

Book Group Titles 2025

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Book Group Synopses 2025

Barker, Elspeth – O Caledonia

At the bottom of a great stone staircase, dressed in her mother's black lace evening dress, twisted in murderous death, lies Janet. So end the sixteen years of Janet's short life.

A life spent in a draughty Scottish castle, where roses will not grow, and a jackdaw decides to live in the doll's house.

A life peopled by prettier, smoother-haired siblings, a Nanny with a face like the North Sea and the peculiar, whisky-swigging Cousin Lila.

A life where Janet is perpetually misunderstood - and must turn from people, to animals, to books, to her own wild and wonderful imagination.

Barr, Damian – The Two Roberts

He will stay like this forever, Robert's arm draped round him. They will be forever twenty.

Scotland, 1933. Bobby MacBryde is on his way. After years grafting at Lees Boot Factory, he's off to the Glasgow School of Art, to his future. On his first day he will meet another Robert, a quiet man with loose dark curls - and never leave his side.

Together they will spend every penny and every minute devouring Glasgow - its botanical gardens, the Barras market, a whole hidden city - all the while loving each other behind closed doors. With the world on the brink of war, their unrivalled talent will take them to Paris, Rome, London. They will become stars as the bombs fall, hosting wild parties with the likes of Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon and Elizabeth Smart. But the brightest stars burn fastest.

Stunningly reimagined, *The Two Roberts* is a profoundly moving story of devotion and obsession, art and class. It is a love letter to MacBryde and Colquhoun, the almost-forgotten artists who tried to change the way the world sees - and paid a devastating price.

Boyne, John – The Elements

Human life is governed by the elements – water, earth, fire and air. They are fundamental to our existence. They sustain us, but they also challenge us.

In *The Elements*, John Boyne has created a vivid kaleidoscope to reflect that contradiction: a quartet of intertwined narratives, each providing a different perspective on cause and effect from the points of view of the enabler, the accomplice, the perpetrator and the victim.

From a mother on the run from her past, to a young football star on trial, a successful surgeon grappling with childhood trauma, and finally a father on a transformative journey with his son, the four strands weave together to form a tapestry of intersecting lives.

Boyne's most ambitious work yet, *The Elements* is both an engrossing drama and a moving examination of the fault lines inherent to human experience. In crisp, spellbinding prose, he navigates a complex subject with extraordinary empathy and unflinching honesty, at every step challenging us to confront our own perceptions of who we are and what made us that way.

Bradley, Kaliane – The Ministry of Time

In the near future, a disaffected civil servant is offered a job in a new government ministry gathering 'expats' from across history to test the limits of time-travel. Her role is to work as a 'bridge': living with, assisting and monitoring the expat known as '1847' - Commander Graham Gore. As far as history is concerned, Commander Gore died on Sir John Franklin's doomed expedition to the Arctic, so he's a little disoriented to find himself alive and surrounded by outlandish concepts such as 'washing machine', 'Spotify' and 'the collapse of the British Empire'. With an appetite for discovery and a seven-a-day cigarette habit, he soon adjusts; and during a long, sultry summer he and his bridge move from awkwardness to genuine friendship, to something more. But as the true shape of the project that brought them together begins to emerge, they are forced to confront their past choices and imagined futures.

Constable, Harriet – The Instrumentalist

Anna Maria may have no name, no fortune, no family. But she has her ambition, and her talent.

Her best hope lies in her teacher, Antonio Vivaldi. Soon she is his star pupil.

But as Anna Maria's star rises, not everyone is happy. Because Anna Maria's shining light threatens to eclipse that of her mentor. The prodigy becomes the rival...

She will leave her mark, whatever it takes. Her story will be heard.

Daré, Abi – And So I Roar

Plucky fourteen-year-old Adunni is in Lagos, excited to finally enrol in school. But it's not so simple to run away from your past.

On the night before she is due to join her new classmates, a terrible knocking at the front gate summons Adunni back to her home village, Ikati, where her dramatic story of resilience first began.

There, Adunni must try to not only save herself, but also transform Ikati into a place where girls are allowed to claim the bright futures they deserve - and roar their stories to the world.

