

BROWN BAG BOOKTALK RECOMMENDATIONS

NOVEMBER 4TH, 2021

Abé, Shona *The Second Mrs. Astor: A Novel of the Titanic* <2021> {historical fiction} (Fiction Abé) - The subtitle pretty much tells you what to expect in this historical novel. The love story of John Jacob (Jack) Astor and his second wife is fascinating. Astor was considered the richest man in the world in 1912. Although he was 29 years older than Madeleine Talmage Force, it seems to have been a real love match. The story is told by Madeleine who is writing to her newborn son. The honeymoon, and especially the trip to Egypt, was a time when the famous, rich couple finally escaped a bit from the constant press harassment. Unfortunately, of course, they are finishing their honeymoon on the Titanic and Madeleine survived while Jack did not. - recommended by JAC

Abataleb, Yasmeen and Paletta, Damian *Nightmare Scenario: Inside the Trump Administration's Response to the Pandemic That Changed History* <2021> (Nonfiction 320.973 A167n) - "Based on exhaustive reporting and hundreds of hours of interviews from inside the disaster zone at all levels of authority, *Nightmare Scenario* is a riveting account of how the United States government failed its people as never before, a tragedy whose devastating aftershocks will linger and be felt by generations to come." - summary from Amazon, recommended by SCR

Albert, Susan Wittig *Hemlock: A Novel in the China Bayles Mystery Series* <2021> {mystery} (Fiction Albert) - *Hemlock* is the most recent entry in the long-running mystery series about herbalist China Bayles. In this novel China Bayles travels to the North Carolina mountain to visit an old friend who is curator of a priceless collection of rare gardening books and herbals. The mystery is that the most valuable book, *A Curious Herbal* by Elizabeth Blackwell, is missing and China wants to help find it. As usual Albert includes useful information about herbs. In this book we are also treated to a historical novel inside the pages of the contemporary one. A library intern has created a factitious biography about the author of the 1730s herbal, Elizabeth Blackwell. So this is a great combination of two of my favorite genres: mystery and historical fiction. - recommended by JAC

Benson, E. F. *Queen Lucia* <1920> {historical humor} (<https://www.hoopladigital.com/title/11428239>) - "Emmeline Lucas (called "Lucia" by her husband) sees herself as the social queen of her little English village—and she spares no effort to retain her position. Even when she is exposed and embarrassed, she never admits defeat! Miss Elizabeth Mapp is as much a social climber and schemer as "Queen Lucia"...but younger and more terrifying! Touted by Edward Gorey as "wicked, funny masterpieces—and thoroughly addictive," E. F. Benson's delightfully amusing novels from the 1920s—originally published separately as *Queen Lucia* and *Miss Mapp*, but bundled together in this special Bas Bleu edition—are pointed social commentaries, full of frivolities to make the reader giggle and smile." - description from Basbleu <https://www.basbleu.com/UR3242.html> recommended by HV

Blake, Audrey *The Girl in His Shadow* <2021> {historical fiction} (Fiction Blake) - This is a story about medicine in mid-nineteenth century London. Nora Beady loses her entire family to a cholera epidemic. The doctor, Dr. Horace Croft, treating her family rescues the young girl and more or less adopts her. Over the years Nora makes herself indispensable to the eccentric doctor and develops an innate skill in drawing anatomical illustrations. When Dr. Croft hires a new assistant, Dr. Daniel Gibson, Nora is

afraid her secret medical skills will be found out and she may even be supplanted. At this time women practicing medicine faced dire consequences if they were found out, and Dr. Croft could also lose his medical license. Dr. Croft is fictitious but based on the real Dr. John Hunter. Nora is also fictitious but was inspired by several pioneering medical women of the time. Audrey Blake is the pseudonym of writing team Jaima Fixsen and Regina Sirois and this is Audrey's first novel. - recommended by JAC

Bova, Ben *Power Challenges* <2021> {science fiction} (Fiction Bova) - Ben Bova was an iconic name in science fiction. He won six Hugo Awards, received the Arthur C. Clarke Foundation award for Lifetime Achievement, won a John W. Campbell Award and was also given the Robert A. Heinlein Award for "his outstanding body of work in the field of literature." He passed away on November 29, 2020 due to Covid-19 complications at the age of 89. These names are the science fiction writers whose work I enjoyed in the 1950 and 1960s. Although this is a brand-new novel, reading this makes me want to go back and reread some classic science fiction. In this story Jake Ross wants to colonize the solar system. He's in the perfect position to do make it happen as an ex-astronaut and the space advisor to the President of the United States. Return to the moon and set up a permanent moon-base which can then serve as the launching pad for Mars and beyond is Jake's goal. He is succeeding, but then political intrigue and conflicting priorities threaten the whole program. - recommended by JAC

