

Laughing Oyster Book Club Picks 2016

Calliope's Picks

Girl Mans Up by M-E Girard

This book is a perceptive window into the life of a “bad-ass” teenager as she figures out who she is and how her journey to stay true to herself is impacting her relationships with family and friends. As the novel begins, Pen is struggling with the strict old-world gender expectations of her Portuguese parents in an Ontario town near Toronto. She learns to navigate high school, first love, homework, and a part-time job while realizing her definition of being a girl is not the same as what the people around her think it should be.

Pen's story will give you insight into why teens would be kicked out of a home because of their gender identity or why they might face violence from their peers. Although this is categorized as a teen novel, it feels like an adult novel because of the depth and range of M-E Girard's writing.

Hardcover – 19.99

All That the Rain Promises and More ... by David Arora

Now that the Death Cap mushroom is here on Vancouver Island, you may find yourself wanting to know which mushrooms sprouting up on your lawn are safe to eat and which are not. There are several delicious edible species that do not have poisonous look-alikes. Conversely, there is a handful of deadly poisonous species that do have edible look-alikes. David Arora explains clearly in *All That the Rain Promises and More* how to identify mushrooms by their shape, type of gill, scent, texture, spore colour and other attributes.

Arora lists mushrooms by main categories: gilled, boletes (including porcinis), polypores, teeth fungi, coral and club fungi, earthstars and puffballs, morels and false morels, and others. He reviews the equipment you need to properly identify and harvest mushrooms, tips on gathering them with kids, what to do if someone has eaten a poisonous mushroom, and even how to dye textiles with fungi. The entire guide is interspersed with humorous stories and photos of enthusiastic and wonderfully dorky mushroom collectors.

A few tips for novice collectors:

Slugs and other animals can eat poisonous mushrooms; don't rely on their judgement to determine if something is safe for humans. Go foraging with more experienced collectors until you are confident you can identify what you want to eat. Leave some behind, don't pick the young ones as they will not have had time to spread their spores.

Paperback – 22.99

Evelyn's Picks

Circling the Sun by Paula McLain

It seems to me that Paula McLain is making a career of shining light on amazing but under-celebrated women through the vehicle of the historical novel. *Circling the Sun* takes the reader to Colonial British Kenya in the 1920's, featuring the life of Beryl Markham – trailblazing horse trainer and record setting aviator.

It took just one paragraph of Beryl Markham's memoir, *West with the Night*, for Paula McLain to realize this was the woman she'd been waiting for.

"Immediately, I got this electric response to her voice," says McLain, "and I read it deeply, knowing I was going to channel her."

McLain stopped work on a novel about Marie Curie to begin one on Markham... who came of age in British colonial Kenya." (Megan Labrise July 2015).

Brought to Kenya as a young child and abandoned there by her mother, Beryl Markham was raised by her father -a horse trainer - and the Kipsigis people who lived on her father's land. Her unconventional upbringing transforms her into a bold woman with fierce will – in a rugged and often decadent environment which she navigates (with more will than grace) the requirements for her survival and ultimately her freedom.

This sweeping tale evokes an unfamiliar land and a fierce spirit, and the exhilarating adventures of a woman before her time.

Also check out - "Out of Africa" by Karen Blixen, Markham's contemporary, and Markham's own "West with the Night".

Trade paper – 21.00

HEAVINESS OF THINGS THAT FLOAT by Jennifer Manuel

Jennifer Manuel is a writer, teacher and activist living on Vancouver Island. This, her debut novel, is about a non indigenous woman negotiating her place on a West Coast First Nation where she has served as a nurse for the past forty years. Her unsettlement about her approaching retirement is further upset when a young man she's loved like a son goes missing, his disappearance bringing all kinds of stories and secrets to the surface.

Bernadette has lived on the edge of Tawakin in the nursing outpost, coming to know and love members of the community intimately over these forty years, becoming keeper of their secrets. This is a place where truth and myth are deeply intertwined "like organisms all their own, life upon life...the way chanterelles spring from hemlock needles".

