

Discussion Schedule and Blurbs for 2023-2024 Havurah Book Group Choices

The Treeline: The Last Forest and the Future of Life on Earth

Author: Ben Rawlence

Submitted by: Harriet Cooke

Nonfiction/202 pages

After the ocean, the boreal forest is the largest biome- living system- on earth. Encircling the globe in a nearly continuous green ring, this "lung" is essential to the planet's health." Author Ben Rawlence takes the reader on a journey around the world, stopping at places in the Boreal forests. From Ireland to Wales, to Norway to Siberia, to Alaska, Canada and Greenland, Rawland journeys with the peoples of the North, interviews scientists and indigenous people whose families have lived in these regions for tens of thousands of years. All of it suddenly changing with our warming climate and massive wildfires. He writes not only the stories of our modern times, but also the historical reasons for the disappearance of forests in Ireland, and Scotland. His writing is lyrical, with rigorous reporting, as he grapples with the rapidly changing conditions and what this might mean for the future of life on Earth. His book is an amazing study in the ecology of these forests. Reading it I felt everything from awe, to terror, to hope.

Comrades and Chicken Ranchers: The Story of a California Jewish Community

Author: Kenneth Kann

Submitted by: Holly Hoffnung

Nonfiction/336 pages

During the heyday of the kibbutz movement, several leftie communities formed in California and New Jersey to practice the Kibbutz lifestyle, sort of. Kenneth Kann is an oral historian who interviewed more than 200 of the former members of the Petaluma commune (obviously, before Petaluma gentrified), and presents the three generations talking about being radical chicken ranchers, their Yiddish cultural life, their intense political commitments and conflicts. By juxtaposing often opposite views of the same situation, the interviews come alive, and on the whole, it's pretty amusing and also an honest look at a radical Jewish community.

The Dark Queens: The Bloody Rivalry that Forged the Medieval World

Author: Shelley Pukak

Submitted by: Maud Naroll

Nonfiction/384 pages

Brunhild was a foreign princess, raised to be married off for the sake of alliance-building. Her sister-in-law Fredegund started out as a lowly palace slave. And yet-in sixth-century Merovingian France, where women were excluded from noble succession and royal politics was a blood sport-these two iron-willed strategists reigned over vast realms, changing the face of Europe. The two queens commanded armies and negotiated with kings and popes. They formed coalitions and broke them, mothered children and lost them. They fought a decades-long civil war-against each other. With ingenuity and skill, they battled to stay alive in the game of statecraft, and in the process laid the foundations of what would one day be Charlemagne's empire. Yet after the queens' deaths-one gentle, the other horrific-their stories were rewritten, their names consigned to slander and legend. The Dark Queens, award-winning writer Shelley Puhak sets the record straight. She resurrects two very real women in all their complexity, painting a richly detailed portrait of an unfamiliar time and striking at the roots of some of our culture's stubbornest myths about female power. The Dark Queens offers proof that the relationships between women can transform the world.

The Promise

Author: Damon Galgut

Submitted by: David Newman

Fiction/293 pages

The 2021 Booker Prize winner, The Promise charts the crash and burn of a white South African family, living on a farm outside Pretoria. The Swarts are gathering for Ma's funeral. The younger generation, Anton and Amor, detest everything the family stand for -- not least the failed promise to the Black woman who has worked for them her whole life. After years of service, Salome was promised her own house, her own land... yet somehow, as each decade passes, that promise remains unfulfilled. The narrator's eye shifts and blinks: moving fluidly between characters, flying into their dreams; deliciously lethal in its observation. And as the country moves from old deep divisions to its new so-called fairer society, the lost promise of more than just one family hovers behind the novel's title. In this story of a diminished family, sharp and tender emotional truths hit home. Confident, deft and quietly powerful, The Promise is literary fiction at its finest.

