicle of the paths crossing for two women caught in the preCivil War United States. A female black slave and an abused white wife: they rise above their poverty and struggle beyond their ignorance to a realization of the bigger picture. Despite the inelegant prose and the contrived episodes, these Southern roles have been captured and intertwined.

Cold Mountain - Charles Frazier (Jan00)

A good, steady read. A story of the Civil War, of the South, of journeys and of strong characters: Innman walks from the battlefield to his mountain home so we observe the natural history of the land through his eyes; Ada transitions from the artist observer to the self-sufficient participant homesteader so we witness the transition of a woman to self confidence. The easy female relationship between Ada and Ruby is comforting; the development of Ruby's father is uplifting; and the vision of war's brutality is horrifyingly in its randomness.

Confessions of Nat Turner - William Styron (Feb00)

Interesting to reexamine the objections to the book regarding a white voice for a black story and a community's rejection of the black man/white woman sexual stereotypes. As Ruth says, "a book that was written at the wrong time for acceptance". Psychotic or not, Nat Turner is a valuable reminder of a human response that wells up when you cross repression with loneliness.

A Moor's Last Sigh - Saloman Rushdee (Mar00)

Several had trouble fighting their way through the book finding "God of All Small Things" had more appeal with its similar time frame, physical place, English usage, and generations of relatives. The dense writing was like the layered paintings discussed where life is seen through the influence of what lies beneath. With the parallels between the Moor and Rushdee, is the book a result of a haunted, hunted man or a comment on Indian and/or human kind with all its dysfunction. The summary last chapter has the insightful and timeless line "Couldn't you all have just...calmed down".

Girl in Hyacinth Blue - Susan Vreeland (Apr00)

Each chapter is a vignette illustrating a different period of time associated with a Vermeer painting. The concept is similar to the movie 'The Red Violin'. The writing, though uneven, flows well backward in time to the painting's origin. It demonstrates well how an art piece represents something meaningful but something different to each individual. Knowing Vreeland as our local University City High School English teacher who battles cancer, the book is a poignant reminder of the passing of individuals and the endurance of a work of art.

The Love of a Good Woman - Alice Munro (May00)

Eight short stories, each with a good woman making choices that bring about

turns and twists in ordinary lives. The well-written sentences present the subtleties and complexities of human interactions.

To Say Nothing of the Dog - Connie Willis (Jun00)

A science fiction and a historical novel spiced with British humor presents a well-constructed overview of the Victorian era. The characters are stereotyped with insight, the events are described with unexpected references, and the pace is maintained with a hop, skip and a bumbling chuckle.

The History of the Siege of Lisbon - Jose Saramago (Jul00)

The reader can ponder whether the author's style is an artistic artifact or part of a message. At any rate the lack of punctuation, paragraphs and quotation marks makes for a difficult read. An artful love story is woven together with the story about a proofreader's compulsion to change one word in a historical text resulting in an entirely different presentation of past and present events. Elicits discussions on written history accounts versus historical fiction and the recognition that all histories must be flawed if only because an event is unique to the individual participant as well as to the record keeper.

Of Love and Other Demons - Gabriel Marquez (Aug00)

Simple but beautiful language for a read: the setting is tangible, the church power all pervasive; and the human condition weak. Set in the time of the Spanish inquisition, one is left wondering whether the book presents magic and miracles or the bizarre and unusual. Polar issues (e.g. black & white; earth & God, loneliness & love) are explored as dysfunctional families, hidden desires and spiritual quests are revealed (e.g. unraveling).

The Red Tent - Anita Diamant (Sep00)

Taking the Biblical story of Joseph and his many wives, the author gives us a multi-generation view of intragroup nomadic Jewish tribes. The tradition of menstruating females retiring to the red tent as a group provides an opportunity for a secluded community of support. The marriage of Joseph's daughter to an Egyptian plunges the reader into intragroup dynamics and widens the visual passages to include another culture and style of living.

Wild Swans - Jung Chang (Oct00)

A coherent overview of China from the Boxer Rebellion to Tiananmen Square is provided through this three generation picture. There are details enough to anchor the broader picture. The realization that so many people's lives were impacted so significantly in a restrictive manner through the politics of Seng Fang, a style of control through upheaval. The peasant's life may have improved but at the expense of intellectual creativity and freedom. Causes a pause to consider the basics of human nature to have the communists using neighbors to report neighbors just as did the Nazis.

Ahab's Wife - Sena Naslund (Nov00)

The book provides another dimension, the broader context and the social history to Melville's manly world of the sea, where Ahab's battle with nature focuses on hatred

and leads to self- with brief mention of the balance of family. There's an epic sweep with an ongoing focus on community from Kentucky cabin or seashore lighthouse isolation to township community. Naslund sets the stage early with Una experiencing a whale attack and sinking ship long prior to that of Ahab. Unlike Ahab, her second husband, she survives. Her choice given interwoven circumstances with relationships and balances is one of survival. Multiple issues arise for Una (cannibalism, feminism, sexuality, slavery, single parenting, work) which impact her trajectory through the fabric of 19 century New England, but unlike Ahab she seeks neither mastery of the physical world nor revenge. Of her children, Liberty dies two deaths, but Justice survives. Toward the end, the fascinating characters become good role models (from Margaret's Boston salon to Marie's astronomic observatory) but seem more icons of contemporary feminism.

The Toughest Indian in the World - Sherman Alexie (Dec00)

Series of short stories highlighting contemporary issues of the North American Indian. Brash illustrations of the many rough aspects for a minority population laced within the culture of America today. Successful in portraying just how unresolved these issues are.

The Interpreter of Maladies - Jhumpa Lahire (Jan01)

Although the characters are specifically of Indian heritage, the insights are general for any minority traveler or cultural voyager: "There are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept." A softly insightful so compelling series of nine stories about the adjustments of individuals and couples as they stumble upon life's maladies.

Guns, Germs and Steel - Jared Diamond (Feb01)

A scientist's treatise on how a population achieves its particular cultural state as compared with that of another community taking into account geographical factors such as continent alignment, native plant and animal species as well as human interfaces. One of the important new type of integrative overview books taking into account the whole earth as a system. A more comprehensive title would read: Guns, Germs, Steel, Information and Interface. The details are what make it credible and what make it tedious. Each chapter is fairly independent and summative of previous chapters so one may delve into selected chapters, including the final one of course.

Ship Fever - Andrea Barrett (Mar01)

These tales of isolation, capturing whole lives in short stories, provide insights both into the historical development of selected biological issues and into the human impacts of how science is done. All the stories (including the final novella Ship Fever) have characters whose development is changed by their gender, position or order. Serves well to stimulate thought on the balances in life that are established through choices. The author does indeed like to see and describe and appreciate rather than synthesize scientifically. The serenity and exactness of the natural world is captured in the writing style.

Babel Tower - A.S. Byatt (Apr01)

Set in 1968 London, we consider the female role in marriage, parenting, academia, religion and education as Frederica separates from an abusive husband to continue growing with relationships and contributing within the world of words. The layers and details leave the reader with a diverse range of mental images from the church basement hotline phone bank to the education committee visiting primary schools to the epitome of slovenly hippidom synthesized in Jude. Full of material for a bookclub discussion; full of analytic detail for an English major.

Plainsong - Kent Haruf (May01)

A quality read that captures the flow of time, gently reminding us of the story of community. This midWest town is a chapter collection of individuals: emergent adolescent Victoria (12 chapters), twins Ike and Bobby (12 chapters), teacher Guthrie (8 chapters), farming McPherson bothers (8 chapters), divorced wife Ella (1 chapter) and co teacher Maggie (1 chapter). In the off-hand manner reflecting real life, it is Maggie who initiates the connections that weave the individuals into what constitutes the town of Holt (final chapter).

City of God - E.L.Doctorow (Jun01)

Doctorow presents a grand synthesis of philosophical themes layered, threaded sometimes knotted into a detective story. Father Thomas Pemberton of St. Timothy's is the Divine Detective in search of a stolen altar cross found on the roof of a Synagogue for Evolutionary Judaism. This book requires a concerted effort to read given the big picture ruminations ranging from relationships with God to romance to Holocaust. Each section digested does provide interesting, powerful views.

MidSummer Night's Dream - William Shakespeare (Jul01)

Classic. Real world or fantasy, the many aspects to love are complex and enduring.

Lust Lizard of Melancholy Cove - Christopher Moore (Aug01)

In our own UC Slug Salon, we chuckled over the vivid scenes Moore creates, from a trailer-shaped-lizard mating with a silver fuel-truck to a Xena-like warrior babe with drawn sword to the doctor's receptionist with oven mits. We liked the alternate views of everything from jazz to drugs to food (given the dog's 'Food Man' perspective). Seems a book 'potted' in the flowerchild 70's era except we weren't mature enough to write it. So like the sleeping lizard, a decade or two later after some quiet Northern California nurturing, there comes forth this unique author. Note he has his own web page (<http://www.chrismoore.com/cmooore/main.html>) with reader group questions and interesting interviews.

English Passengers - Matthew Kneale (Sep01)

Enough warning not to embark upon a journey aboard a vessel named Serenity since this most likely guarantees a journey of anything but the chosen theme. The book follows what seems to be dissociated developments through narrative of a half dozen individuals who ultimately meet. These are English characters in the latter half of the 18th century, besotted and clouded by the breadth and meaning of the British empire as well as

Tasmanian natives coping unsuccessfully with the inevitable dysfunctional cultural interfaces introduced by the invasion of both white men and religion. A spread of opinions in terms of readability and compelling storyline.

Motherless Brooklyn - Jonathan Lethem (Oct01)

A Brooklyn orphan with turrets in a Chandler-like detective story that serves as a vehicle for a smoothly crafted literary investigation of the mind, ultimately manifested in the spoken word. Lionel Essrog as one of Frank Minna's Men develops from boyhood to manhood within an Italian community of illegal activity. A noire humor pervades this surprisingly readable, innovative and thought provoking novel.

Persian Pickle Club - Sandra Dallas (Nov01)

Another gathering of ladies "like a coop full of old biddies" brought together by quilting with its diversity of patterns (including the paisley pattern known as persian pickle) appropriate for a diversity of people and events. Like Otto's How to Make an American Quilt, the gathering is a communication hub for community. Set in the hard times of 1930's Kansas, where crops were failing and jobs non-existent, the book captures the small-town enduring flow of life and the importance of community much like Haruf's Plainsong. Queenie Bean grows through her relationship with city-education Rita but is the virtual anchor showing us why the town mystery remains resolved.

