

# Parkdale Book Club

## March 12, 2018 – My Grandmother...

### and beginning nominations

## Schedule

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

Apr. 14	<b><i>The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness</i></b> by Karen Armstrong -- Lee
May 12	<b><i>The Humans</i></b> , by Matt Haig -- Lynn
June 9	<b><i>One Brother Shy</i></b> , by Terry Fallis -- Joan

## Books for next year

It's that time again; time to start nominating books for next year's reading. We got the ball rolling with a brainstorm on Saturday (these are in roughly alphabetical order), but let's add more to the list of nominations. Please email me or call 403 262 5340 to leave a phone message with your suggestions. If you've already suggested something for next year, please remind me. 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 this newsletter.

As we discussed Fredrik Backman's *My grandmother...*, Margaret recommended his next book, ***Britt-Marie Was Here***. From Amazon: For as long as anyone can remember, Britt-Marie has been an acquired taste. It's not that she's judgmental, or fussy, or difficult - she just expects things to be done in a certain way. A cutlery drawer should be arranged in the right order, for example (forks, knives, then spoons). ... But behind the passive-aggressive, socially awkward, absurdly pedantic busybody is a woman who has more imagination, bigger dreams and a warmer heart than anyone around her realizes. So when Britt-Marie finds herself unemployed, separated from her husband of 20 years, left to fend for herself in the miserable provincial backwater that is Borg - of which the kindest thing one can say is that it has a road going through it - and somehow tasked with running the local football team, she is a little unprepared. But she will learn that life may have more to offer her than she's ever realised, and love might be found in the most unexpected of places.

Sue suggested a Yann Martel: ***The High Mountains of Portugal***. From Amazon: *The High Mountains of Portugal* is a suspenseful, mesmerizing story of a great quest for meaning, told in three intersecting narratives touching the lives of three different people and their families, and taking us on an extraordinary journey through the last century. We begin in the early 1900s, when Tomás discovers an ancient journal and sets out from Lisbon in one of the very first motor cars in Portugal in search of the strange treasure the journal describes. Thirty-five years later, a pathologist devoted to the novels of Agatha Christie, whose wife has possibly been murdered, finds himself drawn into the consequences of Tomás's quest. Fifty years later,

Senator Peter Tovy of Ottawa, grieving the death of his own beloved wife, rescues a chimpanzee from an Oklahoma research facility and takes it to live with him in his ancestral village in northern Portugal, where the strands of all three stories miraculously mesh together. Beautiful, witty and engaging, Yann Martel's new novel offers us the same tender exploration of the impact and significance of great love and great loss, belief and unbelief, that has marked all his brilliant, unexpected novels.

Adam Gidwitz: ***The Inquisitor's Tale: Or, the Three Magical Children and Their Holy Dog***, suggested by Lynn. I put this book on hold initially because there is a greyhound character, but I recommend it here because it is such an interesting exploration of the Middle Ages.

Publisher's Weekly says: A hodgepodge of different narrators in 1242 France introduce readers to three unusual children and one remarkable dog. As their individual stories unfold and their paths collide, tension reaches a fever pitch as an agent of the Inquisition nips at their heels. Gidwitz's epic medieval adventure packs in boisterous action, richly depicted history, and lovable underdog characters, all illuminated by Aly's stunning artwork. There is something of the illustrated manuscript about the book. And one of the themes is the importance of books. One of the most celebrated children's books of 2017.

Lindsay suggested ***A Rhinestone Button*** by Gail Anderson-Dargatz. From the author's site: In a world where everything depends on the harvest, Job Sunstrum is a late bloomer.

In the rough-and-tumble farming community of Godsfinger, Alberta, he lives a solitary existence, raising cattle and farming the land, like his father and grandfather before him. Yet the surrounding pasture do not old much attraction for him. Instead he prefers his humble farmhouse kitchen, where cooking and baking, and even washing dishes, give him deep satisfaction. If his delight in making almond squares for the church doesn't brand him as odd, his soft blond curls and cherubic face are unmistakable foils for his beefy local peers. Yet something else sets him apart, a phenomenon called synaesthesia - an extraordinary ability to see and feel sound in dazzling colours or shapes. Nowhere is the effect more spectacular than when the Godsfinger Baptist Choir sings. But Job's religious faith is soon put to a test when his proselytizing brother Jacob, along with his bossy wife and arsonist son, moves back into the family farmhouse. With them they bring the Pentecostal fervor of a visiting evangelist by the name of Jack Divine. At Jacob's urging, the impressionable Job enlists as one of Divine's religious foot soldiers, but his total immersion in Christian life leads him to wonder what his chances are for love of a more earthly nature. But where might he find such a love? At the Ponoka auction? On "Loveline," a call-in radio show? At the Out-to-Lunch Café? Gail Anderson-

