

Parkdale Book Club

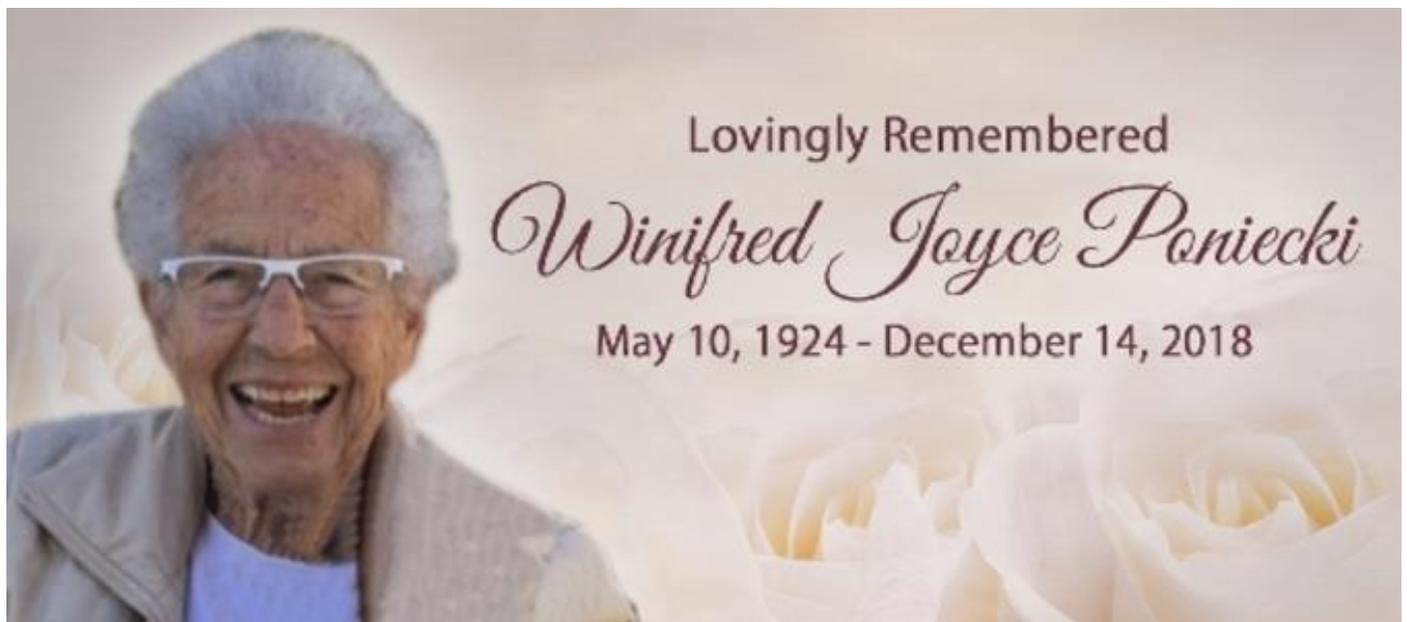
January 2019 – Mao's Last Dancer

Schedule

Date (10 am on 2nd Saturday)

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

Joyce. Sadly we have lost our friend and wise woman Joyce. It seems impossible that she will no longer join us, adding her smile and unique perspectives to the discussions. Joyce was involved in the book club from its inception, as well as a steadfast member of the Parkdale United Church community. When we discussed *La's Orchestra Saves the World* back in June of 2010, Joyce told us the story of being evacuated as a young child during the war. In her memory, donations can be made to CUPS.



Mao's Last Dancer by Li Cunxin.

I have 6 pages of notes from our discussion on Jan. 12 of this book. We were a large group, and we had a lot to say! Here are some highlights.

- I read the whole book in 5 days – loved it
- Riveting for many reasons
- Don't usually read biographies
- Thoroughly enjoyed it
- Turns out there are two versions of this book – the original and then an abbreviated and simplified version for children. Those of us who read the latter may have found the language unsatisfying for that reason.
- What helped Cunxin is that he grew up so well-loved
- I enjoyed learning about the progression of the Cultural Revolution – more than the dance part
- Did not know much re: Chinese communism & control
- After mention of the gory parts, I avoided it
- Hooked by opening story, about the sister-in-law whispering “my feet aren't bound either”
- He is artistic director of Queensland Ballet



- contrast the hunger he and his family experienced to our “I'm hungry, it's been hours...”
- I feel ashamed of some of the things I've complained about
- Ben spent on Christmas gifts the equivalent of 65 years of his father's annual salary
- The numbers! 200,000 died in the earthquake...
- Did Cunxin abandon his family? Selfish?
- Led me into McCarthyism: my husband came home with Mao's little red book – his employer was giving it out. Our neighbour said get rid of it.
- How different were Ben's & Cunxin's views of China?
- Children are still removed from home – and not just in China. If a child is in National Ballet in Canada, they have to live in Ottawa
- Tourist midwifery: so child has citizenship in Canada, pay residential tuition
- How much did he realize as a child, and how much is adult perspective? In memoir, how much of childhood experience can be captured by adult memoirist? See also *Educated*.
- Orientation to learning so different in dictatorship vs our culture

- Narrow or no choice mb better – less stress
- How important was it to show communists choosing capitalism?
- Cunxin's bemusement that Americans pay to go to expensive diet clinics – they could just go to China
- The descriptions of his wives were less passionate than descriptions of food
- Culture shocks – having own bed, food with meat and oil
- The consulate scene was scary
- How to discern truth from brainwashing?
- Is it possible to have a democracy in a country with so many people?
- See also: Madeleine Thien's new novel, *Do not say we have nothing*, the story of three musicians in China before, during and after the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Mao decided some villages would starve to death.

