

Parkdale Book Club

April 14 2018 – Spiral Staircase and more nominations

Schedule

Date (10 am on 2nd Saturday)

May 12 ***The Humans***, by Matt Haig -- Lynn

June 9 ***One Brother Shy***, by Terry Fallis -- Joan

Books for next year

It's time again, up to and including our May meeting, to nominate books for next year's reading.

Please email me at sloanelm@shaw.ca or call 403 262 5340 to leave a phone message with your suggestions.

If you are wondering whether we've previously read something you are considering nominating, please see the list of what we've read at the end of the March newsletter.

Eight nominations came up during our March meeting. More information for these is available in the March newsletter.

As we discussed Fredrik Backman's *My grandmother...*, Margaret recommended his next book, ***Britt-Marie Was Here***. This book was featured in a Bookriot list of books about women over 60 - take a look at the others: <https://bookriot.com/?p=154515>

Sue suggested a Yann Martel: ***The High Mountains of Portugal***.

Adam Gidwitz: ***The Inquisitor's Tale: Or, the Three Magical Children and Their Holy Dog***, suggested by Lynn.

Lindsay suggested ***A Rhinestone Button*** by Gail Anderson- Dargatz.

Ruth nominated ***Medicine Walk*** by Richard Wagamese.

Beth brought a non-fiction to our attention: ***The Mother of All Questions***, by Rebecca Solnit.

Sue's second suggestion was also a non-fiction: ***On Hitler's Mountain: Overcoming The Legacy of a Nazi Childhood*** by Irmagard A. Hunt.

Ruth's second suggestion is ***The Underpainter***, by Jane Urqhart.

Since the March meeting, more nominations!
(listed here in the order they came in)

Lee recommended ***Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*** by J.D. Vance.

From the Calgary Public Library website: "You will not read a more important book about America this year."--*The Economist*. From a former marine and Yale Law School graduate, a powerful account of growing up in a poor Rust Belt town that offers a broader, probing look at the struggles of America's white working class. *Hillbilly Elegy* is a passionate and personal analysis of a culture in crisis--that of white working-class Americans. The decline of this group, a demographic of our country that has been slowly disintegrating over forty years, has been reported on with growing frequency and alarm, but has never before been written about as searingly from the inside. J. D. Vance tells the true story of what a social, regional, and class decline feels like when you were born with it hung around your neck. The Vance family story begins hopefully in postwar America. J. D.'s grandparents were "dirt poor and in love," and moved north from Kentucky's Appalachia region to Ohio in the hopes of escaping the dreadful poverty around them. They raised a middle-class family, and eventually their grandchild (the author) would graduate from Yale Law School, a conventional marker of their success in achieving generational upward mobility. But as the family saga of *Hillbilly Elegy* plays out, we learn that this is only the short, superficial version. Vance's grandparents, aunt, uncle, sister, and, most of all, his mother, struggled profoundly with the demands of their new middle-class life, and were never able to fully escape the legacy of abuse, alcoholism, poverty, and trauma so characteristic of their part of America. Vance piercingly shows how he himself still carries around the demons of their chaotic family history. A deeply moving memoir with its share of humor and vividly colorful figures, *Hillbilly Elegy* is the story of how upward mobility really feels. And it is an urgent and troubling meditation on the loss of the American dream for a large segment of this country.

As someone who was referred to occasionally by a previous partner as a hillbilly, I look forward to reading this one.

Ruth suggested another Richard Wagamese novel, ***Ragged Company***. From Amazon.ca: Four chronically homeless people—Amelia One Sky, Timber, Double Dick and Digger—seek refuge in a warm movie theatre when a severe Arctic Front descends on the city. During what is supposed to be a one-time event, this temporary refuge transfixes them. They fall in love with this new world, and once the weather clears, continue their trips to the cinema. On one of

these outings they meet Granite, a jaded and lonely journalist who has turned his back on writing "the same story over and over again" in favour of the escapist qualities of film, and an unlikely friendship is struck. A found cigarette package (contents: some unsmoked cigarettes, three \$20 bills, and a lottery ticket) changes the fortune of this struggling set. The ragged company discovers they have won \$13.5 million, but none of them can claim the money for lack proper identification. Enlisting the help of Granite, their lives, and fortunes, become forever changed.

