

Parkdale Book Club

November 2020 – Power of One

Schedule

Date (10 am on 2nd Saturday)

December 12	<i>Where the Crawdads Sing</i> by Delia Owens	Beth, Doreen
January 9 2021	<i>Finding Chika</i> by Mitch Albom	Sue
February 14	<i>No Time to Spare</i> by Ursula K. Le Guin	Lindsay
March 14	<i>A Gentleman in Moscow</i> by Amor Towles	Beth
April 11	<i>The Nightingale</i> by Kristin Hannah	Sheila
May 9	<i>One Drum: Stories and Ceremonies for a Planet</i> by Richard Wagamese	Doreen
June 13	<i>The Secret Orphan</i> by Glynis Peters	Sue

Book suggestions from other reading groups

(All summaries from the Calgary Public Library website.)

Hamnet and Judith, by Maggie O'Farrell.

"[An] exceptional winner.... It expresses something profound about the human experience that seems both extraordinarily current and at the same time, enduring." --Martha Lane Fox, Chair of The Women's Prize for Fiction judges

TWO EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE. A LOVE THAT DRAWS THEM TOGETHER. A PLAGUE THAT THREATENS TO TEAR THEM APART. England, 1580. A young Latin tutor--penniless, bullied by a violent father--falls in love with an eccentric young woman: a wild creature who walks her family's estate with a falcon on her shoulder and is known throughout the countryside for her unusual gifts as a healer. Agnes understands plants and potions better than she does people, but once she settles on the Henley Street in Stratford, she becomes a fiercely protective mother and a steadfast, centrifugal force in the life of her young husband. His gifts as a writer are just beginning to awaken when their beloved twins, Hamnet and Judith, are afflicted with the bubonic plague, and, devastatingly, one of them succumbs to the illness. A luminous portrait of a marriage, a shattering evocation of a family ravaged by grief and loss, and a hypnotic recreation of the story that inspired one of the greatest literary masterpieces of all time, *Hamnet & Judith* is mesmerizing and seductive, an impossible-to-

put-down novel from one of our most gifted writers. Published as *Hamnet* in the US and the UK.

The Pull of the Stars, by Emma Donoghue. Dublin, 1918: three days in a maternity ward at the height of the Great Flu. A small world of work, risk, death and unlooked-for love, by the bestselling author of *The Wonder* and *ROOM*. In an Ireland doubly ravaged by war and disease, Nurse Julia Power works at an understaffed hospital in the city center, where expectant mothers who have come down with the terrible new Flu are quarantined together. Into Julia's regimented world step two outsiders--Doctor Kathleen Lynn, on the run from the police, and a young volunteer helper, Bridie Sweeney. In the darkness and intensity of this tiny ward, over three days, these women change each other's lives in unexpected ways. They lose patients to this baffling pandemic, but they also shepherd new life into a fearful world. With tireless tenderness and humanity, careers and mothers alike somehow do their impossible work. In *The Pull of the Stars*, Emma Donoghue once again finds the light in the darkness in this new classic of hope and survival against all odds.

Moving on from plague to climate change, with a little Shakespeare for flavour, we have ***Blaze Island***, by Catherine Rush. One of "Fiction's Buzziest Books," *Globe and Mail* Fall Books Preview. For those who loved Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* comes a new climate-themed, Shakespeare-inspired novel from bestselling author Catherine Bush. The time is now or an alternate near now, the world close to our own. A Category Five hurricane sweeps up the eastern seaboard of North America, leaving devastation in its wake, its outer wings brushing over tiny Blaze Island. During this wild night, a stranger washes up on the doorstep of the isolated house where Milan Wells lives with his daughter Miranda. A climate scientist whose career was destroyed by climate change deniers, Wells has fled to this remote island with his daughter years before, desperate to protect her from the world's worsening weather. Seemingly safe in her father's realm, Miranda walks the island's rocky shores, helping her father with his daily weather records. But the stranger's arrival breaks open Miranda's world, stirs up memories of events of long ago and compels her to wonder what her father is up to with his mysterious weather experiments. In the aftermath of the storm, she finds herself in a world altered so quickly that she hardly knows what has happened or what the unpredictable future will bring.

This is Happiness, by Niall Williams. NAMED A BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR BY THE WASHINGTON POST....