Delecroix, Vincent – Small Boat

Shortlisted for the International Booker Prize

In November 2021, an inflatable dinghy carrying migrants from France to the United Kingdom capsized in the Channel causing the death of 27 people on board. Despite receiving numerous calls for help, the French authorities wrongly told the migrants they were in British waters and had to call the British authorities for help. By the time rescue vessels arrived on the scene, all but two of the migrants had died.

The narrator of Delecroix's fictional account of the events is the woman who took the calls. Accused of failing in her duty, she refuses to be held more responsible than others for this disaster. Why should she be more responsible than the sea, than the war, than the crises behind these tragedies?

Espach, Alison – The Wedding People

Phoebe Stone arrives at a grand beachside hotel in Rhode Island wearing her best dress and least comfortable shoes. Immediately she is mistaken for one of the wedding people - but she's actually the only guest at the Cornwall Inn who isn't here for the big event.

When the bride discovers her elaborate destination wedding could be ruined by a divorced and depressed stranger, she is furious. Lila has spent months accounting for every detail and every possible disaster - except for, well, Phoebe . . . Soon, both women find their best-laid plans derailed and an unlikely confidante in one another.

Hilarious and moving, *The Wedding People* is an irresistible novel about love, friendship, dysfunctional families, and the unexpected paths that lead to happiness.

Fagan, Jenni – Ootlin: a Memoir

The government told a story about me before I was born. Jenni Fagan was property of the state before birth. She drew her first breath in care and by the age of seven, she had lived in fourteen different homes and had changed name multiple times. Twenty years after her first attempt to write this powerful memoir, Jenni is finally ready to share her account. 'Ootlin' is a journey through the broken UK care system - it is one of displacement and exclusion, but also of the power of storytelling. It is about the very human act of making meaning from adversity.

Feeney, Alice – Beautiful Ugly

Author Grady Green is having the worst best day of his life.

Grady calls his wife as she's driving home to share some exciting news. He hears Abby slam on the brakes, get out of the car, then nothing. When he eventually finds her car by a cliff edge, the headlights are on, the driver door is open, her phone is still there . . . but his wife has disappeared.

A year later, Grady is still overcome with grief and desperate to know what happened to Abby. He can't sleep, and he can't write, so he travels to a tiny Scottish island to try to get his life back on track.

Then he sees the impossible: a woman who looks exactly like his missing wife.

Ganeshanathan, V. V. – Brotherless Night

WINNER OF THE WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION 2024

Sixteen-year-old Sashi wants to become a doctor. But over the next decade, as a vicious civil war tears through her hometown of Jaffna, her dream takes her on a different path as she sees those around her, including her four beloved brothers and their friend, get swept up in violent political ideologies and their consequences. Desperate to act, she must ask herself: is it possible for anyone to move through life without doing harm?

Hannah, Kristin – The Women

They answered the call. Then they fought to be remembered.

'Women can be heroes, too'.

When twenty-year-old nursing student, Frances "Frankie" McGrath, hears these unexpected words, it is a revelation. Raised on California's idyllic Coronado Island and sheltered by her conservative parents, she has always prided herself on doing the right thing, being a good girl.

But in 1965 the world is changing, and she suddenly imagines a different path for her life. When her brother ships out to serve in Vietnam, she impulsively joins the Army Nurses Corps and follows his path.

As green and inexperienced as the young men sent to Vietnam to fight, Frankie is overwhelmed by the chaos and destruction of war, as well as the unexpected trauma of coming home to a changed America. But Frankie will also discover the true value of female friendship and the heartbreak that love can cause.

'Thank God for girlfriends. In this crazy, chaotic, divided world that was run by men, you could count on the women'

Harper, Elodie – Boudicca’s Daughter

Boudicca. Infamous warrior, queen of the British Iceni tribe and mastermind of one of history's greatest revolts. Her defeat spelled ruin for her people, yet still her name is enough to strike fear into Roman hearts.

But what of the woman who grew up in her shadow?

The woman who has her mother's looks and cunning but a spirit all of her own?

