

Brown Bag Booktalk Recommendations

November 5th, 2020

Albom, Mitch *The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto* (Fiction Albom) -An author of spiritually engaged fiction and nonfiction, Albom is also a successful songwriter/lyricist. Here he blends the spiritual and the musical to tell the story of Frankie Presto, the greatest guitar player the world has ever heard. Fleeing Spain for America with a battered old guitar, he moves from the Forties to the Sixties, affecting everyone and transforming a few, for that old guitar has six magical blue strings, one for each life he manages to set right. – summary from *Library Journal*, recommended by EN, 2015

Archer, Jeffrey *Nothing Ventured* (Fiction Archer) - Archer has a real gift for family sagas, and here, with Warwick, he's launching what promises to be a series just as riveting as the Clifton Chronicles . . . Readers who know Warwick from the Chronicles will be interested to learn more about him (such as exactly how he acquired the nemesis who haunts his every move later in his career), but previous knowledge of the character is certainly not necessary to enjoy this first in what we hope will be a long series." — summary from *Booklist*, recommended by SCR, 2020

Aurelius, Marcus *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* (Non-Fiction 188 M3341m) -The *Meditations* remain, unendingly moving and inspiring, the communings with itself of a thoughtful and devout soul upon the greatest of human issues. They are not, and do not claim to be, a work of original philosophy, nor yet a systematic exposition of a tradition of thought. They speak for themselves. Only by the slenderest of chances have they come down to the modern world at all ... but the number of times they have been published ... and above all translated into a vast variety of tongues, would have filled their author with amazement." – summary from the Publisher's Introduction by D. A. Rees, recommended by EN, c.170-180

Berry, Steve *The Amber Room* (Fiction Berry) - Atlanta judge Rachel Cutler loves her job and her kids, but her life takes a dark turn when her father dies under strange circumstances, leaving behind clues to a secret about one of the greatest treasures ever made by man. Forged of the exquisite gem, the Amber Room inexplicably disappeared sometime during World War II. Determined to solve its mysteries, Rachel takes off for Germany with her ex-husband, Paul, close behind. Before long, they're in over their heads. Locked into a treacherous game with professional killers, Rachel and Paul find themselves on a collision course with the forces of greed, power, and history itself. – summary from the Publisher, recommended by SCR, 2007

Cummins, Jeanine *American Dirt* (Fiction Cummins) - In a book both timely and prodigiously readable, Cummins offers an unrelenting and terrifyingly you-are-there account of a Mexican mother and son fleeing to America after cartel violence takes their entire family. Lydia had been comfortably running a bookstore in Acapulco, but cartel violence is escalating, and the charming customer with whom she's become friendly turns out to be the jefe of the newest, cruelest cartel in town. When he's also the subject of her journalist husband's latest reveal-all profile, vengeance is swift, which puts Lydia and Luca on the run by bus and van, in migrant shelters, on top of a train,

and, finally, in the remote and blazing American Southwest. Cummins expertly balances the brutality of the cartel, its scary omniscience, and Lydia's ululating fear with Lydia's passionate commitment to Luca's survival and the numerous small, brave acts of kindness she encounters that speed this duo north. Here, it's the journey rather than the arrival on American dirt that counts, and readers will wonder whether they could ever have survived such a trek even as they realize that this could happen to them. – summary from *Library Journal*, recommended by EN, 2020

Daria, Alexis *You Had Me at Hola* (Fiction Daria) - RITA Award-winning Daria has created extremely smart and appealing characters, and the scenes of their shooting the show are delicious fun. Fans of Susan Elizabeth Philips will enjoy the humor and chemistry Daria whips up." – summary from *Booklist*, recommended by NCM, 2020

Ferling, John *Jefferson and Hamilton: The Rivalry That Forged a Nation* (Non-Fiction 973.099 F357j) - With moments of exciting clarity, Ferling's account of two of the most famous American revolutionaries offers gossip, intrigue, and a window into their heated and turbulent relationship . . . As personalities clash and egos are wounded, Ferling gives readers a chance to rediscover the birth of the United States through the characters who helped craft its most vital institutions. — summary from *Publishers Weekly*, recommended by KG, 2014