A profound and enchanting new novel from Booker Prize-longlisted author Niall Williams about the loves of our lives and the joys of reminiscing. You don't see rain stop, but you sense it. You sense something has changed in the frequency you've been living and you hear the quietness you thought was silence get quieter still, and you raise your head so your eyes can make sense of what your ears have already told you, which at first is only: something has changed. The rain is stopping. Nobody in the small, forgotten village of Faha remembers when it started; rain on the western seaboard was a condition of living. Now--just as Father Coffey proclaims the coming of electricity--it is stopping. Seventeen-year-old Noel Crowe is standing outside his grandparents' house shortly after the rain has stopped when he encounters Christy for the first time. Though he can't explain it, Noel knows right then: something has changed. This is the story of all that was to follow: Christy's long-lost love and why he had come to Faha, Noel's own experiences falling in and out of love, and the endlessly postponed arrival of

electricity--a development that, once complete, would leave behind a world that had not changed for centuries. Niall Williams' latest novel is an intricately observed portrait of a community, its idiosyncrasies and its traditions, its paradoxes and its inanities, its failures and its triumphs. Luminous and otherworldly, and yet anchored with deep-running roots into the earthy and the everyday, *This Is Happiness* is about stories as the very stuff of life: the ways they make the texture and matter of our world, and the ways they write and rewrite us.

The Equivalents: A Story of Art, Female Friendship, and Liberation in the 1960s, by Maggie Doherty. (Some non-fiction suggested by our own Roz.) The timely, never-before-told story of five brilliant, passionate women who, in the early 1960s, converged at the newly founded Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study and became friends as well as artistic collaborators, and who went on to shape the course of feminism in ways that are still felt today. In 1960, Harvard's sister college, Radcliffe, announced the founding of an Institute for Independent Study, a "messy experiment" in women's education that offered paid fellowships to those with a PhD or "the equivalent" in artistic achievement. Five of the women who received fellowships--poets Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, painter Barbara Swan, sculptor Mariana Pineda, and writer Tillie Olsen--quickly formed deep bonds with one another that would inspire and sustain their most ambitious work. They called themselves "the Equivalents." Drawing from notebooks, letters, recordings, journals, poetry, and prose, Maggie Doherty weaves a moving narrative of friendship and ambition, art and activism, love and heartbreak, and shows how the institute spoke to the condition of women on the cusp of liberation.

Heroes in my Head, by Judy Rebick. A courageous, moving, and powerful memoir ... *Heroes in My Head* is the incredible untold story of Judy Rebick's struggle with depression and Dissociative Identity Disorder. ... renowned feminist Judy Rebick tells the story of the eleven personalities she developed ... to help her cope with, and survive, childhood sexual abuse. ... Rebick chronicles her struggle with depression in the 1980s, when she became a high-profile spokesperson for the pro-choice movement during the fight to legalize abortion. It was in the 1990s, when she took on her biggest challenge as a public figure by becoming president of a major women's rights association, that her memories began to surface and became too persistent to ignore. Rebick reveals her moment of

discovery: meeting the eleven personalities; uncovering her repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse; and then communicating with each personality in therapy and on the page in a journal -- all of this while she is leading high-profile national struggles. *Heroes in My Head* is a fascinating, heartbreaking, but ultimately empowering story. With courage and honesty, Rebick lays bare the public and private battles that have shaped her life.

And for a stretch, some afro-futurism. **Lagoon**, by Nnedi Okorafor. Publishers Weekly: Alien invasion and mystical gods meet religious zealotry and political corruption in Okorafor's thrilling hybrid of SF, fantasy, and horror. On a January night in Lagos, Nigeria, three strangers cross paths on the beach just before a sonic boom reverberates throughout the city, heralding the

arrival of an alien species. Swept away by a tidal wave that delivers them to the aliens' underwater compound, Adaora, Agu, and Anthony discover they've been chosen to facilitate the assimilation of their peace-seeking otherworldly visitors. But when the task is met with violence and hysteria, the uneasy ambassadors realize that the threat to humankind's survival stems from humankind's own failings. Okorafor (*The Book of Phoenix*) deftly weaves together Nigerian culture and themes of enlightenment and salvation, and the action adroitly veers from blood-curdling horror to the edge of absurdity, lifting up a fast-paced and already fascinating narrative to dizzying heights. Every member of the robust cast of characters—even those who only briefly cross the page—imbues the story with an irresistible combination of pathos and humor. Okorafor's magical world stuns and satisfies.