I delved into the list of books about women over 60, mentioned above, and have enjoyed a couple of them. One, I think, would be a good book-club book. Half-way through a library copy of ***An Unnecessary Woman***, by Rabih Alameddine, I ordered one from Amazon because I know I'll want to read it again. Here is a description from

the Amazon page: *An Unnecessary Woman* is a ... portrait of one reclusive woman's late-life crisis which garnered a wave of rave reviews and love letters to Alameddine's cranky yet charming septuagenarian protagonist Aaliya. Her insightful musings on literature, philosophy, and art are invaded by memories of the Lebanese Civil War and her volatile past. As she tries to overcome her aging body and spontaneous emotional upwellings, Aaliya is faced with an unthinkable disaster that threatens to shatter the little life she has left. Here the gifted Rabih Alameddine has given us a nuanced rendering of one woman's life in the Middle East and an enduring ode to literature and its power to define who we are. A paean to the transformative power of reading, to the intellectual asylum from one's circumstances found in the life of the mind.

I like this blurb from Publisher's Weekly:

"Alameddine's most glorious passages are those that simply relate Aaliya's thoughts, which read like tiny, wonderful essays."

Ida emailed this suggestion for next year: ***The Housekeeper and the Professor*** by Yoko Ogawa. Here is what I learned about it on the library website:

First published in Japanese in 2003, this gem won the prestigious 2004 Yomiuri Prize and in 2006 was adapted for film (*The Professor's Beloved Equation*). The story revolves around a young housekeeper and her ten-year-old son, who have an esoteric link to a retired university professor through "amicable numbers." Ogawa (*The Diving Pool*) deliberately avoids any hint of romance between the two adult protagonists. Instead, she delves into the educational process between the housekeeper, a high school dropout, and the professor, a mathematical genius. With a prose style justly acclaimed as gentle yet penetrating, Ogawa gives mathematical theories from Eratosthenes to Einstein a titanic wink; under her pen, they no longer are solely a topic of conversation among academics but a tool that facilitates conflict resolution, communication between commoner and intellectual, and appreciation for the nobility and individuality of everyday objects; they also help us establish our worth in a chaotic world. This novel evokes the joy of learning, and, with its somewhat eccentric yet lovable protagonists, is a pleasure to read.

Here is Heidi's nomination, via Beth: ***The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music*** by Steve

Lopez. With a subtitle like this we hardly need a blurb. Nevertheless, from *Publishers Weekly*:

Scurrying back to his office one day, Lopez, a columnist for the L.A. Times, is stopped short by the ethereal strains of a violin. Searching for the sound, he spots a homeless man coaxing those beautiful sounds from a battered two-string violin. When the man finishes, Lopez compliments him briefly and rushes off to write about his newfound subject, Nathaniel Ayers, the homeless violinist. Over the next few days, Lopez discovers that Nathaniel was once a promising classical bass student at Juilliard, but that various pressures—including being one of a few African-American students and mounting schizophrenia—caused him to drop out. Enlisting the help of doctors, mental health professionals and professional musicians, Lopez attempts to help Nathaniel move off Skid Row, regain his dignity, develop his musical talent and free himself of the demons induced by the schizophrenia (at one point, Lopez arranges to have Ayers take cello lessons with a cellist from the L.A. Symphony). Throughout, Lopez endures disappointments and setbacks with Nathaniel's case, questions his own motives for helping his friend and acknowledges that Nathaniel has taught him about courage and humanity. With self-effacing humor, fast-paced yet elegant prose and unsparing honesty, Lopez tells an inspiring story of heartbreak and hope.

This book got 4/5 stars on the library website, and 4.5/5 on Amazon.

Jean is recommending a novel by Marcus Borg, *Putting Away Childish Things*. (There seems to be at least 5 books by this title by different authors, so make sure you find the one by Borg.)

