

BROWN BAG BOOKTALK RECOMMENDATIONS

MAY 4TH, 2023

Bascomb, Neal *The Escape Artists: A Band of Daredevil Pilots and the Greatest Prison Break of the Great War* <2018> {nonfiction} (Nonfiction 940.4724 B298e) - This is a breath-taking account of Allied pilots whose sworn duty it was to escape from German prisoner-of-war camps during the first world war. More than ten POW camps were located in central Germany at the time, with Holzminden known as having the harshest conditions. It was where a captive was sent after attempting escape from other prisons. Solitary confinement was a favorite punishment; starvation was rampant. Commandant Niemeyer was a ghoulish and nihilistic monster. Numerous attempts were made by prisoners to escape using disguises, forged documents, subterfuges, and tunnels. Many escapees were shot on sight or returned to months of torture in the prison. Even if some escaped, they still had to somehow walk the 150 miles to the border. This is a keen look at war-time hardships and the perseverance of military forces during the war. - recommended by EN

Brooks, Geraldine *Horse* <2022> {historical fiction} (Fiction Brooks) - *Horse* is Brook's fictionalized tale of Jarret Lewis and Lexington, possibly the greatest horse to run pre-civil war. Jarret's father, Harry Lewis, a freed slave, brought him to his father's place of employment after his mother died after his birth. Jarret and his father helped to rear and shape Lexington as a racehorse. Later, Harry Lewis was gifted the horse by his owner, Dr. Elisha Warfield. When that (illegal) gift is discovered by others, Warfield is forced to sell the thoroughbred to Ten Broeck. Jarret, who is still a slave, is sold with the horse. Their story is entwined with another tale set in the present day. Theo, graduate student in art history at Georgetown, acquires a dingy painting of a horse. He meets Jess, an Australian biologist. Together they explore the origins of both an untitled horse painting, as well as a skeleton stored in the Smithsonian Museum. - recommended by SCR

Byrne, M. V. *Meet Isabel Puddles* <2021> {cozy mystery fiction} (Fiction Byrne) - This is the first of three (so far) *Mitten State Mysteries*. These are true cozies with character development being slowly and captivatingly elaborated. The main character is Isabel Puddles, a widow of a certain age. She makes ends meet by selling her preserved pickles and berry pies, fixing the hair of corpses at the local funeral parlor, and working at the counter of her cousin's hardware store. All this while she is finishing up her college degree. When evening falls, she is fond of reading cozy mysteries with her dog Jackpot at her side. We also meet her lifelong best friend Frances and many other friends living in the small town of Gull Harbor, Michigan. The town is situated in the Northwest corner of Michigan on the shores of the great Lake Michigan. Of course, a murder occurs, and Isabel is determined to help the son of the victim prove his innocence. I love the setting and the characters (except for the murderer). The series is being compared to Garrison Keillor's stories of Lake Wobegon and, perhaps, *Murder She Wrote* and *Cabot Cove*. If you are looking for a fast-paced thriller, this is not it. But I love to drop into familiar lives and locations. In order to avoid the Cabot Cove syndrome, Byrne takes his detective to Mousehole, Cornwall, England in the third book. - recommended by JAC

Cameron, W. Bruce *Love, Clancy: Diary of a Good Dog* <2023> {fiction} (Fiction Cameron) - I love a good dog story, and Cameron is a master of that type of novel. If you have read, or seen the movies *A Dog's Purpose*, *A Dog's Way Home* or *A Dog's Journey*, this is the author. The dog in this case is Clancy

who keeps a diary. His human is JayB who is blessed by plenty of money and a bunch of relatives and friends who are dysfunctional, to say the least. JayB has started walking other people's dogs which certainly adds to an interesting life for our good dog Clancy. He even begins to bond with some of the other dogs. But Clancy will never do more than tolerate the cat in JayB's life. Kelsey the cat is Clancy's best enemy. But Clancy is a good dog and has plenty of wags. - recommended by JAC

Coben, Harlan *I Will Find You* <2023> {thriller fiction} (Fiction Coben) - Imagine you are in prison for life for killing your three-year-old son. You don't really care about prison, because you killed the child whom you should have protected. Furthermore, you can't remember killing him. Now imagine your son may still be alive. You were set up, but why and by whom. How can you get out of jail and find your son? Coben takes you through a harrowing escape as David seeks to find his son and discover the true story. Meanwhile, all forms of law enforcement are out to find David and return him to prison. You should enjoy this story of mystery, suspense and the final surprise ending. - recommended by CSC