Prodigal Summer - Barbara Kingsolver (Dec01)

The story of relationships set in Appalachia organized by chapter: predator-wildlife biologist Deanna Wolfe and her mountain hunter; moth love-city entomologist Lusa Landowski and her farmer husband Cole Widener; old chestnuts-orchardist Nannie Rawley and her crusty-old dynasty-end neighbor Garnett Walker. The human development resulting from traditional thesis-antithesis to synthesis combined with such an evident political agenda lacked the subtleties of earlier works. For those willing to suspend expectations from previous work, built upon perhaps more personally assimilated materials by the author, the text was both a good read as well as an important read given the scarcity of novels taking on a significant mindset reflected throughout as an ecological subtext.

The Ladies Auxillary - Tova Marvis (Jan02)

Batsheva is a converted Jew whose husband has died. With long gauze skirts and free spirits she moves to Memphis seeking community for herself and her daughter. She finds both the strengths and the weaknesses of an Orthodox Jewish community. The community experiences the energy and the disruption of one who thinks outside the narrowing filter of long-standing tradition. We get an excellent introduction to details of the Jewish traditions. We witness the struggle of parents to parent and their children to mature. The female group 'voice' is so strong that it becomes, sometimes awkwardly, the narrator. The disillusioned youths find a lightning rod. Although not the most compelling in terms of reading style, it elicited a good discussion.

The Blind Assassin - Margaret Atwood (Feb02)

The story of sisters, Laura and Iris, develops with finesse through memoirs, journals,

science fiction and even newspapers articles. The richness of narrative types combined with the diversity of authentic voices achieved produces a good read. The Depression era days of Canada filled with union activity and the Red scare set the political stage for classic individual-as-victim-of-context stories.

White Teeth - Zadie Smith (Mar02)

Family, life, love, gender, history, religion and humor addresses the pathos of small joys with a big-hearted despair found among immigrant cultures mixing it up in the US. The story takes place toward the end of the 20th century in London with Archie Jones and his best friend, Samad Iqbal, a Bengali Muslim. In this case, a talented hand has crafted a light, witty book with a big, complex voice and small, human stories.

Post Commander - Patrick O'Brian (Apr02)

Jack Aubrey is a typical Englishman (white man's burden, Church of England, bankrupt upper-middle class) of the 1803 which is to say a bigot, a racist, a sexist and an intolerant man. His best friend, Stephen Maturin, is ironically an Irish, Catholic. Sometimes compared with Jane Austin and sometimes with Hemmingway, O'Brian brings the cultural context while taking straightforward writing to a new height. While spinning tales of adventures through the Napoleonic wars, the reader is treated to accurate insights into details of the period's science, medicine, and the sea.

John Adams - David McCullough (May02)

It's George Washington or Thomas Jefferson who jump colorfully to mind when considering the Declaration of Independence or the early US Presidents. Perhaps this is why it is so important that McCullough has captured the amazing story of John Adams, a forthright and learned man of unique virtue who is the soul mate so needed by the United States city during its current unanchored times. Adams' admirable articulateness, intellect and devotion both to country and to family reveal the lifelong strivings of a man aware of himself but in search of a practical higher good. Given the book's thickness and early history dreariness, this is an unexpected excellent, quickly moving, thought-provoking read.

The Evidence Against Her - Rob Forman Dew (Jun02)

Dew captures poetically and psychologically 'an American family': its evolution, impact, secrets and comforts. Her quiet insight reveals what is evident and what is not evident in terms of what an individual understands as his/her role in life as it evolves nested within a family within a small Ohio town. The children Robert Butler, Lily Scofield and Warren Scofield are joined later through marriage by the independent Agnes Claytor who does and does not escape her family to join the trajectory of this trio in the elusive quest for happiness.

The House Gun - Nadine Gordimer (Jul02)

One of those tacit assumptions, a house gun, which graces South African end tables as a security precaution, has ramifications which cannot be appreciated until events take an unsurprising but unconsidered path, ie spur of the moment shooting of a home occupant. We are dragged through the story by the thoughts of Mr and Dr Lindgard. The he/she

businessman/doctor couple are doing their part in 'post apartheid' South Africa only to be jolted into unexpected trajectories by their son, an upper-middle class architect, being defended ably by a black lawyer. Alternate views of values and their own relationship result. Slow read sections in this novel from the dark continent.

Ecological Vignettes - Eugene Odum (Aug02).

Odum's Ecological Vignettes does on a macrolevel what Carson's book does on a microlevel using a nontraditional format for sharing scientific results: summaries in vignettes followed by more detailed scientific information in essays which have references to more in-depth scientific literature references. An optimism is evident in this presentation of the integrated learnings of a lifetime of field work as he bridges from ecology to the built communities to human sciences. The attempt to reach outside the ecological arena makes the level of presentation seem too simple on occasion as he keeps the ecosphere view in mind while focusing alternatively on individual issues. Perhaps it's the extrapolations that bring forward a somewhat familiar tone or arrogance associated with an academic domain specialist.

The main topic is stated as a dilemma (not a double-bind) of how we decide to deal with having reached the carry capacity of the earth so not having unlimited resources: choose either to limit population and raise standards of living or to not limit population and drop stands of living. Articulating and focusing on the dilemma is the most important activity of this century.

Bel Canto - Ann Patchett (Sep02)

A single setting with a band of peasants using caricaturized-terrorist-techniques living with the international diplomat party gathered for a South American diplomatic celebration. Characters include Japanese industrialist Mr. Hosokawa, American soprano star Roxane Coss, the country's vice president Reuben Iglesias, Swiss Red Cross negotiator Joachim Messner not to diminish the roles for the church with Father Arguedas or of translation by Gen or terrorist leadership by General Alfredo and Benjamin and peasant participants Beatriz and Carmen. Not quite superficial stereotype yet not quite farce, it's an easy read but with paths prompting exploration, points for reflection, and higher planes for consideration. Laid out explicitly for the reader is how the peasant-terrorists are really like family, and given the opportunity rise to the occasion of learning opera or learning to write; less explicitly we ponder the final chapter wondering how the personal learnings and revelation present themselves over time. Once leaving the isolating compound that filters out the routine practices, rearranges ones priorities and roles as well as presents a diverse new set of human interfaces, how much of their new insights is recalled?

The Secret Life of Bees - Sue Monk Kidd (Oct02)

An easy read where Lily, a young white girl in the 1960's, abandons her abusive, bigoted Southern home early. She finds her way to another town and the home of three black sisters who have found and made their own community. Kidd brings in the communities of bees with the title and sticks to it as the household's economic independence. Beyond this self-sufficiency, they understand the need for commitment and flexibility. They make up their own rich rituals and celebrations to support 'be' structure. The annoyance at

character and issue stereotypes is simply outweighed by the comfort brought by the literary existence of August and the Mothers of Mary. The wisdom revealed is captured in a conversation between August and Lily: "The problem is they know what matters, but they don't choose it. . . . The hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters." (p147)

Peace like a River - Lief Eger (Nov02)

The art of storytelling shines through this tale laced with high joy and human tragedy, good humor and unlikely romance. Led by their father, Reuben and his sister Swede embark on a quest departing their small town bullying in an airstream trailer. It's an unlikely story from midwest janitor closet to the saddle of Sunny Sundown, but it's a good read by a newspaper writer father of an asthmatic son who captures the core of the family unit as well as the brother-sister bond.

Life of Pi - Yan Martel (Dec02)

A special fable/parable/quest tale, strong enough to serve both as an end-of-the-year and a start-of-the-new-year story. It's graphicness with respect to who eats whom and how (think 450lb bengal tiger) provides an effective grounding from which to launch such a readable story. Each reader seems to find a personal connect, ie oceanography, religion, ecosystem science, zoos, animal behavior and philosophy. Readers also varied widely in their of opinions (views) on the moral of the tale, ranging from existence of multiple views of any situation, openness to expect the unexpected, survival with triumph of the human spirit and capability or need of human to learn. Allagory, parable, or quest, this was one amazing story because it covered such a diversity of human elements with solid insight.

The Corrections - Jonathan Franzen (Jan03)

A feeling of impatience 'what family is THAT entangled?' except there's a familiar scene here and then a turn-of-phrase there that brings pause again and again. Alfred and Enid and their children; you dislike each individually but in the end, you somehow accept them Alfred the father with little escape before his descent into Parkinson's; Enid the mother and her one last family Christmas; Gary a banker father of three children with narrow focus; Denise an executive chef in Philadelphia; and Chip Lambert New York writer with wandering purpose; We're presented the writings of an American artist who shoulder's the burden of painful insight with respect to functional and dysfunctional relationships and responsibilities, personal and professional. Franzen's book of essays complements and explains the tale of being dropped by the Oprah Winfrey Bookclub. Serious but readable fiction.

Mendel's Dwarf - Simon Mawer (Feb03)

In the genetic crap-shoot, the generations removed dwarf lost out on both height and happiness. He becomes a successful genetic researcher who life unfolds in parallel with that of Mendel's so many decades earlier. Not unexpected that this outside the normal individual prompts us to see the normal and to think. The author is a scientist able to provide the reader thoughts on the uncertainty of scientific knowledge and how scientific knowledge is shared. Provides insight into the importance of emergence yet even knowing about the importance of randomness, the Dwarf interferes to select for the

‘nondwarf’ genes, a recognition that a human is not able to remain passive when given the opportunity to eliminate known pain for unknown strengths. A good read (twice through to clarify the two intertwined stories) sandwiched between an odd but compelling story and a humorous but philosophic tale.

House of Sand and Fog - Andre Dubus (Mar03)

We watch the lives of a mobile lower-middle class American (Kathy) and a migrant Iranian military official (Bahroni) collide over ownership of a home on the coast South of San Francisco. Though one has short-sited simple visions and the other an cross-cultural long-term strategy, the complexity of cultures gives neither a hope of success. Added to the mix is also Lester, the dishonest policeman. As yet another cast member unable to control his impulses, he fuels the dysfunction of both Kathy and Bahroni as well as our bookclub speculation about the ‘R’ factor. Born, bred or created by an overly-complex society, the characters have resilience factors hovering near zero. An interesting, fairly quick read.

A Fine Balance - Rohinton Mistry (Apr03)

The scene is 1975 India with Indira Gandhi’s political administration, emergency regulations and forced sterilizations. The characters: Maneck Kohlah, a college student whose parents' village general store is failing, Dina Dalal, a middle age widow who takes up sewing to support herself; seamstress; Ishvar Darji, her ever hopeful boarder and tailor; and his nephew Omprakash, Ishvar’s nephew whose father is ultimately murdered for crossing caste boundaries and ultimately is murdered for crossing caste boundaries. The book captures the heroic in the everyday life of these four dealing with comedies and tragedies of a corrupt society. As in Dicken’s London, the themes suitably large for the population of India. Two metaphors: life as a game of chance that Maneck learns to play but ultimately in only a win/lose mode; life as a quilt constructed from seemingly unconnected fragments to which their life stories add coherence. His vast, wonderfully precise canvas poses, but cannot answer, the riddle of how to transform a corrupt, ailing society into a healthy one. The fine balance? To participate without taking it too seriously? To focus on the possible and to accept the improbable. The tension between the comedy and the tragedy. Brought back thoughts of Midnight’s Child. Excellent read that takes some time

The Passion of Artemisia - Susan Vreeland (May03)

Fairly quick read about a 17th century female painter in Rome. An unusual time to be a woman participating in the religious or court arts, she meets the world on her own terms. Having to choose between art and family, she chooses art. Somewhat shallow but interesting images and an easy read.