The novel draws you in slowly, compellingly, revealing clues layer by layer – and challenging Bernadette's sense of belonging. She has never truly belonged in Tawakin.

This is not an easy read. Though there is beauty, love and laughter, there is also great pain in *The Heaviness of Things That Float*. No matter how we try to push it under the surface, the burdens of shame, guilt, secrets and silence eventually rises to the surface. What floats is indeed what is heavy.

Trade paper – 22.95

Unearthed: Love, Acceptance and Other Lessons from an Abandoned Garden by
Alexandra Risen

Alexandra Risen and her husband purchase a home and one acre property on the edge of a ravine in downtown Toronto because of the potential they see in its long abandoned garden. Little does she know that reclaiming this wild space will help her unearth her own childhood that echoes with longing, silence and unasked questions.

Alexandra's father dies just as her family is moving to their new home and her mother's health is declining rapidly. When clearing out the family home, Alexandra and her sister discover some wartime documents that shed a little light on the lives of her parents – a life they had never talked about. Uprooted from the Ukraine to work in Nazi Germany during the Second World War, her parents met and married in a Displaced Person's camp before immigrating to Edmonton. Her father shut himself off in a world of silence; her mother buried herself in work and her garden.

As Alexandra works to reveal the garden beneath the weeds she also delves into the early lives of her parents. Memories, connected to the plants she discovers, move from resentments to understanding. “Unearthed” is an account of difficult family relationships, reconciliation and the healing power of nature. Never have I been so moved to uncover some of my own family stories as after reading this moving memoir.

Trade paper 24.95

HOGARTH SHAKESPEARE SERIES

For more that 400 years, Shakespeare's works have been performed, read, and loved throughout the world. They have been reinterpreted for each new generation, whether as teen films, musicals, science-fiction flicks, Japanese warrior tales, or literary transformations.

The Hogarth Press was founded by Virginia and Leonard Woolf in 1917 with a mission to publish the best new writing of the age. In 2012, Hogarth was launched in London and New York to continue the tradition. The Hogarth Shakespeare project sees Shakespeare's works retold by

acclaimed novelists of today. The series launched in 2015 and by 2017 eight works will have been published.

Gap of Time by Jeanette Winterson

One of Shakespeare's final plays, *The Winter's Tale*, is the spellbinding story of newfound love, treacherous jealous, revenge, regret, and ultimately, redemption. In *The Gap of Time*, Jeanette Winterson takes us from 2008 London to a storm-ravaged city in America called New Bohemia in an inspired, witty, and energetic new version of Shakespeare's classic tale.

Shylock is my Name by Howard Jacobson

This is a contemporary rendering of *The Merchant of Venice*, one of Shakespeare's most famous comedies, and now set in England's South Manchester, featuring rich heiresses, art collectors, footballers, and more. Jacobson's vision for *The Merchant of Venice* promises more than just a pound of flesh with the drama, irony, and tragedy that gave the original play its fame.

Vinegar Girl by Anne Tyler

Pulitzer Prize winner Anne Tyler sets her retelling of Shakespeare's classic comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew*, in contemporary Baltimore, featuring Kate, a socially awkward preschool teacher and her unlikely romance with Pyotr, her father's Russian lab assistant. *Vinegar Girl* is a hilarious and heartwarming tale that is sure to delight both longtime fans of Tyler and devotees of the Bard.

Hagseed by Margaret Atwood

10/11/2016 "Now does my project gather to a head: My charms crack not; my spirits obey." Acclaimed critic and novelist Margaret Atwood tackles *The Tempest*, often seen as the most biographical work in Shakespeare's canon. "It has always been a favourite of mine, and working on it will be an invigorating challenge. Is Caliban the first talking monster? Not quite, but close . . ." she writes.

Still to Come:

Jo Nesbo on Macbeth

Tracey Chevalier on Othello

Edward St. Aubyn on King Lear

Gillian Flynn on Hamlet

I have read two of the above and recommend this series as a fresh way to approach Shakespeare and celebrate 400 years of his work!