Cooper, Anderson and Howe, Katherine *Vanderbilt: The Rise and Fall of an American Dynasty* <2021> {nonfiction} (Nonfiction 973.5 C77v) - Anderson Cooper seems to have a need to divest himself of the Vanderbilt heritage. This is one of many treatises he has produced about his millionaire precursors in which he is quick to point out that mighty fortunes do not always survive. The high-and-mighty can fall and that was the fate of his family. This is an extensive biography of Cornelius (famed shipping and railroad magnate) and the other Vanderbilts. Cornelius and Cornelius II triumphed as entrepreneurs and industrial giants, gaining wealth, glamour and glory. They epitomized American business along with such luminaries as J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller. Unfortunately, more recent generations failed to live up to the Vanderbilt name, squandering fortunes and failing miserably. As the great-great-great grandson of Cornelius, Anderson Cooper has a very personal interest in telling this family history. Perhaps most revealing are his childhood remembrances of The Breakers, the family estate in Newport, Rhode Island. This book is very different from his previous account, *The Rainbow Comes and Goes*, written with his mother, Gloria Vanderbilt. - recommended by EN

Dean, Michelle Sharp: *The Women Who Made an Art of Having an Opinion* <2018> {nonfiction} (Nonfiction 305.40944 D282s) - This is an introduction to ten well-known American women writers who were often considered to be too smart for their own good. They came from places as diverse as California and New York. Some were popular; others were not. Each had a certain following among the American public, and all influenced public opinion to a certain extent during their lifetime. Instead of allocating a chapter per subject, Dean introduces Dorothy Parker, for example, in the first chapter but then compares and contrasts her to others in a later chapter. Though these ladies had successful writing careers (many at a time when women were not necessarily welcome especially in journalism) they did not always have happy personal lives. This was due to family trauma, personal relationships, or social situations. Apart from Parker, the author considers the contributions to American social commentary by Susan Sontag, Joan Didion, Lilian Hellman, Hannah Arendt, Mary Macarthy, Pauline Kael, Sylvia Plath, Nora Ephron and Rebecca West. These women each made a mark on the publishing scene in America, from Hellman's novels, to Arendt's historical tracts, Kael's movie reviews, and Plath's poetry. - recommended by EN

Drury, Bob and Clavin, Tom *Blood and Treasure: Daniel Boone and the Fight for America's First Frontier* <2021> {nonfiction} (Biography Nonfiction 92 Boone, Daniel) - It has been a long time since I read about Daniel Boone during primary school history lessons. Now I tend to confuse him with Davey Crockett, another pioneer figure in America's past. It was time to refresh my memory, and this book did it. The title is apt as there are many bloody scenes between the settler farmers in Boone's family who experienced encounters with the Native Americans of Appalachia and beyond. As a 21st-century reader it took some time for me to adjust to the fact that when the authors referred to the northwest territory they meant northern Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan. In fact, most of the action of Boone's life took place in Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, and (for a short time) Florida. Apart from the Indian "wars", the settlers themselves did not always agree on land ownership and other issues so that the book turns out to be a study in aggression of numerous sorts. The treasure is the land because this is a story of acquisition based on individual might in most cases. Rich farmland and abundant forests were readily available, and those with ambition and strong backs seemed always in search of a new frontier. This is an exhilarating fast-paced look at a bit of American history. - recommended by EN

Gappah, Petina *Out of Darkness, Shining Light* <2019> {historical fiction} (Fiction Gappah) This is a tongue-in-cheek account of Dr. David Livingstone's last days in Africa. The story is a 285-day journey taken by the 150 pall bearers of Livingstone's corpse. They are on a journey to deliver his remains from the heart of Africa (Zambia) to the east African coast where he can board a ship to Scotland and finally rejoin his family after decades serving the sick and diseased in the Dark Continent. The journey is not a happy one. The two narrators are Halima, the sarcastic cook, and Jacob Wainwright an African would-be missionary; each offers a different perspective on the significance of not only the journey but on the life of Livingstone as well as the devastating legacy of slavery and colonialism. Gappah, the young award-winning Zimbabwean author, is quick to reveal the personality clashes between the trekkers. The story becomes one of survival, courage, and resilience. - recommended by EN