Domestic Pleasures - Beth Guteheon (Jun03)

It’s not as well written or as complex as ‘The Corrections’ which has its own share of unsolved family matters. Though presenting nice characters with interesting relationships, there is a disappointment with the lack of insight or learning on the part of the adults. Martha, the good parent, is almost too much as her special communications skills unfolds with a rich portrayal of teens and their peer groups. We are left to ponder

whether 'domestic pleasures' is indeed a paradox, outside reality, though everyone yearns for that domestic kind of arrangement. A bit like a soap opera that is well enough written to warrant a fairly quick read.

American Pastoral - Philip Roth (Jul03)

American high school gentle giant sport hero Swede Levov is unmasked in this emigrant-boy makes-good story. Most interesting to find our book group discussion raise the thought that his daughter Merry's rebellion against her black-white unable-to-compromise all-American father Swede could be similar to our upset with our current president George Bush's reflection of another superficial call to an American pastoral view. Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator, brings to mind author Franzen with its writer sensitivity but Roth admits that he actually missed the story that he is now sharing after Swede's death. This story about striving for success and for making coherence in a complex world illustrates how contending with the grand superficial successes in America leaves one 'comfortably numb' but sometimes prompts reflection. The stream of consciousness sentences is a hard to wade into but one is left feeling livelier for the effort. The author captures why 'simple is never simple' and is full of choices even by those who 'simply' accede to the American dream. Good story although not an easy read.

Atonement - Ian McEwan (Aug03)

We watch a young girl intent on learning and observing the upper middle class social world of England so as to understand and be able to describe 'life' as an inspired, insightful, and recognized author. Giving voice to what she sees in the garden gives momentum to developments she only later understands. Briony Tallis seeks escape through numbing nursing work. In time she realizes that no matter how much you experience, there's more to see and learn. No matter how much you hope to mentally or physically escape, your actions indeed have consequences. The time is 1935 but brought to mind scenes from the books *Cold Mountain* with its war images and *American Pastoral* with notions of how the author is a participant. A bit plodding to get into but most were compelled to finish reading it.

East of Eden - John Steinbeck (Sep03)

A rich, compelling, American read with powerful landscapes and complex characters, covering three generations during the 20th century as California Salinas Valley was populated by the Hamilton's from Ireland and the Trasks from Connecticut. With biblical themes and colorful individuals who blend heritage and circumstances, Steinbeck explains with story the critical distinctions in the translation of the word 'Timsbel' from 'thou shalt' (command) or 'thou shall' (promise) to thou mayest (choose), bringing into focus the philosophy of American individuals who 'may' triumph over sin. Good and Greed are presented via the unbalanced individual (Cathy Ames), two ministries to individual loneliness (church and brothel), and the role of education with additional insights into everything from parenting to the servant's role (Lee). Good American read.

Middlesex - Jeffrey Eugenides (Oct03)

A Greek-American hybrid mixing a coming-of-age story with the confusions brought by gender ambiguity. Cal Stephanides, raised as Calliope, provides memorable moments as

we hear this multi-generational tale recounted. Great themes; good read.

Galileo's Daughter - Dava Sobel (Nov-Dec03)

Ice floats because it doesn't break the surface of the liquid? It is for Galileo, one of the fathers of experimental science, to present the alternative, the notion of differing densities. As a philosopher, he demonstrates the ability to provide a coherent, long-term support for family, religion, and science community in his own unique way given the epoch and his circumstances. His first partner and family are amicably cared for in this unemancipated, plague-ridden era where scholars are not permitted to marry. Eventually his work dominates as he both understands and balances the ultimate mind-body tensions as philosopher-experimentalist, that of society and the earth system. One could try to imagine what would have come if so much time were not dedicated to the church's limitations and top-down dictates which extended from book censorship to individual punishment to behavior modification, e.g. three acts of penitence (the third being three acts of good works). With support of his daughter's multi-faceted correspondence as well as his own social networking, his innovative ideas emerged. His work prompted the turning away from an artificial Aristotelian scaffolding of logical unity (math by being immaterial is not useful for describing a materialistic Nature) and from a Catholic control (the earth being the center of the universe). Rather, Galileo grounded science to the reality of observations and measurement. Without stop watches or design studios, he made first the tools (telescope, prototypes, models, timing devices) and then the measurements. Biodiversity; datadiversity, sociodiversity. The many almost invisible subplots from the Duke's librarian (Roninelli) to his Paris lawyer friend (Diodoti) add breadth and depth to this historical novel. A strong line-up of reads this year with Franzen, Mawer, Mistri, Roth and Steinbeck, but Sobel's had the biggest sweep as it addressed a pressing contemporary question: how to reconcile our social and earth systems, as one outgrows the other. The book seems dry and hard to begin until you're aware of the revolutionary period being presented in a scholarly manner making use of original materials to complement Galileo's profession and politics of science with an ethnographically rich presentation of his daughter's views on everyday life. Hard to warm to but an outstanding scholarly read.

The Piano Tuner - Daniel Mason (Jan04)

Edgar Drake, a quiet, middle-aged, happily married piano tuner, accepts a British War Office commission to travel to the jungles of northeast Burma to repair a piano. Does music have a part to play in the political realm of a country as well as in the life-story of an individual. A quietly colorful read presenting everyman's need to pursue one's passions, in this case during the English empire era. Though cast as a minor character by a society that traditionally celebrates the musician rather than the support work, he lives a warm, appreciated life at home where he is understood by a wife who hears the piano tuner's 'invisible' work at a concert. A reminder that a comfortable life is not enough to preclude responding to a call to extrapolate one's core beliefs: in this case, that music can facilitate human understanding.

Unless - Carol Shields (Feb04)

Reta Winters is a novelist and translator. She's in the middle years of adulthood past 40

with three girls beyond middleschool and a husband content with their life and the study of the withdrawn trilobite. The book presents the year of her life when the traditional balances are disrupted. We witness a new mental filter under construction dealing with the hole left in her whole life by an event not understood. The reality of the event appears in each chapter, re-examined in this new context, while each traditional context is re-examined in a context of this event. The event is her oldest daughter's withdrawal from college to embark on a personal learning negotiation after literally running into the impossibility of reconciling personal life with the injustices of societies. While sitting on a streetcorner with a sign around her neck that says 'goodness' as a way of expressing perhaps what is missing and where to focus. The structure of the plot is its strength and its weakness, perhaps inevitable for a novel that takes understanding down to the elements of semantics, from the plannable nouns of 'happiness' and 'goodness' to the unplannable conjunctions of 'unless' and 'nearly'. Despite the capture of familiar moments from a shopping quest metaphor for the perfect scarf for her daughter to the manipulating 'so Lois, tell me about your life' editor, the group was unable to reconcile the superficial formula-like too tidy conclusion representative of an ending able to be incorporated more comfortably, more humanly into an individual's view of a coherent life story. The group gave it a mixed review. It was a quick read leading to good discussion. (see above entry for Stone Diaries with Shield's character Daisy Goodwill also finding happiness to be elusive.)

The Death of Vishnu - Manil Suri (Mar04)

The Bombay apartment building presents a microcosm of India; Vishnu, the apartment building's step-dwelling houseboy, dies on the building staircase. India's caste system, cyclic nature, raising of local heroes to become legendary figures, and reincarnation beliefs along with Hinduism, mythic trinity of Brahma (creator), Vishnu (preserver) and Shiva (destroyer) prompted discussion of different views; sharing kitchens, community actions, and card games that revealed superficiality of community affairs; the building's cross-generational, inter-national composition explores depth and ramification of tensions.

Blindness - Jose Saramago (Apr04)

A powerful parable about basic human values made possible by creating a filter on many of life's tasks by writing about an epidemic of blindness that spreads across the country. As witness of the effects of a quarantine effort housed in an insane asylum, the reader re-enters society with the inmates to find people have become nomadic since returning to the same shelter where you can't read the books or see the artifacts has less priority than being together as a group and finding food and water. The scenes of the blind masses foreground fear, stampedes, and lost artifacts. #78 on the National Public Radio list of best fictional characters is 'dog-of-tears'.

Frankenstein - Mary Shelley (May04)

A readable book that stimulated good discussion. Published by Shelley in 1918 at the age of 19, the scope goes far beyond notions of Boris Karloff monsters. The tale stands out as a metaphorical myth, or is it a scientific allegory, or is it an epistolary tale of speculative fiction. Setting upon a substrate of the period's gothic horror genre and mixing with

Shelley's autobiographical experience as well as Faustian themes on the ramifications of scientific knowledge, the dilemmas that science brings at the start of industrialism unfold as relevant and of concern today. The film (R.DeNiro) captures the visual and intellectual sweep of the novel. Shelley occupied a unique niche in a period where she acted as a Renaissance woman integrating across science, politics and writing. Despite the animation of a monster through the work of the mad (?) scientists (that is, of single minded passion), the book ends with two notes of optimism: upon reflection, the explorer Walton turns back from his knowledge quest and the monster in removing himself integrates beyond isolated personal or scientific passions and reason.

Oryx and Crake - Margaret Atwood (Jun04)

Another carefully crafted nudge to her readers to be awake, vigilant, and mindful regarding self-awareness, relationships, and society. Pay attention to the difference between advertisement and communication, the distinction between 'can' and 'choose, between those in safe areas and those in the he-she-it-like slums. We are presented with a future determined largely by the ramifications of biotech companies, living compounds, and global connectivity. Atwood's social constructionist vision remind the reader that the inevitable human tensions (homogenous vs heterogeneous, product vs process, established vs innovated) are indeed important to balance, not just profit from, legislate about, or escape from. Evolved in human timeframes are the near extinct oryx and the scuttling crake juxtaposed with those produced in fooling-around-individual-time, the rakunks and the crakers. Summarized in fridge magnet space: Take Your Time, Leave Mine Alone; I wander from space to space; The proper study of mankind is everything; siliconsconsciousness.; Where God is, Man is Not; We understand more than we know. Although another dark science fiction that mixes white blindness dysfunction with Frankenstein style dilemmas, glad to have read the bleak fragment-collection as it prompted excellent discussion. KEYWORDS: bogus, scoundrel, corknut, elegant mind, factoids, neurotypical/NT, uncontrolled experiment w/unintended consequences.