Brian D. McLaren says: "We all know that Marcus Borg is a gifted teacher, biblical scholar, and writer of nonfiction, but it turns out that he's a master storyteller, too." From *Library Journal*: Set in the Midwest, this evangelical story introduces Kate, a professor at a small liberal arts college whose tenure is threatened because her teaching and writing are considered too Christian. In her classes and out of them, she expounds on what the Bible has to say about major subjects of contention in the world today. Bestselling author, Bible scholar, and theologian Marcus Borg uses his core teachings on faith and the Bible to demonstrate their transformative power and potential in *Putting Away Childish Things*: the moving, inspirational story of a college professor, her students, and a crisis of faith.

This could be the year of reading Wagamese. A third book by Richard Wagamese came up because of the release of a movie based on the book: *Indian Horse*. 4.5/5 stars on the CPL system. From the library website: Saul Indian Horse has

hit bottom. His last binge almost killed him, and now he's a reluctant resident in a treatment centre for alcoholics, surrounded by people he's sure will never understand him. But Saul wants peace, and he grudgingly comes to see that he'll find it only through telling his story. With him, readers embark on a journey back through the life he's led as a northern Ojibway, with all its joys and sorrows. With compassion and insight, author Richard Wagamese traces through his fictional characters the decline of a culture and a cultural way. For Saul, taken forcibly from the land and his family when he's sent to residential school, salvation comes for a while through his incredible gifts as a hockey player. But in the harsh realities of 1960s Canada, he battles obdurate racism and the spirit-destroying effects of cultural alienation and displacement. *Indian Horse* unfolds against the bleak loveliness of northern Ontario, all rock, marsh,

bog and cedar. Wagamese writes with a spare beauty, penetrating the heart of a remarkable Ojibway man.

From Jane Smiley's review in the *Globe & Mail*: *Indian Horse* distills much of what Wagamese has been writing about for his whole career into a clearer and sharper liquor, both more bitter and more moving than he has managed in the past. He is such a master of empathy – of delineating the experience of time passing, of lessons being learned, of tragedies being endured – that what Saul discovers becomes something the reader learns, as well, shocking and alien, valuable and true.

Ruth offers for our consideration Jack Kornfield's 2017 book, *No Time Like the Present: Finding Freedom, Love, and Joy Right Where You Are*.

From the library website: In this landmark work, internationally beloved teacher of meditation and mindfulness Jack Kornfield reveals that you can be happy now, this minute, with the keys to inner freedom. In his first major book in several years, the inspiring author of the classic *A Path with Heart*, Jack Kornfield, invites us into a new awareness. Through his signature warmhearted, poignant, often funny stories, with their Aha moments and O. Henry-like outcomes, Jack shows how we get stuck and how we can free ourselves, wherever we are and whatever our circumstances. Renowned for his mindfulness practices and meditations, Jack provides these keys for opening gateways to immediate shifts in perspective and clarity of vision, allowing us to see how to change course, take action, or—when we shouldn't act—just relax and trust. Each chapter presents a path to a different kind of freedom—freedom from fear, freedom to start over, to love, to be yourself, and to be happy—and guides you into an active process that engages your mind, heart, and spirit, awakens your spirit, and brings real joy, over and over again. Drawing from his own life as a son, brother, father, and partner, and on his forty years of face-to-face teaching of thousands of people across the country, Jack presents a stirring call to be here, in the power of the now, the present, as we work through life's passages. His keys to life will help us find hope, clarity, relief from past disappointments and guilt, and the courage to go forward.

Joan nominated the book that is upcoming April 18 in the Literary Kaleidoscope series: *Egg on Mao: The Story of An Ordinary Man Who Defaced An Icon and Unmasked A Dictatorship*.

