

BROWN BAG BOOKTALK RECOMMENDATIONS

MAY 5TH, 2022

Adam, Claire *Golden Child* <2019> {fiction} (Fiction Adam) - This moving and suspenseful novel takes place in Trinidad, a land of contrasts and challenges. The characters are guided by superstition and affected by evil and corruption. The story revolves around Clyde and Joy, a poor couple blessed with the birth of twins: Peter and Paul. Clyde is a factory worker and Joy does laundry and housekeeping to contribute to the household finances. Fortunately they both have extended families with a few uncles who generously assist them in times of difficulty. When the twins are about three months old they are taken to a nearby town for a "baptism" or naming rite. Paul cannot endure the physical elements of this ritual and screams so vehemently that he ends up with spasms and a fit. From that day it is clear that although they are twins, the two boys are very different. Peter is the "brain" and always does well in everything; Paul is the slow one who always needs help with reading and other school work. Paul sometimes has spells and blackouts. When the time comes for the boys to matriculate to secondary school, Peter, of course, has no trouble passing the necessary exams. Clyde seeks the help of Father Kavanaugh to get Paul admitted to the same school as the parents do not want the boys separated. Some bribery may have occurred. Tragedy enters when one of the boys is kidnapped. There is no chance of paying the ransom because the generous uncles and others have died at early ages. There are some gruesome scenes relating to the kidnapping foreshadowed by house invasions and theft. As the pathos and plot advance, the reader can only ask, "Which is the golden child?" - recommended by EN

Alderson, Kaia *Sisters in Arms: A Novel of the Daring Black Women Who Served During World War II* <2021> {historical fiction} (Fiction Alderson) - This is Alderson's debut novel based on the true story of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in World War II. The two young black women, whom the story follows, first meet in July 1942 at the New York City army recruitment center. Grace Steele is a musician who has just flubbed her Juilliard audition. She has also found it impossible to find a teaching job despite her impressive credentials. The recent death of her brother in World War II also weighs heavily on her emotions, and she is finding it impossible to face her mother's raw grief. Eliza Jones is from Harlem and has been raised in her family's newspaper business. She chafes at being restricted to reporting in the society pages. When she finally gets a real breaking news piece, she is outraged when her father signs his own name to the report and gives her no credit. The two women, who really have nothing in common, attend officer's training school and are assigned to the all-female black Six Triple Eight Postal Battalion. That battalion was the only all-black female group deployed overseas during World War II. Stationed initially in England, and then in France, the battalion's task is to deliver mail with incomplete addresses to soldiers serving overseas. The women don't always get along with each other and face unbelievable dangers from both their "friends" and enemies. - recommended by JAC

Alexander, Kianna *Carolina Built* <2022> {historical fiction} (Fiction Alexander) - This is an inspiring story based on the true life of Josephine Napoleon Leary. She was born into slavery but goes on to become a real-estate magnate in North Carolina. She was an ambitious young lady who remembered her earliest life in slavery and was determined to build a positive legacy for her family. Jo devoured Shakespeare and other books and was also inspired to pass along her love of learning to her two daughters. She met her husband, Archer "Sweety" Leary when they were training to become barbers. The couple set up their own very successful barbershop, which Jo buys outright a few years later.

While facing blatant racism, sexism, and the cultural expectations of married women in a small Southern town still adjusting to the new realities of life after the Civil War. It was not always easy to balance her career as a barber and to successfully raise a family, but Jo does all that and more. She teaches herself to be a businesswoman, to manage the family finances, and to make smart investments in the local real-estate market. For me this was an illuminating look at a prosperous middle-class black family in the difficult years following emancipation. - recommended by JAC

Bren, Paulina *The Barbizon: The Hotel That Set Women Free* <2021> (nonfiction [305.4097 B837b](#))
- This life story of a New York hotel offers an interesting bit of U.S. history reminiscent of David Oshinsky's *Bellevue*, Stephen Birmingham's *Life at the Dakota*, or even Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (which takes place at the Dakota). All of these famous "place names" develop a character and personality through their decades of existence as well as the roles they have played in the lives of so many people. The hotel was opened in 1927 as the only respectable residential accommodation for young women in the thriving metropolis of New York City. Its first famous resident was Molly Brown (yes, the unsinkable survivor of *The Titanic*). The hotel was located near the business district and not too far from Broadway, ideal for "working girls." Two entire floors of the hotel were occupied by the Gibbs Secretarial School and the Ford Modeling Agency. The Barbizon had strict rules regarding the behavior and dress of residents. No men were allowed beyond the foyer. It is said that Judy Garland called the hotel at least once a day to check that daughter Liza was in her room. Other famous residents included Sylvia Plath, Ali MacGraw, Grace Kelly, and Joan Didion. *Mademoiselle* magazine played a crucial role in the success of the hotel. For several decades the magazine held a journalistic competition for college juniors. The winners worked as guest editors for the month of June and were housed at the Barbizon. Plath and Didion got their start at *Mademoiselle* and went on to expand their careers. Over the years the Barbizon had its share of scandals and its notoriety waxed and waned. Subsequent owners renamed it *The Melrose*, *KLM Tulip*, and, most recently, *Barbizon/63*. This would be a good book for someone interested in reading about the history of New York City. - recommended by EN

