

Parkdale Book Club – The Weight of Ink

May 14	American Dirt by Jeanine Cummins	Beth
June 11	Davita's Harp by Chaim Potok	Margaret

May Book Club



Beth nominated *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins for next month's Book Club, **Saturday, May 14th at 10:00 am.**

If you've ever had thoughts of taking a calm, relaxing vacation on the beaches of Acapulco, you'll be reconsidering that after reading this suspenseful book!

From Amazon: "Lydia lives in Acapulco. She has a son, Luca, the love of her life, and a wonderful husband who is a journalist. And while cracks are beginning to show in Acapulco because of the cartels, Lydia's life is, by and large, fairly comfortable. But after her husband's tell-all profile of the newest drug lord is published, none of their lives will ever be the same.

Forced to flee, Lydia and Luca find themselves joining the countless people trying to reach the United States. Lydia soon sees that everyone is running from something. But what exactly are they running to?"

Join Zoom Book Club Meeting May 14th:
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82432011683?pwd=SEgwSFFlOTRZODVtSmVuYW1vOjNldz09>

Meeting ID: 824 3201 1683

Passcode: 284356

The Weight of Ink

"Let me begin afresh. Perhaps, this time, to tell the truth. For in the biting hush of ink on paper, where truth ought raise its head and speak without fear, I have long lied. I have naught to defend my actions. Yet though my heart feels no remorse, my deeds would

confess themselves to paper now, as the least of tributes to him whom I once betrayed. In this silenced house, quill and ink do not resist the press of my hand, and paper does not flinch. Let these pages compass, at last, the truth, though none read them."

"Lying had become her clothing – without it she'd freeze."

Ten people gathered on Zoom on April 9th to discuss Roz's nomination, *The Weight of Ink* by Rachel Kadish. Our first introduction to the book was viewing some photos Roz took when she visited the Masada. It helped us imagine the drawing that historian Helen Watt had on the wall in her office.

In our discussion, there was consensus that the book's title was appropriate, given how weighty the contents were! Many in our group found the book to be fascinating and informative, while others struggled with the characters or found it too heavy. Some of the themes we discussed were the importance of passing on knowledge; the importance of recording events and reflections about those events; the ongoing struggle of women to gain access to education; courage; persecution; Bible references; and the significance of names.

What's in a name? It was very interesting to learn the connection between characters in the book and people from the Bible. Clearly, Kadish put a lot of thought into choosing the names for her characters. Thanks, Roz, for enriching our understanding of the book by making these connections for us.

Ester signed her manuscripts *Aleph*, which is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. We learned that *Aleph* is a silent letter. How fitting that Ester chose to identify herself in this way, given that her gender meant she wasn't able to speak or write openly.

Here are some of your comments about *The Weight of Ink* ...

I am almost finished the book and I can hardly put it down. I loved how Rachel Kadish portrayed the characters. It was kind of uncanny how Esther and Helen had a love that they knew would be difficult to follow. Esther loved John and yet couldn't go with him because of her respect for Rabbi Mendes, not wanting to leave him in his last days. Helen loved Dror but knew that his life would be tough if he married her so she knew she had to leave. I loved how keen Esther was to learn from Rabbi Mendes. This was not common in her time for women to become educated the same as men. Esther seemed like a sponge in the beginning learning and writing for the Rabbi, even though in the end she betrayed him by writing letters signed by Thomas Fallow. This was her way of sharing the knowledge she had which wasn't normal to be shared by a woman.

“People go through life trying to please some audience. But once you realize there's no audience, life is simple. It's just doing what you know in your gut is right.”

It was very interesting hearing about the times in the 1660s and then being with Helen and Aaron as they researched the documents in the 2000s.

Until we had our conversation last week, I hadn't connected some of the similarities in the names, but thanks to Roz, it helped to understand the connections, such as Ha Levy and Levy. I loved the relationship that Aaron had with Helen, as a student trying to take in all he could from a historian who was so close to retirement. Aaron seemed to connect with the characters from the 1660s, understanding and wanting to understand more of how their lives were intertwined.