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter - Carson McCuller (Jul04)

A book with rich characters that make it a simply good, a timeless read. Characters like the patient listener Timeless though 1940 when McCuller rose above her environment to embrace humanity, to draw a picture not only of a prom party, a day by the creek or crowds at the flying jenny but also of a globe spanning freedom and equality, not to judge but to focus on rights of every individual. She writes creatively in a time bad language was unacceptable. John Singer and quiet musician Mick Kelly in the Southern tradition of troubled folk who fail to fit, of poverty and tempers, unfairness and loneliness, whiteness and blackness. So many rooms of solace for those who in end have no solace. Two characters that have so much to say no one will listen; they can't even listen to each other. A half dozen small town characters befriend a deaf mute thinking they have found understanding friend, when in fact he not only does not understand them, he himself lacks a confidant once his own deaf mute friend goes insane. And if Singer symbolizes god, god is silent, powerless to do for you. A good, solid read.

Kite Runner - Khaled Hosseini (Aug04)

A first book for this Afhani author writing in English that brings Afghani a little

closer to the edge of awareness. A fairly quick but solid read still leaving questions about the Taliban occupation but presenting the nuances of another culture. Sometimes a bit too much caricature and something that left you uneasy. One member suggested it might be the main character: 'you didn't like him!'

Mansfield Park - Jane Austen (Sep04)

Set in England some 200 years ago, it was found to be a slow read. Telling the story of a poor niece come to live in the country home of relatives, the family appears to focus on economic value and connections

So why wasn't it called Mary and Fanny, born-withs and born-withouts, cultural norm and quiet outsider, active and passive, the intellectual and the economic. . Between the structure of English society and country-house living, the story captures the theatre within the theatre.

Time Traveler's Wife - Audrey Niffenegger (Oct04)

Set in Chicago around 2000, a story of love between an artist Clare and a librarian Henry who intermittently time travels. So Henry, whose profession is keeping memories in order, is thrust into the disorderly world of revisiting an event with a different-age perspective. And Clare, whose field is built upon representing in order to liberate and prompt reflection, accepts a life dominated by the linearity of Henry's timeline. A genetic disorder introduces these uncontrolled time shuffling where Henry appears naked in the library cage, meets Clare in the meadow for an 18th birthday picnic, and revisits the car ride ending in his mother's death. The disjointed meetings means time-lagged trusted friends intermingle permitting a rare gift of insightful guidance that things do work out. That you can't change the working out whether due to time travel in fiction or due to culture's and nature's complexity is left to the reader to ponder. An interesting read sometimes like a series of short-stories due to the fragmentation of time but with some well-drawn character's narrating a story of continuing love, longing, and waiting.

Invisible Man - Ralph Ellison (Nov/Dec04)

The world of mind, not minding: Ellison effectively reaches beyond the world of blackness to show sense making embedded within its social order. Though specific to the black race struggle, in presenting a meta-view, it's equally valid for any group seeking identity and any individual seeking to synthesize. He gives voice to the invisible individual as part of the crowd, rediscovering at each stage of understanding that misalignments of internal and external result in lies to further action while movements effectively integrate over the very diversity they represent. The book captures the dilemma of multiple perspectives growing from successive experiences with multiple contexts or levels of learning. While conceptually striving to observe patterns in the chaos and to synthesize events into a coherent story, Ellison has created images of disciplined clarity: the white stag party boxing ring fight, Negro College president, Liberty Paint factory, Mary's boardinghouse, the Brotherhood, the riot, the underground retreat. Periodically mulling over his grandfather's words, the un-named hero ends up with ambivalence and humor, with a call for continued engagement and struggle against the human tendency to inflict invisibility on others.

The Master Butcher's Singing Club - Louise Erdrih (Jan05)

Erdrih, author of *The Beet Queen* and *Tracks*, has written another thought-provoking story of the quiet fullness of everyday life. The story is framed by the two wars starting with German soldier sharp-shooter and singing butcher Fidelis Waldvogel marrying Eva and moving to America to open a small town butcher shop in North Dakota using his father's knives. Fidel's 'forestbird' immigrant voice is counterbalanced by the unique Delphine, a vaudeville performer with a unique balancing partner Cyprian as well as a host of other fully developed characters. Documenting the unspoken understandings, the complexity of real life, the import of culture, it's a tale of wonder to see the Delphine-Eva friendship grow over life-death matters and to hear the butchers sing.

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius - Dave Eggers (Feb05)

This autobiography by Eggers is ironically sincere, a contemporary *Catcher in the Rye* with a blogger-age protagonist taking air-time in his time of full blown 'ripeness of possibility'. The story threads together a narcissistic aged character shaped by a fatalism born of the death of both parents. With sole responsibility to raise his brother, he oscillates between the personal joy of close care and the obsessive non-routine of neglect. An outlet bringing focus and community in the founding of *Might Magazine* (Although a noun, it brings us to yet another adverb like our previous read 'Unless'). The magazine of power 'might' be. From 'solicism' to 'lattice work', is this 'blather' or 'a rant'...but a rant implies a position so we best consider what that position may be. Like another of our reads (a Fan's Notes), this thought may get lost in an impatient yearning for more content and less style as well as for a more straightforward dealing with responsibility versus untended actions amidst a dirty house. It may be contemporary and literary but its more like participating in a 20-something happening than in the delivery of well-packaged, finely-crafted information...or is it. Discussion was prompted, after all, this may be the Kurt Vonnegut of this 'nothing's mine; i'm shareware' generation, but left us with the quandry of content versus media streaming during the month of the multi-million dollar Christo gateways art exhibit/happening in New York central park.

The Devil in the White City - Erik Larson (Mar05)

From Galeleo's Daughter to the Chicago Fair, the human situation appears once again presented for our reflection through historical perspective. This book, subtitled 'Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America' captures the innovation of the Chicago Fair as interrelated with the gruesome design for serial murder. Tales of men are presented, Daniel Burnham driven by public pride growing from a personal belief in community; Herman Webster Mudgett driven by a desire for individual power hidden as H.H. Holmes from sight in the anonymity afforded by an overtaxed societal infrastructure. One story is of inspiration prompting new events; the other of death and elimination of lives. This provocative pairing of intertwined stories is housed within large-scale visions of architecture and individual scale actions in response to change. These physically colocated events capture a moment in US history when there was a democratic flow of information coupled with a movement of individuals outside local communities, when industrial development was unfolding and new technologies displayed publically through the venue of a World Fair. What part do large scale events play for a society? In the end, Larson documents the chaotic aftermath for the physical location itself and reminds the

reader of a string of individuals inspired by the Chicago Fair and their subsequent accomplishments. If we were to try to identify these events for our own times, would we turn to an Olympics (given that I'm not even aware of the latest world fair.) or to the people mover of tomorrowland at Disneyland or the themed experiences of Las Vegas? Using history as an integrative lens, would pairs of events such as the 9/11 terrorist event be juxtaposed with the Christo gates art display in New York's central park?. Tales of exhilarating cultural challenge and of gruesome societal dysfunction, do they indeed go hand in hand in human hand? There's a distancing of journalistic style that puts a sweep into this non-fiction story of black and white, of large and small, of construction and destruction, of participants and observers, of human events and actions, that makes this a novel bookclub read.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time - Mark Haddon (Apr05)

Through the logic of the detective story and the filter of autism, the story presents us with a simplified view into the flow of information and the related interactions with our own emotions. An alternative perspective emerges from the death of the dog Wellington, the broken hopes of a marriage, and a non-average child who foregrounds and integrates our traditional mechanisms for coping with complexity. Prompts thought about how we automatically filter and allow ourselves socially messy, nonlogical states of affairs. Interesting reviews though I disagree with comparisons to *Catcher in the Rye* and *David Copperfield* but agree whole-heartedly with the comment 'showing that the best lives are lived where difference is cherished'.

The Namesake-A Novel - Jhumpa Lahiri (May 05)

Crossing the cultural divide as in her first book *Interpreter of Maladies*, author Lahiri writes of how our lives are shaped by our cultures even when we move to a new culture. Each of the main characters is involved in a relationships that provides a suitable prompt for local insight into cultural differences between India left-behind and American right-upfront.

Jane Austen's Bookclub Book - Karen Joy Fowler (Jun 05)

The six of them – Jocelyn, Bernadette, Sylvia, Allegra, Prudie, and Grigg constitute the all-Jane-Austen-all-the-time bookclub. With them we consider Austen – though lightly and oft subsurface – and consider their relationships – though superficially. The turn of phrase every few pages kept us reading (premature articulation indeed) but not engaged beyond the moment.

Inside the Kingdom: My Life in Saudi Arabia - Carmen Bin Ladin (Jul05)

Marrying outside their cultures, two students are shaped by their American university life. They have no experience from which to predict how each home country would influence their marriage- changing everyday assumptions, attitudes, and needs. A veiled American Carmen Bin Ladin might have continued to be lulled by the indolent wealth and isolating customs of Saudi life if not for the thought of raising two daughters in a country where women are isolated and dominated by an ancient male Saudi culture with a stark black and white perspective grounded in religion. A book written to explain to the

author's daughters how the man she married as a child of the 70s, was lost as his culture reclaimed him.

The Big House: A Century in the Life of an American Summer Home - Goerge Howe Colt (Aug05)

You can smell the musty salt air; you can feel the summer family atmosphere of familiarity; you bump up against the clutter of books left from years past in a familiar house; you can imagine the smooth green glass pieces and the narrow mindedness of new society wealth.. The author presents the life of the land, the house, and the family as they try to hold on to a rapidly changing landscape and a disappearing way of life. Once isolated physically and socially, this Cape Cod summer community provided a long period of routine stability lacking in the Colt's family with its alcoholism, unhappiness, and failure of relationships. Ultimately, the scattering of family with its continued failure of finances, energy, and action blends into a consideration of how to adapt to the contemporary lack of community.

The Pacific - Mark Helprin (Sep05)

Contrary to our usual experience with short story collection discussions, the discussion of Mark Helprin's "The Pacific and Other Stories" took off perhaps nudged by his insight coupled with his care with language. In an NPR radio interview

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4144357>

Helprin describes the theme of this collection "as many things – no one single agenda: art, making amends, memory, childhood, marriage, sacrifice, honor, perseverance, courage, war, putting materialism in its place, infatuation, resolution, the Holocaust, baseball, God, redemption, morality, show business, dictatorship, love for ones family, New York in 1869, the loss of a child, Herman Melville, adultery, global, the mountains, idoltry, technology, ocean racing, dying, the nature of love, the middle east, the second world war, California, and redemption denied." We found honor and learning, balance and challenge, control and perfection burbling to the surface. Poet-soldier or soldier-poet Helprin forgives humans while challenging organization, he recognizes the power of focus and focus of technology. He nudges us to reconsider our balances and to retell our stories. We came up with a list of favorite chapters – those with metaphors and characters that seem to have joined us:

1-diva, learning, intervention, and prevention (Il Colore Ritrovato)

7-House of Ruth Heyseed, Holocaust, perfection and focus (Perfection)

10-customs inspector melville, honor, challenge, and roles (Rain)

12-technology and communication (Jacob Bayer and the Telephone)

Aloft - Chang Rae Lee (Oct05)

Could be subtitled: Jerry Battle, a contemporary Long Island life in perspective. Though more observation does not seem to bring more meaning to the narrator, there is a gently emergent understanding –of choice, engagement, and family.. Quite a different cultural flavor from his previous book 'Native Speaker' but still insightful at a micro/macro level.