Dargatz transports us into a world filled with richness and magic, where divine intervention drops from the sky and silos are billboards for God. A Rhinestone Button has all the hallmarks of the author's previous, award-winning fiction, with a cast of unforgettable characters and a landscape drawn with perfect and loving detail.

Ruth nominated ***Medicine Walk*** by Richard

Wagamese. From Amazon: By the celebrated author of Canada Reads Finalist *Indian Horse*, a stunning new novel that has all the timeless qualities of a classic, as it tells the universal story of a father/son struggle in a fresh, utterly memorable way, set in dramatic landscape of the BC Interior. Franklin Starlight is called to visit his father, Eldon. He's sixteen years old and has had the most fleeting of relationships with the man. The rare moments they've shared haunt and trouble Frank, but he answers the call, a son's duty to a father. He finds Eldon decimated after years of drinking, dying of liver failure in a small town flophouse. Eldon asks his son to take him into the mountains, so he may be buried in the traditional Ojibway manner. What ensues is a journey through the rugged and beautiful backcountry, and a journey into the past, as the two men push forward to Eldon's end. From a poverty-stricken childhood, to the Korean War, and later the derelict houses of mill towns, Eldon relates both the desolate moments of his life and a time of redemption and love and in doing so offers Frank a history he has never known, the father he has never had, and a connection to himself he never expected. A novel about love, friendship, courage, and the idea that the land has within it powers of healing, *Medicine Walk* reveals the ultimate goodness of its characters and offers a deeply moving and redemptive conclusion.

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

From Amazon: In a timely and incisive follow-up to her national bestseller *Men Explain Things to Me*, Rebecca Solnit offers sharp commentary on women who refuse to be silenced, misogynistic violence, the fragile masculinity of the literary canon, the gender binary, the recent history of rape jokes, and much more. In characteristic style, Solnit mixes humor, keen analysis, and sharp insight in these eleven essays. Writer, historian, and activist Rebecca Solnit is the author of eighteen or so books on feminism, western and indigenous history, popular power, social change and insurrection, wandering and walking, hope and disaster. ... A product of the California public education system from kindergarten to graduate school, she is a columnist at *Harper's* and a regular contributor to the *Guardian*.

Sue's second suggestion was also a non-fiction:

***On Hitler's Mountain: Overcoming The Legacy of a Nazi Childhood*** by Irmgard A. Hunt. From

Amazon: Growing up in the beautiful mountains of Berchtesgaden -- just steps from Adolf Hitler's alpine retreat -- Irmgard Hunt had a seemingly happy, simple childhood. In her powerful, illuminating, and sometimes frightening memoir, Hunt recounts a youth lived under an evil but persuasive leader. As she grew older, the harsh reality of war -- and a few brave adults who opposed the Nazi regime -- aroused in her skepticism of National Socialist ideology and the Nazi propaganda she was taught to believe in. In May 1945, an eleven-year-old Hunt watched American troops occupy Hitler's mountain retreat, signaling the end of the Nazi dictatorship and World War II. As the Nazi crimes began to be accounted for, many Germans tried to deny the truth of what had occurred; Hunt, in contrast, was determined to know and face the facts of her country's criminal past. *On Hitler's Mountain* is more than a memoir -- it is a portrait of a nation that lost its moral compass. It is a provocative story of a family and a community in a period and location in history that, though it is fast becoming remote to us, has important resonance for our own time.

Ruth's second suggestion is ***The Underpainter***, by Jane Urquhart. From Amazon: ... a novel of interwoven lives in which the world of art collides with the realm of human emotion. It is the story of Austin Fraser, an American painter now in his later years, who is haunted by memories of those whose lives most deeply touched his own, including a young Canadian soldier and china painter and the beautiful model who becomes Austin's mistress. Spanning decades, the setting moves from upstate New York to the northern shores of two Great Lakes; from France in World War One to New York City in the '20s and '30s. Brilliantly depicting landscape and the geography of the imagination, *The Underpainter* is Jane Urquhart's most accomplished novel to date.

