

2025 PL Book Club Book Reviews

The Light Between Oceans by Australian author, M.L. Stedman

This is a haunting story about love, loss, the effects of isolation and the consequences of the choices we make. Set in Australia in the 1920's, it is a beautifully written historical fiction novel that centers around what happens when a good man is persuaded into a bad decision by the wife he desperately wants to save from herself. Tom is a WWI veteran who maintains a lighthouse off the shore of Australia with his wife, Isabel, a woman desperate to have a baby. Her prayers are answered when an infant washes up on shore in a rowboat. Tom thinks they should notify the authorities, but eventually gives in to Isabel's wish to keep the baby girl. Fate strikes again, when years later, the couple inevitably meet the child's biological mother on the mainland. Now Tom and Isabel must make a decision that will forever affect the lives of four people. The naming of the lighthouse, Janus, for the two-faced god, was interesting in more ways than one.

The Little Liar by Mitch Albom

"This is a story of great truths and deceptions" narrated by Truth. The Jews in Greece were also targeted for extermination by the Germans. This is the story of Nico Kristis, a ten-year-old boy, known throughout Thessaloniki as someone who only spoke the truth. He is used by the German in charge of loading the trains to tell the families they are being relocated and all will be well; in return he can join his family. The people know he doesn't lie, so they obediently board the trains. When Nico sees his family loaded on the train without him, he realizes he's been lying to them all. It is the story of Nico, his brother Sebastian, the young girl Fanny, they both like, and the German officer Udo Graf. "Evil travels like dandelion seeds, blowing over borders, taking root in angry minds." This book should be included on HS class lists to teach about the holocaust.

Hamnet by Maggie O'Farrell

A lyrically imagined story of the courtship and marriage of William Shakespeare and his wife Agnes, their children, and the impact of the death of their eleven-year-old son, Hamnet. While William is making his fortune in London Agnes is keeping things together in a shared home with her in-laws. She is known as a healer, but when her twin children suffer through the plague, she is helpless to save her son Hamnet. Love and grief are felt powerfully through emotionally absorbing characters. We first see Hamnet through his love for his sister, his attempts to find someone to help heal her, and through incidents that invite us to like him. His death is unexpected and shattering. Agnes feels that William's distance apart keeps him from feeling the loss as deeply as she does, until she finds a flier advertising a new play by him, Hamlet.

The Irish Goodbye by Heather Aimee O'Neill

As the Ryan sisters gather for Thanksgiving at the home of their parents in Port Haven, Long Island, years of secrets, resentments, worries, and lies come to light. Casting a shadow on all is the memory of their beloved brother "Topher" and the reality of his tragic passing. This beautifully written, relatable story speaks to the power of family, faith and the power of forgiveness. This is a wonderful debut novel by this author.

When The World Fell Silent by Donna Jones Alward

This historic novel set in Halifax, Nova Scotia during WWI tells the story of the 1917 Halifax Explosion caused by two ships that collided in the Narrows. It follows the struggles of two women whose lives were affected by the event. One was a nurse in the Canadian Army Corp and the other a war widow. It is a story of heartbreak, hope and strength based on a real event.

American Predator by Maureen Callahan

This book is about serial killer Israel Keyes, who committed murders across the U.S. for years without being caught. He seemed like a normal, quiet guy, which makes it even scarier. Something that really stood out in this book about him, were his "kill kits". He buried buckets filled with weapons and supplies years in advance, then flew back later to use them. He chose victims at random, which made it almost impossible for police to see a pattern. The book focuses a lot on the kidnapping of Samantha Koenig in Alaska, and how that case finally led to his arrest. The story is disturbing, but it also shows how investigators slowly pieced everything together. This book is recommended especially for fans of true crime mysteries.

I Called Her Mary- A Memoir by Margaret M. O'Hagan and Thomas A. Gorman

This story begins in a conservative village in 1950's Ireland, where seventeen-year-old Margaret Holland discovers she is pregnant. She goes to the Sean Ross Abbey, a refuge for unwed mothers, where she gives birth to a daughter, whom she named Mary. Margaret makes the heart wrenching decision to release custody of her daughter, to be sent to a family in America for adoption. From Ireland to New York, and lastly to New Jersey, this is Margaret's story of not only heartbreak, but also the power of faith, hope, and a mother's love.

