

2012 Book group collection

Aaronovitch, Ben
Rivers of London

My name is Peter Grant, and I used to be a probationary constable in that mighty army for justice known to all right-thinking people as the Metropolitan Police Service, and to everyone else as the Filth. My only concerns in life were how to avoid a transfer to the Case Progression Unit – *We do paperwork so real coppers don't have to*. Then one night I tried to take a witness statement from a man who was already dead but still disturbingly voluble ... and that led me to Inspector Nightingale, the last wizard in England. And that, as they say, is where the story really starts. There's something festering at the heart of the city I love, a malicious, vengeful spirit that's taking ordinary Londoners and twisting them into something awful; mannequins to act out its drama of violence and despair. The spirit of riot and rebellion has awakened in the city, and it's falling to me to bring order out of chaos – or to die trying.

OK – this is Urban fantasy, a mix of magic and police procedural; Harry Potter meets Hot Fuzz. And great fun. Make of that what you will!

It does look highly entertaining.

Recommended by Liz's husband, also by Sally and one of the book groups but don't have a note of which one

Bender, Aimee

The particular sadness of lemon cake

On the eve of her ninth birthday, Rose Edelstein bites into her mother's homemade lemon-chocolate cake and discovers she has a magical gift: she can taste her mother's emotions in the slice. All at once her cheerful, can do mother tastes of despair and desperation. Suddenly, and for the rest of her life, food becomes perilous. Anything can be revealed at any meal. Rose's gift forces her to confront the truth behind her family's emotions – her mother's sadness, her father's detachment and her brother's clash with the world. But as Rose grows up, she learns that there are some secrets even her taste buds cannot discern. *The particular sadness of lemon cake* is about the pain of loving those whom you know too much about, and the secrets that exist within every family. At once profound, funny, wise and sad, this is a novel to savour.

We were donated 6 copies of this (thanks to the North Berwick library staff for passing them on) so I ordered another 4 to make up a set. I probably wouldn't have chosen this for the collection, as the various reviews I've read have been quite mixed, but it'll be interesting to read the notebooks to see what you think.

Touching on such issues as the disintegration of her parents' marriage, the difficulties faced by a genius brother, living with a family who all possess special skill, depression, magical qualities – there is clearly a lot to get to grips with. Seemingly lack of punctuation and speech marks is annoying at first, but something you get used to. At the risk of really putting you off right from the start one book group reported - We were 100% agreed that this was probably the biggest load of rubbish we had ever read. It wasn't even bad enough to be funny. Ouch! However, this has also been recommended by a member of Alderston Gardens book group, so we'll see

Benioff, David
City of thieves

Four months into the siege of Leningrad, the city is starving.

Shy, chess loving seventeen-year-old Lev fears for his life when he is arrested for looting the body of a dead German paratrooper, while his charismatic cellmate, Kolya, a handsome young soldier arrested for desertion, seems bizarrely unafraid.

Dawn brings, instead of an execution squad, an impossible challenge. Lev and Kolya can find a dozen eggs for an NKVD colonel to use for his daughter's wedding cake, and live. Or fail, and die. In the depths of the coldest winter in history, through a city cut off from all supplies and suffering appalling deprivation, man and boy embark on an absurd hunt. Their search will take them through desolate, lawless Leningrad and the devastated countryside surrounding it, in the captivating journey of two men trying to survive against desperate odds.

Haven't read this yet, but it seems that the fact that this is set during WWII is secondary to the relationship between the two main characters. But by concentrating on this relationship, a powerful tale of the war is told.

Recommended by Jane and Karen

Chua, Amy

Battle hymn of the tiger mother

A lot of people wonder how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids. They wonder what Chinese parents do to produce so many maths whizzes and music prodigies, what it's like inside the family, and whether they could do it too. Well, I can tell them, because I've done so ...

Amy Chua's daughters, Sophia and Louisa (Lulu) were polite, interesting and helpful, they had perfect school marks and exceptional musical abilities. The Chinese-parenting model certainly seemed to produce results. But what happens when you are confronted by a screaming child who would sooner freeze outside in the cold than be forced to play the piano? *Battle Hymn of the tiger mother* is a story about a mother, two daughters, and two dogs. It was supposed to be a story of how Chinese parents are better at raising kids than Western ones. But instead, it's about a bitter clash of cultures, a fleeting taste of glory and how you can be humbled by a thirteen year old. Witty, entertaining and provocative, this is a unique and important book that will transform your perspective of parenting forever.

Hard to know what to say about this book, having just skimmed through it. But the author's concept of the best way to bring up your kids is a completely alien one to me. Certainly at first I was prepared to condemn this author out of hand, but then I wondered if we were doing our kids any favours by allowing them to spend hours on the internet, leading a virtual life, becoming virtuosos at texting and finding their way around smart phones and ipads.

This book will be sure to produce a lot of heated discussion. I think I may have to invite myself to some of your meetings, to hear what you have to say about it. Do contact me to let me know if I could join your group for the chat on this one.