Jane's Picks

Trees on Mars: Our Obsession with the Future by Hal Niedzviecki

There is a notion that there's a technological solution to every problem and that the future is one of endless progress. Hal argues that the overall effect of this obsession with a technological future is the devaluing of human life. Children come home from school with nostrums about saving the planet through recycling, which is by and large a giant joke. What we need is less consumption, but if children came home and told their parents not to buy the latest model iPhone there would be outrage. The idea of some shining, bright technological future flies in the face of our present reality of social disruption, drowning islands, dying fish, displaced people, endless war, etc. The kind of sophisticated thinking that one needs to really see how the system operates to devalue human life is not at the forefront of people's thoughts. But you can't say to your children, Look, the planet's ending. The infinite cycle of technological progress is a mirage. Hal resisted the impulse to end the book on an optimistic note. All we have is each other and love in the end, he says. "Let's all just turn off our phones and sit down to dinner." A very thought-provoking read.

Trade paper – 18.95

Deep South by Paul Theroux

Paul has been traveling a long time around the world. Candidly, he tells us that this was the first time there were no flirtations on his travels. He was treated like an old man, he says, everywhere he went. And he goes everywhere in the South and talks to everyone, it seems. His conclusion is that for all their warmth and courtesy, "these poor folk are poorer in their way and less able to manage and more hopeless than many people I had traveled among in distressed parts of Africa and Asia." The takeaway from this book is that it's a shocking disgrace that the federal government is willing to send hundreds of millions of dollars to places like Tanzania to build schools and clinics and virtually nothing to help the plight of its own dispossessed and impoverished citizens. The reader cannot help but be in agreement.

Trade paper – 21.99

Ola's picks

Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu by Joshua Hammer

This is a fast-paced narrative of a band of librarians in Timbuktu who smuggled over 350,000 manuscripts from the destructive grasp of the Al Qaeda that had invaded Mali in 2012. It is part intellectual history, part geopolitical tract, and part out-and-out thriller.

In the 1980's, Abdel Kader Haidara journeyed across the Sahara Desert and along the Niger River, tracking down and salvaging tens of thousands of ancient Islamic and secular manuscripts

that had fallen into obscurity. These priceless documents included treatises on science, medicine, law, history, and culture. The Al Qaeda invaders imposed Sharia law and threatened to destroy all this knowledge. With quiet resolution and a dedicated band of friends and family, Haidara was able to organize a miraculous slight-of-hand that has so far secured these documents.

The book is wonderfully readable. It provides us with a deeper understanding of what is happening in that part of the world and what those events can mean to us.

Hardcover – 35.00

Do Not Say We Have Nothing by Madeleine Thien

WINNER OF THE 2016 GILLER PRIZE FOR FICTION
SHORTLISTED FOR THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE 2016

In Canada in 1990, ten-year-old Marie and her mother invite into their home a young woman who has fled China in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests. Her name is Ai-Ming. As her relationship with Marie deepens, Ai-Ming tells the story of their family in revolutionary China, from the first days of Chairman Mao's ascent to the events leading to the Beijing demonstrations of 1989. The story is uncovered with difficulty – Marie barely speaks or reads Chinese, and the events and characters are buried beneath layers of forgetting. It is pieced together from the fragments of a set of notebooks brought to Canada from China.

Do Not Say We Have Nothing magnificently brings to life one of the most significant political regimes of the 20th century and its traumatic legacy, which still resonates for a new generation. History is deftly woven into a moving story of the musicians who suffered during and after the Cultural Revolution in China.

Hardcover – 35.00

Susan L's Picks

The Art of Hearing Heartbeats by Jan-Philipp Sendker

This novel was written in German in 2002, recently translated into English by Kevin Wiliarty.

Julia is a New York City lawyer. Four years ago her successful lawyer father, Tin Win, disappeared inexplicably, leaving no clues for his American wife & daughter. Julia comes across a love letter written by her father to a woman back home in Burma some years before. Using this as her starting point, she sets off for the small village of Kalaw.

