

Parkdale Book Club

September 2018

Schedule

Date (10 am on 2nd Saturday - usually!)

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

Hillbilly Elegy, according to Parkdale Book Club

This summary, and most of the newsletter, brought to you courtesy of Lindsay
- thank you very much.

- Reading this, I felt defensive of poor people.
- I had trouble getting into it, but when I did I couldn't put it down.
- I found it fascinating, engaging.
- Eye opener - gave me pause to consider the accident of birth.

- Memoir had a more “telling” style than a “showing” style - took me a while to get into it.
- Author was in his early 30s when he wrote this, shows in his writing.
- I didn’t like it - there wasn’t enough depth, and it made me sad.
- The author’s attitude of Yale Law = success bothered me a bit. He didn’t make it by himself; he had lots of funding and other help along the way.
- Culture of learned helplessness is separate from economic circumstances, and poses a problem not easily solved by ‘throwing money at it’.
- My mom raised me to believe that education was the road out of poverty. Literacy makes a difference in family culture, as does the way money is managed when education is valued.
- Our childhood experiences don’t have to prevent us from becoming successful adults. Big questions: should I blame my mother, given her experiences? Where does my personal responsibility take over?
- Author recognized that “the traits that ensured my survival as a child inhibit my success as an adult”.
- Foster system is too rigid, doesn’t place a high enough priority on keeping extended families together.
- Trump claims to champion poor whites, but his administration (and the southern US in general) is hostile to Planned Parenthood initiatives that could support women in being more economically stable and emotionally prepared mothers.
- Regional economic displacement should be a point of social policy intervention. Displacement can create a void when people lose the support networks of their extended families/communities and their environment of cultural richness. This may have factored into why JD’s grandparents didn’t succeed when they moved to Ohio for work.
- ‘Upward mobility’ means moving away - it’s a drain on the communities left behind, it creates tensions and class divisions between family members.
- Intergenerational trauma aspects of this book have parallels with issues faced by Canadian indigenous communities.
- The ‘Scotts-Irish hypothesis’ bothered me. The blogger who originally put that forward is a controversial figure associated with white supremacy. We don’t see that dynamic with Scotts-Irish communities in Canada. There was English and German immigration to Appalachia too.
- Author didn’t address racism in the context of rural white culture to the extent that he could have, though he does mention the Obama presidency contributing to an internal sense of hillbillies being inferior.
- Comparisons between hillbillies and black people were interesting in context of recent social focus on the concept of white privilege.
- In Ted Talks, JD Vance mentions that Affirmative Action is a particularly contentious issue among poor whites. In the book, he also mentions his surprise to discover that so much social assistance is available to people like him, and that it was actually cheaper to go to Yale than his community college.
- Harvard Law was recently sued for showing discrimination against Asian-Americans through its race-based admissions policies. Interesting opinion piece:
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2018/07/17/let-not-kid-ourselves-harvard-lawsuit-about-affirmative-action-not-asian-americans/mZ0tQiuNnKAt7VnOsWSAvL/story.html>

- Should the goal of Affirmative Action be to balance the racial profile at all levels of society, or to focus on providing opportunities to members of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups?
- It makes a big difference to have organizations that help high school students navigate college application paperwork and to help students become aware of the funding opportunities available to them.
- Online book reviews have accused this book as being 'calculated to support the agenda of Donald Trump'.
<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/rebel-yale-reading-feeling-hillbilly-elegy/> Author was considering going into politics, but decided not to.
- It's an important book because the author has an insider perspective on a group of marginalized people.
- Hillary lost the election when she made the 'Basket of Deplorables' comment. Books like this (and possibly the 'wake-up call' of the Trump election) are necessary to challenge Liberals to get their heads out of their butts and re-engage with empathy. It's not acceptable to write off entire segments of society as 'trash' that is unworthy of consideration.
- I think the author wrote this book out of a personal need.
- This book makes me thankful that I had a wonderful mother.
- (And I'll echo that, as I turn Lindsay's wonderful notes into newsletter format.)

Related:

White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America, by Nancy Isenberg

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/27209433-white-trash?ac=1&from_search=true

In her groundbreaking history of the class system in America, extending from colonial times to the present, Nancy Isenberg takes on our comforting myths about equality, uncovering the crucial legacy of the ever-present, always embarrassing—if occasionally entertaining—"poor white trash."