# My Grandmother...

What a good discussion!

- ☞ Loved Elsa... love weird
- ☞ 1<sup>st</sup> chapter not so great, but now I'm engaged in it
- ☞ confusing at the beginning
- ☞ reminds me of my relationship with my grandma/grandchildren
- ☞ the grandmother reminds me of my mother - I'm lucky I survived
- ☞ "There's something special about a grandmother's house. You never forget how it smells."
- ☞ sophisticated 7-year-old - credible portrayal?
- ☞ "the best stories are never completely realistic and never entirely made-up."
- ☞ Maybe short on realism, but long on heart
- ☞ FANTASTIC! Philosophy, wisdom, humour...
- ☞ Have to read it again to analyse the themes - create a spreadsheet with the 5 letters...
- ☞ I read it again for discussion, and hit hooked me again
- ☞ Read it in January 2017, and remember nada
- ☞ Creating the fantasy world and telling the story through that was just confusing
- ☞ Reminded me of Slaughterhouse-Five
- ☞ Reminded me of Harry Potter - the British humour
- ☞ Brings in Harry Potter & Star Wars
- ☞ Bullying theme - good book for middle school
- ☞ Can't imagine what it's like to live always in fear, plotting out the day to avoid danger...
- ☞ "Only different people change the world," Granny used to say. "No one normal has ever changed a crapping thing."
- ☞ "Death's greatest power is not that it can make people die, but that it can make people want to stop living."
- ☞ Sad at the end
- ☞ "Never mess with someone who has more spare time than you do[.]"
- ☞ "Because not all monsters were monsters in the beginning. Some are monsters born of sorrow."
- ☞ "Having a grandmother is like having an army. This is a grandchild's ultimate privilege: knowing that someone is on your side, always, whatever the details."
- ☞ Grandmother's accomplishments came out over the course of the book

- ☞ As a grandmother, I'm really falling short!
- ☞ "Elsa decides that even if people she likes have been shits on earlier occasions, she has to learn to carry on liking them. You'd quickly run out of people if you had to disqualify all those who at some point have been shits."
- ☞ "We want to be loved," quotes Britt-Marie. "Failing that, admired; failing that, feared; failing that, hated and despised. At all costs we want to stir up some sort of feeling in others. The soul abhors a vacuum. At all costs it longs for contact."
- ☞ "One day at a time. One dream at a time. And one could say it's right and one could say it's wrong. And probably both would be right. Because life is both complicated and simple. Which is why there are cookies."
- ☞ Feeding the monster through the mail chute - why did the chocolate not kill it?
- ☞ "Grow up and be different and don't let anyone tell you not to be different, because all superheroes are different."
- ☞ "It's much more difficult to have conflict when there are cookies around."
- ☞ "Most likely they told her a whole lot of damned things she wasn't allowed to do, for a range of different reasons. But she damned well did them all the same. A few years after she was born they were still telling girls they couldn't vote in the bleeding elections, but now the girls do it all the same. That's damned well how you stand up to bastards who tell you what you can and can't do. You bloody do those things all the bloody same."
- ☞ Did anyone suspect Kent was having an affair? Britt-Marie knew, but said nothing about it - created order and control where she could
- ☞ Grandmother should read *Being Mortal*, and have the conversations with Elsa about grandmother's illness
- ☞ Elsa developed a relationship with each person in the apartment building (maybe grandmother did her preparing of Elsa a different way)
- ☞ Elsa had lots of protectors, set up by Grandmother
- ☞ Grandmother had rescued all of them: "Granny was the sort of person you brought with you when you went to war, and that was what Elsa loved about her."
- ☞ My dad used to set treasure hunts
- ☞ Understand there is a story behind how people act strange.
- ☞ "Promise you won't hate me when you find out who I've been."
- ☞ Being talked to in baby talk is coming... maybe not for Lindsay!
- ☞ What an imagination this guy has!
- ☞ Backman is a kid! Born in 1981; Sweden's most popular author, 2013
- ☞ Reminds me of Roald Dahl, how he describes characters
- ☞ See also *Beartown*, same author
- ☞ Published same day as *Ove* but sadly not available in English: *Saker min son behöver veta om världen* (*Things my son needs to know about the world*) with chapters such as "What you will need to know about Ikea", "What you will need to know about motion sensor lights in toilets" "What you will need to know about manliness" and "What you will need to know if I hold your hand a little too tightly"