Cohen, Jon *Harry's Trees* <2018> {fiction} (Fiction Cohen) - Who cannot appreciate Harry Crane, "hugger of trees" who naturally happens to be a Forest Service analyst? Unfortunately, the story starts with two deaths: Harry and his wife are hurrying to an important meeting in Philadelphia, walking along a busy street made chaotic by a building site. When Harry sees the sweepstakes office across the way he insists that she go ahead while he dashes in to buy his ticket. While he is there, a freak accident takes the life of his wife. At the same time, in a city near the Endless Mountains, Amanda Jeffers loses her husband to an unexpected health problem. These two grieving people meet by chance in the forest where Harry ends up renting a tree-house from Amanda whose young daughter Oriana is searching for answers to why she had to lose her father. These three work together to disperse the millions of dollars Harry won from the sweepstakes. Along the way, they meet Olive Perkins, the city librarian, who, like all good librarians, is full of good advice for everyone. This story will appeal to environmentalists, fantasists, and all who have experienced life's challenges. - recommended by EN

Hawkins, Paula *A Slow Fire Burning* <2021> {thriller} (Fiction Hawkins) - "When a young man is found gruesomely murdered in a London houseboat, it triggers questions about three women who knew him. Laura is the troubled one-night-stand last seen in the victim's home. Carla is his grief-stricken aunt, already mourning the recent death of yet another family member. And Miriam is the nosy neighbor clearly keeping secrets from the police. Three women with separate connections to the victim. Three women who are - for different reasons - simmering with resentment. When it comes to revenge, even good people might be capable of terrible deeds. How far might any one of them go to find peace? How long can secrets smolder before they explode into flame?" - summary from Amazon recommended by SCR

Henry, Emily *People We Meet on Vacation* <2021> {romance} (Fiction Henry) - "Poppy Wright met Alex Nilsen 12 years ago on the first day of college orientation, and they never got along-until a road trip from Chicago back to their neighboring Ohio towns, which sparked a deep friendship and a tradition of taking a yearly summer vacation together. But Poppy and Alex haven't spoken much since a

disastrous trip two summers ago, and the details of what triggered their falling out are teased maddeningly slowly. When Poppy realizes that what she wants most in the world is to have Alex back in her life, she arranges a shoestring-budget vacation to Palm Springs that she hopes will fix everything. Flashbacks to each past summer trip make for fun travelogues that highlight both characters' understandable but frustrating refusal to discuss their feelings. Watching them dance around the inevitable grows tiresome as things drag on, but Henry's skills with sensory detail and lovable characters shine through. This is a strong choice for readers looking for a vicarious summer vacation of their own." - review from *Publisher's Weekly* recommended by NCM

Horowitz, Anthony *A Line to Kill* <2021> {mystery} (Fiction Horowitz) - "When ex-detective inspector Daniel Hawthorne and his sidekick, author Anthony Horowitz, are invited to an exclusive literary festival on Alderney, an idyllic island off the south coast of England, they don't expect to find themselves in the middle of murder investigation. Arriving on Alderney, they soon meet the festival's other guests - an eccentric gathering that includes a best-selling children's author, a French poet, a TV chef turned cookbook author, a blind psychic, and a war historian - along with a group of ornery locals embroiled in an escalating feud over a disruptive power line. When a local grandee is found dead under mysterious circumstances, Hawthorne and Horowitz become embroiled in the case. The island is locked down, no one is allowed on or off, and it soon becomes horribly clear that a murderer lurks in their midst. But who?" - summary from Amazon recommended by SCR

Hourican, Emily *The Glorious Guinness Girls* <2021> {historical fiction} (Fiction Hourican) - If you are fascinated by stories about high society in the roaring twenties (a la Downton Abbey) you will find this an enjoyable book. Guinness was (and is) an Irish brewery. The Ernest Guinness was an extremely rich Anglo-Irishman whose three daughters were part of the Bright Young People of the time. Aileen was the eldest and was known for her poise. Middle daughter Maureen was a defiant young thing, always looking for the next thrill. Oonagh was the youngest and felt trapped by her needy Mother Cloé. The story is narrated by their fictitious cousin Felicity (known as Fliss). Her family, while related, was from a far less affluent side of society. Fliss can relate to the family, other member of "society" and the downstairs staff in her late in life memories of the twenties when the "troubles" dominated Irish thought and life. There is a useful cast of characters at the front of the book. - recommended by JAC