The wretched and landless poor have existed from the time of the earliest British colonial settlement. They were alternately known as "waste people," "offals," "rubbish," "lazy lubbers," and "crackers." By the 1850s, the downtrodden included so-called "clay eaters" and "sandhillers," known for prematurely aged children distinguished by their yellowish skin, ragged clothing, and listless minds.

Surveying political rhetoric and policy, popular literature and scientific theories over four hundred years, Isenberg upends assumptions about America's supposedly class-free society—where liberty and hard work were meant to ensure real social mobility. Poor whites were central to the rise of the Republican Party in the early nineteenth century, and the Civil War itself was fought over class issues nearly as much as it was fought over slavery.

*Reconstruction pitted "poor white trash" against newly freed slaves, which factored in the rise of eugenics—a widely popular movement embraced by Theodore Roosevelt that targeted poor whites for sterilization. These poor were at the heart of New Deal reforms and LBJ's Great Society; they haunt us in reality TV shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Duck Dynasty*. Marginalized as a class, "white trash" have always been at or near the center of major political debates over the character of the American identity.*

We acknowledge racial injustice as an ugly stain on our nation's history. With Isenberg's landmark book, we will have to face the truth about the enduring, malevolent nature of class as well.

Nomination for next year

A recommendation from Lee (?):

Educated, by Tara Westover

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/35133922-educated?from_search=true

Tara Westover was 17 the first time she set foot in a classroom. Born to survivalists in the mountains of Idaho, she prepared for the end of the world by stockpiling home-canned peaches and sleeping with her "head-for-the-hills bag". In the summer she stewed herbs for her mother, a midwife and healer, and in the winter she salvaged in her father's junkyard.

Her father forbade hospitals, so Tara never saw a doctor or nurse. Gashes and concussions, even burns from explosions, were all treated at home with herbalism. The family was so isolated from mainstream society that there was no one to ensure the children received an education and no one to intervene when one of Tara's older brothers became violent.

Then, lacking any formal education, Tara began to educate herself. She taught herself enough mathematics and grammar to be admitted to Brigham Young University, where she studied history, learning for the first time about important world events like the Holocaust and the civil rights movement. Her quest for knowledge transformed her, taking her over oceans and across continents, to Harvard and to Cambridge. Only then would she wonder if she'd traveled too far, if there was still a way home.

Educated is an account of the struggle for self-invention. It is a tale of fierce family loyalty and of the grief that comes with severing the closest of ties. With the acute insight that distinguishes all great writers, Westover has crafted a universal coming-of-age story that gets to the heart of what an education is and what it offers: the perspective to see one's life through new eyes and the will to change it.

Other reading

(Send me yours...)

***Bury Your Dead*, by Louise Penny:** Five stars, my reaction to all Louise Penny's Three Pines series.

***Jane, Unlimited*, by Kristin Cashore:** It was odd to me to see the negative and diminishing reviews of *Jane, Unlimited* on the library site. This book was not YA categorized at the library, but throughout I was reminded of YA books, partly because of the ages of the central characters. I was intrigued at the idea of an umbrella artist, and enjoyed the descriptions of Jane's works. For people who pitched the book at page 50, or even page 100, you missed the exploration of the multiverse, how the reality that develops as a result of Jane's choice is based on the events that transpired before the choice point. It was a complicated project, and in my opinion, Cashore managed it competently.

***Calling Invisible Women*, by Jeanne Ray:**

I think often about the invisibility of the middle-aged woman. Sometimes I enjoy the freedom of (metaphorical) invisibility, and sometimes I find it irritating and diminishing. So I was happy to find an author, a book, that explored the idea in a way that challenges also the sexism of the pharmaceutical industry. I think Ray does a good job of exploring serious issues in a gentle way.

***This Accident of Being Lost*, by Leanne**

Betasamosake Simpson: I checked this e-book out so I'd have some poetry for a trip. The poem I read first, to the oldest tree in the world, and the short story following it were so compelling that I turned to the beginning and read it through, flying over the Great Lakes,

Minnesota, North Dakota, Manitoba, Saskatchewan to Alberta. I appreciated the satire, the pointed truths that are laden with anger and grief. "They won't change and we won't change and no amount of talking fixes that. They want a beach. We want rice beds. You can't have both. They want to win. We need to win. They'll still be white people if they don't have the kind of beach they want. Our kids won't be Mississauga if they

can't ever do a single Mississauga thing." "This week alone I've already googled "games white people play at birthday parties" (and then learned to leave out the "white people" part because white people think of them as just birthday parties)." We need to be confronted with the reality of being occupiers, causing occupation anxiety. I'll look for other books by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson.