

MVAH ZOOM BOOK CLUB

Book Reviews for November 2020

Our Book Club is unique in that we don't focus on one book, but allow members to share a current read or a favorite book they recommend. The next BookClub Meeting will be December 10th at 3pm on Zoom. Here is a summary of November's books.

1. Carol Mattaino – **TESTAMENT OF YOUTH** by Vera Brittain. Published 1933.



Vera in VAD uniform during the first world war.

Is an autobiography of Vera's life during the years of 1900-1925. "Testament of Youth" centers on the 20-something Vera, who puts aside her college studies at Oxford after one year when war breaks out. Working as a field nurse, she becomes the heart and soul of a tight-knit group of soldiers that includes her younger brother Edward (Taron Egerton); her fiancé Roland (Kit Harington); her not-so-secret admirer Victor (Colin Morgan); and, less prominently, Edward's friend – and, as some have speculated, possible lover – Geoffrey (Jonathan Bailey).

What this aspiring writer, who went on to become a notable pacifist, learns about love, sacrifice, heartbreak and the ravages of war could – and did – fill a book. Published in 1933, Testament of Youth became an instant hit. It was followed by two other memoirs: Testament of Friendship (1940) and Testament of Experience (1957). Was a movie on PBS.

2. Sarah Tatum – **BLUE MIND** by Wallace J. Nichols. Published 2014 - 320 pages

- a. 'Blue Mind,' on the benefits of being near water, by Wallace J. Nichols

Book review by Nicola Joyce, 2014, WASHINGTON POST. As I look up from the pages of this book, there's nothing between me and the horizon but water. The only sounds are the hypnotic hiss of stones as they are dragged back by waves and the occasional call of a gull. Fresh air gusts over the water's surface, picking up notes of saltwater and seaweed. My mind is perfectly at peace. And it's no surprise that I've headed to the beach to read "Blue Mind." The author, Wallace J. Nichols, would tell me that I sought out the nearest body of water because I instinctively knew it would settle my mind, sharpen my senses and put me in a more productive state. But what I didn't know — until I read the book — was why this happens.

"Blue Mind" is a fascinating study of the emotional, behavioral, psychological and physical connections that keep humans so enchanted with water. Nichols examines seas and oceans, lakes and rivers, even swimming pools and the contents of our bathtubs in a study that is both highly readable and rooted in real research. He is a marine biologist whose passion for our planet's water goes far beyond the classroom. He urges us to get closer to water, not only for our own sake but for the environment and a healthier future for us all. The blue mind of the book's title refers to the neurological, psychological and emotional changes our brains experience when we are close to water. Nichols draws on science and art, hard data and anecdote, and plenty of experience, to explain our blue mind in detail. Not just what it is, but how we can enter into this state and — perhaps most important — why we should do so.

b. The Madonna's of Leningrad by Debra Dean. Published 2006, pages 231. Historical fiction. Notable Book of the Year, Americana Library Association.

Review on Debra Dean's website. "An unforgettable story of love, survival, and the power of imagination in the most tragic circumstances. The rare kind of book that you want to keep but you have to share" —Isabelle Allende, best-selling author of *The House of the Spirits*

Bit by bit, the ravages of age are eroding Marina's grip on the everyday. And while the elderly Russian woman cannot hold on to fresh memories—the details of her grown children's lives, the approaching wedding of her grandchild—her distant past is preserved: vivid images that rise unbidden of her youth in war-torn Leningrad.

In the fall of 1941, the German army approached the outskirts of Leningrad, signaling the beginning of what would become a long and torturous siege. In the coming months, the city's inhabitants would brave starvation and the bitter cold, all while fending off the

constant German onslaught. Marina, then a tour guide at the Hermitage Museum, along with other staff members, was instructed to take down the museum's priceless masterpieces for safekeeping, yet leave the frames hanging empty on the walls—a symbol of the artworks' eventual return. To hold on to sanity when the Luftwaffe's bombs began to fall, she burned to memory, brush stroke by brush stroke, these exquisite artworks: the nude figures of women, the angels, the serene Madonnas that had so shortly before gazed down upon her. She used them to furnish a "memory palace," a personal Hermitage in her mind to which she retreated to escape terror, hunger, and encroaching death. A refuge that would stay buried deep within her, until she needed it once more. . . .