(an aside: Literary Kaleidoscope, Calgary is a longstanding volunteer organisation of and for book-lovers) ... meetings are held at the Marda Loop Community Centre, 3130 16th St SW, the third Wednesday of the month, from September through November, and January through May. Admission is \$10 (coffee and cookies included). Presentations begin at 9:30 and run between 60 and 75 minutes. All are welcome. See <http://www.literarykaleidoscope.ca>)

From the library website: In her first book in a decade, beloved author Denise Chong, tells the story of a man who humiliated a repressive regime in front of the entire world, and whose daring gesture informs our view of human rights to this day. Despite his family's impeccable Communist roots, Lu Decheng, a small-town bus mechanic, grew up intuiting all that was wrong with Mao's China. As a young man he believes truth and decency mattered, only to learn that preserving the Chairman's legacy mattered more. Lu's story reads like Shakespearean drama, peppered with defiance, love and betrayal. His steadfast refusal to acquiesce comes to a head, but not an end, with his infamous defacing of Mao's portrait during the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square.

Pamela recommended Sharon Bala's *The boat people*.

From the library's website: By the winner of The Journey Prize, and inspired by a real incident, *The Boat People* is a gripping and morally complex novel about a group of refugees who survive a perilous ocean voyage to reach Canada - only to face the threat of deportation and accusations of terrorism in their new land. When the rusty cargo ship carrying Mahindan and five hundred fellow refugees reaches the shores of British Columbia, the young father is overcome with relief: he and his six-year-old son can finally put Sri Lanka's bloody civil war behind them and begin new lives. Instead, the group is thrown into prison, with government officials and news headlines speculating that hidden among the "boat people" are members of a terrorist militia. As suspicion swirls and interrogation mounts, Mahindan fears the desperate actions he took to survive and escape Sri Lanka now jeopardize his and his son's chances for asylum. Told through the alternating perspectives of Mahindan; his lawyer Priya, who reluctantly represents the migrants; and Grace, a third-generation Japanese-Canadian adjudicator who must decide Mahindan's fate, *The Boat People* is a high-stakes novel that offers a deeply compassionate lens through which to view the current refugee crisis. Inspired by real events, with vivid scenes that move between the eerie beauty of northern Sri Lanka and combative refugee hearings in Vancouver, where life and death decisions are made, Sharon Bala's stunning debut is an unforgettable and necessary story for our times.

4 1/3 stars on the Amazon site.

A second nomination from Pamela is Donna

Leon's *The Waters of Eternal Youth*. From the

library description: In Donna Leon's Commissario Guido Brunetti series, the Venetian inspector has been called on to investigate many things, from shocking to petty crimes. But in *The Waters of Eternal Youth*, the 25th novel in this celebrated series, Brunetti finds himself drawn into a case that may not be a case at all. Fifteen years ago, a teenage girl fell into a canal late at night. Unable to swim, she went under and started to drown, only surviving thanks to a nearby man, an alcoholic, who heard her splashes and pulled her out, though not before she suffered irreparable brain damage that left her in a state of permanent childhood, unable to learn or mature. The drunk man claimed he saw her thrown into the canal by another man, but the following day he couldn't remember a thing. Now, at a fundraising dinner for a Venetian charity, a wealthy and aristocratic patroness—the girl's grandmother—asks Brunetti if he will investigate. Brunetti's not sure what to do. If a crime was committed, it would surely have passed the statute of limitations. But out of a mixture of curiosity, pity, and a willingness to fulfill the wishes of a guilt-wracked older woman, who happens to be his mother-in-law's best friend, he agrees. Brunetti soon finds himself unable to let the case rest, if indeed there is a case. Awash in the rhythms and concerns of contemporary Venetian life, from historical preservation, to housing, to new waves of African migrants, and the haunting story of a woman trapped in a damaged perpetual childhood, *The Waters of Eternal Youth* is another wonderful addition to this series.

A second nomination from Joan: *Natural Causes: An Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Killing Ourselves to Live Longer* by Barbara Ehrenreich. I've recommended this to CPL for purchase. It is available in paperback from some sellers, but not yet from Amazon.ca -

presumably it will be available in PB on Amazon.ca by next year. Research this made me want to read all of Ehrenreich's books! From

Amazon: A razor-sharp polemic which offers an entirely new understanding of our bodies, ourselves, and our place in the universe.