## April: *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness* by Karen Armstrong.

In 1969, after seven years as a Roman Catholic nun -- hoping, but ultimately failing, to find God -- Armstrong left her convent. She knew almost nothing of the changed world she was entering, and she was tormented by panic attacks and inexplicable seizures. Her struggle against despair was fueled by a string of discouragements -- failed spirituality, doctorate and jobs, fruitless dealings with psychiatrists -- but finally, in 1976, she was diagnosed with epilepsy and given proper treatment. She then began the writing career that would become her true calling, and as she focused on the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, her own true inner story began to emerge. She would come to experience brief moments of transcendence through her work -- the profound fulfillment that she had not found in the long hours of prayer as a young nun. Powerfully engaging, often heart-breaking, but lit with bursts of humour, *The Spiral Staircase* is an extraordinary history of self.

## May: *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.

## What we've read

*A man called Ove*

*Alone in the classroom*

*An altar in the world*

*And the birds rained down*

*art of racing in the rain, The*

*An astronaut's guide to life on earth*

*An audience of chairs*

*An Irish country doctor, Patrick Taylo*

*Annabel*

*Atonement*

*Bad medicine, Judge John Reilly*

*Barney's version*

*Bedlam*

*Being mortal*

*Belonging*

*Best laid plans*

*birth house, The*

*Body surfing*

*book of negroes, The*

*book thief, The*

*cat's table, The*

*Cause for hope*

*Children Act , The*

*Colour of water*

*confidence game , The*

*Crow Lake*

*Curious Charms of Arthur Pepper, The*

*Dying to be me*

*Eat pray love*

*elegance of the hedgehog, The*

*end of your life book club, The*

*endless Knot, The, by Gail Bowen*

*Exile*

*Fatal Passage*

*Fifteen Dogs*

*Fighting Castro: a love story*

*forgotten garden, The*

*geography of bliss, The*

*girls, The*

*glass castle, The*

*God's hotel*

*Good to a fault*

*Green grass, running water*

*Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society, The*

*happiness project, The, Gretchen Rubin*

*house at Tyneford, The*

*Humans, The*

*I am Hutterite*

*I shall not hate*

*Illegal, The*

*inconvenient Indian, The*

*immortal life of Henrietta Lacks, The*

*In search of April Raintree*

*Infidel*

*Into the magic shop*

*juggler's children, The*

*kite runner, The*

*La's orchestra saves the world*

*Late nights on air*

*Latitudes of melt*

*light between oceans, The*

*Lila*

*Little Bee*

*Married to a Bedouin*

*Martian , The*

*Massey murder, The*

*Memory board*

*mistress of nothing, The*

*Moral disorder*

*Mr. Pip*

*My Grandmother Sends Her Regards and Apologises*

*Nikolski*

*notebook, The*

*Old Filth, Jan Gardam*

*One brother shy*

*One plus one*

*Open secrets, Alice Munro*

*Orphan train*

*outliers, The*

*Payback*

*Proof of heaven*

*Quiet, Susan Cain*

*road to Little Dribbling , The*

*Rosie project, The*

*Russian winter, the*

*samurai's garden, The*

*Sarah*

*Saturday big tent wedding party*

*second-last woman in England, The*

*Secret daughter*

*shack, The*

*Shadow of the wind*

*Slaughterhouse Five*

*Spiral Staircase, The*

*Station Eleven*

*Still Alice*

*Still life*

*stone carvers, The*

*Suite Francaise*

*Take this bread*

*Three cups of tea*

*Three Sisters Bar and Hotel, The*

*Too close to the falls*

*uncommon reader, The*

*Universe Versus Alex Woods, The*

*Unless*

*Up and down*

*Water for elephants*

*Whistling past the graveyard*

*Widower's tale, The*

*Woefield Poultry Collective, The, Jubby*

*writing on my forehead, The*

*419, Ferguson*