I'm not sure why the author had Aaron sleep with the female owner of the house where the documents were found, and yet understanding the layout of the house seemed so important to him. Helen also went to the house. Did she know about the afternoon rendezvous with Aaron and the homeowner???? I found the book very heavy at first, but must admit that after the discussion at Book Club, I picked up the book with a greater intensity to finish it and have been so engaged in reading it now. It is a great book, and a great story. I would recommend it to others I know who love to read.

“You think straightforwardness is a virtue.”

I found the book a most enjoyable and informative read. I appreciated the information that Roz provided. I was so interested to find that the signature *Aleph* is silent in Hebrew. So perfect. And the information about G-d, the fact that God's name is not spoken in Judaism. All the other tidbits about names were also interesting. A worthwhile read.

I regret that I wasn't able to get into *The Weight of Ink*, in spite of interest in the historical figures and characters. I started it twice, but got bogged down in the writing style. If it becomes a movie, I'd want to see it for sure.

I read the *Weight of Ink* in early 2020, but didn't take any notes. What I remember is that I really enjoyed it. It was gripping, well written and was really a mystery at heart. It was effective in how it linked the present day academic and her assistant to the past events, although I recall finding myself wanting to go back to the past story of the scribe. It also included many historical events of the time and their effects upon the people.

“The greatest act of love – indeed, the only religion she could comprehend – was to speak the truth about the world. Love must be, then, an act of truth-telling, a baring of mind and spirit just as ardent as the baring of the body. Truth and passion were one, and each impossible without the other.”

I was not taken with this book for a number of reasons. But I greatly enjoyed our discussion, with people's cogent interpretations and reactions. I especially enjoyed the added value of Roslyn's comments and background.

In retrospect, I think my own dissertation trauma framed a negative reaction to the book. The antagonism between Aaron and Helen felt contrived. I experienced the book as 23 hours of people being mean to each other. Fortunately, I did make it to the end (35 minutes before our meeting), where there was some redemption.

“An ecstasy of ink, every paragraph laboring to outline the shape of the world. The yellow light of a lamp on leaves of paper, the ivory-black impress of words reasoning, line by line.”

The aspect of the book that resonated most for me was the writing, the ink on paper (sometimes, sadly, the ink destroying paper). On a grand scale, the importance of remembering, of passing on knowledge, wisdom, thinking, philosophizing. On a smaller scale, the scarcity of resources, saving of paper by writing between lines. Having grown up in a context where everything was scarce, I still have a habit of saving paper. And since part of me registers that resources are no longer scarce (but could be again), I have 29 bottles of ink and 33 empty journals.

I enjoyed the two Patricias and the relationships between Ester and Alvaro and Alvaro and Richard (noting that the marriage is an echo of the falseness we adopt for survival – wearing a cross).

The book brings up many important questions including this basic one: why are diverse voices silenced versus celebrated?

“A definition of loneliness surfaced in his mind: when you suddenly understand that the story of your life isn’t what you thought it was.”

This book reminds us how slowly attitudes change – the gender restrictions Ester faced were ones Helen faced 350 years later. Perhaps learning about Ester’s bravery allowed Helen to take some risks in her own life. At least girls in our part of the world are allowed to go to school now so we have made some changes. They are still prevented from going to school in some parts of the world.

“Why say a woman may not follow her nature if it led her to think, for must not even the meanest beast follow its nature? And why forbid woman or man from questioning what we are taught, for is not intelligence holy? The world and I have sinned against each other.” (p. 529)

I wondered if Ester’s mother, Constantina, also did her own writing under another name. There were 3 generations of woman who defied external rules. Did they all refuse to be controlled? Ester’s grandmother conceived Constantina with a non-Jew from London (whom we presume was William Shakespeare). Constantina was angry at her mother and birth father for not choosing love over rules. Constantina conceived Ester’s brother with a lover outside her marriage; Ester slept with John, hoping that would cement their bond and convince him that she was committed to him.