Nominations for next year

Last year, Jean recommended Marcus Borg's novel, *Putting Away Childish Things*. Sue is putting this idea before us again for next year. 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.

Who nominated this one? Lee? Sue? I was focusing on whether it was a nomination or not, more than who was speaking. *The Boston Girl*, by Anita Diamant: From CPL: From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Red Tent* and *Day After Night*, comes an unforgettable novel about family ties and values, friendship and feminism told through the eyes of a young Jewish woman growing up in Boston in the early twentieth century. Addie Baum is *The Boston Girl*, born in 1900 to immigrant parents who were unprepared for and suspicious of America and its effect on their three daughters. Growing up in the North End, then a teeming multicultural neighborhood, Addie's intelligence and curiosity take her to a world her parents can't imagine—a world of short skirts, movies,

celebrity culture, and new opportunities for women. Addie wants to finish high school and dreams of going to college. She wants a career and to find true love. Eighty-five-year-old Addie tells the story of her life to her twenty-two-year-old granddaughter, who has asked her "How did you get to be the woman you are today?" She begins in 1915, the year she found her voice and made friends who would help shape the course of her life. From the one-room tenement apartment she shared with her parents and two sisters, to the library group for girls she joins at a neighborhood settlement house, to her first, disastrous love affair, Addie recalls her adventures with compassion for the naïve girl she was and a wicked sense of humor. Written with the same attention to historical detail and emotional resonance that made Anita Diamant's previous novels bestsellers, ***The Boston Girl*** is a moving portrait of one woman's complicated life in twentieth century America, and a fascinating look at a generation of women finding their places in a changing world.

Add these to a previous recommendation from Lee (?): ***Educated***, by Tara Westover

Maybe nominated Lindsay brought to our attention: ***There Will Be No Miracles Here*** by Casey Gerald. From CPL: Marlon James says: "Somehow Casey Gerald has pulled off the most urgently political, most deeply personal, and most engagingly spiritual statement of our time by just looking outside his window and inside himself. Extraordinary." The testament of a boy and a generation who came of age as the world came apart--a generation searching for a new way to live. Casey Gerald comes to our fractured times as a uniquely visionary witness whose life has spanned seemingly unbridgeable divides. His story begins at the end of the world: Dallas, New Year's Eve 1999, when he gathers with the congregation of his grandfather's black evangelical church to see which of them will be carried off. His beautiful, fragile mother disappears frequently and mysteriously; for a brief idyll, he and his sister live like Boxcar Children on her disability checks. When Casey--following in the footsteps of his father, a gridiron legend who literally broke his back for the team--is recruited to play football at Yale, he enters a world he's never dreamed of, the anteroom to secret societies and success on Wall Street, in Washington, and beyond. But even as he attains the inner sanctums of power, Casey sees how the world crushes those who live at its margins. He sees how the elite perpetuate the salvation stories that keep others from rising. And he sees, most painfully, how his own ascension is part of the scheme.

There Will Be No Miracles Here has the arc of a classic rags-to-riches tale, but it stands the American Dream narrative on its head. If to live as we are is destroying us, it asks, what would it mean to truly live? Intense, incantatory, shot through with sly humor and quiet fury, ***There Will Be No Miracles Here*** inspires us to question--even shatter--and reimagine our most cherished myths.

Not nominated but recommended:

Michele Obama's book; ***Homesick*** by Jean Fritz (see last month's newsletter)

Other reading (please send yours)

I read R.M. Greenaway's 3rd book ***Creep*** first, and because I enjoyed that, checked out the other two (so far) in the series: ***Cold Girl*** and ***Undertow***. The main characters, Cal Dion and Dave Leith, are presented in depth, and the dynamic between them is intriguing. A great deal of the appeal for me is the Vancouver and north B.C. settings, the weather, the forest... Reading all day and into the late evening, I finished the 1st and 2nd in this series in two days. Fortunately, a 4th is coming up. These appeal more on a location/plot/ character level than prose level but the writing does justice to the plot and the characters. So many interesting themes well handled; good characterization. And of course, setting -- worth at least 3 stars in my rating.

Michael Connelly just keeps getting better and better; evidence ***Dark Sacred Night***. Ballard was a wonderful addition to the cast, and Ballard and Bosch make a wonderful combination. After a few experiences of dipping in to a series I've liked in the past and feeling disappointed, it was wonderful to be swept up into this story and enjoy it so much. I look forward to more Ballard and Bosch.

it is really too bad that we'll see no more from Siobhan Dowd. I enjoyed ***Bog Child*** and ***The London Eye Mystery***. It is good to immerse into a culture that is different in so many ways, and the relationships are complex and believable. Well worth your time.

Kingdom of the Blind: Another winner from Louise Penny. It is so good to be back with the characters we've grown to love, in the fairy tale Three Pines.