Fuentes, Agustín *The Creative Spark: How Imagination Made Humans Exceptional* (Non-Fiction 153.3 F954c) - Condensing a great deal of anthropological research, Fuentes shows how imaginative resourcefulness enabled a vulnerable species lacking fangs and claws to survive in a world of fierce predators... whether facing the current threat of armed conflict or pondering contemporary controversies surrounding gender and religion, Fuentes draws one imperative lesson from humankind's deep past: we survive as a species only so long as we continue to creatively innovate. – summary from *Booklist*, recommended by EN, 2017

Garber, Stephanie *Caraval* (Teen Fiction Garber) - *Caraval* delights the senses: beautiful and scary, described in luscious prose, this is a show readers will wish they could enter. A double love story, one sensual romance and the other sisterly loyalty, anchors the plot, but the real star here is *Caraval* and its secrets. Immersive and engaging . . . destined to capture imaginations." — summary from *Kirkus Reviews*, recommended by NCM, 2018

Grisham, John *A Time for Mercy* (Fiction Grisham) - Set five years after the events of Grisham's first novel, 1989's *A Time to Kill* (and a couple of years after its sequel, 2013's *Sycamore Row*), this new Jake Brigance novel finds the Mississippi lawyer roped into defending a 16-year-old boy charged with the murder of a police deputy. The reader knows from the beginning the circumstances surrounding the fatal incident: there is no doubt who did what to whom and why. And, yet, the book is impossible to put down because we're fascinated by how Jake will overcome the many obstacles in his path to discovering what we already know. It's really a very clever setup; the story's structure bears a slight resemblance to an episode of *Columbo*, in which the viewer knows more than the detective at the beginning of the episode. Grisham builds a complex, surprising, and, in places, emotionally devastating story around Jake and his teenage

client. *A Time for Mercy* isn't a whodunit. It's not even really a courtroom drama, although, of course, Grisham delivers some seriously intense courtroom scenes. Ultimately, it's a story about a community that values its secrets more than it values the truth, and Grisham tells it with great power and style. – summary from *Booklist*, recommended by SCR, 2020

Isaacson, Walter *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (Biography Non-Fiction [92 Franklin, Benjamin](#)) - Isaacson presents what he calls "a chronological narrative biography" of Benjamin Franklin. The result is an admirable work that takes its place among recently acclaimed biographies by H.W. Brands and Edmund Morgan as one with special appeal to a general audience. Isaacson considers the social activist and historical actor, focusing on Franklin as "a civic-minded man" who expressed the virtues and values of a rising middle class, America's new ruling class of ordinary citizens. He also highlights Franklin's personal relations with numerous individuals—including his common-law wife, Deborah Read—his famous moments and achievements, e.g., the kite-flying electricity experiment, and his evolving social thought on a range of issues, including slavery. Isaacson serves the needs of nonspecialists with three helpful sections: a "Chronology" of Franklin's life, a "Cast of Characters" of the most important men and women Franklin knew, and "Currency Conversions." – summary from *Library Journal*, recommended by KG, 2004

Kalotay, Daphne *Russian Winter* (Fiction [Kalotay](#)) - As she nears 80, former Russian prima ballerina Nina Revskaya—now pain-ridden and confined to a wheelchair in her Boston brownstone—puts her jewelry up for auction, little realizing that the provenance of one of the pieces will uncover long-hidden secrets. Kalotay's narrative moves effortlessly between mid-twentieth-century Russia and contemporary Boston. Kalotay has created appealing, well-rounded characters in well-researched settings, notably in capturing the fear, deprivation, and rampant suspicion of the Stalin era and its effect on artists. Although the book's heft and jacket illustration suggest a tome, this is a briskly paced, fresh, and engaging first novel dealing with the pain of loss and the power of love. – summary from *Booklist*, recommended by EN, 2010

Keillor, Garrison *Lake Wobegon Summer, 1956* (Fiction [Keillor](#)) - Keillor recounts the summer of 1956 with sensitivity, a swing in his step and an untouchable talent for comic timing. He does well to balance the religious fear of a small-town boy and the daring of someone who wants to break out. *Lake Wobegon Summer 1956* may, for those who know it, suffer in the absence of Keillor's distinctive voice and radio performance. But even so, it will have you tearing through the pages. – summary from *The New York Times*, recommended by KG, 2001