Hoffman, Alice *The Museum of Extraordinary Things* <2014> {historical fiction} (Fiction Hoffman) - This story takes place in New York City in the early 1900s. The museum is really a freak show which had such appealing wonders as the Wolfman, Butterfly Girl, a 100-year-old turtle, and a mermaid. It is a curious tale of evil, cruelty, greed, unhappy fates and grotesque realities. And yet, it is a love story. There are three strong characters: the self-proclaimed Professor Sardie, Coralie, and Eddie Cohen. Sardie created the museum by travelling around the world searching for oddities to display on his Coney Island attraction. Coralie is one of his finds. She has a slight deformity which he capitalizes on by billing her as The Mermaid. In fact, he trains her unmercifully to become a star swimmer and hence a star attraction. Eddie Cohen happens upon Coralie one winter night as she emerges from her Hudson River training. They seem to have an immediate connection but do not meet up until much later in the story. He is a recent immigrant from Russia and wants to become a photographer. Eddie gets a break when he happens to be in the vicinity of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, a real event which took place in 1911. It was the largest industrial fire in U.S. history and was ever more tragic as the women victims had been locked into their workstations. From that tragedy Eddie moves on to photographing all and sundry on the streets of New York, including Dreamland and Coney Island. As Coralie's life becomes more and more dominated by the possessive and sadistic Professor, Eddie becomes more successful. Finally, Coralie and Eddie meet and the story takes a swift turn. The plot moves along quickly dreamily. The reader is emerged in a swift and cloudy stream of events; all seems like fantasy, but reality is just around the bend. - recommended by EN

Kidder, Tracy *Rough Sleepers* <2023> {nonfiction} (Nonfiction [392.592 K466r](#)) - It was Dr. Jim O'Connell's intention to become an oncologist after graduating from Harvard Medical School. But that was before he was asked to delay his plans to take on a one-year assignment to set up a medical clinic for the homeless in Boston. Thirty some years later, Dr. O'Connell never returned to oncology from this temporary assignment. Over his lifetime, he learned from the nurses on the front line on how to develop his own relationships with the homeless and to set up a very successful traveling van/clinic to provide care for the largely marginalized population of Boston America. - recommended by SCR

Moyes, Jojo *Someone Else's Shoes* <2023> {fiction} (Fiction [Moyes](#)) - Nisha Cantor works hard to be the perfect trophy wife. Samantha Kemp is also a hard-working spouse. Unfortunately, her husband is currently unemployed and suffering from severe depression, leaving Sam to be the sole breadwinner in her home. On the one day that Sam decides she should practice self-care at a gym, she unwittingly picks up Nisha's gym bag. Pressured to get quickly back to work, she discovers the bag contains a pair of six-inch Christian Louboutin pumps and a Chanel jacket. Since Nisha's powerful husband decides to trade her in for a newer model, those two items are the only things of value Nisha still owns. Suddenly, the race is on to untangle the error and get both of their lives back on track. A nice story of the value of female friendships in times of stress. - recommended by SCR

Napolitano, Anne *Hello Beautiful* <2023> {fiction} (Fiction [Napolitano](#)) - William was not an only child for the first six days of his life. The death of his older sister changes his family's dynamic and casts a shadow over his childhood. His school years provide solace in basketball. Basketball leads him to Northwestern University and fellow student, Julia Padavano. Suddenly, the voids in his life are filled by Julia, her parents, and her three sisters. Sylvie, is bookishly romantic, Emmaline is gay, and Cecelia, is a young teen mom. But Julia's plans for William to obtain a professorship after graduation get derailed by his past life and the birth of their child. They divorce and William falls apart. After Julia leaves William and flees to NYC, the friendship between the remaining sisters and William goes on. The rest of the novel focuses upon the relationships between William and Sylvie, who find solace in each other. - recommended by SCR

O'Farrell, Maggie *The Marriage Portrait* <2022> {historical fiction} (Fiction [O'Farrell](#)) - In Florence, Italy in the 1550s, Lucrezia is the third daughter of the grand duke Cosimo de 'Medici. While still a child, she is unaware of her fated future. As a female she is used as a political pawn. When her older sister dies, she becomes next in line for a political marriage. She is destined to marry her sister's betrothed and more to his home in Ferrara. Because of her age, the wedding is postponed, but eventually she moves to Ferrara where she is not easily accepted. After befriending one of her husband's sisters, she becomes more comfortable in her palace and starts learning more about her role. An artist is commissioned to paint her portrait, one to be viewed for centuries. Lucrezia receives adoration from her husband and feels better about her future. The court is waiting for an heir to be born, and as hostilities in the court develop, Lucrezia sees both sides of her husband and begins to fear for her life. This book contains mystery, drama and romance, as well as a look at how little concern royalty has for others. This was an interesting read, but it is definitely fictional history. - recommended by CSC