Clayton, Victoria

A girl's guide to kissing frogs

Position vacant: Prince Charming wanted. Fairy-tale castle optional. Frogs need not apply. A charming, witty novel from much-loved novelist, Victoria Clayton A girl may have to kiss a lot of frogs before she finds her Prince Charming but Marigold has found herself a real toad. As a principal dancer at the Lenoir Ballet Company, she is on her way to becoming a Prima Ballerina. She has the talent and the ballet director, Sebastian Lenoir, has her bent over backwards -- quite literally -- working her way to the top. But, when a painful fall sends her limping home to Northumberland to recuperate, Marigold fears that this could mean the end to her dreams. Luckily, her childhood friend, Rafe, who is just as delicious as she remembers him, is ready and waiting to sweep her off her feet. But, is there a handsome stranger waiting in the wings? 'A Girl's Guide to Kissing Frogs' is a charming, witty book, perfect for fans of 'Not Married, Not Bothered', 'A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian' and 'The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing'.

I've discovered an author that I had not bothered with before called Victoria Clayton. Having read 'Past Mischiefs' I've gone to the bother of getting from Amazon a few more and have just finished 'A

girls guide to kissing frogs'. this one is set in Northumberland in the winter and features bizarre characters but there's something about it.....(Ruth)

I often have requests for lighter reads, something with a bit of humour. So the challenge is to find something that is a light right, but with a bit of depth to it. This is one of those that looks like it's going to be "chic lit" (though sometimes that's just what you fancy) but in fact offers up more than that. One reviewer described it as a "frothy social comedy but cloaking serious issues" and another, "an amusing take on class and society." Let's hope so!

Davidson, Andrew

The Gargoyle

The nameless and beautiful narrator of *The Gargoyle* is driving along a dark road when he is distracted by what seems to be a flight of arrows. He crashes into a ravine and wakes up in a burn ward, undergoing the tortures of the damned. His life is over – he is now a monster. But in fact it is only just beginning. One day Marianne Engel, a wild and compelling sculptress of gargoyles, enters his life and tells him that they were once lovers in medieval Germany. In her telling, he was a badly burned mercenary and she was a nun and a scribe who nursed him back to health in the famed monastery of Engelthal. As she spins her tale, Scheherazade – fashion, and relates equally mesmerising stories of deathless love in Japan, Greenland, Italy and England, he finds himself drawn back to life – and, finally, to love.

Speaking as someone who regularly burns herself on the oven and the solid fuel stove, the description of what the narrator goes through when the car crashes and his whole body is engulfed in flame, is absolutely horrendous. You can't help feeling that this must be exactly what it would be like – and you really don't want to even imagine it. Never mind wonder how anyone could survive it. So for the moment I've stopped reading there.

Burns and horror aside it seems to me this is a book about love, how it endures, can it be strong enough to drive lives, but more than that, beyond the one lifetime most of us believe we have. Yet another debut novel – quite a few first novels are featured in this year's collection

DeWitt, Patrick

The Sisters brothers

Hermann Kermit Warm is going to die. The enigmatic and powerful man known only as the Commodore has ordered it, and his henchmen, Eli and Charlie Sisters, will make sure of it. Though Eli doesn't share his brothers appetite for whiskey and killing, he's never known anything else. But their prey isn't an easy mark, and on the road from Oregon City to Warm's gold-mining claim outside Sacramento, Eli begins to question what he does for living – and whom he does it for. With *The Sisters Brothers*, Patrick DeWitt pays homage to the classic Western, transforming it into an unforgettable comic tour de force. Filled with a remarkable cast of characters – losers, cheaters, and ne'er-do-wells from all stripes of life – and told by a complex and compelling narrator, it is a violent, lustful odyssey through the underworld of the 1850s frontier that beautifully captures the humour, melancholy and grit of the Old West and two brothers bound by blood, violence and love.

My husband just finished this – "it's weird" was his only comment.

I prompted him – weird? "Well, one of the two main characters, who were brothers, spoke a lot about his feelings". Heaven forbid. In a western. I asked him if he found that disturbing. "No," he said, "it was unusual but quite compelling. But weird because they just went around killing people, without a

second's thought or remorse". (But, says I, it was a Western. I thought they did that). "Yes, but this was a sensitive soul who shouldn't have been doing that. Weird". (Trina, and husband)

Eggers, Dave

Zeitoun

In August 2005, as Hurricane Katrina blew in, the city of New Orleans had been abandoned by most citizens. But resident Abdulrahman Zeitoun, though his wife and family had gone, refused to leave. For days he traversed an apocalyptic landscape of flooded streets by canoe. He protected neighbours' properties, fed trapped dogs and rescued survivors. But eventually he came to the attention of those 'guarding' this drowned city. Only then did Zeitoun's nightmare really begin. *Zeitoun* is the powerful, ultimately uplifting true story of one man's courage when confronted with an awesome force of nature followed by more troubling human oppression.

Interesting to learn about the Hurricane and immediate aftermath, but the disbelief and anger comes when you learn what happens when Zeitoun is arrested for "looting" his own house. Seems to me this is a perfect choice to feature as a book group book – something that is really worth reading but would be easy to overlook on the shelves

Elphinstone, Margaret

The Gathering night

Between Grandmother Mountain and the cold sea, Alaia and her family live off the land. In the untamed hills in winter you must stick together to survive. But when one of her brothers goes hunting and never returns, the fragile balance of life is upset and her family is thrust into turmoil. Half-starved and maddened with grief, Alaia's mother follows her visions and goes in search of her lost son. Then a stranger from a rival tribe appears with a story of a great wave that has destroyed his people. Is he to be believed? What else could drive a man to travel alone between tribes in the depths of winter? Hopes of resolution come when Alaia's mother returns home as a Go-Between, one able to commune with the spirits. But as all the Auk people come together for their annual Gathering Night, who there will listen to the voice of a woman? "The Gathering Night" is a story of conflict, loss, love, adventure and devastating natural disasters. This mesmerising pre-historical novel is set deep in our stone-age past. It is a celebration of wildness, but also resonates as an ecological parable of our troubled planet 8000 years on.