The Power of One – November Book Discussion

Thirteen people joined our November 14th Zoom Book Club. It was great to have Lindsay with us again, this time Zooming in from her new home in Los Angeles. The response to *The Power of One* was varied; some people thoroughly enjoyed it and others chose not to read it. Here are some of the broad-stroke reactions:

- I stopped reading after the chicken got killed; I didn't like the child abuse.
- Too hard to follow; couldn't see it going anywhere so I stopped reading.
- Thoroughly enjoyed it! Liked the ending.
- Fascinating. Best book I've read in a long time. Enjoyed the educational parts in Africa. Terrific writer. Last chapter was stunning.
- Very appropriate with "Black lives matter." It made us aware of history.
- Didn't finish, got 2/3 through. Enjoyed the parts I read but got tired of the boxing matches.
- Liked the book; history was interesting. The torture was distressing to read. A lot of touching moments.
- Hard to read; everyone seemed to be so cruel. Upsetting when people were being so nasty.
- The writer did a great job of capturing the voice of Peekay as a child.

The thing people seemed to like best about this book were **Peekay's relationships**. He had a lot of people in his life who cared for him and mentored him. Here are some comments about Peekay's relationships and the lessons he learned from these important people:

- The connections put meat in the story, the relationship building.
- The main part of the book that touched me is Peekay as a young boy and his relationship with Granpa Chook. What touched me is the very deep human drive for connection and acceptance such that Peekay could find friendship with a chicken where he lacked it elsewhere in his life. I have always had a soft spot for children who feel alone.
- When things are bad, one can take solace in having a faithful rooster for a friend. Granpa Chook was good at catching cockroaches!
- Loved the relationship with Dum and Dee.
- Bonding from 0 to 5 years is very important; his power of one started with the nanny; she was his safe place; that helped him put up with bullying so he was able to cope.
- Hoppie was a mentor – "first with the head, then with the heart." "He managed to change my life. He had given me the power of one – one idea, one heart, one mind, one plan, one determination. ... He gave me a defense system, and with it he gave me hope." Hoppie encouraged Peekay to dream big.
- My favorite character was Doc. Loved the way he encouraged Peekay to think. Everything Doc said had a message.
- Harry Crown, the Jewish shopkeeper, gave Pisskop a new name, Peekay. His new name made a huge difference in how he viewed himself and how he interacted with others.

- The medicine man cured his bed-wetting.
- Big Hettie taught him about pride, courage and love. "Pride is holding your head up when everyone around you has theirs bowed. Courage is what makes you do it." "Plenty of time for hate, Peekay. Better still to concentrate on love, there is already too much hate in this land of ours. This country has been starved of love too long."
- Doc taught Peekay to love music and cacti, to pay attention to details, and not to hide being smart. Doc and Peekay's adventures in the hills were intimate and precious.
- I liked Peekay's relationship with Doc and all the lessons he learned.
- Dee and Dum were devoted to Peekay and to Doc.
- Rasputin (the Russian at the mine) sacrificed his life to save Peekay.

People made observations about some of the **shallow and negative stereotypes** portrayed in the book:

- I was totally turned off with Morrie. The first interaction was so unrealistic. He was a Jewish boy immigrant in the 50s in a Christian school; he wouldn't announce being a Jew.
- Morrie was portrayed as a Shylock, a negative stereotype. It made me question other stereotypes.
- At the beginning of the book, Peekay wasn't age appropriate; he was more powerful than a 5-year-old would have been.
- I was uncomfortable with the fairly shallow stereotypic portrayals of different groups (e.g., Jews, evangelical Christians, Catholics, blacks, whites).
- The stereotypes were difficult.

There was a comment about the **title of the book**:

- The title bothered me. So many people sacrificed themselves for Peekay and then he called it "the power of one."
- The movie was more satisfying. It re-interpreted the "power of one" to be black people joining as one.

There were differing responses to **the ending of the book**. Some people thought Peekay's actions were reasonable in the context; others thought the ending was disturbing.

- It was a strange, abrupt ending. After all the build-up focused on Peekay becoming the welterweight champion of the world, the book ended with his fight with the Judge. It was surprising that the Judge

reappeared right at the end. The intensity of Peekay's hatred toward the Judge was jarring and disturbing. It seemed like Peekay could put his hate to rest only after he had defeated the Judge. It didn't feel like victory. It seemed more like Hate had won and Peekay went over to the dark side.