The woman whose desperate bid for survival will take her from Britain's sacred marshlands to the glittering façades of Nero's Roman Empire.

Born to a legend. Forced to fight. Determined to succeed.

Meet Solina.

Boudicca's Daughter.

Hart, Emilia – Weyward

Three women, five centuries, one spellbinding story

In the present day, Kate flees a traumatic relationship to the Cumbrian cottage she inherited from her great-aunt; but the cottage hides secrets of its own.

In 1942, Violet rebels against her father’s ideas of a ‘proper young lady’ ... until he takes matters into his own hands.

In 1619, Altha is on trial for witchcraft, implicated in the gruesome death of a local man.

Three women they tried to cage – but Weyward women belong to the wild. And they cannot be tamed...

Kamali, Marjan – The Lion Women of Tehran

In 1950s Tehran, seven-year-old Ellie lives in grand comfort until the untimely death of her father, forcing Ellie and her mother to move to a tiny home downtown. Lonely and bearing the brunt of her mother’s endless grievances, Ellie dreams of a friend to alleviate her isolation.

Luckily, on the first day of school, she meets Homa, a kind, passionate girl with a brave and irrepressible spirit. Together, the two girls play games, learn to cook in the stone kitchen of Homa’s warm home, wander through the colorful stalls of the Grand Bazaar, and share their ambitions for becoming 'lion women.'

But their happiness is disrupted when Ellie and her mother are afforded the opportunity to return to their previous bourgeois life. Now a popular student at the best girls’ high school

in Iran, Ellie's memories of Homa begin to fade. Years later, however, her sudden reappearance in Ellie's privileged world alters the course of both of their lives.

Together, the two young women come of age and pursue their own goals for meaningful futures. But as the political turmoil in Iran builds to a breaking point, one earth-shattering betrayal will have enormous consequences.

Kidd, Mairi – The Specimens

Up the close and down the stair, meet the women of Burke and Hare

Edinburgh, 1828. Two women - one rich, one poor - must navigate life against a frenzied backdrop of medical discovery, mob mayhem, and murder.

Susan's sheltered life as the wife of Robert Knox, a wealthy anatomist, is a far cry from Helen's perilous existence in the Old Town slums with her lover William Burke.

Yet as people begin disappearing, these two different women face the same impossible choice. Should they protect what they have or tell the truth about what they know?

Discover the notorious serial killings of Burke and Hare, told for the first time through the eyes of women whose stories reveal the depths of the human heart.

Kuang, R.F. – Katabasis

Katabasis, noun, Ancient Greek. The story of a hero's descent to the underworld.

Grad student Alice Law has only ever had one goal: to become the brightest mind in the field of analytic magick.

But the only person who can make her dream come true is dead and – inconveniently – in Hell. And Alice, along with her biggest rival Peter Murdoch, is going after him.

But Hell is not as the philosophers claim, its rules are upside-down, and if she's going to get out of there alive, she and Peter will have to work together.

That's if they can agree on anything.

Will they triumph, or kill each other trying?

Marmery, Nikki – Lilith

In the Garden of Eden, at the beginning of time, an outrageous lie is born: that women are inferior.

Lilith and Adam are equal and happy in the Garden of Eden. But when Adam decides Lilith should submit to his will and lie beneath him, she refuses – and is banished forever from Paradise. Demonised and sidelined, Lilith watches in fury as God creates Eve, the woman

who accepts her submission. But Lilith has a secret: she has already tasted the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Endowed with Wisdom, she knows why Asherah – God’s wife and equal, the Queen of Heaven – is missing. Lilith has a plan: she will rescue Eve, find Asherah, restore balance to the world and regain her rightful place in Paradise.

McDonald, Margaret – Glasgow Boys

Two boys can't remember the last time they had a hug.

Meet Finlay. He's studying for his nursing degree at Glasgow University, against all the odds. But coming straight from care means he has no support network.

How can he write essays, find paid work and NOT fall for the beautiful boy at uni, when he's struggling to even feed himself?

Meet Banjo. He's trying to settle in with his new foster family and finish high school. But he can't forget all that has happened, and his anger and fear keep boiling over.