*Best fiction I've read this year is one I missed when it came out, and I shouldn't have missed it, because it's by my friend Margaret Elphinstone. It's *The Gathering Night* and it's a very convincing story of Scotland's Neolithic ancestors, the ones who arrived here 8,000 years ago at the end of the last Ice Age. (Colin)*

Farthing, Pen

One dog at a time: saving the strays of Helmand

In a remote outpost in Helmand Province, Pen Farthing's tour of duty will change his life forever, but for entirely unexpected reasons ... Appalled by the horrors of a local dogfight, he intervenes to free the victims. One of these dogs finds his way into the Marine compound – and into Pen's heart. Soon other strays are being drawn to the sanctuary provided by Pen's makeshift pound, including one young mum who crawls under the compound fence carrying her newborn pups to safety. But as his time in Helmand draws to an end Pen cannot leave the dogs to their own fates. He begins hatching plans to help them escape to a better life.

Don't think this is just a story about saving some dogs. It is so much more than that. It's about what it's like to serve in Afghanistan; of everyday warfare, the searing heat and the dust; waiting for the

mortars to fall; of remarkable courage and hardships. And yes, emotional and heart warming, but nothing wrong with that!

Recommended by the girls at Musselburgh library

Forna, Aminatta

The Memory of love

Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1969. On a hot January evening that he will remember for decades, Elias Cole first catches sight of Saffia Kamara, the wife of a charismatic colleague. He is transfixed. Thirty years later, lying in the capital's hospital, he recalls the desire that drove him to acts of betrayal he has tried to justify ever since. Elsewhere in the hospital, Kai, a gifted young surgeon, is desperately trying to forget the pain of a lost love that torments him as much as the mental scars he still bears from the civil war that has left an entire people with terrible secrets to keep. It falls to a British psychologist, Adrian Lockheart, to help the two survivors, but when he too falls in love, past and present collide with devastating consequences. *The Memory of Love* is a heartbreaking story of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances.

I haven't read this but it's interesting to note that the reason many folk have is because it was for their book group. Looks like one of those that you have to keep on with, as it sounds like it's quite hard to get into. But definitely more positive than negative reviews. This was recommended by a friend of mine, an avid reader, who has always come up with good suggestions in the past.

Gregory, Philippa

The little house

It was easy for Elizabeth. She married the man she loved, bore him two children and made a home for him which was the envy of their friends. It was harder for Ruth. She married Elizabeth's son and then found that, somehow, she could never quite measure up. Isolation, deceit and betrayal fill the gaps between the two individual women and between their different worlds. In this complex thriller, Philippa Gregory deploys all her insight into what women want and what women fear, as Ruth confronts the shifting borders of her own sanity. Laying bare the comfortable conventions of rural England, this spine-tingling novel pulses with suspense until the whiplash double-twist of the denouement.

One of three psychological thrillers featured in this year's collection and this one promises to be a real "page turner." It'll be interesting to read something by this author that is not an historical novel Recommended by Fiona

Haynes, Elizabeth

Into the darkest corner

Catherine has been enjoying the single life for long enough to know a great catch when she sees one. Gorgeous, charismatic, spontaneous – Lee seems almost too good to be true. And her friends clearly agree, as each in turn falls under his spell. But Lee's erratic and sometimes controlling behaviour makes Catherine feel increasingly isolated. Driven into the darkest corners of her world, and trusting no-one, she plans a meticulous escape. Four years later, and struggling to overcome her demons, Catherine dares to believe she might be safe from harm. Until one phone call changes everything.

Another debut novel, another psychological thriller. A great build up of tension, as there is with "Before I go to sleep". Apologies if you struggle with sleep in the month when you're reading these two – they'll both have you reading until the wee small hours, and then you may find it hard to sleep due to the anxiety and fear you have for the main characters

Isaacson, Walter

Steve Jobs

Based on more than forty interviews with Steve Jobs conducted over two years – as well as interviews with more than a hundred family members, friends, adversaries, competitors and colleagues – this book chronicles the rollercoaster life and searingly intense personality of a creative entrepreneur whose passion for perfection and ferocious drive revolutionised six industries: personal computers, animated movies, music, phones, tablet computing and digital publishing. At a time when societies around the world are trying to build digital age economies, Jobs stands as the ultimate icon of inventiveness and applied imagination. He knew that the best way to create value in the twenty-first century was to connect creativity with technology, so he built a company where leaps of the imagination were combined with remarkable feats of engineering. Although Jobs co-operated with this book, he asked for no control over what was written, nor even the right to read it before it was published. He put nothing off limits and instead encouraged the people he knew to speak honestly. “I’ve done a lot of things I’m not proud of, such as getting my girlfriend pregnant when I was 23 and the way I handled that,” he said. “But I don’t have any skeletons in my closet that can’t be allowed out.” Jobs speaks candidly, sometimes brutally about the people he worked with and competed against. Likewise, his friends, foes and colleagues provide an unvarnished view of the passions, demons, perfectionism, desires, artistry, devilry and obsession for control that shaped his approach to business and the innovative products that resulted. Jobs could drive those around him to fury and despair. But his personality and products were interrelated, just as Apple’s hardware and software tended to be. His extraordinary tale, told through this masterly biography, is filled with lessons about innovations, character, values and leadership.