Cander, Chris *The Weight of a Piano* <2019> {fiction} (Fiction [Cander](#)) - This is a novel about pianists, families and orphans. The story moves from the forests of Romania where a piano-builder, Blüthner, searches for the best trees to use for the creation of his pianos in Germany. The first part of the story is about Katya and Mikhail Zeldin, she is a pianist; he is a laborer. They flee Russia to avoid the revolution. Katya bemoans the fact that they are unable to take her beloved Blüthner, but Mikhail arranges for a relative to smuggle the piano out of the country and it is returned to her a decade later. In America, Katya is successful as a piano teacher, but Mikhail struggles to learn English and does not easily acculturate. They soon have a son Grigoriy (also called Grisha) who prefers to be called Greg. Katya's life changes drastically when her beloved piano is returned to her.

Fast-forward to another generation and a story that focuses on Bruce and Alice a happy couple living in California. Alice has inherited the Blüthner. One day, when their ten-year-old daughter, Clara, is walking home from school, she discovers their house has burned down and that her parents have perished. Only the piano miraculously was saved from the fire. Clara always fears that the fire was her fault, and although she has only the piano to remind her of her mother, she never learns to play it. Clara is then adopted by an uncle who runs an auto repair shop. She soon discovers that being a mechanic is her destiny. Several love stories keep the plot moving and shifting. At a low time in her life, Clara decides that the Blüthner is becoming a burden to her as every time she moves, she incurs

heavy expenses transporting the piano. When she tries to sell it on Craig's list, there is a surprising twist when a photographer, Greg, offers her twice the asking price. The story quickly moves to Death Valley where Greg begins a photo montage starring the Blüthner. There are many moving passages in this novel where the author describes Katya and her music. From Chopin to Liszt to Rachmaninoff and a half-dozen other composers and compositions in between, she lyrically describes how art, love and the human spirit are interconnected. The symbolism of the Blüthner piano becomes most memorable in the desert scenes. This is an unusual novel with a surprise ending-- the story ends but the melody lingers on. - recommended by EN

Cornwall, Lecia *The Woman at the Front* <2021> {historical fiction} (Fiction Cornwall) - This is the story of Eleanor Atherton who graduates from the medical school at the University of Edinburgh near the top of her class in 1917. She is determined to practice medicine even though her family just wants her to settle down and find a husband. She tries to enlist as a doctor on the front lines of the war in France. Even though women were "allowed" to be ambulance drivers or nurses at the front, they could not be doctors. The work was considered too dangerous and frightening even though there was a severe shortage of trained physicians. When the Countess of Kirkswell asks Eleanor to travel to France to safely bring home her injured son pilot Louis Chastaine, she jumps at the opportunity to live her dream of helping the war effort even in a minor way. She is inspired by her contact with the brave dedicated male doctors, surgeons, and stretcher-bearers. Against all orders she risks her life to give medical care to all the injured, not just Louis Chastain. *Publishers Weekly* said that "Cornwall's realistic depiction of the battlefield horrors is enhanced by her magnetic, multidimensional characters. This emotionally charged novel delivers to goods." - recommended by JAC

