

Laughing Oyster Bookshop

Book Club Picks

October 2014

Karen's picks

Under the Wide and Starry Sky by Nancy Horan, paperback, \$19

From Nancy Horan, New York Times bestselling author of *Loving Frank*, comes her much-anticipated second novel, which tells the improbable love story of Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson and his tempestuous American wife, Fanny.

At the age of thirty-five, Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne has left her philandering husband in San Francisco to set sail for Belgium—with her three children and nanny in tow—to study art. It is a chance for this adventurous woman to start over, to make a better life for all of them, and to pursue her own desires. Not long after her arrival, however, tragedy strikes, and Fanny and her children repair to a quiet artists' colony in France where she can recuperate. Emerging from a deep sorrow, she meets a lively Scot, Robert Louis Stevenson, ten years her junior, who falls instantly in love with the earthy, independent, and opinionated “belle Americaine.”

Fanny does not immediately take to the slender young lawyer who longs to devote his life to writing—and who would eventually pen such classics as *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In time, though, she succumbs to Stevenson's charms, and the two begin a fierce love affair—marked by intense joy and harrowing darkness—that spans the decades and the globe. The shared life of these two strong-willed individuals unfolds into an adventure as impassioned and unpredictable as any of Stevenson's own unforgettable tales.

Coming Ashore by Catherine Gildiner, hardcover \$27.95

Picking up her story in the late 60s at age 21, Cathy Gildiner whisks the reader through five years and three countries, beginning when she is a poetry student at Oxford. Her education extended beyond the classroom to London's swinging Carnaby Street, the mountains of Wales and a posh country estate.

After Oxford, Cathy returns to Cleveland, Ohio, which was still reeling from Ghetto riots. Not one to shy away from a challenge, she teaches at a high school where police escort teachers through the parking lot. There, she tries to engage apathetic students and tussles with the education authorities.

In 1970 Cathy moves to Canada. While studying literature at the University of Toronto, she rooms with members of the FLQ and then with one of the biggest drug dealers in

Canada. Along the way she falls in love with the man who eventually becomes her husband and embarks on a new career in psychology.

Coming ashore is the third in the biographical series that begins with *Too Close to the Falls*, then continued Cathy's adventures in *After the Falls*.

Molly's Pick

Orange is the New Black: a Memoir by Piper Kerman, paperback \$19

In 1998, Piper Kerman was working as a freelance producer in New York City and living a peaceful life with her magazine editor boyfriend, Larry. When two police officers arrived at their door one morning, Kerman assumed it must have something to do with the apartment building. In fact, they were there to arrest her on conspiracy drug charges related to her role in a drug trafficking ring several years earlier.

Contrary to her fears, most of her fellow inmates approach her with warmth and concern. Descriptions of their small acts of kindness and acceptance are remarkably touching, and reveal the human side of living in the prison system. The resilience these women show to survive within the concrete walls, warehoused for years on end is fascinating. Kerman lived and helped many women with lesser privileges during her year in prison. As she came from an educated, middle-class background, she was definitely the minority and so shares insight and experience the public hasn't heard before in a voice we can relate to yourself, sister or daughter.

Piper Kerman's Biography about her year in prison has been made into a successful and anticipated Netflix television series.

Ola's Picks

The Bone Clocks by David Mitchell, hardcover \$34

The Bone Clocks follows the twists and turns of Holly Syke's life, from a scarred adolescence in Gravesend, England in 1984 to old age on Ireland's Atlantic coast in 2043, as Europe's oil supply dries up – a life not so far out of the ordinary, yet punctuated by flashes of precognition, visits from people who emerge from thin air and brief lapses in the laws of reality. Some characters from Mitchell's previous novels reappear here and their stories are concluded.

David Mitchell is a superb storyteller. He can get a narrative rolling along faster than most writers and he has a marvelous sense of the real and of the unreal. He keeps these elements in nice tension in his latest novel The Bone Clocks.

Sweetland by Michael Crummey, hardcover \$32

By turns darkly comic and heartbreakingly sad, *Sweetland* is a story about one man's struggles against the forces of nature and the ruins of memory.