I don't normally buy hardbacks for the book group collections, but as Steve Jobs just died in October 2011, I thought that it would be better to feature his biography sooner, rather than wait for the paperback to come out later. A fascinating and driven man. And a bit weird. This book is huge. Sending this one out on its own so if you don't fancy it, a good opportunity to give something else a go

Irving, John

A prayer for Owen Meany

Owen Meany is a dwarfish boy with a strange voice who accidentally kills his best friend's mum with a baseball and believes--correctly, it transpires--that he is an instrument of God, to be redeemed by martyrdom. John Irving's novel, which inspired the 1998 Jim Carrey movie *Simon Birch*, is his most popular book in Britain, and perhaps the oddest Christian mystic novel since Flannery O'Connor's work. Irving fans will find much that is familiar: the New England prep-school-town setting, symbolic amputations of man and beast, the Garp-like unknown father of the narrator (Owen's orphaned best friend), the rough comedy. The scene of doltish Dr Dolder, Owen's shrink, drunkenly driving his VW down the school's marble steps is a marvellous set piece. So are the Christmas pageants Owen stars in. But it's all, as *Highlights* magazine used to put it, "fun with a purpose". When Owen plays baby Jesus in the pageants, and glimpses a tombstone with his death date while enacting *A Christmas Carol*, the slapstick doesn't change the fact that he was born to be martyred. The book's countless subplots add up to a moral argument, specifically an indictment of American foreign policy--from Vietnam to the Contras.

I didn't read it this year, but I think everyone should read it at some point. Owen Meany stays with you for a long time after you have finished reading it, it's an amazing piece of storytelling (Caroline).

Also recommended by Eileen

Many folk have said if you're only going to read one novel by John Irving, make sure it's this one.

Ishiguro, Kazuo

The remains of the day

A contemporary classic, *The Remains of the Day* is Kazuo Ishiguro's beautiful and haunting evocation of life between the ears in a Great English House. In the summer of 1956, Stevens, the ageing butler of Darlington Hall, embarks on a leisurely holiday that will take him deep into the countryside and into his past.

The novel's narrator, Stevens, is a perfect English butler who tries to give his narrow existence form and meaning through the self-effacing, almost mystical practice of his profession. In a career that spans the second world war, Stevens is oblivious of the real life that goes on around him--oblivious, for instance, of the fact that his aristocrat employer is a Nazi sympathizer. Still, there are even larger matters at stake in this heartbreaking, beautifully crafted novel-- namely, Stevens' own ability to allow some bit of life-affirming love into his tightly repressed existence.

This is one of those books I've always meant to read, and never got around to. The same is true of "A Prayer for Owen Meany." And that is the only reason that I've paired these two books together – they were both written some time ago and are both regarded as modern classics. Hopefully you may be the same as me and have not read at least one of them. Time to put that right!

Jansson, Tove

The Summer book

An elderly artist and her six-year-old granddaughter while away a summer together on a tiny island in the gulf of Finland. Gradually, the two learn to adjust to each other's fears, whims and yearnings for independence, and a fierce yet understated love emerges – one that encompasses not only the summer inhabitants but the island itself, with its mossy rock, windswept firs and unpredictable seas. Full of brusque humour and wisdom, *The Summer book* is a profoundly life-affirming story. Tove Jansson captured much of her own experience and spirit in the book, which was her favourite of the novels she wrote for adults. This new edition sees the return of a European literary gem – fresh, authentic and deeply humane.

Thanks so much to Sheila for suggesting this. I'm familiar with the Moomintroll stories written for children by this author, but had not come across her adult books. My mum married a Norwegian navigator at the end of the war, and they went to live in Norway for the first 12 years of their married life. Her mother-in-law, my grandmother, was, by all accounts, an amazing woman and a real matriarch. She didn't speak English and insisted that her new daughter-in-law not only had to learn the Norwegian language, but cooking too. Quite challenging when you really did not like to eat cod's heads! She had very different ideas of the roles of men and women, ones which my mum definitely did not adhere to, e.g. that it was not a man's place to do dishes or help with household chores. Think again Dad! But I can imagine that my grandmother would have shared many traits to the one featured in this book. Certainly sounds like it. One thing that certainly resonates, most of my relations do indeed have a summer house on an island or on the coast, a very popular thing in Scandinavia, and our family enjoyed many holidays staying in them, after we returned to Scotland to live. I've just given this book to mum to read. She's 91 now, but has played a major part in the childhood of all 9 of her grandchildren. There is so much in this book that brings back fond memories for her, but you don't need to have experienced a Scandinavian summer, or even grandchildren, to thoroughly enjoy this book

Kalhan, Savita

The Long weekend

Sam knows that he and his friend Lloyd made a colossal mistake when they accepted the ride home. They have ended up in a dark mansion in the middle of nowhere with a man who means to harm them. But Sam doesn't know how to get them out. They were trapped, then separated. Now they are alone. Will either of them get out alive?