Perry, Amani *South to America: A Journey Below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation* <2022> {nonfiction} (Nonfiction 917.5 P463s) - This well-researched study of the social, economic, and political history of the southern USA also contains personal revelations of the author. Although she draws a regional picture, she suggests that an understanding of The South by all Americans will help to complete the canvas of a true national identity. For a long time, southern states were characterized by slavery, cotton, *Gone with the Wind*, Disney World, and civil rights marches. Perry dispels those stereotypes by giving countless examples of this heartland's contributions to the country's wealth and politics. She compares and contrasts the cities of New Orleans, Atlanta and Miami and explains how even their dialects have unique significance to the American vernacular. The book examines Black life in America with countless personal accounts and experiences of the author and others, many heart-rending. This is a valuable read for anyone interested in social commentary and is certainly as thorough as Isabel Wilkerson's migration narrative, *The Warmth of Other Suns*. In some ways, however, the author seems to tackle too much: people, institutions, business, agriculture, education, geography, history, finance. - recommended by EN

Pleiter, Allie *On Skein of Death* (Riverbank Knitting Mystery series) <2021> {cozy mystery fiction} (Paperback Mystery Pleiter) - After a contentious divorce, Libby returns to her hometown of Collinstown, Maryland, to start a new life. Her dream is to open a yarn shop and encourage people to find their inner artist. Names Y.A.R.N. for "you're absolutely ready now." Libby encourages other to change the acronym to suit their own feelings. As she builds her clients, she finds a famous Norwegian knitting celebrity, Pearl Lonager, to do a workshop. She has her English bulldog Hank model one of Pearl's doggie sweater and interest peaks in the town. When, on the day of the workshop, Pearl is found strangled with a skein of red yarn, Libby knows she will have to solve this mystery to keep herself and her shop alive. This is a cozy mystery with very likable characters and a touch of romance. It is the first in a series of three so far. I think it well worth the read. - recommended by CSC

Sittenfeld, Curtis *Romantic Comedy* <2023> {fiction} (Fiction Sittenfeld) - Sally Milz is a sketch writer for an SNL-like show, *The Night Owls*. She is surrounded by the tons of people required to run such a big production. Her closest friends are officemate Danny Horst, a Pete Davidson character and several gal pals. Enter Noah Brewster, former teen idol, now musical guest and cohost; the two bond over the week long process of developing the skits. Sally and Noah seem to hit it off, but Sally's sharp sense of humor drives him off. When COVID hits, the two reconnect in this very sweet story. - recommended by SCR

Todd, Charles *The Cliff's Edge* (A Bess Crawford Mystery) <2021> {cozy mystery fiction} (Fiction Todd) - I have discussed several of Todd's books over the years in our various book groups. Todd is a pseudonym for the mother and son writing team of Caroline and Charles Todd. We read the first book in their *Ian Rutledge series* in one of our first meetings of our Cozy Mystery Book Group. *The Cliff's Edge* is a book in their other series called the *Bess Crawford Mysteries*. Both series take place during and after World War I in England. Bess Crawford was a battlefield nurse in that war. This is the thirteenth book in that series. Bess is helping to nurse a friend of her cousin in Yorkshire. Lady Beatrice is about to have her gallbladder removed and Bess is willing to be a nurse and companion for as long as necessary. Lady Beatrice is a very forceful elderly woman and Bess soon finds herself shipped

off to Scarfdale to help friends of Lady Beatrice. She agrees to help the Neville family solve a murder of one man and nurse another man with horrible injuries. Both men fell off a cliff together, and it is very unclear what really happened. Bess eventually figures out who was to blame and why. At the end of the story something seemingly unrelated leads Bess back to her own military family and her friend Sergeant-Major Simon Brandon. I'm looking forward to the next installment. Although Caroline passed away last August at the age of 86, her son will continue to write the books. - recommended by JAC