Kingsolver, Barbara *Animal Dreams* (Fiction [Kingsolver](#)) - *Animal Dreams* is a passionate and complex novel about love, forgiveness, and one woman's struggle to find her place in the world. At the end of her rope, Codi Noline returns to her Arizona home to face her ailing father, with whom she has a difficult, distant relationship. There she meets handsome Apache trainman Loyd Peregrina, who tells her, "If you want sweet dreams, you've got to live a sweet life." Filled with lyrical writing, Native American legends, a tender love story, and Codi's quest for identity, *Animal Dreams* is literary fiction at its very best. – summary from the publisher, recommended by EN, 2013

Lauren, Christina *Love and Other Words* (Fiction Lauren) - Young Macy Sorensen's life changes forever, first when her mom dies of cancer, and then again, a few years later, when she meets Elliot Petropoulos. Macy and Elliot find comfort in each other, hiding away reading in a closet of books, sharing their favorite words, growing up, and eventually falling deeply in love. But a chain of events unfolds on New Year's Eve of their senior year that changes everything. Both try to move on and forget. Macy throws herself into an intense medical residency program and gets engaged, while Elliot attempts a serious relationship and buries himself in writing a book. A chance encounter 11 years later brings them back together, and their lives seem to begin again in the instant they see each other. In their latest collaboration as Christina Lauren, Christina Hobbs and Lauren Billings craft a dynamic love story, alternating swiftly between Macy's present and her past. *Love and Other Words* brings to life a romance that stands the test of hardship and time and will restore anyone's faith in love. - summary from *Booklist*, recommended by NCM, 2018

McCullough, David *John Adams* (Biography Non-Fiction 92 Adams, John) - This life of Adams is an extraordinary portrait of an extraordinary man who has not received his due in America's early political history but whose life work significantly affected his country's future. McCullough is here following his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, *Truman*, and his subjects have much in common as leaders who struggled to establish their own presidential identities as they emerged from the shadows of their revered predecessors. The author paints a portrait of Adams, the patriot, in the fullest sense of the word. The reader is treated to engaging descriptions and accounts of Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin, among others, as well as the significant figures in the Adams family: Abigail, John's love and full partner, and son John Quincy. In tracing Adams's life from childhood through his many critical, heroic, and selfless acts during the Revolution, his vice presidency under Washington, and his own term as president, the full measure of Adams a man widely regarded in his time as the equal of Jefferson, Hamilton, and all of the other Founding Fathers is revealed. This excellent biography deserves a wide audience. - summary from *Library Journal*, recommended by KG, 2001

McCullough, David *1776* (Non-Fiction 973.3 M133s) - What a year it was, featuring the creation of a new nation, which barely survived it. George Washington, on whom the book concentrates, went from success to several blunders and back to success. The year began with the siege of Boston, where the British were bottled up. Then one of Washington's closest associates, Henry Know, came up with the scheme of trundling the cannons from Fort Ticonderoga in New York State to Boston, a grueling journey and an astonishing triumph. In a brilliant night maneuver, the Yankees slipped onto Dorchester Heights with the cannons, and at dawn, the British in Boston realized that they were under the gun. A truce was arranged, and the British then evacuated. Though Washington is central in this unusually short work, McCullough touches upon many other figures and events. - summary from *Library Journal*, recommended by KG, 2005

Medie, Peace Adzo *His Only Wife* (Fiction Medie) - Afi Tekple has her focus on mastering her skills as a seamstress in a small town in Ghana, where she is happy with a simple life. She lives with her widowed mother who one day proposes an arranged marriage to a wealthy man named Elikem Ganyo, who is too busy to attend their eventual wedding and sends his brother in as a stand-

in. The Ganyo family convinces Afi that the woman Elikem is currently dating has a wicked hold on him, and marriage to Afi will help bring him back around. After she moves to Accra to live in the flat provided by Elikem, Afi learns that the situation is more complicated than the family initially led on. In her debut novel, *Medie* writes with a precise rhythm that builds the reader's anticipation. Themes like deception, ambition, love, and values drench the pages with conflict that evolves into an emotional rollercoaster. Essentially, Afi's fight for love leads her down the path of boundary-setting and living life on her own terms. – summary from *Booklist*, recommended by SCR, 2020