Seamlessly moving back and forth in time between the Soviet Union and contemporary America, *The Madonnas of Leningrad* is a searing portrait of war and remembrance, of the power of love, memory, and art to offer beauty, grace, and hope in the face of overwhelming despair. Gripping, touching, and heartbreaking.

3. Cher Terry – *THE SPENDID AND THE VILE* by Erik Larsen. Published 2020. 609 pages.

A Saga of Churchill, Family, and Defiance During the Blitz

By Erik Larson

In the winter of 1940, as Germany's brutal bombing campaign against Britain dragged on, Joseph Goebbels poured out his frustrations in his diary. "When will that creature Churchill finally surrender?" he complained. "England cannot hold out forever!" What the Nazis' minister of propaganda resented even more than the British prime minister's stubbornness, however, were his powers of persuasion. Every time Churchill took to the airwaves it was as if he were injecting adrenaline-soaked courage directly into the British people. Still worse, Goebbels knew that growing numbers of Germans had begun listening, too. Convinced that tuning in to Churchill's soaring speeches was not only a dangerous vice but also a traitorous act, he was determined to crush so-called "radio offenders" at any cost. "Every German," Goebbels proclaimed, "must be clear in his mind that listening in to these broadcasts represents an act of serious sabotage."

What Goebbels rightly feared — with a prescience drawn from his own use of public opinion as a weapon — was the threat that a far greater master of words and ideas would unite the West in a resolute defense against Nazi domination. In "*The Splendid and the Vile*," Erik Larson, the author of such earlier books as "*In the Garden of Beasts*" and "*The Devil in the White City*," tells the story of how that feat was indeed accomplished during Churchill's first year as prime minister, rescuing Western

civilization from the edge of the abyss and leaving it free to continue to fight. Through the remarkably skillful use of intimate diaries as well as public documents, some newly released, Larson has transformed the well-known record of 12 turbulent months, stretching from May of 1940 through May of 1941, into a book that is fresh, fast and deeply moving.

As important as Churchill's stirring and carefully calculated speeches was the audience that received them on both sides of the Atlantic. When we look back on history, the most dramatic events — Rudolf Hess's desperate solo flight to Scotland, the attack on Pearl Harbor — often overshadow everything else. But Larson's deft portraits show the essential connection that words created between the powerful and the powerless, capturing the moments that defined life for millions struggling to survive the decisions of a few. These small, forgotten stories, which Larson uses to such moving effect, make it possible for us to understand, even 80 years later, what made hearts race and break, and are best told by the people who experienced them, not only in a war room surrounded by military advisers but also in a London walk-up, alone. "My heart misses a beat whenever a car changes gear-up, or when someone runs, or walks very quickly, or suddenly stands still, or cocks their head on one side, or stares up at the sky, or says, 'Sshh!'" a young Londoner wrote in her diary after enduring months of nerve-shattering bombings. "So, taken all round my heart seems to miss more beats than it ticks!"

4. Betsy Stephens – **THE BEEKEEPER OF ALEPPO** by Christy Lefteri. Published 2019. 354 pages.

Review by Naina Bajekal Time magazine. After two summers volunteering in a refugee center in Athens as thousands of families flooded into Greece, Christy Lefteri found herself wondering what it means to see, and be seen. From the question sprang her second novel, which follows Nuri, a Syrian beekeeper, and his wife Afra, an artist blinded by an explosion, on a journey to find safety in the U.K.

We tend to hear refugee stories in the abstract: millions of people fleeing war, poverty and persecution—words that carry no specifics. But in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, Lefteri gives us a deeply researched, intimate look at the lives of one couple. Narrated by Nuri, the novel weaves together two-time lines: one starting in Aleppo in 2015 as the couple decides to leave Syria and make the dangerous journey through Turkey and Greece, and the other from a seaside town in England the following year, where they are applying for asylum.