Drop City - T.C.Boyle (Nov05)

The 60's – live on well through the concept of the mini-skirt and the well-remembered abandonment to freedom, but this does not make hippy communes and back-to-the-land communities engaging reading.

Past the dirt and beyond the studied lack-of-structure and planning, one wonders why only culture- commune blemishes like unprevented rape and stoned driver accidents are discussed while nature-man events like no mice in the pantry and wilderness survival are taken-for-granted. It's only when a deviant outlier is let-to-die at the end that a cultural norm is reinforced in the Alaskan wilderness. More than half found it difficult to wade through to this end however.

Wicked - Gregory Maguire (Jan06)

The Death of Vishnu brought us the Indian culture as a microcosm. Along with Hobbits, Mummins, and Starwars, here's another book aiming to put all types of cultures on the map for consideration and intercomparison. Of mythic intent, the narrative builds on the shoulders of an embedded story speaking to global themes. Foregrounding multiple perspectivism and minority voices, the story provides the context for the death of the Witch and subsequent carrying off of shoes by Dorothy in Baum's Wizard of Oz. The introduction of technology through tictokism, the subconscious with the dragon, and the ecological perspective through the Quadling swamp mentality, we're presented the world in metaphorical minature. Could be read as interfaces of technologiic and magic born of privilege and all that ensures. From 'taking the yellow brick road' (read internet) to "resisting the yellow brick road" (technology/power-civilization as we know it) to "coping with change" (growth by coping with The Horrors). In its comprehensive sweep, the story is frequently subservient to the diverse collection of concepts and events. Although both evil and craft are sometimes tedious, the writing architecture is masterful shot through with a craftman's foreshadowing so to bind together start to finish. It took some time to get into, to read and to discuss but once warmed up, the discussion was lively and followed Macquires comment on art "not to chide but to provoke challenge. Otherwise why bother?"

The Honkin Hollar Opening Soon - Billie Letts (Feb06)

A down home parable centering on the serendipitous flow of folks that staff a small town Oklahoma drive-in cafe – the Honkin Hollar Opening Soon. With the view that life happens while you're waiting or planning something else, Letts provides an optimistic view by capturing a diverse assortment of hopes and fears from Caney Paxton, a wheel chaired Vietnam Vet who opened the Honk in 1975 and shelters his recovery within its walls; Vera Takes Horse who rolls in with a homeless dog and a history of running from herself; Bui Khanh, a straight-forward Vietnamese immigrant whose fiancée is in a refugee camp and his budhist statue in a baptist church; Molly O with her Christmas apron and an insomniac's time for mulling over-and-over what-if-memories so that she almost misses joining together with imperfect Life, the Century 21 Wilma Drive and her kidney-stoned husband, the VA Dr Tremble, a Cherokee regular, and the alzheimered

cabinet maker Duncan Renfrow who is forever taking measure. It make a full-hearted, fast read with a lot more to it than meets the eye – true to life itself.

The Birth of Venus - Sarah Dunant (Mar06)

Creating the swirl court of music and renaissance paintings, one may forgive a noticeable thinness to characters and their relations, as Dunant draws the reader into the midst of Florentine culture of the 1600s, an active, integrative time for arts and sciences. With character ties from Greek to gendered culture, from deep thinking to lavish pleasure, from sumptuous cloth merchantry to austere monestary life, the author provides a large vision sweep of the balances and the challenges, the individual and the cultural choices. Took our bookclub discussion from Renaissance times - broken by Savonarola excesses culminating in the Bonfire of Vanities in a landscape of city states, to contemporary tensions – broken by war and polarity in a globalized world. Alessandra Cecchi, a privileged child of this time, strives toward informed decisions. Optimism with such human capacity is called into question as Alessandra ultimately takes her own life – perhaps once again a demonstration of her free agency as well as a reminder of her exhaustion with the work of creating artful, personally meaningful, balances amidst a set of cultural norms from a period remembered historically as enlightened.

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay - Michael Chabon (Apr06)

Superman and Houdini set the scene for escape and transformation and the story of the comic book hero ‘The Escapist’. There are three main characters: Sam Klayman (a little man, a NY city boy, and a Jew), cousin Joe Kavalier from Prague (a cartoonist on paper and escapist on stage) and our need for a greater-than-life creation whether a golem or a superhero. Chabon captures the sincerity and tenacity of artful lives intent on success and the defiance of evil; under mythic themes, we experience with Sam and Joe first glimpses of naked women and the nervousness of negotiating and jockeying for position in the times of Hitler and growing sensitivity to the powers of art. A good read that didn’t prompt a great discussion.

The Evidence Against Her - Robb Forman Dew (May06)

Without realizing it, we selected not only an author our bookclub had read before (Fortunate Lives Jun93) but also a book that we read previously (see Jun02). Many of us had followed up reading ‘Fortunate Lives’ reading a related “Dale Loves Sophie to Death”. Similarly, we are looking to follow up our current read by selecting ‘The Truth of the Matter’, a second in the cross generational Scofield trilogy located in Washburn, Ohio. when it is out in paper back the end of the year. Why so much focus on a single author? The author presents interesting and realistically flawed characters living everyday lives while having at hand themes of place, family, myth, and metaphor while bringing to life the full flavor of childhood arrangements, physical pleasure, and intellectual pragmatism. Deciding on the ‘her’ in the evidence against her was a quick but far reaching consideration. Is it Agnes who broke from normative elements or her mother who put forth a false Claytor family image of normalacy; or is it ‘against her happiness’ point to our lots in life of pursuing rather than achieving happiness. Very good read and discussion.

Gilead - Marilynne Robinson (Jun06)

Though the author of a less spiritual 'Housekeeping', here Robinson took time to try to describe an attempt to put one's conceptual house in order. A book that says straight out that 'doctrine is not belief, it's a way of talking about belief'. That presents the paradox of the well thought out life and the lived life, presenting us with the Greek word 'sozo' that is often translated healed but may also be restored. So we're reminded that conventional translations may narrow meanings of words in way that can create false expectations. Recall Steinbeck in East of Eden reminds us of the translation of the word 'Timsbel' from 'thou shalt' (command) or 'thou shall' (promise) to thou mayest (choose). And then there is Carol Shields in 'Unless' explicitly saying it's a novel that takes understanding down to the elements of semantics, from the plannable nouns of 'happiness' and 'goodness' to the unplannable conjunctions of 'unless' and 'nearly'. As will happen with sermons, the lessons are outside the lecture – it's in the doing. A different kind of read.

A Thread of Grace - Mary Russell (Jul06)

Russell moves with the agility of expansive themes from science fiction (The Sparrow, Jan98) to historically detailed fiction, bringing reflections on life not by looking into off-world cultures but by looking back in time. In the mountains of Italy at the end of World War II, no matter who happened to be the victor, the Jewish refugees suffered. No matter what the season, it was the village people who helped the new-to-the-village people, seeing through the politics to stay in touch. At once a story of hope and of hopelessness, the horrors of war are mixed up with lively senses of place, of self, and of humanity.

The Cave - Jose Saramago (Aug06)

We know Saramago – a punctuator who is period light and comma heavy – took us through "The History of the Siege of Lisbon" (Jul00) and into an illustrative time of rapid transition in "Blindness" (Apr04). "The Cave" focuses on a period of long-term transition when an old potter content with a plot in life becomes a plotter as his lot in life is herded toward a generic societal 'norm'. We watch as he juggles rapid and routine pottery markets and products, family and extended relations, group and personal goals. An earthy allegory and an easy read though with robust images that stir and stay.

The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse - Louise Erdrich (Sep06)

We meet up with another old friend - from Tracks (Jan91) to The Master Butcher's Singing Club (Jan05).

Lives intersect and questions are framed on a North Dakota Indian Reservation particularly by the church representative Father Damien. Amidst the usual quandaries brought by philosophical codification and tradition, we are prompted to ask: So what constitutes a religious experience? What of passion? What of flexibility. Where forth truth, goodness, and functionality?

River Town - Peter Hessler (Oct06)

A door to China open to Americans by this peace corps volunteer. The approach of having a general essay followed by a non-fiction account blended nonfiction and fiction, travelogue and story, historical and present. In a way, we peered into an ethnographic an field journal expanded upon with interview notes and set of self-memos. Aptly subtitled

two years on the Yangtze, Peter's stay was on the banks of a river to be damned that would wash away the town. Juxtaposing two cultures and then stretching the mobility element to include displacement, one is prompted to reflect upon whether culture is not rooted in place (whether an American home town or a Chinese River Town). It was also a prompt to remember the motivation and effectiveness of the Peace Corps concept. Recent low participant seems to suggest need of not just a new recruitment strategy but a renewed overarching vision with updated ethical grounding in light of our contemporary global culture that is networked digitally and economically.

On Beauty - Zadie Smith (Nov06)

A complex slice of contemporary society served up complete with issues of race and gender, saying and doing, individual responsibility and systemic inequities. The individual-society tension is framed in terms of class – a traditional literary theme - though there were occasional glimpses of a broader perspective of society as an interdependently complex system. Characters tend toward characteratures in order to cover the intellectual and cross-generational territory. So Howard Belsey a recently middled-class muddle, a white academic Rembrandt scholar contrasted with and anchored by his socially integrative black wife Kiki. Their children provide avenues to consider minorities and systems via feminist Zora, identity and engagement via Levi a tuned-out hip-hop homey and Jerome a conservative reactionary. Jerome provides an oddly tenuous tie to the Kipps family that introduces another set of contrasts - contrived but interesting nevertheless. Revealing of it's sweep that the book is compared with both novels of class and of academia: Howards End by E.M.Forster, along with Middlemarch by George Elliot or most any work of Dickens in how they present the functioning of society as dysfunctional in the particular; Lucky Jim by Kingsley Amis and Straight Man by Richard Russo or ' I am Charlotte Simmons' by Thomas Wolfe in how the academic world is a society within society. The stretch to bring coherence with a painting, art criticism, and poetry didn't quite reach the magnificently lofty title 'On Beauty' but still a most interesting follow-on to 'White Teeth' (Mar 02).

The Inheritance of Loss - Kiran Desai (Jan07)

A good read this story of individuals in postColonial India living on the border of Nepal with the legacy of past political alignments – Sai, a young girl orphaned by parents in a Soviet astronaut camp, the judge, snaring a government position by submitting to a disconnected training in England that returns one a local misfit disconnected from ones own culture, and the cook's son seeking material gain by leaving for America and opening the window on the immigrants life within the big city restaurants. A pessimistic view of the downside of both a western culture with materialistic focus and multicultural mixing. A realistic reminder of the pervasive humiliation and rage seeded from past ages to the present – dislocation issues that are particularly evident when crossing boundaries – local to global – from India to Russia, America, and Britain.

