

# Parkdale Book Club

## December 2018 – Housekeeper & Professor

### Schedule

Date (10 am on 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday)

Jan. 12	<i>Mao's Last Dancer</i>	by Li Cunxin	-- Beth, Sharon
Feb. 9	<i>A Fatal Grace</i>	by Louise Penny	-- Doreen
March 9	<i>The Mother of All Questions</i>	by Rebecca Solnit	-- Beth
April 13	<i>Medicine Walk</i>	by Richard Wagamese	-- Ruth
May 11	<i>A Rhinestone Button</i>	by Gail Anderson-Dargatz	-- Lindsay
June 8	<i>An Unnecessary Woman</i>	by Rabih Alameddine	-- Lynn

### January's book

**Mao's Last Dancer** by Li Cunxin. The message I received from CPL: "... The item... is no longer available for purchase by the public library... may be out of print, without Canadian distribution rights or only available in a previously used format..." So we'll share the copies that we have. I have a copy someone can take, if you let me know to put it out in the mailbox, and you come to Inglewood to pick it up. I'll get an Audible copy, and listen to it. Tip from Sharon J: "I was in Fair's Fair this afternoon on 61 Avenue SE and just off McLeod Trail SE and they had approximately four books on the shelf with a variety of prices based on condition."

Here's what to expect: Sharon reminded us that Beth brought Mao's Last Dancer to our attention. This book is by Li Cunxin (pronounced "Lee Schwin Sing"), and got a 4.23/5 rating on GoodReads: The extraordinary memoir of a peasant boy raised in rural Maoist China who was plucked from his village to study ballet and went on to become one of the greatest dancers of his generation. From a desperately poor village in northeast China, at age eleven, Li Cunxin was chosen by Madame Mao's cultural delegates to be taken from his rural home and brought to Beijing, where he would study ballet. In 1979, the young dancer arrived in Texas as part of a cultural exchange, only to fall in love with America-and with an American woman. Two years later, through a series of events worthy of the most exciting cloak-and-dagger fiction, he defected to the United States, where he quickly became known as one of the greatest ballet dancers in the world. This is his story, told in his own inimitable voice. See also: Acclaimed biographer, Jean Fritz, was born in China to American missionaries. Living there until she was almost thirteen sparked a lifelong interest in American history. She wrote about her childhood in China in *Homesick, My Own Story*, a Newbery Honor Book and winner of the National Book Award. This fictionalized autobiography tells the heartwarming story of a little girl growing up in an unfamiliar place. While other girls her age were enjoying their childhood in America, Jean Fritz was in China in the midst of political unrest.

### The Housekeeper and the Professor

By Yoko Ogawa. Nine of us had a good discussion of Ida's recommendation; I think we were unanimous in liking the book. Sue sent some notes, and Lee and Beth had sent some notes, so we heard from 12 of us. Here are some of our reactions:

- **Mathematics:** It almost made me want to open my old calculus textbook
- The housekeeper built a bond with the professor through numbers, which to her became a challenge to try and understand why numbers made the professor happy.
- Math is God's language
- I liked the amicable numbers
- Personifying numbers
- Elegant solutions
- I have a new respect for 28
- I could relate to math being a calming influence
- The focus on primary numbers was interesting
- There must be a way to program a computer to find prime numbers
- My son in university was on a quest to find the final primary number – not yet successful
- We would have more mathematicians if math were taught the way the professor taught – instead of focusing on arithmetic and rote learning
- My grandson's eyes light up at the idea of this kind of math: beauty > practicality
- I had some synesthesia with numbers when I was young – if taught this way, might be very different now
- I loved how hard he worked when solving math problems – still have the salt marks
- Way better than orgasm to solve a math problem
- Does the author know a lot of math?
- From Wikipedia: Since 1988, Ogawa has published more than forty works of fiction and nonfiction. In 2006 she co-authored "An Introduction to the World's Most Elegant Mathematics" with Masahiko Fujiwara, a mathematician, as a dialogue on the extraordinary beauty of numbers.
- Triangular numbers, p. 69
- From Wikipedia: around 1955, Japanese mathematicians Goro Shimura and Yutaka Taniyama suspected a link might exist between elliptic curves and modular forms, two completely different areas of mathematics. Known at the time as the Taniyama–Shimura–Weil conjecture, and (eventually) as the modularity theorem, it stood on its own, with no apparent connection to Fermat's Last Theorem.
- Was the professor one of these people?
- I was very irritated at the math getting in the way of the story
- In my other book club, with 4 of us in late 80s, two of them had worked every math problem
- In *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, Steig Larsson's sequel to *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, the self-taught young genius, Lisbeth Salander, is also trying to find a proof of Fermat's Last Theorem. Fermat's Last Theorem (the statement that there are no positive, whole number solutions to the equation  $x^n + y^n = z^n$  when  $n > 2$ ) is famous for being a mathematical statement that is very simple to make but notoriously difficult to prove or disprove. Salander seems to realize that Fermat's solution was a sort of joke rather than anything mathematical at all, even suggesting that it would have been better solved by a philosopher than a mathematician.
- **Relationships:** Interesting relationship between sister in law and professor
- At first I wondered why it was hard to keep housekeepers for the professor, and I was also curious as to why the sister in law treated him so poorly, leaving him out in the small cottage when she had a big house where she could look after him, and would make it easier to keep housekeepers.
- Once I got into the book I began to understand the professor's way and realized that when a person loses their memory it is usually only short term. The professor was a brilliant man in his day, and was able to cope with life by using numbers. Through his skill with numbers he was able to connect with the housekeeper and her son. The knowledge that the professor had with numbers inspired the young lad, but I think it was also deeper. He did not have a father figure in his life, the professor took an interest in him, and therefore "Root" was willing to do whatever it took to keep the professor happy. (nickname square root)
- I think that the housekeeper and her son were missing a special relationship in their life, and the professor was missing any kind of relationship in his life, and there coming together filled a void in both of their situations.
- The formulas that the professor used, which challenged both the housekeeper and her son, enabled the three of them to build a strong relationship that wouldn't have happened without them being inquisitive about the formulas and how numbers worked.
- He encouraged the housekeeper to improve herself – they all became better versions of themselves
- The friendships were very heartwarming – cross-generational relationships
- **Romance?** The deep care that all three had for each other was obvious, it wasn't a romance but it sure showed how love can evolve when strong relationships are built.
- I'm curious about the romantic part
- Was the sister in law visiting at night? Is that why she did not want the housekeeper to stay over- night?
- Sister in law was satisfied with the chaos of housekeepers coming and going
- The professor would remember SIL because she was around before his memory loss
- Romantic connection between housekeeper and professor? It is about LOVE
- What is romance? What is love?
- I fall in love with people's minds
- **The book, the rest:** I found it delightful