Kawaguchi, Toshikazu *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* <2020> {time travel fiction} (Fiction Kawaguchi) - This imaginative story takes place on a busy street in Tokyo, where there is a hundred-year-old coffee shop that offers an unusual experience to some patrons. If so desired, a person can go back in time to relive a past experience. The novel introduces four such persons: one wishes to revisit the jilting lover; one wishes to see a husband whose memory has begun to fade; another wishes to see a sister one last time; and the last wants to meet the daughter she never knew. But the journey into the past does not come without risks: customers must sit in a particular seat, cannot leave the cafe, and must return to the present time before the coffee gets cold. What happens when one customer is unable to follow the rules? - recommended by EN

Keefe, Patrick *Empire of Pain* <2021> {mystery} (Nonfiction 920 K261e) - "This is the saga of three generations of a single family and the mark they would leave on the world, a tale that moves from the bustling streets of early twentieth-century Brooklyn to the seaside palaces of Greenwich, Connecticut,

and Cap d'Antibes to the corridors of power in Washington, D.C. *Empire of Pain* chronicles the multiple investigations of the Sacklers and their company, and the scorched-earth legal tactics that the family has used to evade accountability. It is a portrait of the excesses of America's second Gilded Age, a study of impunity among the super elite and a relentless investigation of the naked greed and indifference to human suffering that built one of the world's great fortunes." summary from Amazon recommended by SCR

Kelly, Julia *The Last Garden in England* <2021> {historical fiction} (Fiction Kelly) - I love British gardens and historical fiction. This novel is a beautiful combination of both themes. It takes place over several time periods. In the present day, Emma Lovell is given her dream job - to restore the beautiful gardens of Highbury House in Warwickshire. The gardening detective work is fascinating as she strives to discover the secrets of the various "garden rooms." The gardens originated in 1907 when Venetia Smith is selected to design them. The gardens were to have a life-changing influence upon her. In between is a trio of women in 1944. The war has brought many changes. The mansion associated with the gardens has been changed into a convalescent hospital. Widowed owner Diana Symonds just wants to cling to her pre-war life. Her cook, Stella Adderton wants to escape Highbury House, and go to London to pursue a secretarial career. And finally, land girl and budding artist Beth Pedley desires nothing more than to call Highbury House her home. There is a mystery, romances and, ultimately, beautiful descriptions of the garden. If you liked Kate Morton's *The Lake House*, you will enjoy this novel. - recommended by JAC

Lauren, Christina *In a Holidaze* <2020> {romance} (Fiction Lauren) - "Pseudonymous writing duo Christina Hobbs and Lauren Billings (*The Honey-Don't List*) put a fantastical twist on holiday cheer in this hilarious and heartwarming rom-com. Mae Jones is 26, single, and unhappy with her boring accounting job, but excited for her annual Christmas trip to a cabin in Park City, Utah, with her friends and family. Her vacation is ruined, though, by the announcement of the eminent sale of the cabin, threatening years of tradition. Mae finishes the trip despondent-only to be hit by a car and wake up back at the beginning of the holiday getaway. This Groundhog Day-style time loop repeats until Mae can figure out how to save the season, hold onto the cabin, and finally act on her yearslong crush on Andrew Hollis, the son of family friends. The messy, slow-burn romance between Andrew and Mae is delectable, but just as engrossing are the subplots devoted to Mae's complex relationships with her vividly rendered friends and family, and her winding path toward self actualization as she realizes which traditions are worth holding onto. The result is a perfect Christmas treat." - *Publishers Weekly* review, recommended by NCM

O'Leary, Beth *The Road Trip* <2021> {romance} (Fiction O'Leary) - "A pair of exes travel from England to Scotland for a friend's wedding in O'Leary's delightful third contemporary romance (after *The Switch*). Sisters Addie and Deb Gilbert are heading north in a Mini that's seen better days when they're rear-ended by Addie's ex, Dylan Abbott, and his obnoxious friend, Marcus, who always did his worst to sabotage their relationship. Marcus's Mercedes is totaled, so the sisters feel obliged to squeeze the guys into the backseat with Rodney, a friend of the bride's who needed a lift. From there, the trip becomes an extended nightmare of hilarious breakdowns, rescues, and pit stops peppered with snide comments, hurt feelings, and rivalries old and new. The present narrative is interspersed with flashbacks to Addie and Dylan's relationship and devastating breakup. Over the course of their

misadventures, it becomes clear that these two still love each other-but have they matured enough to make it work?" - *Publishers Weekly* review, recommended by NCM