Patchett, Ann *The Dutch House* (Fiction Patchett) - This latest from Patchett is a decadeslong family saga centered on a piece of real estate. Narrator Danny recalls his troubled childhood in the stately Philadelphia-area mansion purchased by his father, who was striving for a level of elegance and comfort that Danny's ascetic mother, an aspiring nun before marriage, could never accept. Largely raised by his saintly sister, Maeve, and a small household staff after his mother runs off to India in the footsteps of Mother Teresa, Danny forms an unbreakable bond with Maeve and a shared obsession with the Dutch House, from which he and Maeve are banned by Andrea, their egotistical stepmother, after their father's early death. The siblings structure their lives around the tragic loss of their home, sublimating their feelings of parental neglect into an all-encompassing loathing of Andrea. – summary from *Library Journal*, recommended by EN, 2019

Russo, Richard *Elsewhere* (Biography Non-Fiction 92 Russo, Richard) - This memoir focuses on Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Russo's (Empire Falls) life as the only child of an emotionally ill mother. Single after a brief marriage to his father, Jean worked at General Electric in Schenectady, NY, not far from the Gloversville flat she rented in her parents' house, despite her pride in being independent. Prone to emotional outbursts followed by calm periods, Russo's mother thought happiness would be available if she could just be elsewhere. Finally, she quit her job to move to Arizona with Russo when he goes there to college; it was then that Russo acknowledged her illness. Even after he married, had children, and had established a career, his mother's demands continued to shape the family dynamics. Verdict: Without sentimentality, Russo succeeds in writing a poignant and humorous account of coping with his beautiful, charming, yet destructive mother. – summary from *Library Journal*, recommended by KG, 2012

Schultz, Connie *The Daughters of Erietown* (Fiction Schultz) - The comfortably sprawling first novel by Pulitzer Prize--winning journalist Schultz (*And His Lovely Wife*, 2007) follows a working-class family in a fictional town in northeastern Ohio. Moving around in time, the novel centers on ambitious Samantha McGinty, who in 1975 becomes the first member of her family to attend college, and her parents, Ellie and Brick, whose lives are stunted early. Unexpected, if not necessarily unwanted, pregnancies feature heavily in the narrative, which takes more than a few telegraphed, dramatic turns. Though Schultz's sympathies clearly lie with the women of the family, who are held back from achieving their goals and fulfilling their promise by societal expectations, her warmth and compassion also extend to the men, whose bad behavior is usually explained by a cycle of abuse. She anchors the domestic story in the wider one of a fully realized community in which religion plays a significant role. At its best, the novel has an old-fashioned

charm and a keen eye for the details of Midwestern life in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. – summary from *Booklist*, recommended by KG, 2020

Tedrowe, Emily Gray *The Talented Miss Farwell* (Fiction Tedrowe) - Becky Farwell learned early on how to uncover the hidden profit, discover the sweet loophole, and look for little savings that could result in big gains for her father's failing business. So it is no surprise to her rural hometown of Pierson, Illinois, when Becky lands a job at town hall, doing for the city what she did for her father. But somewhere along the way, Becky is bitten by the art bug, developing an eye for talent and a taste for acquisition that quickly turns into a full-blown jones. With an art mecca like Chicago just a couple of hours away, Becky, or Reba, as she comes to be known, is soon buying and selling among the elite, ultimately triumphing in New York City. But how does she compete in the high-stakes art world on a small-town comptroller's salary? She doesn't, but as the keeper of Pierson's books, she knows all the ways of robbing Peter to pay Paul. Both light-hearted and deeply conflicted, Tedrowe's (*Blue Stars*, 2015) caper, with its Becky Sharp allusions, raises significant moral issues. – summary from *Booklist*, recommended by SCR, 2020

Tevis, Walter *The Queen's Gambit* (Fiction Tevis) - Engaging and fast-paced, this gripping coming-of-age novel of chess, feminism, and addiction speeds to a conclusion as elegant and satisfying as a mate in four. Now an acclaimed Netflix series. Eight-year-old orphan Beth Harmon is quiet, sullen, and by all appearances unremarkable. That is, until she plays her first game of chess. Her senses grow sharper, her thinking clearer, and for the first time in her life she feels herself fully in control. By the age of sixteen, she's competing for the U.S. Open championship. But as Beth hones her skills on the professional circuit, the stakes get higher, her isolation grows more frightening, and the thought of escape becomes all the more tempting. - summary from our online catalog, recommended by SCR, 2020