

# Parkdale Book Club

## October 2018

### High Mountains of Portugal

## Schedule

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

<b>Nov. 10</b>	<b><i>No Time Like the Present:</i></b>	
	<b><i>Finding Freedom, Love, and Joy Right Where You Are</i></b>	-- Ruth
Dec. 10	<b><i>The Housekeeper and the Professor</i></b>	-- Ida
Jan. 12 2019	<b><i>Mao's Last Dancer</i></b>	-- Beth, Sharon
Feb. 9	<b><i>A Fatal Grace</i></b>	-- Doreen
March 9	<b><i>The Mother of All Questions</i></b>	-- Beth
April 13	<b><i>Medicine Walk</i></b>	-- Ruth
May 11	<b><i>A Rhinestone Button</i></b>	-- Lindsay
June 8	<b><i>An Unnecessary Woman</i></b>	-- Lynn

## Coming up next month

On November 10 we will look at one of Ruth's nominations, ***No Time Like the Present: Finding Freedom, Love, and Joy Right Where You Are*** by Jack Kornfield. I'm glad to have an external reason to read one of Kornfield's books to completion as I have greatly benefited (and quoted) from the

beginnings of his other books. [From the library website](#): In this landmark work, internationally beloved teacher of meditation and mindfulness Jack Kornfield reveals that you can be happy now, this minute, with the keys to inner freedom. In his first major book in several years, the inspiring author of the

classic *A Path with Heart* invites us into a new awareness. Through his signature warmhearted, poignant, often funny stories, with their Aha moments and O. Henry-like outcomes, Jack shows how we get stuck and how we can free ourselves, wherever we are and whatever our circumstances. Renowned for his mindfulness practices and meditations, Jack provides these keys for opening gateways to immediate shifts in perspective and clarity of vision, allowing us to see how to change course, take action, or--when we shouldn't act--just relax and trust. Each chapter presents a path to a different kind of freedom--freedom from fear, freedom to start over, to love, to be yourself, and to be happy--and guides you into an active process

that engages your mind, heart, and spirit, awakens your spirit, and brings real joy, over and over again. Drawing from his own life as a son, brother, father, and partner, and on his forty years of face-to-face teaching of thousands of people across the country, Jack presents a stirring call to be here, in the power of the now, the present, as we work through life's passages. His keys to life will help us find hope, clarity, relief from past disappointments and guilt, and the courage to go forward.

## Future months

Remember to start early seeking out the January book, as it appears to be in short supply. We have at least 4 copies among us already, so we can share them about, as needed. The library has the blue-ray disc but not the book or dvd. Audible.com has the audiobook. Scribd has neither audiobook nor book.

## The High Mountains of Portugal



← **Tuizelo** - Vinhais - Bragança – Portugal, showing the high mountains

Eleven of us gathered to contribute to a very stimulating and educational discussion of this novel by Yann Martel. Sue did a wonderful job of facilitating. We missed Ruth, Beth, and Joan. Here are some of our musings about *The High Mountains of Portugal*.

- I did a book study of this in ON 2 years ago (5 tables of 8 women each, dinner first, and a 40-minute presentation on the book!)
- **Reactions to the book:** Several of us read the book twice
- some who read it once said they thought they ought to read it again.
- This is a book that I have fought with in the same way that I have struggled with the beginning of Thomas Hardy's novels. Feeling that way at the outset, I applied my Thomas Hardy strategy: Read the first 50 pages and abandon the book if it has not drawn you in by then. With Thomas Hardy, I am always hooked well before the 50th page but this book was different. I was in and out as I continued to read.
- I listened to the audio book and enjoyed it very much, notwithstanding it is a pretty strange story. As soon as the story was finished, I wanted to listen to it again because I'm sure there is much more to hear the second time around.
- I read it twice and liked it better the 2<sup>nd</sup> time.
- I wish I had taken notes.
- I'm fascinated to hear others' opinions about this. I came this morning to make sense of it.
- I enjoyed the book, the interconnections
- I liked the car part, liked imagining the change in the vehicle from pristine to battered
- I did not like it.
- I could identify with learning to drive; the first part was funny.
- I enjoyed his writing.
- In general, I was disappointed by the writing even though there were nuggets to glean along the way. Normally, the lyricism of an author's writing will keep me engaged even if the topic is not compelling. This was not the case here.
- I thought it was awful
- The colonialism, taking over and killing place, people, and animals, is oppressive. Mud flaps of elephant ears made me feel sick to my stomach. It's like a detailed description of actions taken in the Holocaust. Fortunately I could speed up the playback.
- I enjoyed the middle story: '...describe the life of Jesus, as a Murder Mystery', Maria muses
- The discussion of Agatha Christie as representing Christ in her murder mysteries was fascinating; almost redeemed the book after that terrible start.
- "The sad fact is that there are no natural deaths, despite what doctors say. Every death is felt by someone as a murder, as the unjust taking of a loved being."
- "I noticed how those who know the truth are always treated with suspicion and disdain. That was the case with Jesus, of course. But look at old Miss Marple. Always she knows, and everyone is surprised that she does. And the same with Hercule Poirot. How can that ridiculous little man know anything? But he does, he does. It is the triumph of the meek, in Agatha Christie as in the Gospels."
- This book took too much work
- In the second part of the book, Homeward, I was drawn in by the idea of an autopsy serving to inform how a life was lived rather than the cause of death (no matter how surreal the outcome of the autopsy). In my mind, it speaks to focusing on living well as opposed to preoccupying oneself with the fear of death. Then the detail that the author offered regarding the parallel between Agatha Christie's novels and the Gospel distanced me once again from the story. However, the idea that "the holy word is story and story is the holy word" invited me once more into the novel. For me, faith is about believing the narrative without requiring proof.

- The more we talked about it, the more complicated it got
- I liked it better after the discussion
- Would I have liked it better if I'd read it instead of listening to it?
- Like old satires, like *Erewhon* by Samuel Butler, *L'Etranger* by Camus, *Gulliver's Travels* by Swift
- I wondered often, what is the point of this? What is the point of a detailed description of the rotting of a dead body?
- I liked the magical realism
- Always glad to see a Canadian in the story - I had thoughts of Best Laid Plans
- **Symbols?** Rhinoceros = death?
- The second story was the weirdest. I was intrigued with the argument about the similarities between Agatha Christie mysteries and Bible stories. The autopsy got weirder and weirder and it got my attention when the pathologist pulled out a chimpanzee. Given the chimpanzee on the cross in the first story, I wondered if this was something about internalizing the message of Jesus. I also wondered about the symbolism of all the other artifacts he pulled out. It gave me pause to think about what thoughts, feelings, values, memories I hold inside of me. If there were symbols to represent them, what would they be?
- Significance of walking backwards - Tomás was objecting to God for taking away his loves - although it's unclear how this punishes anyone but Tomás. Perhaps "Because to suffer and do nothing is to be nothing, while to suffer and do something is to become someone."
- In 3<sup>rd</sup> story, some people walked backwards in the funeral processions
- I was intrigued (though I found it to be odd) by the metaphor of walking with one's back to life to cope with the intense blows that existence on this earth delivers us. I think that many people do this emotionally if not physically. I found the detail about the car that the author provided fastidious and tedious. Then I was drawn back in as I watched Tomas work through his grief by focusing on mastering a new skill (driving a standard). I have used this strategy effectively in difficult moments in my own life.
- In the 1<sup>st</sup> story, the caged females = chimpanzees, so the priest was prompted to put chimpanzee on the cross.
- The priest's equation of his suffering with that of the kidnapped natives/chimpanzees - but then he sees the suffering, and is transformed - and excommunicated. The hand in glove of religion and commerce.
- What was in the dead man's body - his recollections - why were coins the first thing?
- How much of the symbolism was planned?
- The grieving character is personified in the car
- Every body tells a story
- The autopsy on the man was just a dream, wasn't it? - to find out how he lived
- Peter's constant tinge of apprehension about Oto → our tinge of apprehension about the shadow/ape aspect of ourselves - what might it do that we can't control because it is so strong?
- In the first story, The Car seemed to be as important a character as Tomas on the quest to find the crucifix. I was thinking Martel went on about the car a bit too much but then I thought there was a reason for that. How we get to where we're going seems to make a difference. In this case, maybe the journey was more important than the destination because when he found the crucifix, it seemed it was a disappointment to him.

- **Grief:** I would not have called it a book about grief
- Great love, great loss
- “We loved our son like the sea loves an island, always surrounding him with our arms, always touching him and crashing upon his shore with our care and concern. When he was gone, the sea had only itself to contemplate.”
- Three men who had lost the loves of their lives, each dealing with loss differently
- “In the course of one week - Gaspar died on Monday, Dora on Thursday, his father on Sunday - his heart became undone like a bursting cocoon. Emerging from it came no butterfly but a grey moth that settled on the wall of his soul and stirred no farther.”
- Move forward, or not - Tomás never did
- Tomás’ grief made him unable to think clearly, to make good decisions
- Tomas wanted the crucifix to subvert Christianity, furthering his objecting to God
- The book study focused on the crucifixion - another great love, great loss
- Pathologist - how can you grieve loss when having to detach from the body in order to do one’s work?
- I thought the book was about blocking grief
- Grief - letting go of taking care of house - house reflects the grief
- The intense loneliness of the men
- “Loneliness comes up to him like a sniffing dog. It circles him insistently. He waves it away, but it refuses to leave him alone.”
- Grief can do awful things
- Canadian denial of death & grieving
- “Grief is a disease. We were riddled with its pockmarks, tormented by its fevers, broken by its blows. It ate at us like maggots, attacked us like lice- we scratched ourselves to the edge of madness. In the process we became as withered as crickets, as tired as old dogs.”
- **Animals:** How close humankind is to all living creatures
- Why is there a bear in the pathologist story? They called son little bear
- I was fascinated with the recurrence of the chimpanzee in all three stories and I liked the other threads that wove the three stories together.
- “Without your sheep, you would have no livelihood, you would die. This dependency creates a sort of equality, doesn’t it? Not individually, but collectively. As a group, you and your sheep are at opposite sides of a seesaw, and somewhere in between there is a fulcrum. You must maintain the balance. In that sense, we are no better than they.”
- I thought it was about adaptability - Peter and the villagers get used to Odo
- - The third story was my favorite. I loved Peter’s relationship with Odo. In rescuing Odo from the research facility, Peter ended up rescuing himself. One of my favorite lines was something like, “He experienced the grace of the ape.” There was something very beautiful for Peter in being accepted just as he was/is. Perhaps that was the message of the recurring chimpanzee -- whether it is on a cross, within us or being held by it, the power of love can transform. Although I wanted Peter and Odo to live happily ever after together in Portugal, there is comfort that Peter died at peace, cradled by love.
- Look what we did to Odo - look what people did to each other over history
- Peter travelled at the ape’s pace
- Only the children looked at Odo in the trees
- The lice connection - how they were dealt with in first story vs 3rd story, and see quotation above

- There really were rhinoceros in Portugal: A team made up of members of the University of Oviedo (UO) and the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM) have gathered together all findings of the woolly mammoth, the woolly rhinoceros and the reindeer in the Iberian Peninsula to show that, although in small numbers, these big mammals -- prehistoric indicators of cold climates -- already lived in this territory some 150,000 years ago. ScienceDaily, 9 September 2010.
- I am still reading the second section so have no further comments but look forward to reading the results of your discussion which I regretfully missed last Saturday.
- Martel lived in Spain
- Obviously a scholar of grief
- In a recent interview author Yann Martell notes that there are no high mountains in Portugal, but that the names of places do not necessarily describe them, but rather tell their story. (this is from a review by Malcolm on Goodreads site)
- saudade = a deep emotional state of melancholic longing for a person or thing that is absent
- "While Odo has mastered the simple human trick of making porridge, Peter has learned the difficult animal skill of doing nothing. He's learned to unshackle himself from the race of time and contemplate time itself. As far as he can tell, that's what Odo spends most of his time doing: being in time, like one sits by a river, watching the water go by. It's a lesson hard learned, just to sit there and be."
- The theme in the 3rd story, of being in time, is a good lead in to next month's book, *No Time Like the Present*

## Nomination for next year

*Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse? Lee? Just think, this book is almost 100 years old.

## Other reading

*(Send me yours...)*

***Margaret the First***, by Danielle Dutton: What an interesting novel! Often poetic, with carefully placed elisions. The presentation of a time when people (i.e., men) were trying to figure out how the world works was dramatic, and such a contrast to the present when we (assume we) know quite a lot of physics and chemistry and medicine... Margaret speculates on fine webs in the air being what holds us down from floating off into space. The medical treatments described were unnerving: "excrement of a virile ram rubbed across my belly" to address Margaret's infertility; for William's virility, tonic of backbones of vipers, and anointing his toes in Spanish oil each night. Margaret presented such contrasts: quiet thoughtfulness and questioning while the 'learned men' spoke; amazing courage in publicizing her views and responses to their assertions, self-publishing, and sending copies of her books to royalty and leaders in the intellectual world; and vain seeking of fame. The greatest appeal for me was her drive to write and to figure things out for herself, with William's consistent support even while Margaret was becoming known as Mad Madge.