A good book is a good book, no matter who the intended audience. Over the past 2 or 3 years we've featured several junior and teen novels – When Hitler stole pink rabbit, Private Peaceful, The Boy in the striped pyjamas, The Book thief, Twilight, and they've generally been very well received. So here is another novel aimed at young teens, but a gripping read for anyone never the less. Paired with "My Sister lives on the mantelpiece" by Annabel Pitcher

Kennedy, Emma

The Tent, the bucket and me

For the 70s child, summer holidays meant being crammed into a car with Grandma and heading to the coast. With just a tent for a home and a bucket for the necessities, we would set off on new adventures each year, stoically resolving to enjoy ourselves. For Emma Kennedy, and her mum and dad, disaster always came along for the ride no matter where they went. Whether it was being swept away by a force ten gale on the Welsh coast or falling down a squat toilet in the first few hours of a brave trip to France, family holidays always left them battered and bruised. But they never gave up. Emma's memoir, *The Tent, the bucket and me*, is a painfully funny reminder of just what it was like to spend your summer holidays cold, damp but with sand between your toes.

Every year I ask the book group members as well as just about everyone I know for suggestions for the new collection. This year several members of our staff came up with this one, and said it was tears running down your face funny. So now we'll find out if librarians have a strange sense of humour! Thanks to Wilma and Emma

Lamb, Wally

She's come undone

In his extraordinary coming-of-age odyssey, Wally Lamb invites us to hitch a wild ride on a journey of love, pain, and renewal. At once a fragile girl and a hard-edged cynic, so tough to love yet so inimitably lovable, Dolores Price is as poignantly real as our own imperfections.

"Mine is a story of craving; an unreliable account of lusts and troubles that began, somehow, in 1956 on the day our free television was delivered." So begins the story of Dolores Price, the unconventional heroine of Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone*. Dolores is a class-A emotional basket case, and why shouldn't she be? She's suffered almost every abuse and familial travesty that exists: her father is a violent, philandering liar; her mother has the mental and emotional consistency of Jell-O; and the men in her life are among the most loathsome creatures ever to go by the name of man. But Dolores is no quitter; she battles her woes with a sense of self-indulgence and gluttony rivalled only by Henry VIII. Hers is a dysfunctional Wonder Years, where growing up in the golden era was anything but ideal. While most kids her age were dealing with the monumental importance of the latest Beatles single and how college turned an older sibling into a long-haired hippie, Dolores was grappling with such issues as divorce, rape and mental illness. Whether you're disgusted by her antics or moved by her pathetic ploys, you'll be drawn into Dolores's warped, hilarious, Mallomar-munching world.

Great read - body image, disaffection, child abuse, depression but it is an uplifting and redemptive read (Rhona)

I don't normally pinch other people's reviews (well actually that's not quite true) but this comment by a reviewer on Amazon made me laugh "She's Come Undone is capable of making you cry, but surely I am not the only reader capable of seeing the humour which exists in nearly every page? How can you not laugh at instances such as when Dolores claims to be an artist and is asked "What medium do you work in?" to which she replies, with all seriousness, "Etch-a-sketch." Another long book, but I can't exclude it because of that, or our choices for book group books would be severely curtailed. However,

most folk seem to have rattled through it. One of the things most commented on is the fact that this has been written by a man, I guess because he really seems to have nailed this female perspective. I've paired this with "Glass castle" as both these books, one fiction, one non-fiction seem to be dealing with different – dysfunctional? – families.

Lovric, Michelle

The book of human skin

13 May, 1784, Venice: Minguillo Fasan, heir to the decaying, gothic Palazzo Espagnol, is born. Yet Minguillo is no ordinary child: he is strange, devious and all those who come near him are fearful. Twelve years later Minguillo is faced with an unexpected threat to his inheritance: a newborn sister, Marcella. His untempered jealousy will condemn his sister to a series of fates as a cripple, a madwoman and a nun. But in his insatiable quest to destroy her, he may have underestimated his sister's ferocious determination, and her unlikely allies who will go to extraordinary lengths to save her...

Don't know about you, but I find it increasingly difficult to read as the day wears on and the light gets dimmer. Using different size font and typefaces depending on which character is narrating, is an interesting device, but made reading Minguillo somewhat challenging at bed time! Minguillo. It's 1784, Venice and Minguillo Fasan claws his way out of his mother's womb. This does somehow set the tone of the book. Not for you if you have a weak stomach. There is torture and horror and truly evil and horrible characters. But compelling and not without humour. This book reminds me a bit of Perfume by Patrick Suskind. One of our book group members wrote that reading it made her feel "deliciously dirty!" I think you may get the same kind of feeling reading this. As well as feeling a bit guilty at enjoying something so morally reprehensible and disgusting!
Recommended by Jean

McLain, Paula

The Paris wife

Chicago, 1920: Hadley Richardson is a shy twenty-eight-year-old who has all but given up on love and happiness when she meets Ernest Hemingway and is captivated by his energy, intensity and burning ambition. After a whirlwind courtship and wedding, the pair set sail for France. But glamorous Jazz Age Paris, full of artist and writers, fuelled by alcohol and gossip, is no place for family life and fidelity. Ernest and Hadley's marriage begins to founder, and the birth of a beloved son only drives them further apart. Then, at last, Ernest's ferocious literary endeavours bring him recognition not least from a woman intent on making him her own ...