“To study with an able mind is to escape prison, for a time.”

I was very sad that both Ester and Helen died prematurely, before seeing the full impact of their writing and intellectual explorations.

I wish Aaron had looked for and found Helen sooner. Maybe he could have saved her. Maybe she didn’t want to be found. I wanted them to write the papers together. It is good that Aaron will show his love and respect for Helen by ensuring that she is first author on the first article he will publish about Ester.

I liked how the relationship between Helen and Aaron evolved such that both came to respect and care for the other. It was lovely that he was the one person she trusted with the legacy of the historical documents.

Similarly, I liked how the relationship between Ester and Alvaro evolved. Although theirs was a marriage of convenience and one that allowed each of them to be themselves, they did develop fondness and compassion for one another. Alvaro didn’t make Ester stop writing and Ester was the cover that allowed Alvaro to pursue his love interest with Richard. It was beautiful that Alvaro wanted Ester and her writing to be known and he took care to protect and preserve all her papers.

I liked the relationship that the two Patricias had with Helen and Aaron. They were not vocal about their regard for Helen but the care they took with the documents and the tenderness with which they helped Helen get “cleaned up” for her exit interview

showed their love and respect for her and how important it was for them to protect her dignity. It was an intimate connection that Library Patricia and Aaron went together to find Helen.

I liked the relationship that Aaron had with Ester and how eager he was to tell her story and let her own words be heard.

“He’d always pitied those ensnared in the time periods he studied—people captured in resin, their fates sealed by their inability to see what was coming. The greatest curse, he’d thought, was to be stuck in one’s own time—and the greatest power was to see beyond its horizons.”

I liked the ending of the book. The right voices were heard. The right person became the guardian of Ester’s writing. Helen was able to resolve her relationship with Dror. Aaron was re-energized by Helen and by Ester and will return to his academic writing with much more enthusiasm and passion. He will also pursue life and relationships with more authenticity and less fear. Helen taught him not to pass up opportunities for love and connection. ❖

Nominations for Next Year

You have one more month to submit your nominations for what you’d like to read in 2022-2023. Here are the nominations to date (in alphabetical order):

1. ***The Art of Leaving*** by Ayelet Tsabari – Roz
2. ***The Bookwoman of Troublesome Creek*** by Kim Michele Richardson -- Beth
3. ***Braiding Sweetgrass*** by Robin Wall Kimmerer – Ruth
4. ***Cool Water*** by Dianne Warren – Janine
5. ***H is for Hawk*** by Helen Macdonald -- Lindsay
6. ***The Lincoln Highway*** by Amor Towles -- Beth
7. ***Migrations*** by Charlotte McConaghy – Lynn
8. ***The Shoe on the Roof*** by Will Ferguson – Heidi
9. ***Sufferance*** by Thomas King -- Janine
10. ***The Wives*** by Tarryn Fisher – Sue
11. ***The Woman Outside My Door*** by Rachel Ryan -- Sue

See December, February and March newsletters for a description of nominated books. Please note that nominations are fluid until May – you may nominate something now and then later have some additional ideas. ❖

Author Jeanine Cummins talks about *American Dirt*.

Here are some links if you’re interested in listening to Jeanine Cummins discuss her novel or learning about the praise and the controversy surrounding *American Dirt*.

Jeanine Cummins discusses *American Dirt* at a book launch at Politics and Prose Bookstore in Washington, DC. (59:16)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDPLEtuxlbQ&t=344s>

WBUR immigration reporter Shannon Dooling and arts and culture reporter Cristela Guerra interview Cummins about *American Dirt*. (1:26:07)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdKFnFUpNIs>

GBH News discusses the *American Dirt* controversy. (12:54)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-f3lna9i7Gg>

Gramercy Books conducts a virtual interview with Jeanine Cummins. (29:03)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zPpzUx8-Q>