Memory Keepers Daughter - Kim Edwards (Feb07)

An interesting read that captures quietly the long-term ramifications of an early unilateral act in a young couple's life. David, the young physician husband, decided to act to protect his wife Norah Henry from thre stress of raising a Down Syndrome twin by

announcing its death while asking his nurse to take the child to an agency. Instead we are treated to the delightful blossoming of a nurse who realizes the limitations of her dedication to the doctor and experiences an unexpected fullness in her own life as she raises the child as a single mom.

Norwegian Wood - Haruki Murakami (Mar07)

Titled after a Beatles song (Norwegian Wood; this bird has flown) that first incorporated Indian music and antagonistic - or shall we say multi-dimensional - relationships with a woman, the book has a literary quality that stays with readers. It's about love, about Tokyo university students dealing with life and "the norm", and it's about coming of age in Japan in 1970 with its mix of international and traditional culture. A remarkable Toru Watanabe encounters an ideal love with Naoko who has retreated to a sanatorium, a real-world love with Midori with whose father he crunches cucumbers, and a quality of shared bidirectional communication with others like Hatsumi associated with red sunsets and the older woman Reiko associated with guitar playing. Surrounded by sadness, Toru - an intelligent, open and kind main character remarkable in his ability to accept things as they are without judgment - finds no safe havens yet neither retreats nor does he 'opt out of adulthood' to join the multiple suicides that bring forward the ever present lonely dark-side to everyday life.

Charming Billy - Alice McDermott (Apr07)

An Irish-American world engulfs the reader as the life of Billy unfolds as a love story and a dream of love story, a tragedy. We witness the realities of time packaged with humor and good will yet unsuccessful at smoothing over the contradictions inherent in human relations where participants are simultaneously concerned with kindness and enabling dysfunctional behaviors including the drinking of a charming Irish boy.

Holy Cow - Sarah MacDonald (May07)

Over a dozen years of periodic selections by Indian writers - each has been unique and read-worthy: *Midnight's Child*-Salomon Rushdee (Mar93); *Palace Walk*-Naguib Mahfouz (Apr93); *The God of Small Things*-Arundhati Roy (Nov98); *Open Heart*-A.B. Yehoshua (Oct99); *A Moor's Last Sigh*-Saloman Rushdee (Mar00); *The Interpreter of Maladies* - Jhumpa Lahiri (Jan01); *A Fine Balance* - Rohinton Mistry (Apr03); *The Death of Vishnu* - Manil Suri (Mar04); *The Namesake-A Novel* - Jhumpa Lahiri (May 05); *The Inheritance of Loss* - Kiran Desai (Jan07). Each of these is memorable in taking us in at the level of everyday life - into the bustling, crowded, contradictory cacophony of Indian culture with its family rituals, elaborate weddings, and full spectrum characters. MacDonald's book has a multiplicity of features that stand in contrast: an outsider's view, breadth rather than depth of interest, and written by a journalist in journalistic style. We're treated to a dabbling that stretches across travel visits and religions as the author seems to undertake a quest - not to know India but with a kind of differential diagnosis face her own fears and fantasies.

Water for Elephants - Sara Gruen (Jun07)

We meet Jacob who ran away to the circus twice, first as a young man at a time of family tragedy and then at the age of ninety something. The circus –with oddities normal and normalcy the oddity - provides a microcosm of society, in this case during the depression when being fed was constantly at stake. And for Jacob, the love of animals and of Marlena captures his heart. It's a good read, moving along in action while handling gracefully the discontinuity of youth to old age, of society to circus, of rousters to rubes.

Three Cups of Tea - Mortenson & Relin (Jul07)

In post 9/11 days of sensitivity to global warming and awareness of Islamic culture, Three Cups of Tea is a memoir about an engaged world citizen. The reader is provided an opportunity to see the historical, physical, and social circumstances framing next generations– who recognized the world is not just something to be 'put in order' but rather to be discussed over three cups of tea. Mortenson tells the story of his failure to climb K2. As the story unfolds, the failures provide lessons from which new opportunities and broader sensibilities arise. In addition, we witness his developing understanding of organizational scaling –a window to a lesson-not-yet-learned. He seems to present an intuitive understanding of the failure of big business economies-of-scale approaches to growth

Digging to America - Anne Tyler (Aug07)

With this good read Tyler creates a unique opportunity to know ourselves better through her vivid portrayal of cultural differences between Korea, Iran and the United States. Her vehicle for this is the annual reunion of two couples – Iranian and US - and their extended families. We first meet these families at the airport when they are each receiving a newly adopted baby from Korea. We see ourselves through the Iranians' caricature of Americans as well as in the Americans' caricature of other cultures. And yet empathy is also developed as we understand what is involved in Iranians and Americans coming to terms with other cultures and new blends of cultures that prompt development of new traditions. .

Talk Talk - T.C.Boyle (Sep07) (previously Tortilla Curtain)

A novel involving a deaf girl, a computer animator boyfriend and an identity thief. A community of characters were described well enough to evoke distaste enough to make finishing the book difficult. The ending with its lack of definitive resolution or conclusion may be found either disappointing or realistic.

A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian – Marina Lewycka (Oct07)

A book about how one's view is shaped by the times. Vera is a War baby, old enough to be a teenage survivor of the occupation of the Ukraine; Nadezhda is a Peace Baby having experienced the 70's as a teenager. They unite in England as middle age sisters when their father Nikolai Alexeevich proposes, marries, and then is tyrannized his home by a big-tits, system-manipulating, fish wife Valentina who escaped from the Ukraine to England and a belief in her entitlement to the pleasures of the West – breast implants, shopping trips and a Rolls Royce. A book with insight into human nature and a message about technology as a driver of society rather than a neutral support to society. The scholarly rant takes the form of a short history of tractors and its multiple transformations

over time, each seeming to be helpful in the short-term but resulting in large-scale harm in the long-term. The sister-sister dialogue seems occasionally slow but captures well the stereotyped perspectives we can so readily identify in others but not ourselves. Amidst a fictional story with clear beginning and end, the well-drawn characters – sisters and father, families and scientific communities – emerge. A series of quotes pops up to summarize the underlying themes explicitly: “language is supremely important. In language are encapsulated not only thoughts but cultural values...” p128; “I grew up with no knowledge of the darkness which lurks at the bottom of the human soul” p249; “And so I leave you with this thought, dear reader. Use the technology that the engineer has developed, but use it with a humble and questioning spirit. Never allow technology to be your master, and never use it to gain mastery over others.” Of course, the engineer does not heed the inverse advice a sociologist would give, ie “Never allow others to be your master, and never use another to gain mastery over others.” Despite finally reluctantly leaving his home and moving to managed living arrangements, the reader is provided a wrap-up that echoes chapter 25:- the triumph of the human spirit - when Pappa ends/begins the day in his new digs with a yoga “I salute the sun”

Forty Signs of Rain - Kim Robinson (Nov07)

Robinson, a science fiction writer well-grounded in science who is a good-enough writer, is well known for his psychological trilogy set some hundreds of years in the future – Red Mars, Green Mars, Blue Mars. Forty Signs is also part of a trilogy – Forty Signs of Rain; Fifty Below, and Sixty Days & Counting, - that brings many of the Mars themes closer in time to the present – science practices and funding, entrepreneurship and innovation, and policy and global warming. We follow Frank from his professorship at UCSD and participation in a biotech company in San Diego to his rotation position as a program manager at the National Science Foundation (NSF). The book can be read superficially but also with an eye to its humor, as a book casting NSF as the protagonist. A remarkable number of contemporary scientific issues are brought casually to the table in moving from a ‘technoterrain’ to a technocosmos’ – long-term thinking, game theory, paradigm construction, tipping points, the philosophy of science, the infrastructure of dispersion, the department of unfortunate statistics, and the notion of curiosity as a value and a form of contemplation. For humans with our short-term action plans, the book presents the sweep of global warming to the doorstep of our attention. The parallel between Buddhist philosophy and the macro-micro dichotomies underlying choice is a theme woven throughout the story.

River King - Alice Hoffman (Dec07)

Discussion was thin on this story threaded with magical realism set in a private school on a river in New England. A variety of ramifications of love and friendship unfold revealing the strengths and weaknesses of human character.

Arthur and George – Julian Barnes (Jan08)

Fiction presenting non-fiction, we witness the development of two young Englishmen from youth through death. Dickens-like in presenting local English culture, prejudice, and coping skills, the book is well summarized by “When the outside world brings the door-knocker down, George usually jumps”. For biography we are treated to an in-depth look

at a 1903 case of injustice that Sir Arthur Doyle solves, reacting against his father's approach as 'a gentle failure of a man' and inspired by the literary success of his fictional character Sherlock Holmes. Rather than a clever puzzle mystery with straightforward detective work, this case requires insight into English character, bureaucracy justice, and potential for change that results in development of an Appeals Court in England in order to avoid the system reveals "A new concept in English law – guilty and innocent". The system cannot admit of error so one is faced with the dichotomies as 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand' in the case of where "Something terrible has happened but nobody has done anything wrong". And as with Eggers book, Doyle/Holmes reacts by filling the void with words, words that as George points out, are not quite as insightful on all issues as he would bring forward...if he were to bring things forward. A good read especially when coupled with articles available online about the actual case of 'half-Indian George Edalji'. An engaging read with some laborious sections.

What is the What – David Eggers (Feb08)

Whether physically or economically, we as American citizens have been presented with life as a vast frontier and yet a manageable system. But now, context shifts: we find ourselves part of a closed earth system with unmanageable, unstable human components. Given tribal hierarchies and resettlement issues, one can venture to suggest that 'the What' is the embracing of the emergent, unknowable, ever-changing set of arrangements and potential arrangements associated with individual situations as well as whole cultures. The story of the Sudanese Lost Boys sweeps to a soul stopping ending-beginning. We are moved - from a mix of religions in India to those in Sudan, from a third cup of tea to shared jerry-cans of well-water, from American adoptions of Korean babies to sponsorship of Sudanese students -from Holy Cow, Three Cups of Tea, Digging to America in 2007 to What is the What in 2008. Eggers presents with quiet thoroughness the multiple perspectives inherent in human activities with Achak Deng – Valentino, Dominic, Sleeper, Gone Far, Red Army, Lost Boy – who (re)assures us that "I speak to you because I cannot help it. It gives me strength, almost unbelievable strength, to know that you are there. ... I am alive and you are alive so we must fill the air with our words. " A compelling, thought-provoking read.