- The ending was not satisfactory.
- I hated the ending; needed the ending to show he had the upper hand.
- Liked the ending when he took on his childhood tormentor.
- The last part of the book was a slog.
- Peekay wasn't fighting from anger; he was defending his life.
- Peekay stood up for his rights; he was defending himself or else the Judge would have pummeled him.
- He defended himself with the head but punished the Judge with his heart.
- Can we recover from childhood damage?
- Overly convenient plot devices (e.g., having the Judge show up at the end).
- I didn't think the ending was so bad.
- I thought Peekay had handled his childhood trauma but then he pummeled the Judge.

Those who had seen the **movie** (from the 90s) liked it.

We discussed **how different people respond to having been treated badly or tortured** – some can forgive and move on and some hold on to hate and bitterness.

- An example was given of a Holocaust survivor who, when asked if he can forgive, said, "No Nazi has come to my door to ask forgiveness." When asked if he hates, he said, "No. If I do, that means they have taken my soul."
- Doc said "Inside all people there is love. There is a savage and there is tenderness and compassion."
- Many people know that hate is not the answer. They are the true heroes.

The book has some **autobiographical elements**.

Peekay's life had some parallels to Bryce Courtenay:

- Raised by a single mother
- Sent to boarding school
- Learned to box for self-defense
- Was involved in schooling for blacks (Courtenay was not allowed back into South Africa because of this involvement).

The discussion about Peekay's relationships led to people thinking about **mentors in our own lives** and things we have learned from them. Here is a sample of some of the lessons we have learned from our mentors:

- Hope is the most important thing. When there is not hope, you need to invent it.
- Every job you do is a portrait of yourself.
- If you act without thinking, you have reason to regret.
- If a job is worth doing, it's worth doing well.
- If you turn to hate, they've won.
- My most fervent hope is that, when you die you meet a God you can talk to – because I have a lot of questions!
- What can you do? It is what it is. Make the best of what you have.
- You can do it!

Here are some **favorite tidbits** from the book:

- It was priceless when the chicken pooped in the Judge's mouth!
- Peekay didn't want to hurt people (despite being exposed to so many people who were kept in separate closets and hated each other).
- I loved Doc's *Concerto for the Southland*, with all the prisoners from different tribes joining together in song. It gave me goosebumps.
- I loved Peekay. He was magnetic and smart.

Where the Crawdads Sing

by Delia Owens



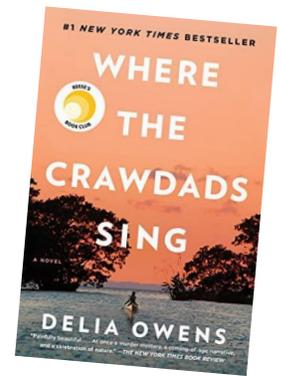
Our **December 12th** book is a novel by Delia Owens, ***Where the Crawdads Sing***. It's a popular book, getting 4.7/5 on Goodreads.

Like Bryce Courtenay, Delia Owens has lived in Africa. She has written three non-fiction books about her life as

a wildlife scientist in Africa. Although she currently lives in Idaho, she continues to support the people and wildlife of Zambia. *Where the Crawdad Sings* is her first novel.

Here is Goodreads' synopsis of *Where the Crawdad Sings*:

"For years, rumors of the "Marsh Girl" haunted Barkley Cove, a quiet fishing village. Kya Clark is barefoot and wild; unfit for polite society. So, in late 1969, when the popular Chase Andrews is found dead, locals immediately suspect her.



"But Kya is not what they say. A born naturalist with just one day of school, she takes life's lessons from the land, learning the real ways of the world from the dishonest signals of fireflies. But while she has the skills to live in solitude forever, the time comes when she yearns to be touched and loved. Drawn to two young men from town, who are each intrigued by her wild beauty, Kya opens herself to a new and startling world—until the unthinkable happens.

"In *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Owens juxtaposes an exquisite ode to the natural world against a profound coming of age story and haunting mystery. Thought-provoking, wise, and deeply moving, Owens's debut novel reminds us that we are forever shaped by the child within us, while also subject to the beautiful and violent secrets that nature keeps.

"The story asks how isolation influences the behavior of a young woman, who like all of us, has the genetic propensity to belong to a group. The clues to the mystery are brushed into the lush habitat and natural histories of its wild creatures."

Zoom Book Club

Our next meeting is on **Saturday, December 12th** from **10:00 am to 11:30 am**. Here is the link to connect to the meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83337881941?pwd=bThZHpXcW1zU2tjcHZBeXYzcUVvQT09>

If you click on this link, you should go directly to the meeting. If you are prompted to enter further information, you may need these:

Meeting ID: 833 3788 1941
Passcode: 017132

See you on Zoom on December 12th!