The heart-wrenching story of ambition and betrayal that captures the love affair between two unforgettable people: Ernest Hemingway and his first wife Hadley

Most of the book group members really enjoyed the fictionalised account of Clara Schumann's life by Janice Galloway, when we featured it a few years ago. So here we have a novel based on the first wife (he had 4) of Ernest Hemingway. Can't say that "For whom the bell tolls" was very well received when it was a book group book back in the day, but this novel based around his early years, when Ernest Hemingway was a bright young thing sounds eminently readable. A fascinating study of a deeply romantic, but doomed relationship.

May, Peter

The black house

A brutal killing takes place on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland: a land of harsh beauty and inhabitants of deep-rooted faith. **A murder.** Detective Inspector Fin Macleod is sent from Edinburgh to investigate. For Lewis born Macleod, the case represents a journey both home and into his past. **A secret.** Something lurks

within the close-knit island community. Something sinister. **A trap.** As Fin investigates, old skeletons begin to surface and soon he, the hunter, becomes the hunted.

I haven't read this yet, but I see we already have 5 requests for the Lewis Man, the sequel to this novel and second in the Lewis trilogy. Looks very promising.

Recommended by Liz

Miller, A.D.

Snowdrops

Snowdrops. That's what the Russians call them – the bodies that float up into the light in the thaw. Drunks, most of them, and homeless people who just give up and lie down into the whiteness, and murder victims hidden in the drifts by their killers. Nick has a confession. When he worked as a high-flying British lawyer in Moscow, he was seduced by Masha, an enigmatic woman who led him through her city: the electric nightclubs and intimate dachas, the human kindnesses and state wide corruption. Yet as Nick fell for Masha, he found that he fell away from himself; he knew that she was dangerous, but life in Russia was addictive, and it was too easy to bury secrets in the winter snows ...

This is an intensely riveting psychological drama that unfolds over the course of one Moscow winter, as a young Englishman's moral compass is spun by the seductive opportunities revealed to him by a new Russia: a land of hedonism and desperation, corruption and kindness, magical dachas and debauched nightclubs; a chilling story of love and moral freefall: of the corruption, by a corrupt society, of a corruptible young man. It is taut, intense and has a momentum as irresistible to the reader as the moral danger that first enchants, then threatens to overwhelm, its narrator.

I keep coming across references to this book; people recommending it, reviews of it, hearing folk talking about it, seeing it advertised. I did like one of the descriptions on the back cover – "reads like Graham Greene on steroids." I've just started this and already gripped.

Yet another debut novel.

Recommended by Dorothy

Moyes, Jojo

Me before you

Lou Clark knows lots of things. She knows how many footsteps there are between the bus stop and home. She knows she likes working in the Buttered bun tea shop and she knows she might not love her boyfriend Patrick. What Lou doesn't know is she's about to lose her job or that knowing what's coming is what keeps her sane. Will Traynor knows his motorcycle accident took away his desire to live. He knows everything feels very small and rather joyless now, and he knows exactly how he's going to put a stop to that. What Will doesn't know is that Lou is about to burst into his world in a riot of colour. And neither of them knows they're going to change the other for all time.

My daughter burst in the other day, "I've been crying all the way home", she said accusingly, as if it was my fault. "You and your book group books!" She'd been reading this, so of course I asked her to write a review:

"This is a fantastic book about love and loss and learning to live again. It is a novel that fearlessly takes on a hot button issue with care, compassion and consideration without judgment or resorting to politics. I fell in love with the characters whose struggles, although different, mirrored each other's in such a way that you couldn't help but feel so glad they were able to find one another. I read this book in a day; I couldn't put it down, funny, sweet and heart-wrenchingly sad I was blown away by how much it affected me – crying on the bus, ahem. "Tell me something good," Will says to Lou at two important junctures in the book. Jojo Moyes novel is truly something good!" (Rachael)

Ox travels

Introduced by Michael Palin

Ox travels is an extraordinary collection. Thirty-six travel writers have contributed stories of remarkable meetings – life-changing, affecting, amusing by turn. Most of the writers are based in Britain, but a few are from further afield. There were no rules imposed on the contributors, except that their story should be true – and the meeting real. And so here is a book featuring thirty-six compelling stories, with an introduction by Michael Palin.

Travel books have featured quite regularly in the past but feedback indicated that you'd had enough of them for a while – especially anything to do with India, fiction or non-fiction. While India is most definitely represented, I think I'll be forgiven for including it. What a pedigree of travel writers! I don't imagine anyone will read this from cover to cover, but what a great book to dip into. Thanks to Kevin for recommending it.

Paver, Michelle

Dark matter. A ghost story

Out of nowhere, for no reason, I was afraid. My skin prickled. My heart thudded in my throat. My body knew before I did that I was not alone

London, 1937. Jack is poor, lonely and desperate to change his life, so when he's offered the chance to join an Arctic expedition, he jumps at it. Spirits are high as the ship leaves Norway and at last they reach the remote, uninhabited bay where they will camp for the next year. But the Arctic summer is brief. As night returns to claim the land, Jack feels a creeping unease. One by one, his companions are forced to leave. Soon Jack will see the last of the sun, the sea will freeze and escape will be impossible. And Jack is not alone. Something walks there in the dark ...

