

# Parkdale Book Club

## Midnight Library

**Schedule** – 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday each month, 10 am, zoom

December 10 – ***Small Things Like These*** by Claire Keegan -- Ruth

January 14 2023 -- ***The Bookwoman of Troublesome Creek*** by Kim Michele Richardson -- Beth

February 11 -- ***Migrations*** by Charlotte McConaghy – Lynn

March 11 – ***The Art of Leaving*** by Ayelet Tsabari – Roz

April 8 -- ***The Children's Blizzard*** by Melanie Benjamin -- Margaret

May 13 -- ***Sufferance*** by Thomas King – Janine

June 10 -- ***The Woman Outside My Door*** by Rachel Ryan – Sue

### Correction

Thank you to Joan for correcting an error in the October newsletter, which described ***Woman Watching: Louise de Kiriline Lawrence and the Songbirds*** of Pimisi Bay as “historical fiction.” Joan wrote, “This is NOT fiction. It is the true story of a remarkable real woman who happened to have some Forrest Gump-like experiences (e.g. the Dionne quintes) as well as touching on the lives of a number of women bird-watchers who added a great deal to the ornithological body of knowledge over the last century. You might guess I am enjoying it immensely!” I wonder if Janine or Joan will nominate this book for next year!

### Nominations for next year:

Here are the nominations we've collected for next year, so far. If, as is sometimes the case, your nomination has been misplaced by the absent-minded, please contact me at [sloanelm@shaw.ca](mailto:sloanelm@shaw.ca) to correct this.

1. ***The Boy in the Woods*** by Maxwell Smart (not agent 86) nominated by Lee
2. Doreen is recommending two books for a fun change of pace, from her summer reading for next year: ***The Invention of Wings*** by Sue Monk Kidd.

3. Doreen's second: ***The Little Old Lady Who Broke All the Rules***, by Catherina Ingleman Sunberg.
4. From Lynn: Shelby Van Pelt's *Remarkably Bright Creatures*
5. Lynn is nominating this year's Giller Prize winner, Suzette Mayr's ***The Sleeping Car Porter***
6. ***Son of elsewhere*** by Elamin Abdelmehmoud is nominated by Lee

Please add to the list of nominations with any book you think would make for a good discussion. Our parameters are quite inclusive, with a consideration only that the book be available in formats in addition to hardback by the time we're reading it. Send nominations to [sloanelm@shaw.ca](mailto:sloanelm@shaw.ca).

### December's meeting



#### ***Small Things Like These***

by Claire Keegan  
Shortlisted for the 2022 Booker Prize

"A hypnotic and electrifying Irish tale that transcends country, transcends time." — Lily King, *New York Times*

***Small Things Like These*** is award-winning author Claire Keegan's landmark new novel, a tale of one man's courage and a remarkable portrait of love and family.

It is 1985 in a small Irish town. During the weeks leading up to Christmas, Bill Furlong, a coal merchant and family man, faces into his busiest season. Early one morning, while delivering an order to the local convent, Bill makes a discovery which forces him to confront both his past and the complicit silences of a town controlled by the church.

Already an international bestseller, *Small Things Like These* is a deeply affecting story of hope, quiet heroism, and empathy from one of our most critically lauded and iconic writers.

### **Zoom Meeting for *Small Things Like These*:**

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82432011683?pwd=SEgwSFFIOTRZODVtSmVuYW1vOXNwdz09>

Meeting ID: 824 3201 1683

Passcode: 284356

If you're not able to join the meeting, you are welcome to send your comments about *Small Things Like These* to [bethbalshaw@shaw.ca](mailto:bethbalshaw@shaw.ca) or [sloanelm@shaw.ca](mailto:sloanelm@shaw.ca) before December 10<sup>th</sup> so they can be shared with the group and included in our next Book Club Newsletter.

## *Midnight Library*

"Librarians have knowledge. They guide you to the right books. The right worlds. They find the best places. Like **soul-enhanced search engines**."

Eleven of us gathered on Saturday (and all of us had read all of the book!). Unfortunately we missed some of our members for this discussion. If you miss a meeting but have reactions to the book, feel free to send in your comments, either ahead of time so they become part of the discussion, or after so they can be included in the newsletter summary.