Natural Causes describes how we over-prepare and worry way too much about what is inevitable. One by one, Ehrenreich topples the shibboleths that guide our attempts to live a long, healthy life -- from the importance of preventive medical screenings to the concepts of wellness and mindfulness, from dietary fads to fitness culture. But *Natural*

Causes goes deeper -- into the fundamental unreliability of our bodies and even our "mind-bodies," to use the fashionable term. Starting with the mysterious and seldom-acknowledged tendency of our own immune cells to promote deadly cancers, Ehrenreich looks into the cellular basis of aging, and shows how little control we actually have over it. We tend to believe we have agency over our bodies, our minds, and even over the manner of our deaths. But the latest science shows that the microscopic subunits of our bodies make their own "decisions," and not always in our favor. We may buy expensive anti-aging products or cosmetic surgery, get preventive screenings and eat more kale, or throw ourselves into meditation and spirituality. But all these things offer only the illusion of control. How to live well, even joyously, while accepting our mortality -- that is the vitally important philosophical challenge of this book. Drawing on varied sources, from personal experience and sociological trends to pop culture and current scientific literature, *Natural Causes* examines the ways in which we obsess over death, our bodies, and our health. Both funny and caustic, Ehrenreich then tackles the seemingly unsolvable problem of how we might better prepare ourselves for the end -- while still reveling in the lives that remain to us.

The Spiral Staircase

"Consequently I rejoice,

having to construct

something

upon which to rejoice."

(from Eliot's Ash-Wednesday, the source of the title of Armstrong's book)

I am rejoicing that I can work on this newsletter in my sunroom, blessed by the sun despite snow on the ground.

It was good to see a full house today, and especially to welcome a new person, Pamela, to our circle for Saturday's discussion of *The Spiral Staircase* by Karen Armstrong.

Several people found this book slow to start, but worthwhile to persist to the ending. A common reaction was frustration, disbelief, and anger that Armstrong's epilepsy was misdiagnosed for so long, resulting in questionable amounts of psychoanalysis and some heavy anti-psychotic medications prescribed. Ahh, but then it is diagnosed. I cried at Karen's response to Dr. Wolfe's questions: "the world stood still" The experience of reframing "Again, the silence in the little consulting room vibrated..." "And more wonderful than almost anything else... Dr. Wolfe was nodding as though this was only to be expected."

Here are some other of our reactions:

- Armstrong's descriptions of culture shock were striking. "I need a new training - one that is equally intensive - to turn me into a secular."
- Re: psychiatric sessions: "I would listen, bemused by this fantasy." What would psychiatry be if developed and dominated by women? The same because most women's minds were dominated by men? The psychiatrist is so contemptuous toward Armstrong. How could that be imagined to be therapeutic? "You're not that interesting." Or is this by now just countertransference?
- She brings up things we've all thought but not wanted to talk about
- It is a relief that a theologian thinks as I do and I'm not a wicked person
- In the United church, we come not to have our questions answered, but to have our answers questioned.
- Reminiscent of Spong and Borg
- Her paper on resurrection, written to be acceptable. "But it's not true, is it?" "No, but don't tell the others."
- I'd meant for a long time to read this, so I'm glad it came to book club
- I was teary at the description of the author's first experiences of "the beauty of the slow movement of Beethoven's Emperor Concerto... This, I was aware, was probably the kind of experience I had sought in religion. While I listened, I felt my spirits knitting together. Things began to make sense." It was fun to play the music referenced in the story -- the joy of technology, reading the story on a machine that will also play the music.
- "My tutors told me repeatedly that I had no future in academia." Why on earth? The author is such a scholar. And why did she accept this assessment?
- The movie *The Novitiate* is remarkably similar, but not based on Armstrong's life. Interestingly, a review of the movie mentioned this book and concluded (paraphrased): They are both garbage and I should know because I'm a nun.
- I was greatly relieved the book was not as dismal as I thought it was going to be from the description.
- The nastiness of how she was treated in the nunnery paralleled treatment of children in Catholic residential schools.
- In Newfoundland there are denominational schools - the nuns in Catholic schools were tough/cruel (some were nice).
- This made me think of the long impact of residential schools.
- We know about intergenerational trauma - intergenerational success will take much longer to have an impact.
- We are acculturated to believe in a bearded man in the sky - it is very hard to let go of that, and the older hymns reinforce the image.
- I approached it as a mystery.