Crummey's prose in *Sweetland* is distinct from that of *Galore*, his previous novel. The rhythm here is slow, circular, and we gently rock between present-day events and Moses Sweetland's memories. Much of the book's beauty lies in its finely wrought portrait of this powerful, eccentric character who sustains those around him in ways so unobtrusive and gracious that detecting them can be like discovering buried treasure. That's what is so touching about this book – the memories it evokes of a vibrant community and how time changes everything.

Jane's picks

How to Build a Girl by Caitlin Moran, paperback \$22.99

"It is a million times easier to be cynical and wield a sword, than it is to be open-hearted and stand there, holding a balloon and a birthday cake, with the infinite potential to look foolish." So true, and Caitlin certainly risks looking foolish with this brutally honest memoir disguised as a work of fiction.

Like her protagonist, Dolly Wilde, Caitlin changed her name from the pedestrian Cathy, and became a journalist for a rock magazine at the age of 17. Is everything else taken from life as well, from the near-feral upbringing to the sexually induced cystitis? The reader feels it is.

Adolescence is a long time ago for me, less for her (she's 39), but she does a fine job of bringing it back with all its brashness, insecurities and cluelessness. She had the youth I wish I had had. A respectable, middle-class upbringing can be a drawback, might be the unintended lesson of the book.

Station Eleven by Emily St. John Mandel, paperback \$21.99

It's the end of civilization as we know it, (I know, but this is different) that comes on the wings of a global, swift-moving virus that wipes out 90% of the earth's inhabitants in the space of about a week. Five of the survivors are linked to an actor who is the first fatality of the book, who dies, ironically, on stage of a heart attack. That is the narrative bones of the book. There are no chainsaw-wielding zombies. If this is how you like your apocalypses this is not the book for you. We come in 20 years after the collapse of civilization and most of that chaos lies in the past.

There are two themes or areas of interest to the author, as I see it. The first seems to be the marvels of our modern world that we are immune to, such as electricity at the flick of a switch, fast, comfortable travel by car, phones, computers, etc. The second idea is

fascinations with the way small repetitive memory tid-bits eventually form the substance of who we are. Why do certain memories return to us again and again, even though they appear to be trivial and on the surface, not worthy of being remembered?

It's a terrible cliché, but in this case it's true, especially with the Ebola virus whipping around the globe, if you only read one book this year, this should be the one. You will race through the book and it will stay with you for weeks afterwards, maybe forever

Susan's picks

Medicine Walk by Richard Wagamese, hardcover \$29.95, paperback expected March 3, \$17.95

Franklin Starlight has been schooled by a guardian ('the old man') for his 16 years, to be a farmer and to learn himself and the land. He receives a summons from his alcoholic father Eldon, with whom he has had only bitter and disappointing encounters, to walk him out on the land and bury him as a warrior. Franklin, a testament to the man who raised him, steps up to the task, albeit reluctantly. Father and son set out on what is to be a 'medicine walk' or healing journey. Franklin is an impressive young man, self-reliant and strong in the best sense of the word. Eldon, the father, slowly receives what healing the land can bring and gradually reveals his own layers of wounding, as a son himself. The journey is not without extreme physical & emotional trials, and the men are forever changed.

This book, for me, was both gentle and profound. It is a story (for storytelling is Wagamese's finely-honed tool) about reconciliation at the personal level, leaving the degree of extrapolation for the reader to determine.

All My Puny Sorrows by Miriam Toews, hardcover, \$29.95

Sisters Elf and Yoli are devoted to each other, despite the different paths their lives have taken. In defiance of their Mennonite community, Yoli has followed her prodigious talent to become a world-class concert pianist, with a husband who adores her. Elf, the younger, wise-cracking, unconventional stalled author with a sketchy relationship history, is committed to supporting Yoli. But what does that mean, if what Yoli wants is to end her own life?

Author Miriam Toews is no stranger to literary awards and bestseller charts. Her novels are often her venue of choice to explore issues in her own life. In this case, she walks the reader through the heart-rending minefield of suicide and impossible loyalties and choices. I'm not sure one 'enjoys' such a book, but it was emotionally challenging and the tone rang true throughout. The issues raised are timely and will make for deep discussion and perhaps, like me, you will miss Elf when you finish.

Evelyn's Picks

The First and Second World Wars have provided material for writers for 100 and 75 years respectively: as 2014 is an anniversary year for both, this season in fiction is rich with writers exploring new territory in these historic events.