**Overheard during the discussion:** The power of agency – when do we have it or not have it?

Nora didn't go back to her old life; she went back to begin creating the life she wanted.

Even the perfect life wasn't what Nora was looking for. She had always been looking outside herself.

Interesting, fun, intriguing.

We need to have reasons to stay alive.

"...sadness is intrinsically part of the fabric of happiness. You can't have one without the other. Of course, they come in different degrees and quantities. But there is no life where you can be in a state of sheer happiness for ever. And imagining there is just breeds more unhappiness in the life you're in."

"*The Midnight Library* was an interesting read. Haig is a very imaginative writer and his exploration of the different choices we might have made at decision points in our lives was done in an intriguing way, through book choices at a midnight library, managed by the person most nurturing to Nora. It reminded me of the "choose your own adventure" books that were popular when my children were young, as they went off in different directions depending upon the choices made. Many of us have regrets over things that we didn't do (more over inaction than action) -- but Nora discovers that things weren't as wonderful as she thought they might have been. In her "root" life, she was plagued by inaction following the death of her mother--as I've said many times, inaction or indecision is in itself a decision made. The ending is both satisfying and a bit disappointing--we should be satisfied with what we have and the decisions that we have made.... but also take ownership over our own lives".

"We can't tell if any of those other versions would have been better or worse. Those lives are happening, it is true, but you are happening as well, and that is the happening we have to focus on."

I really enjoyed this book and read it in just a few days. I found myself wondering if this could be possible – that alternate lives could be happening at the same time. I thought Matt Haig was brilliant to think of the logistics of how and where the transitions happened (e.g., for Nora it was a library with Mrs. Elm; for Hugo it was a library) and what things could interfere with transitions.

The Book of Regrets was very significant – as the years passed, the chapters got longer as regrets piled up. Nora had spent a lot of time regretting that she hadn't married Dan so that was the first decision she wanted to reverse when she tried a different life. It took her a very short time to find out that wouldn't have brought joy

and she immediately returned to the Midnight Library. I predicted then that the book would be full of experimenting with different lives but that Nora would discover she needed to return to her root life and live it differently.

Her second last life, with Ash and Molly, was quite happy but she couldn't shake feeling like an imposter living someone else's life. So, she had to go back to being herself.

When the Midnight Library burned down, with only one book left intact, the Book of Regrets was destroyed, freeing Nora to embrace her own life with a clear decision that she wanted to live. "I am alive" was the declaration that saved her. Since reading this book, I quickly recommended it to someone who was talking about having a lot of regrets – "If only I had done this ..." "I wish I hadn't ..." "I wish I had ..." This is a good book to remind us to commit ourselves to the life we're living, and live it so we have no regrets.

'Never underestimate the big importance of small things.'

It seems that there's an abundance of Multiple Lives books. Perhaps it's substantial enough to be considered a sub-genre of speculative fiction. I'll ask a librarian.

Here's one such list on Goodreads.

<https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/multiple-lives>

The other-worldliness of *The Midnight Library* was an obstacle for me in connecting with the central character. If major aspects of existence, such as time and space, are either arbitrary or invented, that lessens my sense that the character's situation matters.

I appreciated the use of chess and tree analogies.

"Three simple words containing the power and potential of a multiverse. I AM ALIVE."

I approached this book cautiously, so was pleasantly surprised to find I very much enjoyed it. Wouldn't it be marvelous to have a taste of the life that a different decision might have brought? And isn't it satisfying to find that the life we're living suits

us after all? ..... the regrets can be discarded, one by one ....

When regret gets loud, recite these 5 words:

"Today matters more than yesterday. © Rachel Macy Stafford 2022"

*The Midnight Library* – an intriguing and memorable title - the grey zone between life and death. Science tells us it's a mysterious place, a singular point where you are both dead and alive. Hugo in the book says if he was religious he would say it was God and if he wasn't he thought that the human brain can't handle the complexity of it and so translates it into something it can understand.

I can't say that I enjoyed the book but having said that it haunted me. I am a fairly content person but the book at odd times would pop up in my mind and made me ask some "What if?" questions.