Onda, Riku *The Aosawa Murders* <2005> translation <2020> {mystery} (Fiction Onda) - The Aosawas live in a house with round windows near the Sea of Japan. They operate a popular hospital near their home. During a birthday party at their home, a delivery boy arrives with a carton of drinks for the celebration. Minutes later 17 people are dead from cyanide poisoning. Only the blind daughter, Hisako, survives. As the author suggests, "Fear is a spice that lends credibility. Just the right amount sprinkled in any story makes it plausible." This intriguing murder mystery will keep readers guessing and questioning until the last page. The main question concerns motive. Even though one reporter has written a book about the murders, after decades, the crime remains unsolved. Chapters are individually dedicated to the varying points of view of Saiga, a reporter and author of *The Forgotten Festival*; a young research assistant; the housekeeper's daughter who tells us a lot about Hisako Aosawa; the detective who adds the origami element; Sei-ichi, the brother; the tobacconist's grandson; and others. Each character adds a few more details. Deciphering the clues ("the other woman") and especially the symbols (crane, red flowers and white flowers) make this an entertaining read. - recommended by EN

Patrick, Bethanne *The Books That Changed My Life: Reflections by 100 Authors, Actors, Musicians, and Other Remarkable People* <2016> (Nonfiction 028.9 B724) - This is a fascinating read which contains short responses by the surveyed famous and not-so-famous. For example, Margaret Atwood was inspired by Grimm's *Fairy Tales*, not so surprising when one recalls the macabre tone of some of her works, e.g. *The Handmaid's Tale*. It was comforting to read that many of the responders were influenced by classics such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, 1984, Edgar Allen Poe, etc. For some, it was difficult to say that a book was life-changing, but easier to reflect that a book affected the reader in a way that was memorable and/or lasting. - recommended by EN

Sahota, Sunjeev *China Room* <2021> {historical fiction} (Fiction Sahota) - "Mehar, a young bride in rural 1929 Punjab, is trying to discover the identity of her new husband. Married to three brothers in a single ceremony, she and her now-sisters spend their days hard at work in the family's "china room", sequestered from contact with the men - except when their domineering mother-in-law, Mai, summons them to a darkened chamber at night. Curious and strong willed, Mehar tries to piece together what Mai doesn't want her to know. From beneath her veil, she studies the sounds of the men's voices, the calluses on their fingers as she serves them tea. Soon she glimpses something that seems to confirm which of the brothers is her husband, and a series of events is set in motion that will put more than one life at risk. As the early stirrings of the Indian independence movement rise around her, Mehar must weigh her own desires against the reality - and danger - of her situation. Spiraling around Mehar's story is that of a young man who arrives at his uncle's house in Punjab in the summer of 1999, hoping to shake an addiction that has held him in its grip for more than two years. As he rides out his withdrawal at his family's ancestral home - an abandoned farmstead, its china room mysteriously locked and barred - he begins to knit himself back together, gathering strength for the journey home. *China Room* is a deft exploration of how systems of power circumscribe individual lives and a deeply moving portrait of the unconquerable human capacity to resist them." - summary from Amazon recommended by SCR

Willett, Marcia *The Garden House* <2021> {romance} (Fiction Willett) - This is a charming, contemporary, adult romance taking place in the Devonshire countryside. Family and friends have gathered to say goodbye to Martin. He passed away suddenly and unexpectedly. Among those he left behind is daughter, El, who moves into his cottage "pigpen." She has just graduated from the university and hopes that her father's spirit will guide her in her future. She begins to assimilate into the community and takes a job at a local bookstore with dreams of possibly becoming an author. Another saying goodbye to Martin is Julia. Although she is a widow and Martin was divorced, they have kept their romance very secret, being afraid that it would be too upsetting to their young adult children. With the help of her stepbrother Will, El eventually meets Julia and they connect in the summer house at a nearby garden center. As always, Willett's descriptions of west country England are heartwarming.

- recommended by JAC