The Best Strangers in the World

Author: Ari Shapiro

Submitted by: Beth Kaye

Nonfiction/ 256 pages

From the beloved host of NPR's All Things Considered, a stirring memoir-in-essays that is also a lover letter to journalism. In his first book, broadcaster Ari Shapiro takes us around the globe to reveal the stories behind narratives that are sometimes heartwarming, sometimes heartbreaking, but always poignant. He details his time traveling on Air Force One with President Obama, or following the path of Syrian refugees fleeing war, or learning from those fighting for social justice both at home and abroad. As the self-reinforcing bubbles we live in become more impenetrable, Ari Shapiro keeps seeking ways to help people listen to one another; to find connection and commonality with those who may seem different; to remind us that, before religion, or nationality, or politics, we are all human. *The Best Strangers in the World* is a testament to one journalist's passion for Considering All Things—and sharing what he finds with the rest of us.

Apeirogon

Author: Colum McCann

Submitted by: Marjorie Walters

Fiction/496 pages

Bassam is a Palestinian Muslim who was imprisoned by Israeli officials for seven years. Rami is a Jewish man who was born in Israel and married into a well-heeled family that has some social capital in Israeli politics. They inhabit a world of conflict that colors every aspect of their lives, from the roads they are allowed to drive on to the schools their children attend to the checkpoints, both physical and emotional, they must negotiate.

But their lives, however circumscribed, are upended one after the other: first, Rami's thirteen-year-old daughter, Smadar, becomes the victim of suicide bombers; a decade later, Bassam's ten-year-old daughter, Abir, is killed by a rubber bullet from an Israeli soldier. She is taken to a hospital. The doctors feel she can survive if she is transferred to a better hospital. Due to the roadblocks, traffic, and bureaucracy, her ambulance is delayed for over an hour. She arrives at the new hospital where she dies not long after. Rami and Bassam had been raised to hate one another. And yet, when they learn of each other's stories, they recognize the loss that connects them. The two men come together, across the animosity and violence of their respective home nations, over a shared desire to spread a message of education, understanding, and the end of Israel's

occupation of Palestine. Together they attempt to use their grief as a weapon for peace. These two men travel the world calling for the end of the Occupation and the fighting between Israel and Palestine. Their one small act starts to permeate what has seemed an impermeable conflict for generations.

Colum McCann met Bassam and Rami on a trip with their non-profit organization, Combatants for Peace. McCann was moved by their willingness to share their stories with the world, by their hope that if they could see themselves in one another, perhaps others could too. With their blessing, and unprecedented access to their families, lives, and personal recollections, McCann began to craft *Apeirogon*.

It is worth noting that an *apeirogon* is an infinitely sided object. It may seem an odd title for the book. McCann uses historical records and interviews to reconstruct the story of the two men, their lives, and the lives of their family, which is the central story. McCann also includes many relevant historical events, anecdotes, quotes, and myths. There are numerous references to literature, cinema, and philosophy. He emphasizes the interconnection of everything and everyone. Something that seems to have two sides—the continual fighting between Israel and Palestine—is complex and infinitely-sided.

Ultimately, *Apeirogon* is a timely novel about war, violence, grief, forgiveness, and the human connection between everyone despite our differences. The novel expands to cross centuries and continents, stitching together time, art, history, nature, and politics in a tale both heartbreaking and hopeful. The novel received positive reviews and was longlisted for the Booker prize in 2020.

Horse

Author: Geraldine Brooks

Submitted by: Leah Hershey

Fiction/401 pages

Horse by Geraldine Brooks, winner of the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for March, is a story covering nearly 170 years of American history, stretching from antebellum Kentucky to present-day Washington, DC. Thoroughbreds provide the unifying element for this far-reaching narrative, but horses and the complex culture surrounding them are only devices for Brooks to explore her fundamental subject: race and its corrosive influence on our nation's foundation and cancerous impact on society today.

Told from the perspective of six characters, *Horse* interweaves the story of the Black equestrians who made their white masters fabulously wealthy with those of contemporary young professionals struggling to form relationships despite racial discrimination and misunderstanding. I was particularly impressed with Brooks' ability to

interweave seamlessly the stories of her characters spanning different time periods. In addition, the development of horse racing in this country and the enslaved men who groomed and trained them was a fascinating piece of history with which I was unfamiliar. Based on the true story of Lexington, the greatest racehorse in American history, "Horse" is an imaginative, and impeccably researched work of historical fiction, wonderfully written as well as skillfully structured, with characters to connect to and a story that I cannot forget.

