

Parkdale Book Club

June 8 2019 – An Unnecessary Woman

Schedule

Date (10 am on 2nd Saturday)

Summer off to collect and read next year's books

Sept 14	Lynn	<i>Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine</i> , by Gail Honeyman
Oct 12	Ida	<i>Warlight</i> by Michael Ondaatje
Nov 9	Lynn	<i>A Long Way From Home</i> , by Peter Carey
Dec 14	Joan	<i>Albatross</i> by Terry Fallis
Jan 11 2020	Ruth	<i>Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows</i> , by Balli Kaur Jaswal
Feb 8	Lynn	<i>The Cruellest Month</i> , Louise Penny
March 14	Sue	Marcus Borg's novel, <i>Putting Away Childish Things</i> (note, no longer in library)
April 11	Beth	<i>The Ghost Keeper</i> by Natalie Morrill
May 9	Sharon	<i>The Black Candle</i> by Catherine Cookson
June 13	Lindsay	<i>There Will Be No Miracles Here</i> by Casey Gerald

Unnecessary?

I'm writing this right after our meeting so that I can then focus on reading, as three of next year's books were awaiting me at the library when I went on Friday. I've started *The Black Candle*, and I'm enjoying it so far.

Nine of us gathered for our ultimate discussion before summer break. I read *An Unnecessary Woman* by Rabih Alameddine in April 2018, and listened to it over the past week to refresh my memory. Reading and listening were very different experiences. When I read, it seemed to be more about book references with a thin thread of plot. When I listened, the story was much more salient. I hunted up my reactions in my journal – I was enjoying it, and then realized it was written by a man. As I listened to it, I heard more of the humour.

Here are our reactions to this controversial book:

- 🌀 Fabulous book
- 🌀 **Beautiful writing** – the downside of listening is that it is difficult to go back to take in the good of a lovely sentence
- 🌀 "If I happen to come across a garden these days, I burst into bloom."
- 🌀 I was very engaged with this book
- 🌀 Very good book
- 🌀 Why is this called a novel? It was stream of consciousness
- 🌀 This left me with more questions than answers
- 🌀 I liked it the most of all we read this year
- 🌀 Dark, matches my life now
- 🌀 Two-thirds through, I thought, There is no plot to this
- 🌀 I did enjoy in the end though
- 🌀 I was happy Aaliya was able to start again after the flood
- 🌀 I liked the main character – would like to meet her
- 🌀 She reminded me of Ruth Zardo
- 🌀 Intriguing that a man wrote what a woman is feeling

- ⊗ Author is gay – more able to write about marginalized people?
- ⊗ I think it is the author's story
- ⊗ I found Aaliya very unlikable
- ⊗ She is totally w/o sentiment
- ⊗ She spends her whole life doing nothing
- ⊗ Aaliya comes from a bad childhood experience
- ⊗ "In every evocation of a childhood scene, my stepfather's face is the least detailed, the most out of focus; when I think of him my memory's eyes have cataracts."
- ⊗ She's not old – only 72!
- ⊗ She looked for meaning in her life – she had a turbulent misfit life, and she found a purpose
- ⊗ She dug into the depth of the books – you have to, for translation
- ⊗ Listening to her internal dialogue
- ⊗ The cultural perspective
- ⊗ Reminded me of May Sarton's *Journal of a Solitude*
- ⊗ The ruminations to which we are susceptible when we live alone
- ⊗ Books as life, as protection, as companion: after I lost a long-time relationship and was heart-broken, I realized I would be more sad if books broke up with me
- ⊗ **Literary references**
- ⊗ I did not enjoy this book because it made me feel so stupid
- ⊗ So many books I have not read
- ⊗ But when I got one of the references – WIN!
- ⊗ Some quotes not attributed
- ⊗ I had to look up almost everything – took me ages to read it
- ⊗ Lots of **humour**
- ⊗ "Beirut is the Elizabeth Taylor of cities: insane, beautiful, falling apart, aging, and forever drama laden. She'll also marry any infatuated suitor who promises to make her life more comfortable, no matter how inappropriate he is."
- ⊗ "Noah... was a son of a bitch of a captain who ran a very tight ship. Only pairs of the best and the brightest were allowed to climb the plank—perpetuate the species, repopulate the planet, and all that Nazi nonsense. Would Noah have allowed a lesbian zebra aboard, an unmarried hedgehog, a limping lemur?"
- ⊗ the "chic woman... trailing a reek of lily perfume and petit bourgeois affectations" asks, to be mean, "Which (Heidegger) would you recommend?" "Without lifting her eyes from the sweater she was working on, Hannah said, "We wouldn't recommend anything by that proto-Nazi.
- ⊗ He's a third-rate philosopher ... His only interest was in posturing, and only posturers are interested in him. A woman of your intelligence shouldn't waste time reading Heidegger... Try Schopenhauer – him we can recommend."
- ⊗ How was Aaliya **unnecessary**? Who makes that judgment? What IS an unnecessary woman?
- ⊗ "I am my family's appendix, its unnecessary appendage."
- ⊗ "Of course, like Descartes, Newton, Locke, Pascal, Spinoza, Kierkegaard, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, Kant never formed an intimate tie or reared a family."
- ⊗ "Joseph Roth ends *Flight Without End* with the sentence: "No one in the whole world was as superfluous as he." I beg to differ. No one in the whole world is as superfluous as I. Not Franz Tunda, Roth's protagonist, no. I am the one who has no occupation, no desire, no hope, no ambition, not even any self-love."
- ⊗ Fascinating pursuit – translations that no one saw – shame
- ⊗ I was glad she valued the manuscripts after the flood
- ⊗ **Did Aaliya want connection with people?**
- ⊗ She was conflicted about this
- ⊗ Fadia says, "There are two kinds of people in this world: people who want to be desired, and people who want to be desired so much that they pretend they don't."
- ⊗ "If you read these pages and think I'm the way I am because I lived through a civil war, you can't feel my pain. If you believe you're not like me because one woman, and only one, Hannah, chose to be my friend, then you're unable to empathize."
- ⊗ "I long ago abandoned myself to a blind lust for the written word. Literature is my sandbox. In it I play, build my forts and castles, spend glorious time. It is the world outside that box that gives me trouble. I have adapted tamely, though not conventionally, to this visible world so I can retreat without much inconvenience into my inner world of books."
- ⊗ she was highly engaged but at a distance
- ⊗ she cried when she heard about Fadia's bereavement
- ⊗ Fadia gave her lamb stew
- ⊗ "I slipped into art to escape life. I sneaked off into literature."
- ⊗ "...I try to live without interfering in the lives of others because I have no wish for them to interfere in mine."
- ⊗ "The cure for loneliness is solitude. —Marianne Moore, from the essay "If I Were Sixteen Today"
- ⊗ at the time of the flood crisis, she allowed herself to be supported and cared for by the three women