There, a man named U Ba spins out the amazing tale of Tin Win as a boy and young man, rejected by superstition surrounding his birth and later because of his blindness. He is drawn

inextricably to the young woman Mi Mi, also dealing with physical challenges. Together they form an unbreakable bond.

This is a love story that tugs at the heartstrings, while also requiring a willing suspension of disbelief, given the twists and turns of the relationship.

As U Ba's tale unfolds Julia also unfolds, moving from her logical and impatient New York view of this small anachronistic village to a fuller understanding of her father.

One reviewer referred to a need for 'sentimental indulgence' on the part of the reader. I found I also needed to set aside my cynical reader's stance and let myself unfold along with Julia, to a place where love can, indeed, produce unexpected magic.

Trade paper – 18.95

Stranger by David Bergen

Winnipeg author David Bergen is well established, with eight previous novels to his credit, many of them nominated and/or awarded with literary prizes. This book was nominated for the 2016 Giller Prize.

Iso, a young Guatemalan girl, works in a fertility clinic in the high mountains, serving a wealthy and exclusive clientele. Her own pregnancy & subsequent disappearance of her baby from the clinic spark her journey to the USA on a true Heroine's Quest for her child.

Stranger is a story larger than its protagonist, the quest shining a spotlight on the perils of being poor, not American, a woman, an illegal.....to name but a few. Iso's journey through the many pitfalls is harrowing (a requirement for a Quest) and depends on some magical realism and that some allowances be made by the reader.

Although one is pulled into this tale, the broader vantage point blunts some of the more difficult details. There are luscious moments, dreamy in quality, particularly in Guatemala, but the story also packs literary punch. I am loathe to provide further plot details for fear of spoiling your journey. Hardcover – 29.99

Fates and Furies by Lauren Groff

A third novel by Ms Groff, this is a story of a relationship, but to leave that as the sole description would be a travesty.

Most of the novel takes place in New York, about the 1990's. As life unfolds, we are introduced to a host of erudite & intriguing characters and also to the worlds of theatre & art galleries.

The 'Fates' section gives us Lancelot's world, which is also the accepted public view of things. The Golden Boy, seemingly born for greatness, luck and accolades both public and private, 'Lotto' is shaped by his past & borne along by his present. He is affable, lovable and loves easily,

especially his darling and devoted wife Mathilde. In his inherent narcissism, he accepts her presentation of herself, draws his own conclusions and digs not much deeper. Things are good.

Mathilde conceals both herself and her past which has certainly shaped her present. She is the 'Fury' section, revealing a far different reality than the one in which we have been immersed thus far.

Nothing is black and white here, although it is tempting to try and cast the protagonists in such roles. This book is not so much adding to our information about marriage as asking questions about reality and what goes into making us who we are.

With the title already suggestive of Greek theatre, Groff plays with the Greek chorus as well, with sly observances and prescient asides. The language is wonderful, with spot-on word choices and inventive descriptions.

I loved the structure of the narrative, the secrets and revelations, the surprises. This is a complex story about a complicated relationship between two fascinating people. I long to say more..... You may finish with more questions than answers.

Trade paper – 22.00

Susan S's Picks

A Different Kind of Daughter - the girl who hid from the Taliban in plain sight

by Katherine Holstein w/ Maria Toorpaki

This book is about Maria Toorpaki, a young girl from the tribal region of Pakistan, who risked everything to be true to herself and to pursue the sport she loved despite being targeted by the Taliban. In doing so, she became an inspiration to girls all over the world.

Here are a few paragraphs from the prologue, this is where I was pulled immediately into her story.....

"Just before my fifth birthday I complained to my father that I could not suffer another suffocating dress and would prefer to wear loose clothes like the boys I'd watched playing outside in the dirt. I heard the constant thud of feet kicking a ball and I felt a sudden fist of intense heat punch at my gut.

Suddenly I was aware that despite all of my father's liberal efforts and everything about the wider world that he'd tried to teach me, I would never truly be free.