- A measure of a book – how many people I want to give copies to – I'll give copies of this to the math team at work
- What does this book tell us about Japan?
- Children are the foundation
- In our society often men like the professor are not valued, but he was
- I listened to it at .75 speed
- I loved that they let the professor believe that the players he knew on the baseball team were still playing, they had no intention of breaking his heart to tell him that was so long ago.
- This was one of my most favorite reads so far this year.
- I liked the simplicity of the story
- The characters felt real, the moreso because they were not named
- What does it mean when an author chooses not to name a character? The role is emphasized.
- I did not notice that there wasn't a name
- Root was named by the professor
- Living in the moment, no plans, no future goals
- I was shocked and confused, alongside the housekeeper, when she was fired
- It is also the story of what robbed the professor of his memory
- (I never like coming after Beth in the circle!)
- I loved her writing, the descriptions
- Limpid & lyrical writing – how she described the sun setting
- I thought, there is more behind this than I'm seeing
- Similar to next book in focus on significance of influence by professor/mentor
- **See also:** Her novel *The Housekeeper and the Professor* was made into the movie *The Professor's Beloved Equation*.
- Interesting that math fiction is a whole genre unto itself. See also other math fiction: *The Last Theorem*, by Arthur C. Clarke & Frederick Pohl; *Thursday Next: First Among Sequels*, by Jasper Fforde; *The Boy who Escaped Paradise*, by J.M. Lee; *Fermat's Room*, by Luis Piedrahita/ Rodrigo Sopenia; *Oh, Brother*, by Stanley Hart; *The Lure*, by Bill Napier; *The Cipher*, by John C Ford; *Zero Sum Game*, by S. L. Huang; *Gauntlet*, by Richard Aaron; *Simple Genius*, by David Baldacci. Perhaps the authors with initials only are women, but otherwise it looks like Ogawa is relatively unique in being a woman writing math fiction. Searching a little further, I found *A Girl Named Digit* by Annabel Monaghan
- *She Wrote the Book*, a 1946 film about a shy female math professor whose life changes drastically when she gets amnesia. Hmmm
- See also *The Number Devil* by Hans Magnus Enzensberger: The international best-seller that makes mathematics a thrilling exploration. In twelve dreams, Robert, a boy who hates math, meets a Number Devil,

who leads him to discover the amazing world of numbers: infinite numbers, prime numbers, Fibonacci numbers, numbers that magically appear in triangles, and numbers that expand without. As we dream with him, we are taken further and further into mathematical theory, where ideas eventually take flight, until everyone - from those who fumble over fractions to those who solve complex equations in their heads - winds up marveling at what numbers can do.

- See also *The Joy of Mathematics*, by Theoni Pappas: Part of the joy of mathematics is that it is everywhere-in soap bubbles, electricity, da Vinci's masterpieces, even in an ocean wave. Written by the well-known mathematics teacher consultant, this volume's collection of over 200 clearly illustrated mathematical ideas, concepts, puzzles, and games shows where they turn up in the real" world. You'll find out what a googol is, visit hotel infinity, read a thorny logic problem that was stumping them back in the 8th century.

*Nomination for next year -  
no new nominations this month*