A former psychotherapist and the daughter of Cypriot refugees, Lefteri sensitively charts what it's like when war comes home, alert to the subtle effects of trauma and grief. Nuri and Afra are not broadly sketched as victims, but rather suffer in different and complex ways from PTSD—a condition still rarely explored in literature beyond the accounts of veteran fighters or war correspondents. Nuri and Afra manage to escape their shattered hometown, but they cannot escape the memories that haunt them. “You are lost in the darkness,” Afra tells Nuri, reminding us that even if she is the one who has lost her sight, he is even more cut off from his loved ones—and himself.

5. Karen Justesen – **SELLOUT by Paul Beatty**. Published 2015. 305 pages.

The Sellout' Is A Scorchingly Funny Satire On 'Post-Racial' America – per NPR Michael Schaub.

It's difficult to pin down the exact day when post-racial America was born. Maybe it was when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law, or when Thurgood Marshall was appointed the first African American member of the Supreme Court. Maybe it was when Barack Obama was elected president, or the first time a white person claimed to be "colorblind." It's honestly hard to tell, because as we keep seeing proved again and again, "post-racial America" is completely indistinguishable from what came before.

Enter the narrator of Paul Beatty's new novel *The Sellout*. When we're first introduced to him, he's sitting in front of the Supreme Court, openly smoking marijuana and being berated by a furious associate justice. His crime, as he explains it to a police officer: "I've whispered 'Racism' in a post-racial world." Specifically, he owned a slave and resegregated public transportation and education in his hometown, making the charges a little more complicated. "I'm the Scopes monkey," he reflects, "the missing link in the evolution of African-American jurisprudence come to life."

Post-racial America or not, it's hard to see how anything funny could come out of slavery, police violence, gangs and racial discrimination, all subjects Beatty tackles in his fourth novel. It's the equivalent to an improv comedy troupe dedicating an entire performance to abortion. But somehow, *The Sellout* isn't just one of the most hilarious American novels in years, it also might be the first truly great satirical novel of the century.

6. Louise McLean– **KAVALIER AND CLAY by Michael Chabon** Published 2000. 544 pages.

Comic books and magic tricks can mean more than just ballooning muscles and gag gifts - or so Michael Chabon thinks, as he brings us to a time and place where intellect and

mystery find their way into these two often overlooked art forms. Jewish mysticism meets Americana in his novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, and we find all this in the comic-book superhero, the Escapist, who is the creation of the wonderful pair of Joe Kavalier and Sam Clay.

Josef Kavalier first makes the acquaintance of his cousin, Sammy Klayman, late one night in 1939. He has managed to escape from Prague, with the help of his magic teacher, Bernard Kornblum, but has had to leave his family behind after the German occupation of the city. Chabon brings Jewish mysticism from Prague to Brooklyn in the form of the Golem.

The Golem is 'Rabbi Loew's mysterious automaton', whom, centuries back, Rabbi Loew conjured out of mud to save the Jewish people from destruction. As the story goes, after the Golem begins to cause his own forms of destruction, Rabbi Loew buries the Golem's clay body in case he is ever needed again. When the Germans occupy Prague in the Thirties, a committee of Jewish elders decides that the Golem's body must be sent away to protect it and his coffin becomes the means of departure for Josef. Stashed in the bottom, Josef escapes to his aunt's home in Brooklyn.

Josef and Sammy discover their compatible artistic and narrative talents and convince Sammy's boss, Sheldon Anapol - head of Empire Novelty, soon to become Empire Comics - to start distributing comic books, which Josef and Sammy will create.

Desperate to help his own family escape, Josef hits upon an idea for a new superhero with Sammy. Their hero is the Escapist, a masked man in tights who can perform daring acts of chain-breaking, lock-loosening and other feats of liberation. The Escapist, while a typical superhero in appearance, serves an additional purpose: he fights Hitler and the Nazis to liberate the Jews and other oppressed peoples. The Escapist takes off - and Josef and Sammy become Joe Kavalier and Sam Clay, Americanizing their names to become a great comic book team.