- It was very depressing - I was glad she found a truth for herself.
 - There should have been some landings on the staircase where she could recuperate.
 - We tolerate other religions more than other Christian churches - all of us are in process.
 - I was told the United Church is not a Christian church.
 - Author's aloneness - the value of solitude, of the freedom that solitude allows. Now that I live alone I can understand her more. What would it be like to be alone much of one's life?
 - "Solitude is ... a teacher. It is lonely, living without intimacy and affection tears holes in you."
 - "My solitary lifestyle could imprison me forever in selfishness. In a relationship, you constantly have to go beyond yourself."
 - "I miss my study and silence as others might miss a beloved person."
 - Why did she not say much about family of origin? Her coming back was to the convent, not to the family of her youth.
 - Which is more difficult? Which is more powerful? To do unto others as I would have them do unto me, or to follow Hillel's Golden Rule: Look into your own heart to find out what distresses you and then refrain from inflicting similar pain on other people.
 - Orthodoxy - Apostles' Creed, beliefs, religion - vs orthopraxy - spirituality. (A parallel focus on orthopraxy is this powerful definition of feminism (from Sandra Butler): Feminism is how you treat every woman in every moment.)
 - Author's struggle is the United Church's struggle - to find out what she believed and what god meant to her. "What if God was also a mental aberration?"
 - "If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express sympathy in concrete acts of loving-kindness, this was good theology. But if your notion of God made you unkind, belligerent, cruel, of self-righteous, or if it led you to kill in God's name, it was bad theology."
 - "Men and women have a potential for the divine, and are not complete unless they realize it within themselves." "... true faith... should make you more human than before."
 - "We are most creative and sense other possibilities that transcend our ordinary experience when we leave ourselves behind. There may even be a biological reason for this. The need to protect ourselves and survive has been so strongly implanted in us by millennia of evolution that, if we deliberately flout this instinct, we enter another state of consciousness."
 - "In theology, I am entirely self-taught, and if that makes me an amateur, that need not necessarily be all bad. After all, an amateur is, literally, "one who loves."
 - Maybe people don't come to church because the first line in the Apostles' Creed is I believe in God the Father, and all of it is focused on belief rather than practice.
 - When you say your prayers, who are you praying to?
 - Antidote to the Apostles' Creed is God is love. Substitute "love" for God in the Creed. How to live out love?
 - Change is both desired and inevitable.
- Thanks to Lee for suggesting this interesting memoir and facilitating a dynamic discussion. (Lee noted that Armstrong has a number of Youtube videos available for anyone who wants to explore more.)

May 12 discussion:

The Humans by Matt Haig. suggested by Lynn to increase the speculative fiction quotient. Here is the spiel from Amazon.ca: The bestselling, award-winning author of *The Radleys* is back with what may be his best, funniest, and most devastating dark comedy yet. When an extraterrestrial visitor arrives on Earth, his first impressions of the human species are less than positive. Taking the form of Professor Andrew Martin, a prominent mathematician at Cambridge University, the visitor is eager to complete the gruesome task assigned him and hurry back home to the utopian world of his own planet,

where everyone enjoys immortality and infinite knowledge. He is disgusted by the way humans look, what they eat, and their capacity for murder and war, and he is equally baffled by the concepts of love and family. But as time goes on, he starts to realize there may be more to this weird species than he has been led to believe. Disguised as Martin, he drinks wine, reads poetry, and develops an ear for rock music and a taste for peanut butter. Slowly, unexpectedly, he forges bonds with Martin's family, and in picking up the pieces of the professor's shattered personal life, he begins to see hope and beauty in the humans' imperfections and to question the mission that brought him here. Praised by *The New York Times* as a "novelist of great seriousness and talent," Matt Haig delivers an unlikely story about human nature and the joy found in the messiness of life on Earth. *The Humans* is a funny, compulsively readable tale that playfully and movingly explores the ultimate subject—ourselves