Wisdom of Our Fathers- Lessons and Letters from Daughters and Sons by Tim Russert

Following the publication of Tim Russert's number one NY Times bestseller about his father, **Big Russ and Me** in 2004, he received over 60,000 letters and e-mails from sons and daughters who wanted to share with him stories about their own fathers. These fathers were not super dads or heroes, but ordinary men who were remembered and cherished for some of their best moments of advice, strength, honor, discipline, softness, and occasional craziness. This book is both heartfelt and at times humorous, and may generate moments of reflection on one's own personal memories of their father.

The Frozen River by Ariel Lawhon

When the Kennebec River freezes over, entombing a man in the ice, midwife Martha Ballard is summoned to examine the body and determine cause of death. Over the course of winter, as the trial nears, and whispers and prejudices mount, Martha doggedly pursues the truth. Her diary soon lands at the center of a scandal. The Frozen River is a thrilling, tense, and tender story about a remarkable woman who left an amazing legacy. This story was inspired by the life of Martha Ballard, a renowned 18th century midwife who defied the legal system.

The Orchardist by Amanda Coplin

Set in the untamed American West, this highly original and haunting novel is about a makeshift family whose dramatic lives are shaped by violence, love, and a powerful connection to the land. Writing with precision and empathy, Amanda Coplin has crafted a novel about a farmer who disrupts the lonely harmony of his ordered life when he opens his heart to two endangered teenage girls who wandered onto his land, starving, pregnant and looking for food to steal. The Orchardist is intimate and atmospheric, and filled with haunting characters both vivid and true to life.

Isola by Allegra Goodman

A young woman and her lover are marooned on an island in this saga of love, faith and defiance. Heir to a fortune, Marguerite is destined for a life of prosperity and gentility. Then she is orphaned, and her villainous guardian spends her inheritance. When it is discovered that she has a lover (who is the servant of her guardian), they are abandoned on an island, along with her loyal servant. At the mercy of nature, with no food or shelter, this is an exciting, powerful story of survival and determination. This book was inspired by the real life of a sixteenth century French noble woman from the 1500's.

West With Giraffes by Lynda Rutledge

This extraordinary novel is classified as historical fiction but it is so much more. All readers will find something to love about this inspirational story: part romance, part coming-of-age, and part rousing adventure. Based on the real-life story of two giraffes headed for the San Diego Zoo in 1938 from New York City in the middle of a devastating hurricane, the story is a moving testament to the beauty of friendship, both human and animal.

The narrator, Woody Wilson Nickel, 105 years of age at the opening of the book, recalls talking his way onto the truck carrying the giraffes when he was 17, and traveling "ocean to ocean" while confronting the tragedies of his poverty-stricken childhood and learning about people, animals and himself. While life can be traumatic and challenging, Rutledge reminds us that friendship and love can provide the courage and resilience to persevere.

The book includes a helpful glossary of names, places and depression-era phrases to help readers understand this powerful story.

Funny in Farsi - A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America by Firoozah Dumas

This book is humorous, and talks about the differences in cultures between Iran and the United States. It covers both the pre-Iranian and post-Iranian Revolution. The author's father was an engineer who attended graduate school in America, and who eventually moved his family and his extended family to the United States. This is an unforgettable story of identity, discovery, and the power of family love.

The Nickel Boys by Colson Whitehead

We first meet Elwood Curtis in the prologue. He is presently living in New York, and is reading about the Nickel Academy, a reform school in Florida that is being demolished. The article tells how a secret graveyard has been found, and Elwood realizes he must return to the school and tell his story.

He tells the story of Elwood Curtis, an idealistic Black boy unjustly sent to this brutal reform school where he becomes friends with Turner, a cynical young man who knows how to survive in this corrupt system. There is much violence, sexual abuse and even death, where boy's bodies are buried on the Nickel Academy grounds.

This book is about racism, the loss of innocence, cruelty, torture, and hope that maybe there can be survival from the horrors. When they escape from Nickel Academy, one boy dies and the survivor assumes the identity of his dead friend. He then goes on to live the life stolen from his friend.

The ending is shocking as it reveals something about Turner and Elwood's identity, and what had happened in their lives after leaving the Nickel Academy.

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