7. Hugh Schwartz – **THE ROOM WHERE IT HAPPENED by John Bolton**. Published 2020. 444 pages.

NPR Steve Inskeep: Here are some background facts about John Bolton. He is a veteran U.S. diplomat, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations appointed by President Bush. He's a controversial figure for his skepticism of international agreements. That made him popular with many Republicans and earned him many appearances on Fox News. President Trump made him national security adviser. These are the credentials Bolton brings to his book about 18 months in the White House. Bolton describes - and

these are his words, we're just reporting here - Bolton describes a shockingly erratic and ignorant president who asked foreign leaders for help with his own reelection. That's a paraphrase of the book.

8. Barbara Brennan – **THE NEW TSAR: THE RISE AND REIGN OF VLADIMIR PUTIN** by **Steven Lee Myers**. Published 2014. 592 pages.

Kirkus review: 2015:

The reptilian, poker-faced former KGB agent, now Russian president seemingly for life, earns a fair, engaging treatment in the hands of New York Times journalist Myers.

Barnes and Noble: The author was based in Russia for some years during Vladimir Putin's rise to power, and he clearly knows his material and primary subject, which is very important in the tracking of this slippery conniver, who was in a good place to take power at President Boris Yeltsin's decline in 1999.

In this gripping narrative of Putin's rise to power, Steven Lee Myers recounts Putin's origins—from his childhood of abject poverty in Leningrad to his ascent through the ranks of the KGB, and his eventual consolidation of rule in the Kremlin.

As the world struggles to confront a bolder Russia, the importance of understanding the formidable and ambitious Vladimir Putin has never been greater. On the one hand, Putin's many domestic reforms—from tax cuts to an expansion of property rights—have helped reshape the potential of millions of Russians whose only experience of democracy had been crime, poverty, and instability after the fall of the Soviet Union. On the other, Putin has ushered in a new authoritarianism—unyielding in its brutal repression of dissent and newly assertive politically and militarily in regions like Crimea and the Middle East. The New Tsar is a staggering achievement, a deeply researched and essential biography of one of the most important and destabilizing world leaders in recent history, a man whose merciless rule has become inextricably bound to Russia's foreseeable future.

PS – we did discuss **CASTE** by **Isabel Wilkerson**

Now, in her sophomore effort, the former New York Times Chicago bureau chief does not disappoint. Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents is a masterwork of writing — a profound achievement of scholarship and research that stands also as a triumph of both visceral storytelling and cogent analysis.

What is caste? According to Wilkerson, "caste is the granting or withholding of respect, status, honor, attention, privileges, resources, benefit of the doubt, and human kindness to someone on the basis of their perceived rank or standing in the hierarchy." Racism and casteism do overlap, she writes, noting that "what some people call racism could be seen as merely one manifestation of the degree to which we have internalized the larger American caste system."

Wilkerson's central thesis is that caste, while a global occurrence, achieves its most violent manifestation in the treatment of American Blacks, set at the lowest level in society through historical and contemporary oppression, marginalization and violence — all legally maintained through systems of law and order. "The English in North America developed the most rigid and exclusionist form of race ideology," Wilkerson writes, quoting the anthropologists Audrey and Brian Smedley.

Wilkerson establishes a correlation between American Blacks, whom she names the "American untouchables" and the Indian "untouchables," or Dalits, as the lowest caste; while whites in America are the dominant, highest caste equivalent to the Indian Brahmins. Describing the treatment of Blacks in America, Wilkerson writes:

"The institution of slavery was, for a quarter millennium, the conversion of human beings into currency, into machines who existed solely for the profit of their owners, to be worked as long as the owners desired, who had no rights over their bodies or loved ones, who could be mortgaged, bred, won in a bet, given as wedding presents, bequeathed to heirs, sold away from spouses or children to convene an owner's debts or to spite a rival or to settle an estate. They were regularly whipped, raped, and branded, subjected to any whim or distemper of the people who owned them. Some were castrated or endured other tortures too grisly for these pages, tortures that the Geneva Conventions would have banned as war crimes had the conventions applied to people of African descent on this soil."