I loved Michelle Paver's "Chronicles of ancient darkness" series for younger readers. She has a lifelong love of the Arctic, which has taken her to northern Canada, Greenland, Scandinavia and Spitsbergen. I'm really looking forward to reading her first adult novel, which happens to be a ghost story, even better ...

Recommended by Fran

Pitcher, Annabel

My sister lives on the mantelpiece

Ten-year-old Jamie hasn't cried since it happened. He knows he should have – Jasmine cried, Mum cried, Dad still cries. Roger didn't, but then he is just a cat and didn't know Rose that well, really. Everyone kept saying it would get better with time, but that's just one of those lies that grown-ups tell in awkward situations. Five years on, it's worse than ever: Dad drinks, Mum's gone and Jamie's left with questions that he must answer for himself. This is his story, an unflinchingly real yet heart-warming account of a young boy's struggle to make sense of the loss that tore his family apart.

The other novel in this year's collection aimed at younger readers. This one has attracted many fantastic reviews. First published in 2011, I do think it's interesting to see what's being written for this market these days. I hope you enjoy this sufficiently to recommend to young people you know. Do however, let me know if you feel we've featured enough books aimed at younger readers. (Recommended by Rhona's daughter)

Pollen, Bella

The Summer of the bear

In the summer of 1979, a tamed grizzly bear is tempted by the lure of freedom and the wild open sea ... Meanwhile, the sudden death of British diplomat Nicky Fleming has left his wife closed down with shock. Relocated from Cold War riven Germany to a remote Hebridean island, Letty Fleming is haunted

by the unthinkable – was it an accident, murder or suicide? And how can she ever begin to explain to her three children that their father may have betrayed his country? As the family's secrets threaten to tear them apart, it is only the strange but brilliant Jamie who manages to hold on to the one thing he knows for sure: his father has promised to return, and Nicky Fleming was a man who never broke a promise ...

Apparently this is part spy thriller, part ghost story. But I do love novels set in the Highlands and Islands, so looking forward to reading it. Bella Pollen also wrote Hunting unicorns and Midnight Cactus which I really enjoyed.

Rakha, Naseem

The Crying tree

Irene Stanley thought her world had come to an end when her husband found their 15 year old son, Shep, murdered in their Oregon home. Daniel Robbin, who had spent his teenage years in and out of trouble, gave himself up to the police and was given the state's harshest sentence: death by lethal injection. Now, nineteen years later, as the superintendent of the state penitentiary prepares to execute Robbin, Irene Stanley must reveal something she has been hiding from her family. Her revelation stuns her family and cracks open the secrets that surrounded her son's death. Secrets that reveal how little she understood Shep, her husband, or herself.

Lots of good reviews for this one. Lots of themes being touched on - love, grief, mental health, prejudice, religion, marriage, the death penalty, forgiveness. Looks interesting. Recommended by Fiona

Reichl, Ruth

Garlic and sapphires: the secret life of a food critic

Garlic and sapphires is Ruth Reichl's delicious and mischievous account of her time spent as an undercover restaurant critic. Reichl knows that to be a good critic you have to be anonymous. When she lands the much coveted job of the New York Times restaurant critic, she resorts to disguise in order to avoid the inevitable red carpet treatment. But what is remarkable about Reichl's spy games is that as she takes on these various guises (frumpy, blonde Molly; bohemian, red-headed Brenda...) she finds herself changed beyond her physical appearance. Ruth discovers how one's outer appearance can profoundly influence one's inner character, expectations – and appetites.

A famous food critic dons a disguise and it is really interesting to see how the dining experience would be completely different for her, depending on what she looked like. Lots of insight into her personal life too.

Tobin, Betsy

Crimson China

February 2004, Morecambe Bay. Angie, an English woman haunted by her past. Wen, a Chinese cockle picker fighting for a future. One freezing night Angie wades into the sea in a drunken bid to commit suicide; braced for death, she finds herself instead saving the life of a young Chinese cockle picker, one of the only survivors of a tragic mass drowning. They share neither language nor experience but Angie offers him sanctuary, soon finding in this enigmatic stranger a refuge of her own. Within a short time their unlikely pairing blossoms into something darkly passionate. But Wen's past soon catches up with him. He is still in debt to the snakeheads who brought him out of China. And when his sister, Lili, travels to Britain in search of his memory, she unwittingly seals his fate, for Wen is a wanted man, on the run from a criminal gang who pose just as great a threat as the icy waters of Morecambe Bay ...

This novel is dedicated to all those who perished at Morecambe Bay on February 5th 2004.

"I liked Crimson China by Betsy Tobin – a good first novel which starts with the Chinese Cackle pickers in Morecombe Bay – quite brave!" (Sheila)
Also recommended by Beverley and Sally

Tomalin, Claire

Charles Dickens: a life

Charles Dickens was a phenomenon: a demonically hardworking journalist, the father of ten children, a tireless walker and traveller, a supporter of liberal social causes, but most of all a great novelist - the creator of characters who live immortally in the English imagination: the Artful Dodger, Mr Pickwick, Pip, David Copperfield, Little Nell, Lady Dedlock, and many more. At the age of twelve he was sent to work in a blacking factory by his affectionate but feckless parents. From these unpromising beginnings, he rose to scale all the social and literary heights, entirely through his own efforts. When he died, the world mourned, and he was buried - against his wishes - in Westminster Abbey.