Lincoln in the Bardo

Author: George Saunders

Submitted by: David Newman

Fiction/368 pages

February 1862. The Civil War is less than one year old. The fighting has begun in earnest, and the nation has begun to realize it is in for a long, bloody struggle. Meanwhile, President Lincoln's beloved eleven-year-old son, Willie, lies upstairs in the White House, gravely ill. In a matter of days, despite predictions of a recovery, Willie dies and is laid to rest in a Georgetown cemetery. "My poor boy, he was too good for this earth," the president says at the time. "God has called him home." Newspapers report that a grief-stricken Lincoln returns, alone, to the crypt several times to hold his boy's body.

From that seed of historical truth, George Saunders spins an unforgettable story of familial love and loss that breaks free of its realistic, historical framework into a supernatural realm both hilarious and terrifying. Willie Lincoln finds himself in a strange purgatory where ghosts mingle, gripe, commiserate, quarrel, and enact bizarre acts of penance. Within this transitional state—called, in the Tibetan tradition, the bardo—a monumental struggle erupts over young Willie's soul.

Lincoln in the Bardo is an astonishing feat of imagination and a bold step forward from one of the most important and influential writers of his generation. Formally daring, generous in spirit, deeply concerned with matters of the heart, it is a testament to fiction's ability to speak honestly and powerfully to the things that really matter to us. Saunders has invented a thrilling new form that deploys a kaleidoscopic, theatrical panorama of voices to ask a timeless, profound question: How do we live and love when we know that everything we love must end?

Whatever Happened to Antisemitism?

Author: Anthony Lerman

Submitted by: Joel Beinin

Nonfiction/336 pages

The public, academics, journalists, activists and Jewish people themselves are divided over the meaning of antisemitism. Antony Lerman shows that this is a result of a 30-year process of redefinition of the phenomenon, casting Israel, problematically defined as the “persecuted collective Jew,” as one of its main targets. This political project has taken the notion of the “new antisemitism” and codified it in the flawed International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s “working definition” of antisemitism. This text is the glue holding together an international network comprising the Israeli government, pro-Israel advocacy groups, Zionist organizations, Jewish communal defense bodies and sympathetic governments fighting a war against those who would criticize Israel. The consequences of this redefinition have been to suppress free speech on Palestine/Israel, legitimize Islamophobic right-wing forces, and politicize principled opposition to antisemitism.

All I Love and Know

Author: Judith Frank

Submitted by: Beth Kaye

Fiction 432 pages

A searing drama of a modern American Family on the brink of dissolution, one that explores adoption, gay marriage, and love lost and found. For years, Matthew Greene and Daniel Rosen have enjoyed a quiet domestic life together in Northampton, MA. But when they learn that Daniel’s twin brother and sister-in-law have been killed in a bombing in Jerusalem, their lives are suddenly and utterly transformed. The deceased parents wanted Matthew and Daniel to adopt these children - a six year old and a baby.

Learning from the Germans, Race and the Memory of Evil

Author: Susan Neiman

Submitted by: Harriet Cooke

Nonfiction/432 pages

Susan Neiman is a Jewish philosopher who lives and teaches in Berlin Germany. Her book insightfully looks at the journey that allowed the shift in German consciousness, from seeing themselves as the victims of WWII, to taking responsibility for the atrocities done to Jews and others in the Holocaust. “As an increasingly polarized America fights over the legacy of racism... Neiman's book gives an urgently needed perspective on how

a nation might come to terms with historical wrongdoing." I was moved to read this book while wondering how Israel might come to terms with her own historical wrongdoings toward Palestinians. I have about a hundred flags sticking out of the book- a testament to the wisdom I have found in these pages. Her writings and teachings have been used in Havurah's class on reparations.