I didn't think about what I did next. I simply got up, backed away into cool shadow, tearing off my dress, ripping at the seams, clawing at the arms.

Then in a quiet rampage through the house, I pulled every one of my dresses out of the closet and into the garden. One by one. They were so heavy, it took an entire hour.

I knew where my mother kept the kerosene and the matches. I moved fast, before I could change my mind, knowing full well that if I allowed myself to think too much, I would stop. Standing back I watched the flame fly at my command like a small shooting star."

Maria Toorpaki was born in northwest Pakistan, in a violently oppressive tribal region where women are forbidden from playing sports and girls rarely leave their homes. But Maria yearned to live her life as freely as her brothers and all the other boys in her neighbourhood. So one day she burned all of her dresses, chopped off her hair and with her parents' support, began to live her life disguised as a boy in order to play the sport she loved.

This book tells of Maria's journey to follow her destiny, despite living under the strict rule of the Taliban. She lived as a boy and played on boys' teams until puberty betrayed her true gender. Even though it seemed impossible at times, Maria became the #1 female squash player in Pakistan.

Then she became a target for the Taliban, along with her entire family. A girl playing squash openly meant only one thing - a death sentence in Taliban- controlled Pakistan. She knew that the only way she could live her life was to flee the country, leaving behind her beloved parents and the only home she had ever known.

Maria writes forcefully and clearly about the most painful elements of life under Taliban rule. She doesn't engage in self pity, rather, she gives an honest, painful account of the reality of everyday life in Pakistan with the Taliban.

A Different Kind of Daughter is a book about equality, courage, determination, parents' enduring love and the commitment to fight against what is terribly wrong in the world.

Hardcover - 34.95.

Paperback due March, 2017 - 21.00

This Is Not My Life by Diane Schoemperlen

In 2005, while trying to get over her latest heartbreak, Diane is talked into volunteering at a soup kitchen in Kingston, Ontario. Three months later, a new volunteer arrives and Diane is immediately intrigued. He is a powerful looking man in his late 50s with very white teeth, very straight hair, a noticeable limp and a teardrop tattoo below his left eye. He is also serving a life sentence for 2nd degree murder.

But volunteering at the soup kitchen has taught her that everyone has a story of some sort and that it is best not to assume anything or judge anyone. So with an open heart she lets Shane into her life and eventually her home.

She hasn't ever imagined meeting a man serving a life sentence for murder. However, he becomes an important part of her life for the next six years.

The book details, painfully, the highs and lows of her relationship with Shane while he is incarcerated and then out on parole, only to be incarcerated again. Diane gives the reader a very unique glimpse into the minutiae of a prisoner's life and of the families that visit them.

This is not only the dramatic tale of a romance gone terribly wrong, but it is also an intimate

look at the correctional service in Canada. It is an important commentary on how often the system fails rather than rehabilitates. And the incredible amount of patience it takes her to learn how to navigate through and around it.

Anyone who has ever realized that they have fallen in love with the wrong person, for whatever reason, will identify with Diane's own emotional reflections. Painfully honest, she is not afraid to admit her own personal contributions to the couples' failed attempt at a relationship.

I found it difficult to understand how a woman, not unlike you or me, could fall in love with a murderer. But Diane examines herself openly and honestly, displaying all of her hopes and beliefs in the power of love and commitment.

By her own admission, she held onto the relationship far too long, determined to make it work, even when both she and Shane knew it was unlikely. Through her own self critique she reveals her incredible strength, endurance and compassion. She writes, "I'd been in love with the story, not the reality of my life joined with Shane's."

At times I wished that I could just yell at her to give up and walk away. But she is so brutally honest in her self reflection, I just kept reading right through to the end, wanting her to accept the reality and hoping that she would end things with Shane for good.

She does not come across as naive nor as a victimized woman led astray by a manipulative murderer. Instead this is the story of two incompatible people who surprisingly found love despite their own dysfunctions and extreme circumstances.

This is a great read, lots to think about and talk about regarding unexpected personal relationships and the value they can bring to our lives.

Trade paper – 24.95