Suicide is a depressing situation. It's like a black hole. Nora Seed was in a dark place. She felt no one needed her. She knew with absolute certainty that she didn't want to reach tomorrow. In the midnight library Mrs. Elm shows up with Nora's Book of Regrets and gives her the opportunity to live in a parallel or sometimes in a perpendicular universe where she makes different choices and those choices lead to different outcomes. In the end she realized that the regrets she had been living most of her life were wasted ones. She decided on a different direction, wanting to do some good in the world. I think a counsellor or a psychiatrist may use this approach of dealing with regrets on a suicidal or deeply depressed person. Hopefully the number of sessions would be less than the number of different lives Nora had to experience before she realized she wanted to live.

I liked the use of the chess game. Mrs. Elm often used the words "Never underestimate the big importance of small things. You must always remember that." And using the chess game she reiterated that point "the pawn may be small and ordinary but it isn't. ....I am saying the thing that looks the most ordinary might end up being the thing that leads you to victory." E.g. Nora stumbling on the neighbor's door mat to call for an ambulance which led to a happier and fulfilled life, again little things - playing chess in

the senior's home with Mrs. Elm, helping out at the homeless shelter every Tuesday, giving piano lessons.

The story is full of good advice. There is no perfect life. Be true to yourself. Stop worrying about other people's approval. Excellent outcomes are the result of wise choices of many alternatives. Sibling rivalry is not about siblings but about parents. It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.

Interesting side bits: P. 83 fish on Prozac, P 125 walk in circles to keep warm, we'll be back in 5 hours, p.139 The life of a human was of no greater importance than that of an oyster.

(Hume)

"A person was like a city. You couldn't let a few less desirable parts put you off the whole. There may be bits you don't like, a few dodgy side streets and suburbs, but the good stuff makes it worthwhile."

I enjoyed the book. It was interesting that the lives Nora might have lived turned out to be less than satisfactory, with the exception of being a wife and mother, but even that didn't hold her. I read the book quite awhile ago so am no doubt missing some of the finer points but was pleased that at the end of the book Nora decided that maybe the life she was already living wasn't as bad as she thought. She started to reach out and make an effort to improve her life and I guess that was the point of the story. Life is what we make it.

"And that sadness is intrinsically part of the fabric of happiness. You can't have one without the other. Of course, they come in different degrees and quantities. But there is no life where you can be in a state of sheer happiness for ever. And imagining there is just breeds more unhappiness in the life you're in."

I listened to this book twice, enjoying that it was narrated by actress Carey Mulligan.

This book invites two kinds of discussion: the book itself, and the questions the book asks as applied to each of us – what did you feel? What regrets? What different decision from the past would you like to try on? What aspects of your life would be consistent across alternate universes? What is success? As I thought of my regrets, some of them huge, I always found

myself following that with, 'yes, but...' because there were some consequence of the regrettable decision that I would not want to eradicate with a do-over in which I made the different decision.

"(Nora) realized that you could be as honest as possible in life, but people only see the truth if it is close enough to their reality." This is true of books, too – in looking at wildly divergent reviews of *The Midnight Library*, I thought the range of reactions must be related to what readers bring of themselves to the book. For me, this book followed some of my favourite philosophies: The value and validity of the ordinary; the importance of small changes; the importance of connection; the question of what is success; not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good, i.e. not avoiding doing something unless you can be best at it. So I'm predisposed to like the book.

In real life, how does one accomplish dealing with regrets, when we don't have a metaphysical library that gives access to the multiverse?

"Regrets don't leave. They weren't mosquito bites. They itch forever." Really? Isn't that at odds with the whole premise of the book?

A characteristic of Haig's writing is that he imparts wisdom about how to live well, the risks that abound in our culture(s) (he is British) like social media, and how to get out of despair and depression. What is the best way to live? These aspects of his writing reflect his own struggles and recovery.

"Maybe that's what all lives were, though. Maybe even the most seemingly perfectly intense or worthwhile lives ultimately felt the same. Acres of disappointment and monotony and hurts and rivalries but with flashes of wonder and beauty. Maybe that was the only meaning that mattered. To be the world, witnessing itself."