The Wind is Not a River by Brian Payton, paperback \$18.99

Payton tells a little known story of WWII – the Japanese invasion and occupation of Alaska's Aleutian Islands through the eyes of journalist John Easley and his young wife Helen. Journalists have been evacuated from the Aleutians by the US military – but John is determined to return to see what is really going on. He deceives his way on to a US bomber which is shot down over the island of Attu. Easley survives, but now must deal with the harsh elements, barren landscape and the enemy. Meanwhile, Helen has heard nothing from John for over three months. Armed with little more than suspicion of his whereabouts she sets a determined course to find him. It takes extraordinary measures for this young woman to make her way from Seattle to Adak on the Aleutian Islands.

Alternating between the crisp sentences driving John's story of deprivation, of tiny celebrations and of deep remorse and Helen's methodical, determined search fueled by love and regret, this gripping story illuminates a little known story while celebrating the human spirit and the power of love.

All the Light We Cannot See by Anthony Doerr, paperback \$19.99

Anthony Doerr brings us two almost mystical characters to tell a very human story set during WWII in France and Germany. Orphaned Werner is a curious, inventive child, enchanted by this new technology – the radio and with big questions he writes into a notebook. MarieLaure is a beloved daughter who, by age six, loses her sight. We understand from the beginning the destinies of these two are intertwined.

This book is haunting, it is beautiful and tender. It tells of the enormous efforts to save the treasures of the Museum of Natural History in Paris, of the rigorous preparation of young men selected for the Hitler Youth Academy. It tells of the tender, protective love between father and daughter, sister and brother.

Short chapters give the reader pause to reflect – each chapter is so elegant that it behooves one to take a moment to savour before moving on. Alternating between the stories of MarieLaure and Werner, weaving them to their ultimate convergence in the walled citadel of Saint Malo, Doerr builds the suspense and the challenges for the characters “to be good” in this time of war. I would have been happy there – but there is yet a denouement which completes the tapestry. My favourite book this year!!

A Man Came Out of a Door in the Mountain by Adrienne Harun, paperback, \$18.00 (Not a WWII story but a war nonetheless)

“In a lonely Canadian town, two strangers twist the hearts of five good friends inspiring deadly trouble. The only defense: fairy tales and physics assignments.” This is Harun's brief description of her first novel, inspired by British Columbia's notorious “Highway of Tears”. Life is raw and tough for Leo Kreutzer and his friends Bryan and his sister Ursie, Tessa and Jackie in their small logging community. Leo inventories the town's assets – mill yard and railroad, two motels, Greyhound station, a school, community centre, a museum stuffed with pioneer paraphernalia and another little museum behind the shopping plaza where you can buy native art. Then there is the meth lab just outside town where the Nagel brothers and Gerald Flacker manufacture and sell meth to school kids. But the action spot in town is the motel where men come in from the logging camps and gamble away their earnings. When two strangers arrive in town – Keven Seven with his magical way with the cards, and Hana Swann with her bone white skin and hair – the devil's work is set in motion. Leo and his friends are entranced, bewitched. Leo's uncle Lud, dying of cancer, tells magical stories – stories of warning, of redemption which Leo carefully writes up in his notebooks. And as long as the five friends stick together they believe they will be safe. Dark and magical, rough and raw, poetic and real...a powerful take on the ancient struggle of good and evil.

Angela's pick

Those Who Save Us by Jenna Blum, paperback \$18.95

A difficult read, *Those Who Save Us* speaks through two interwoven storylines. Anna, a German citizen with a commandeering father, is just entering womanhood as WWII breaks out across Europe. She is young and naïve, although she learns very quickly what she must do to survive and what parts of her own humanity are worth saving. Anna takes risks and suffers the consequences as she does whatever it takes to ensure her infant daughter has food and shelter.

About fifty years later, in Minnesota, Trudy struggles with the guilt of being a German survivor of the war. All she has to remind her of her past is a family portrait of herself on Anna's lap, a Nazi officer standing behind them. Neither Anna, nor the American soldier that she married, will answer Trudy's questions about the man in the photo. Her work as a professor of German history leads her to begin a project that involves interviewing Germans who lived through the war. As the two stories begin to intertwine, Anna becomes further silenced by her shame and Trudy searches more and more vigorously for answers. The question remains, will Trudy ever find the answers she is looking for?