- ☉ the switch to connection to the three women at the end of the story – people don't make changes like that at end of life
- ☉ **Did Aaliya consider herself superior?**
- ☉ When you read that much – she probably found the witches superficial
- ☉ "I am a functioning human being. Mostly. Just so you don't make too much fun of me, the mostly above refers to functioning, not to human being."
- ☉ "Nothing is working. Nothing in my life is working. Giants of literature, philosophy, and the arts have influenced my life, but what have I done with this life? I remain a speck in a tumultuous universe that has little concern for me. I am no more than dust, a mote—dust to dust. I am a blade of grass upon which the storm-trooper's boot stomps. I had dreams, and they were not about ending up a speck. I didn't dream of becoming a star, but I thought I might have a small nonspeaking role in a grand epic, an epic with a touch of artistic credentials. I didn't dream of becoming a giant—I wasn't that delusional or arrogant—but I wanted to be more than a speck, maybe a midget. I could have been a midget. All our dreams of glory are but manure in the end."
- ☉ "My mind becomes congested, jammed with feelings and thoughts that I can't formulate nimbly enough."
- ☉ "The presence of another person—of any person whatsoever—makes me feel awkward,"
- ☉ she says it derails her mind to be around people
- ☉ "I thought every person should live for art, not just me, and furthermore, why would I want to be normal? Why would I want to be stupid like everyone else?"
- ☉ "Such a worrywart I am. I miss miracles blooming before my eyes: I concentrate on a fading star and miss the constellation. I overlook dazzling thunderstorms worrying whether I have laundry hanging."
- ☉ "But to paraphrase the ever-paraphraseable Freud, who said something to the effect that when you speak about the past you lie with every breath you take, I will say this: When you write about the past, you lie with each letter, with every grapheme, including the goddamn comma."
- ☉ She just found joy in her work – "I think that at times, not all times, when I'm translating, my head is like skylight. Through no effort of my own, I'm visited by bliss... Sometimes I think that's enough, a few moments of ecstasy in a life of Beckett dullness. ... During these moments, I am healed of all wounds. I'll be sitting at my desk and suddenly I don't wish my life to be any different. I am where I need to be. My heart distends with delight. I feel sacred....

Sometimes I think that's enough, that I'm grateful. Most often I think I'm delusional. *Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas.*"

- ☉ Or was she introverted?
- ☉ Or reclusive?
- ☉ "Like most Lebanese, Joumana speaks rapidly, one sentence dovetailing into another, producing guttural words and phrases as if gargling with mouthwash. I prefer slow conversations where words are counted like pearls, conversations with many pauses, pauses replacing words."
- ☉ I feel stupid and judged around introverts who don't talk
- ☉ **Philosophical issues**
- ☉ "One reason we desire explanations is that they separate us and make us feel safe."
- ☉ "Most of us believe we are who we are because of the decisions we've made, because of events that shaped us, because of the choices of those around us. We rarely consider that we're also formed by the decisions we didn't make, by events that could have happened but didn't or by our lack of choices, for that matter." "Among the many definitions of progress, "enemy of trees" and "killer of birds" seem to me the most apt."
- ☉ "Memory, memoir, autobiography - lies, lies, all lies."
- ☉ "As much as I loved it and felt at home within its cages, school is more Hades than Heaven - a ritual killing of childhood is performed in school, children are put to death."
- ☉ We identify who we are with our work – so the changing nature of work...
- ☉ "No loss is felt more keenly than the loss of what might have been. No nostalgia hurts as much as nostalgia for things that never existed."
- ☉ Other male writers who portray women well: Brian Moore; Peter Høeg – *Smilla's Sense of Snow*

She read books as one
would breathe air,
to fill up and live.