Yet the brilliance concealed a divided character: a republican, he disliked America; sentimental about the family in his writings, he took up passionately with a young actress; usually generous, he cut off his impecunious children.

Claire Tomalin, author of Whitbread Book of the Year *Samuel Pepys*, paints an unforgettable portrait of Dickens, capturing brilliantly the complex character of this great genius. *Charles Dickens: A Life* is the examination of Dickens we deserve.

Recommended by Veronica

Walls, Jeannette

The Glass castle

While Jeannette Walls was living on Park Avenue, covering the Academy Awards and attending black-tie parties at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, her parents were squatting in an abandoned building on the Lower East Side. Rex Walls, her father, was an ingenious adventurer and a hopeless alcoholic. Her mother was an artist who abhorred domestic routine and the chores of motherhood. "Why should I cook a meal that will be gone in an hour when I can do a painting that will last forever?" Funny, sad, quirky and loving, *The Glass castle* is an almost incredible story of a nomadic, impoverished childhood.

A familiar tale of alcoholism, poverty and abuse – or as one reviewer put it, more scatty neglect, but told with humour, acceptance and above all understanding. So a refreshing change.

Walsh, Jill Paton

Knowledge of angels

It is, perhaps, the fifteenth century and the ordered tranquillity of a Mediterranean island is about to be shattered by the appearance of two outsiders: one, a castaway, plucked from the sea by fishermen, whose beliefs represent a challenge to the established order; the other, a child abandoned by her mother and suckled by wolves, who knows nothing of the precarious relationship between Church and State but whose innocence will become the subject of a dangerous experiment. But the arrival of the Inquisition on the island creates a darker, more threatening force which will transform what has been a philosophical game of chess into a matter of life and death ...

"Fabulous" (Erin)

I haven't read this yet, but have looked at several reviews and I still not what this novel is about. I understand it's something to do with belief in God or at least the importance and significance of arguments for and against religion. It's a medieval fable apparently, an allegory for today and yesterday. Sounds really hard work, but I don't think it is. The fact that it is so "beautifully written"

will hopefully ensure that most of you will give it a try, if you haven't already read this. Originally published in 1994.

Watson, S.J.

Before I go to sleep

Memories define us. So what if you lost yours every time you went to sleep? Your name, your identity, your past, even the people you love – all forgotten overnight. And the one person you trust may only be telling you half the story. Welcome to Christine's life.

Who are you?" I say.

"I'm your husband Ben," he says. "You had an accident a long time ago. You have trouble remembering things."

"What things?"

"Everything."

"I'm scared."

"Don't worry. I'll look after you. I'll always look after you."

This blurb on the front cover of the book really reflects the disturbing and unsettling tone of this novel. I found this totally compelling, and read half way through the night to finish it. I love it when I become so involved with fictional characters in a book – I was genuinely fearful for Christine. This is a gripping read.

Recommended by Caroline , Liz and Kathryn

Winman, Sarah

When God was a rabbit

This is a book about a brother and a sister. It's a book about childhood and growing up, friendships and families, triumph and tragedy and everything in between. More than anything, it's a book about love in all its forms.

A novel written in the first person, the main character being Elly. She tells of her brother, his friend Charlie, her long lost childhood playmate Jenny. Of a family story over 4 decades. A coming of age tale which triggers all your emotions. I particularly liked the author's note at the back explaining why and how she started writing as well as the writing process itself. And have you noticed how many books have Reading Group Questions these days? I'd be interested to know if you find these useful, and whether you use them as the basis for some of your discussions.

Recommended by Kathryn

Young, Louisa

My dear, I wanted to tell you

My dear **Nadine.....**

I want to tell you, before any telegram arrives, that I was admitted to **36 Casualty Clearing Station B.E.F.....**

On **August 21.....**

With a slight/serious wound in my

I am now comfortably in bed with the best of surgeons and sisters to do all that is necessary for me. I will write and tell you how I get on, but don't write here, as I expect to leave for Base shortly.

Your loving,

Riley Purefoy

August 1917. A letter, two lovers, a terrible lie. In war truth is only the first casualty

Set on the Western Front, in London and in Paris, MY DEAR I WANTED TO TELL YOU is a moving and brilliant novel of love, class and sex in wartime, and how war affects those left behind as well as those who fight. While Riley Purefoy and Peter Locke fight for their country, their survival and their sanity in the trenches of Flanders, Nadine Waveney, Julia Locke and Rose Locke do what they can at home. Beautiful, obsessive Julia and gentle, eccentric Peter are married: each day Julia goes through rituals to prepare for her beloved husband's return. Nadine and Riley, only eighteen when the war starts, and with problems of their own already, want above all to make promises - but how can they when the future is not in their hands? And Rose? Well, what did happen to the traditionally brought-up women who lost all hope of marriage, because all the young men were dead?

Another book which is receiving a lot of attention and making several best sellers lists. I tried not to feature any second world war books this time, as you reckoned you'd had your fair share of them last year. Hope you don't mind the first world war then, as it would have been a shame to miss out on this one.