Kirkpatrick, Jane *The Healing of Natalie Curtis* <2021> {historical biographical fiction} (Fiction Kirkpatrick) - This is the true story of Natalie Curtis a young classically trained singer and pianist. She apparently suffered a nervous breakdown just before her biggest concert appearance with the New York Philharmonic. She was more or less house-bound at her parent's home for several years and continued to suffer from serious physical maladies and depression. Her brother George returned from working a cattle ranch in Arizona and in 1902 he convinces Natalie that she might recover her strength and sense of purpose by also travelling to the Southwest. She prepares to visit the Southwest and give it a try. Once there she is captivated by the songs, stories, dances, and art of the various Indian tribes she encounters. She is appalled to discover that all these cultural endeavors are outlawed by the governmental Code of Indian Offenses of 1883. We read how Natalie begins to collect the songs of the indigenous communities in both notation and recordings. She becomes a passionate ethnomusicologist devoted to the preservation of Indian culture. This culminates in a 575 page book she called *The Indians Book: Authentic Native American Legends, Lore and Music*. One of the keys to Natalie's great success was that she convinced President Theodore Roosevelt, a family friend, to write her success was an official letter giving her permission to record the songs. Before that precious letter Natalie had broken the law in making her recordings. The book was published to great critical acclaim. This biographical fiction novel is inspiring on many levels. Music first destroyed Natalie and later helped her recover both her health and sense of purpose. Even more importantly, Kirkpatrick does an excellent job of showing us how horrible the Indian Code of Offense was. - recommended by JAC

Larson, Edward J. *Franklin & Washington: The Founding Partnership* <2020> (Nonfiction 973.3 L3346f) - If readers did not get enough information about Benjamin Franklin from the recent Ken Burns PBS series or Walter Isaacson's comprehensive biography, they can add this shorter dual biography to their reading list. Larson does not suggest that these two pillars of American democracy worked hand-in-hand to establish a new nation or that they were in business together. Rather, he uses comparison and contrast to highlight the remarkable accomplishments of both in their personal lives and in their efforts to unify the original colonies to form a unified nation. Franklin and Washington were certainly not the best of friends, but over the course of 30 years they found themselves collaborating on the Declaration of Independence, the Continental Congress, the Constitutional Convention and other milestones of American history. They did not always agree or have the same opinions, but what is most obvious is that they put the country above their personal differences, what today is touted as non-partisan law-making. There is almost thirty years difference in their ages.

Franklin was born in 1706 in Boston as part of a large Quaker family. As a young man in dire need of employment he soon moved to Philadelphia where, even though he was self-taught, he achieved success as a printer, entrepreneur, writer, and scientist. In his later life he gained international fame as a diplomat and statesman. Washington, on the other hand, was born in 1732 of wealthy plantation owners in Virginia. At age 18 he fought in the French and Indian War and soon earned the rank of general. His leadership skills made him the obvious choice for the presidency. Although Washington inherited vast tracts of land, he did not concentrate on farming and businesses until he retired. Although Franklin supported the abolitionists with his printing press, neither he nor Washington did anything to free the slaves. It is clear from this biography that Franklin and Washington had a respect for each other, and they used that to forge "a more perfect union". - recommended by EN

Mustian, Kelly *The Girls in the Stilt House* <2021> {fiction} (Fiction Mustian) - This debut novel is set in the 1920s in the Natchez Trace, Mississippi. Ada promised herself that she would never return to her hard life in the swamp on the Trace. She runs away to Baton Rouge and briefly knows a different kind of life. But when her boyfriend deserts her, she has nowhere to go but home to her widowed, harsh and abusive redneck father. Matilda is the daughter of a black sharecropper and is from the other side of the trace. She just wants to escape to Ohio where she can make a better and more rewarding life for herself. The two teenage girls become unlikely partners and friends through a murder. We read of unrelenting cruelty and a stilt house becomes the girls' shared home. You will read of bootlegging, illegal hunting and unbelievable malice. But on the other hand, the bonds of the unlikely friendship and the resiliency of the human spirit combine to form an uplifting tale. Those who enjoyed *Where the Crawdads Sing* should give this novel a try. - recommended by JAC

Ferguson, Sarah, Duchess of York *Her Heart for a Compass* <2021> {historical romance fiction} (Fiction Sarah) - Sarah Ferguson, former wife of Prince Andrew Duke of York and sponsor of numerous children's charities, is also known as the author of numerous children's books, lifestyle books, self-help books, and has now written her first adult novel. This is a romantic novel loosely based on the life of her great-great-aunt Lady Margaret Montagu Douglas Scott. In 1865 Margaret is expected to announce her betrothal in an arranged marriage. Instead, she flees, and her parents more or less banish her from polite society. Margaret then throws herself into charitable work for underprivileged children. She spends some time in Ireland with aristocratic friends of her mother and begins working in orphanages and writing stories for children. When her father finally offers her an allowance so she can become more

independent, she moves on to New York City where she continues her charitable work. Margaret finds strength in her circle of like-minded female friends who want to break the molds of expectations at that time. Ultimately, she does return to Britain where she marries in 1875. The novel has been described as "a delicious costume drama rich in atmosphere, history and color." - recommended by JAC