Some Tame Gazelle – Barbara Pym (Mar08)

Pym may be the only author we have had three times for book club, i.e. 'Excellent Women' in June 1992 and 'Quartet in Autumn' July 1995. Her work is threaded with quiet irony drawn from a ceaseless observation of small things and mundane events. Her characters and themes reveal the richness of everyday life – internal and external. Topics are summarized nicely by one of her biographies: 1) ridiculous, really the relationship between men and women, 2) the company of women, 3) everyone has a mother, 4) isolation and loneliness, 5) infinite possibilities, and 6) but what does it lead to. Her characters remind us that what's important is how we respond to change and how we can harbor hope in even a cheerless environment. After reading Pym who is light-spirited with the culturally laden term 'spinster', we might seek to avoid the negative of 'unmarried'. Louisa May Alcott used the term 'gentlewoman'. In contemporary times passing by adjectives such as unfettered, non-desperate, and open-ended, one might arrive at the point Pym describes so well in her stories: The Singular Woman. It's a great

read but only if you're able to pick up on and aren't put out by the quietly outrageous humor.

The Dante Club: A Novel – Mathew Pearl (Apr08)

Takes place in 1865 in Boston, a time when the church was still struggling, medicine was burgeoning, and law maturing. The American Civil War (1861-1865) is ongoing and the narrative provides a telling glance that drives home an understanding of the drivers for and the trauma from war. A US citizen would recognize national poet Longfellow so was liable to stop on the street to shake his hand before passing by but the same individual required time to mature into respect for minority citizens. It was a nation whose university 'old guard' was loathe to give up Latin so saw the teaching of Dante's work as irresponsible and a threat to traditional, true learning materials. Within this context, we're treated to a contemporary murder mystery complete with intrigue, chase scenes, and deductive reasoning. The at-first-glance stuffy members of Longfellow's Dante Translation Club are revolutionary in pursuing scholarly excellence despite local moors and in taking up the challenge of finding a murderer. Rich in historical detail while entertainingly fiction, it's a good book club read.

Infidel – Ayann Hirsi Ali (May08)

A biography though this book reads more like fiction in presenting unwanted marriage, male brutality, and an ingrained cultural brutality such as genital mutilation. It will be hard to forget the moment on a bicycle in Holland when Ayann Hirsi first experienced the sense of freedom that comes with intellectual pursuits, independence, mobility, and a trust in the national infrastructures to support and protect even foreigners. The picture of what the female endures in Somalia and Kenya is drawn so that a Westerner can begin to appreciate the situation. The view of tolerance and its troubles in the Netherlands when it allows Muslims to carry forth their native intolerance to an adopted country with an advanced social support infrastructure and a highly developed culturally embedded attitude toward tolerance. An excellent read that taken together with "A Thousand Splendid Suns", provides an unforgettable foundation for reflection, disbelief, sadness, and consternation with respect to Islamic culture and Ali's struggle with her Muslim faith.

Sacred Hunger – Barry Unsworth (Jun08)

A large vision narrative framed by the planning, building, sailing, and demise of a slave-running ship built in England around 1750. We follow characters from all walks of life, William Kemp an English cotton merchant caught in hard times, nephew Mathew Paris concerned with ramifications of religious-secular solutions for human development, Erasmus as a son following onto his wealthy father's coat-tails. We are provided a multi-level, thought-provoking experience of the slave trade and the intertwining of issues and unexpected turns of events over time. We participate in the barter with African kings over 'cargo', in the irresolvable tensions inherent to societal class systems and to cultural interfaces alike. In the end we consider human nature along with the dichotomy between free market capitalism and a utopian socialist perspective. A well-written and engaging narrative suggesting multiple topics of discussion.

The Female Brain – Louann Brizendine (Jul08)

A recent exposition on the female brain that is not overly scholarly but presents an important 2005 milestone especially if you haven't yet transitioned from "Females are equal to males" to new age "Females and males can do the same things but they may do them differently". Brizendine presents the new medical evidence that the neurochemistry of the female brain differs from that of the male. Despite lapses into unsubstantiated generalizations, she presents well the case that one approach is not better than the other, just different. She essentially adds to the notion of 'abnormal times' such as the time of menstruation; stress of birth, death, and change as periods of disturbance and rebalancing, of 'passages' as a finer scale continuum of change, and of co-existence of multiple temporalities. This is not an angry feminist; it is an inquiring researcher who concludes with the importance of understanding and maximizing 'joy' no matter what your role and condition. A good read prompting lively discussion.

Bad Blood: A Memoir – Lorna Sage (Aug08)

The story is a window into Lorna Sage's growing up because of and despite dysfunctional family dynamics and a childhood legacy of border experiences, e.g. Wales-England, religious-secular, growing up-growing out. It's a co-mingling of learning environments – books, an angry feminist grandmother unwilling to play her part as defined by tradition, and the possibility of individual choice given even the 'bad blood' choice of her grandfather. Carries brooding overtones but if one can persevere through the first chapters, the narrative carries the reader forward. Not a compelling read but holds potential for an interesting book club discussion.

Magic Mountain – Thomas Mann (Oct08)

A classic read, dense and with an epic overview of pre WWI. Published in 1929, it serves as a coming of age not only for an individual but for a culture. Hans Castorp is presented as an everyman who spends years in a Swiss Alps sanatorium for tuberculosis patients, ultimately leaving to become a soldier in World War I. The isolated sanatorium represents a microcosm of European society where Hans transforms from being a self-absorbed, reluctant engineering student as he is introduced to intellectual, emotional and spiritual ideas that shaped the pre war period and stimulate his inner growth. After his initial weeks at the sanatorium, Castorp becomes trapped there for seven years when he discovers he is 'sick'. During his stay he encounters a sweeping cross-section of people: Settembrini represents Western culture and faith in scientific progress; Naphta is a Jew converted to Jesuit who combines communism with the mysticism of the Middle Ages; and millionaire Dutchman Peeperkorn embraces the world of the senses. Themes writ large in this tome include time, sickness and health and the mind-body relationship.

Leaving Home – Anita Brookner (Dec08)

The book covers themes similar to those found in our two previous Brookner reads: 'Misalliance' in Jul94 and 'Brief Lives' in May98. We are presented with the unshared thoughts of a quiet, risk-adverse, easily dominated individual who is functional despite being sad. The reality, ramifications, and nuances of isolation are explored with mastery. Emma Roberts remains displaced even as she travels across vast emotional and physical territories. Moving from home to life as a single woman, between London and Paris, and

from school to scholarship, she fails to find or develop any personal engagement or satisfaction. Through Emma's unceasingly analytic mind, we witness a quiet life without joy, a life of displacement. The writing is precise and elegant. Group consensus was that "Brookner's excellent writing style could not make up for the lack of any turning point in the heroine's passive life".

A Thousand Splendid Suns – Khaled Hosseini (Jan09)

With lyrical prose, the reader is drawn physically, culturally, and emotionally into an Afghanistanian world. Against the noisy, restrictive landscape of change, we read about the connections within families, between individuals, and under male, Muslim regimes. Mariam is brought up alone by her mother Nana who is a servant cast out of Jalil's household when she becomes pregnant. She grows up in an isolated shack between the simple joys of childhood and the bitterness of her mother's reality. We learn about Afghanistan and what it means to live a prescribed, restricted Muslim life where women are belongings who continue to build family infrastructure according to the customs of the land. Mariam is faced with learning her own lessons including an understanding of the lack of control over her own life and the unanticipated joy of unlikely friendships. An outstanding read that prompted a wide-ranging discussion.

Loving Frank – Nancy Horan (Feb09)

A historical novel about Frank Lloyd Wright and Mamah Cheney. They are presented both as individuals and as a couple with demanding intellectual interests. After meeting each other, they both divorced wife and families as they sought to establish broad, full lives. Mamah's stay in Sweden with feminist Ellen Key contrasts with the ensuing US public scandal associated with abandoning her children: "it isn't sufficient to be a mother" she felt. Wright is presented to the reader through eyes of a lover, a passionate intellectual, and an equally complex individual. Mamah's story does allow us to see past his egotism and self-centered perspective. Much more than the classic case of a woman having an affair with a married man. Sad ending but a good read followed by a good discussion.

Stallion Gate - Martin Cruz Smith (Mar 09)

This is an historical fiction and science/political/intrigue story set at Los Alamos in the midst of the Manhattan Project. It's an engaging peek into the development of Big Science. The historical fiction turns part mystery as Sargent Pena, an Indian, is discovered stealing dynamite for local Native Americans.

The Lost – Daniel Mendelson (29 April 09)

Daniel Mendelson, the author, searches for information about family members lost in the World War II Holocaust by traveling to Poland, Ukraine, and ultimately Australia among other countries. He lets the reader join him in hearing diverse oral histories of survivors who are of an elderly status that means he will soon no longer have original sources for his quest to understand his family. A worthwhile read that prompted a good discussion.

Remembering the Bones – Frances Itani (May09)

The weight of organization and scholarliness represented by the Grey's Anatomy tome

comes to mind as bones provide a skeletal framework binding together the stories of present and past in families and the realities of physical and mental elements of life. Georgie Whitley is an independent 80 year old invited to meet Queen Elizabeth on their shared birthdays. This special invitation quickly changes from an anticipated adventure to an unexpected accident as her car flies off a cliff and pins the story to the bottom of a ravine. The reader joins her as she reflects upon what her life has meant, where the meaning resides. All found the book worthwhile in terms of both readability and discussability.

Recessional – James Michener (Jun09)

Andy Zorn, a dedicated young doctor, drops out of the lawsuit ridden medical establishment by accepting a position in Florida to manage a graduated levels-of-care retirement home. An interesting opportunity for Michener to explore with stately sweep, a critical question during his own recessional period: what are the central issues in the final decade of life from a geriatric perspective? The facility's small bench at the start of a walking trail brings the verve of nature and change. This seems a portal opening to the unplanned and the unexpected enriches life considerably for those many whether they are still allowed to drive or not. Taboo topics from arrangements for medical care, quality of life or death decisions, and the meaning of life for the aged are threaded throughout. Time enters through the history of organizational developments and the memories of the nursing home folks as the reader drops in on one year of the lives of a somewhat diverse cast of old-times. Opinions were split on whether it was a good read; discussion focused on parents and grandparents experiences and dilemmas but did not turn to questions of more contemporary empty nests.

Composing a Life – Catherine Bateson (Jul09)

Catherine Bateson is an anthropologist who is the daughter of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. She presents a reflection on her life and four female friends, all of whom faced 'composing a life' somewhat purposefully and gracefully. Her thesis is that the norm need not be a career within a field much less a single company. With the view provided by the passing of time, one was left unsatisfied with her analysis of why she didn't succeed in her position at Amherst. Above all, however, the notion of one's work as a continuing improvisational art emerges when one considers the norm as creating one's work many times over from fragmented elements at hand provided energizing moments. Opinions were mixed as some appreciated the ideas prompted by a shifted standard and others found too many sections that read like an uninspired journal.