There was a real flavour of "It's a Wonderful Life" towards the end of the book.

I was ready for the book to be finished several chapters before it was finished. A phenomenon of listening to books is that you don't have cues (like number of pages in your right hand) about how much longer the book goes on. Sometimes in books, including this one, I think, okay, that's the end of it. And it's a satisfying end. But the narrator carries on...

I did not enjoy the chapter of “in one life...” over and over and over. What are the implications of Nora becoming like Hugo, sampling and sampling. Is this addictive? Was she still looking for THE life?

Nora’s name – **Seed**. A possibility, a beginning. Potential. Nora says of herself, “She just needed potential. And she was nothing if not potential.”

There were many little bits of zen wisdom: From the book: “You don’t have to understand life. You just have to live it.” Zen Saying: If you understand, things are just as they are. If you do not understand, things are just as they are. From the book: “You see, doing one thing differently is very often the same as doing everything differently.”

This reminded me of a book by Zen student Cheri Huber: *How You Do Anything Is How You Do Everything*

I would hate the experience of dropping into a life the way Nora did. Even when I start a new job it takes me days to remember the way to the bathroom. I would be a disaster. And I felt bad for the people who had lost their real Nora. I think Haig could have made more of this. He came closest in the story of Nora with Ash & Molly. One of the Goodreads commenters said, “The other-Noras aren't just characters-on-a-page, they are real people with real lives. And as she's surfing through them, she's also living with the knowledge that she'd be taking their lives.” She is taking their lives without having put in the work to get there.

This book reminds me of one of my fav Talking Head songs, Once in a Lifetime.

... And you may find yourself living in a shotgun shack  
And you may find yourself in another part of the world  
And you may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile  
And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife  
And you may ask yourself, “Well, how did I get here?”  
... Letting the days go by, let the water hold me down  
Letting the days go by, water flowing underground  
Into the blue again, after the money's gone  
Once in a lifetime, water flowing underground  
... And you may ask yourself, “How do I work this?”  
And you may ask yourself, “Where is that large automobile?”

And you may tell yourself, “This is not my beautiful house”  
And you may tell yourself, “This is not my beautiful wife”  
... Letting the days go by, let the water hold me down  
Letting the days go by, water flowing underground  
Into the blue again, after the money's gone  
Once in a lifetime, water flowing underground  
... Same as it ever was, same as it ever was  
Same as it ever was, same as it ever was  
Same as it ever was, same as it ever was  
Same as it ever was, same as it ever was

If you’d like to hear it sung correctly, for a little blast from the past, see

<https://open.spotify.com/track/1Tr4K5MU5XYE44umXGDndd?si=beb00037e25f4ab3>

Another association: from the Progoff Intensive Journal Writing Method, Intersections: Roads Taken and Not Taken.

**See also:** *The Moral Psychology of Regret*, Anna Gotlib (Editor);  
*The Power of Regret: How looking backward moves us forward*, Daniel H. Pink;  
*Regret: A study in ancient moral psychology*, James Warren

The (person) who insists upon seeing with perfect clearness before (they) decide, never decides. Accept life, and you must accept regret.  
Henri Frederic Amiel

*Recent reads:* What have you been enjoying?

*Burning Questions*, essays by Margaret Atwood

*The Dime*, by Kathleen Kent

*The Equivalents*, by Maggie Doherty

*The Farm*, by Joanne Ramos

*The Law of Innocence*, by Michael Connelly, a Lincoln lawyer novel

*Modern Fables*, essays by Mikka Jacobsen

*Night Rooms*, essays by Gina Nutt

*Sea of Tranquility*, by Emily St. John Mandel: More multi-verse exploration

*Storm Front* by Jim Butcher: A fun beginning to a series called The Dresden Files, about a wizard who is a private investigator

*Tell No Lies*, by Allison Brennan: Police procedural about murder of a young activist in the Southwest desert

*A Thousand Steps into Night*, by Traci Chee: Japanese-influenced fantasy with a female protagonist

*The Thursday Murder Club*, by Richard Osman