Sen, Mayukh *Taste Makers: Seven Immigrant Women Who Revolutionized Food in America* <2022> (Non Fiction [641.5 S474t](#)) - Mayukh Sen is a James Beard Award-winning food writer. This biographical essay traces the stories of seven immigrant women who were among the first to write cookbooks, taught cooking and were amazing chefs. The subjects are: 1) Chao Yang Buwei who wrote *How to Cook and Eat in Chinese*, 2) blind chef Elena Zelayeta who wrote several Mexican cookbooks, 3) Madeleine Kamman a French chef, 4) Italian chef Marcella Hazen, 5) India's Julie Sahni, 6) Iranian author and chef Najmieh Batmanglij, and 7) Norma Shirley who was a Jamaican chef and restaurateur. There are several themes in these obviously well-researched portrayals. There is often a tension between presenting authentic dishes that still accommodate American appetites. Sen weaves food history, immigration and gender into his fascinating depictions of these seven food artists. - recommended by JAC

Shipman, Viola *The Secret of Snow* <2021> {fiction} (Fiction [Shipman](#)) - Viola Shipman is the pen name of Wade Rouse, who has written multiple bestsellers. He chose his grandma's name to represent this side of his literary output. The story is about Sonny Dunes, who is a Palm Springs, California meteorologist. Think all sunshine and 72°, and that is her typical forecast. Suddenly she learns that she is to be replaced by a virtual artificial intelligence meteorologist. Sonny, who is now fifty-years old, seals her fate when she throws an on-air tantrum when learning of the imminent firing. As a result, it turns out that the only job she can now get is in snowy and cold Michigan. Coincidentally the job is in her former, long-ago hometown. Sonny grudgingly takes the job, even though it means moving back home and living with her mother. To make matters worse, her boss is now a former journalism classmate. Sonny throws herself into covering every small-town winter event. She meets a handsome widower and begins to make peace with who she used to be. This is all about the power of friendship and the beauty of a Michigan winter. - recommended by JAC

Slocumb, Brendan *The Violin Conspiracy* <2022> {fiction} (Fiction [Slocumb](#)) - Two themes in this debut novel first piqued my interest. First, is the role of black musicians in classical music. Second, this is an art heist story featuring an irreplaceable Stradivarius violin. Ray McMillian is a Black virtuoso violinist preparing for the Tchaikovsky competition - which no American has never won. Ray had an almost impossible route to his current success. The only person in his family who believed in his talent was his beloved grandmother. She gave him an old beat-up violin last played by their ancestor who was given the instrument when he was freed from slavery. Ray's mother on the other hand wants him to drop out of school, and get a real job at the local cafeteria, and stop making that awful racket. Ray perseveres and ultimately the old violin is found to be a Stradivarius. Then, as he is feverishly preparing for the Tchaikovsky Competition, the violin is stolen from his hotel room. His family might be involved in the theft, or maybe it is the descendants of the slave owner who originally freed his ancestor. Or maybe it is another competitor. The police, FBI, and the insurance company adjustor all work tracking down the clues. The real message here is how perseverance can ultimately pay off and the bad guys are always caught. Even today racism is inherent in the world of classical music. Only 1.8% of all musicians

playing in symphony orchestra are black. The author is himself a black, classically trained violinist so the cut-throat world of classical music is realistically described. - recommended by JAC

Stories from Suffragette City edited by M. J. Rose and Fiona Davis <2020> {short stories fiction}
(Fiction Stories) - One of the great losses from the COVID pandemic is that we never got to really focus on the celebration of women finally getting the right to vote. This collection of twelve stories were penned to commemorate October 23, 1915, when there was a march of thousands supporting women's suffrage in New York City. The authors include Lisa Wingate, M. J. Rose, Steve Berry, Paula McLain, Katherine J. Chen, Christina Baker Kline, Jamie Ford, Dolen Perkins-Valdez, Megan Chance, Alyson Richman, Chris Bohjalian and Fiona Davis, with an introduction by Kristin Hannah. A wide variety of characters, both real and imagined are presented. They include a young artist, children selling apples, a housemaid, a Chinese suffragette, a seven-year-old with a Brownie camera, a female pastor with a long history in the movement, prominent socialites, and many others. The most poignant story to me was about Ida B. Wells, who was not allowed to march because she was Black. It is never too late to read about our history. - recommended by JAC