Dreamers of the Day – Mary Russell (Aug09)

Perhaps the title refers to the book characters trying to plan national arrangements on a global scale; or perhaps the title refers to the author who was able to make the day such that an early fascination with Laurence of Arabia could be developed into a novel of historical fiction about Agnes Shanklin, a bemused observer of the Cairo Peace Conference of 1921 where Winston Churchill, T.E. Lawrence, and Lady Gertrude Bell meet. Agnes, a singular American schoolteacher turned librarian from Ohio and her dachshund Rosie, is an entertaining if unlikely narrator

The Road - Cormac McCarthy (Sep09)

Neither fiction nor science fiction but more an Everyman Story, a cautionary tale. Against the stark post-apocalyptic landscape where ash falls and the ecosystem destroyed, a father and son are on the road. With this metaphor for life's journey, the author juxtaposes personal survival with community concern, the naiveté of youth and the amoral pragmatics of the old. Within this dark scenario of society's breakdown and ecosystem dysfunction, the author foregrounds the father-son bond, the fragility of society's function, and human reach for hope. A quick, dark read that led to a wide-ranging general discussion.

March - Geraldine Brooks (Oct09)

Brooks provides readers a chance to revisit an American shared cultural artifact – the reading of Little Women as a youngster growing up in the United States. With their father departing to participate in the Civil War, we recall the continuing small struggles of each girl to achieve heroic acts within their reach – gifting to or caring for others as well as giving up small luxuries. Brooks novel allows us to march alongside the departed father and to get to know this transcendentalist by observing his assessments and evaluations that carry him through the war. Essentially an impractical idealist, we observe a philosophy deduced in theory that largely fails in practice. Several of us were not looking forward to reading the book so were quite surprised to find we all valued having read the short novel. The novel brings to life significant events that threatened and then contributed to the United States remaining governed as a union.

Adoration of Jenna Fox – Mary Pearson (Dec09)

A science fiction reminding us of the unexpected in life. There are mistaken understandings when rules are developed solely through rational thought uninformed by experience. Teenager Jenna survives severe injuries because her father is a successful bioengineer who uses nanotechnology illegally to save her life. This brings forward contemporary questions of science, ethics, and sociotechnical understandings. As Jenna is moved from Boston to California, the book becomes an adolescent quest to understand what determines identity, self, and one's place in the world.

The Hour I First Believed – Wally Lamb (Jan10)

Caelcum Quirk teaches at Columbine High School with his wife Maureen and wayward student Velvet. He is absent tending to family on the East Coast but his wife is in the school library 20 April 1999 in Littleton, Colorado when two students attack the school. We live through the ramifications of post traumatic stress disorder as Caelcum and Maureen try to understand family, stress disorders, responsibility, and the why of it all. The randomness of events pervades the butterfly part 1; a loose, unpredictable connectedness dominates part 2. A well-crafted work that is non-fiction in its naming of Columbine victims as an act of respect and remembrance and is fiction in its family story of the Quirks – from Lolly to Lizzy and Lydia. In quest of the meaning, there's a cornfield maze metaphor prior to our introduction to the bifurcation concept of chaos theory as well as the social justice, not dogma, in religion central to Quirk, our accidental activist. Wally Lamb asks the hard questions, i.e. how could it have happened? What have we learned? Where does one go from here? An excellent story and read though with

a story that unfolds complexity over a period of time, there are a number of slow, seemingly tedious sections. Lamb wrote (and we read) ‘She’s come undone’ and ‘I know this much is true’.

Elizabeth Strout – Olive Kitteridge (Feb10)

An outstanding read in cast as 13 tales from coastal Maine. The sometime over-structured chapters focus on different characters and are presented from a variety of perspectives but each includes reference to or an appearance by Olive Kitteridge. This results in a multi-faceted view of Olive over time, reminding one of the complexity and interconnections that arise in the course of relationships. Olive Kitteridge is a fully developed character whose well-defined personality stays with you for quite some time. Indeed, she stays around for the end-of-the-book interview responding with dialogue to which the reader becomes accustomed. Strout knows how to capture the mundane conversations of married couples whether in the scenes that occur at a family wedding or in the small events that comprise long-time, unspoken marriages shaped by joys and disappointments.

Orson Scott Card – Ender’s Game (Mar10)

From the opening line “I’ve watched through his eyes, I’ve listened through his ears, and I tell you he’s the one.” we enter a world shaped by adults and children alike. In Ender’s Game find adults struggling to train children for upcoming epic moments in the human battle for survival against alien ‘buggers’. In Ender’s Game, a Battle School is the training ground for the future leaders of Earth’s International Space Fleet. A handful of Earth’s children are trained in military theory through orbiting Battle School null gravity battles and computer games. Ender’s personal battles with loneliness and a variety of fears resonates with readers of all ages. We observe Ender’s struggle between being the kind, peaceful boy he wants to be and the savage, violent actions he is frequently forced to take and that are mirrored in the personalities of his sister Valentine and his sadistic brother Peter, respectively. His siblings hide their identity on Internet postings and become influential using pseudonym’s Locke and Demosthenes. These two – named after an enlightenment philosopher who described the social contract and knowledge as gained through experience and a Greek philosopher seeking to restore Athens’s supremacy through oration – look to shape the destiny of post war Earth. This book is one of a series (Ender’s Game, Ender in Exile, Speaker of the Dead, Xenocide and Children of the Mind).

Daniyal Mueenuddin - In Other Rooms, Other Wonders (Apr10)

A book of short stories that are interconnected so as to triangulate in on life in Pakistan. The importance of family and village, of rank in society, potential futures and luck are foremost in each of the eight chapters. The style is crisp in revealing across classes and time the weaknesses of individuals and the feudal system. A well-written series of sad stories that is a good read.

Temple Grandin - Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism (May10)

This is the story of Temple Grandin, born autistic with a mother who rejects medical traditions to teach her autistic daughter how to become functional in society. In order to do this, Temple comes to learn about the sciences including the science of the brain that

makes her different from others. This difference becomes an opportunity. She is able to communicate to society about what it is like to have this specialist mind, that is, to be autistic and how autism means her brain differs cognitively from the norm in being extremely sensitive to sensory input. We follow her life story while learning about sensory perception and visual thinkers in contrast to abstract and verbal thinker. Her claim is that this is closer to how animals see the world. She explains the many different types of autism but sees autism as at one end of a spectrum from the normal of visual thinking being filtered through a language-logic part of the brain (where both pictures and language functions of the brain fuse). I found it useful to consider instead a three dimensional cognitive landscape of visual thinking, language thinking, and social thinking. Grandin was highly functional in being able to make use of visual thinking together with an awareness of the social. We watched the movie of Grandin's life from early childhood to adult that brought this book to life and led to a lively discussion.

Abraham Verghese – Cutting for Stone (Jun10)

The story begins at sea, reaches Ethiopia and ends in Boston with main characters Sister Mary Joseph Praise, a young nun who leaves India and ends up a nurse in Ethiopia, Thomas Stone, chief surgeon at Missing Hospital in Addis Ababa, Shiva and Marion, their twin sons who grow up in the hospital compound, and Gosh and Hema, Indian expatriate doctors who take some time to discover their love and their desire to raise the twins. There is an intermingled feeling of intimacy with a sense of larger than life themes – family ties, trust, and the need for care that comes in all shapes, forms, and circumstances. A story told with amazing skill and insight. One of our most outstanding and memorable reads in several years.

John Irving-Last Night in Twisted River (Jul10)

We join Dominic Baciagalupo (Cookie) and his son Danny in a logging camp near Twisted River. We learn in chapters that alternate present with past about Dominic's Kiss-of-the-Wolf history and follow the two as Dominic cooks and Danny goes to school. A father and son story with Expecting another 'The World According to Garp', 'A Prayer for Owen Meany' or 'The Cider House Rules' leads to some disappointment before readjustments are made to the world of the cook and his son, an Irvingesque writer. Cookie moves from American lumberjack to Italian in Boston, Chinese in Iowa City, and French in Toronto. Ketchum, a larger-than-life logger, saves the day but not necessarily the storyline. The story wanders across two generations and has some momentum when viewed as a series of short stories or tall-tales. Many didn't finish the book; the discussion vacillated between a feeling of interesting situations with caricatured characters and evidences of a writer's self-indulgence.

Tracy Chevalier – Remarkable Creatures (Aug10)

Fossils are the focus of this fictionalized history situated on the beach in the Southwest coast of England. Chevalier takes the reader back to and brings to life a period in the early 19th century when scientists and the public begin to imagine geologic time and the inhabitants of the earth over time. A friendship and temporary rivalry between Mary Anning and Elizabeth Philpot is the vehicles that allow us to explore an unusual

friendship as well as the changing roles of women, the confines of English society, and the passion associated with a deep interest in natural science. It is intriguing to have unfold, the story of how Mary, a young, uneducated working-class daughter, and Elizabeth, an older, unmarried gentlewoman both manage against circumstances to engage with and contribute to scientific investigations and worldviews. An unusual, interesting, and fairly easy read that led to an enthusiastic discussion.

Per Patterson, Anne Born – Out Stealing Horses (Sep10)

A surprisingly good read given the solitude and loneliness of a story set in Norway. We follow Trond in his retirement. He is looking forward to solitude, only to be reminded of the importance of neighbors and family. Perhaps because of his purposefulness, the book brought to mind Bateson's *Composing a Life*. An unobtrusive structural finesse that carries the reader along through intertwined chapters on his childhood past and his retirement in a cabin in the country.

Barbara Kingsolver – The Lacuna (Oct10)

Following the life of Harrison Shepard, the book covers large historical periods: the Mexican revolution for his childhood and the US McCarthy hunt of communists in the 1950's. In between Shepard is shaped by his work in the house of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, complete with being note taker for Leon Trotsky their houseguest. Earlier books short and long we've read: *The Bean Trees*, *Animal Dreams*, *Poisonwood Bible*. The *Lacuna* provided a more difficult book to finish perhaps because of the weight of pervasive context that was sometimes interrupted by the interesting mix of diary entries and letters. Only half our readers finished the ponderous pages but it provided an interesting enough discussion and brought to light the librarian term 'lacuna' meaning the last in a series

Tatiana de Rosnay – Sarah's Key (Dec10)

With journalist Julia Jarmond, we experience life as a young American woman in Paris with an unfaithful French husband. The history of the Starzynski family apartment they are to move into takes the reader back to 1942 when there were Jewish families rounded up for transport to Auschwitz. Learning about the survival of the Starzynski family 10-year-old daughter Sarah and the loss of her brother Michel is a key for Julia who learns at the same time more about the French in general as well as her husband and his family in particular. Julia's quest to follow-up on Sarah's story brings to the fore feelings of guilt and pain found throughout history often characterized as 'an evil anomaly' but here shown as the doings of ordinary French police rather than the Gestapo. A good enough, fairly quick read.