How can he hold on to the one good person in his life, when his outbursts keep threatening his already uncertain future?

Can Finlay and Banjo let go of the past before it drags them under?

McEwan, Ian – What We Can Know

A quest, a literary thriller and a love story, *What We Can Know* spans the past, present and future to ask profound questions about who we are and where we are going.

2014: A great poem is read aloud and never heard again. For generations, people speculate about its message, but no copy has yet been found.

2119: The lowlands of the UK have been submerged by rising seas. Those who survive are haunted by the richness of the world that has been lost.

Tom Metcalfe, a scholar at the University of the South Downs, part of Britain's remaining archipelagos, pores over the archives of the early twenty-first century, captivated by the freedoms and possibilities of human life at its zenith.

When he stumbles across a clue that may lead to the great lost poem, revelations of entangled love and a brutal crime emerge, destroying his assumptions about a story he thought he knew intimately.

What We Can Know is a masterpiece that reclaims the present from our sense of looming catastrophe, and imagines a future world where all is not quite lost.

McFadden, Freida – The Surrogate Mother

She was promised a miracle. She got more than she bargained for.

Abby wants a baby more than anything.

But after years of failed infertility treatments and adoptions that have fallen through, it seems like motherhood is not in her future.

That is, until her personal assistant Monica makes a generous offer to serve as a surrogate. It's an offer that will make all of Abby's dreams come true.

But soon, strange things start happening. And it turns out Monica isn't who she says she is. The woman now carrying Abby's child has an unspeakable secret.

And she will stop at nothing to get what she wants.

Freida McFadden delivers a page-turner that redefines what it means to be in the family way, with gut-wrenching twists and pulse-pounding thrills that will keep you hooked until the suspenseful conclusion.

Okereke, Chioma – Water Baby

She's the Pearl of Makoko and the world is her oyster. In Makoko, the floating slum off mainland Lagos, Nigeria, nineteen-year-old Baby yearns for an existence where she can escape the future her father has planned for her. With opportunities scarce, Baby jumps at the chance to join a newly launched drone-mapping project, aimed at broadening the visibility of her community. Then a video of her at work goes viral and Baby finds herself with options she could never have imagined - including the possibility of leaving her birthplace to represent Makoko on the world stage. But will life beyond the lagoon be everything she's dreamed of? Or has everything she wants been in front of her all along?

Pearse, Lesley – The Long and Winding Road

Born during the Second World War, Lesley's innocence came to an abrupt end when a neighbour found her, aged 3, coatless in the snow. The mother she'd been unable to wake had been dead for days. Sent to an orphanage, Lesley soon learned adults couldn't always be trusted.

As a teenager in the swinging sixties, she took herself to London. Here, the second great tragedy of her life occurred. Falling pregnant, she was sent to a mother and baby home, and watched helplessly as her newborn was taken from her.

But like so many of her generation, Lesley had to carry on. She was, after all, a true survivor. Marriage and children followed – and all the while she nurtured a dream: to be a writer. Yet it wasn't until at the age of 48 that her stories – of women struggling in a difficult world – found a publisher, and the bestseller lists beckoned.

As heartbreaking as it is heartwarming, Lesley's story really is A Long and Winding Road with surprises and uplifting hope around every corner...

Pederson, Michael – Muckle Flucka

Life on a remote island is turned upside down by a stranger's arrival, testing bonds of family and tradition and leaving a young dreamer's future hanging in the balance.

It's no ordinary existence on the rugged isle of Muckle Flugga. The elements run riot and the very rocks that shape the place begin to shift under their influence. The only human inhabitants are the lighthouse keeper, known as The Father, and his otherworldly son, Ouse. Them, and the occasional lodger to keep the wolf from the door.

When one of those lodgers - Firth, a chaotic writer - arrives from Edinburgh, the limits of the world the keeper and his son cling to begin to crumble. A tug of war ensues between Firth and the lighthouse keeper for Ouse's affections - and his future. As old and new ways collide, and life-changing decisions loom, what will the tides leave standing in their wake?

Perrin, Valérie – Fresh Water for Flowers

Violette Toussaint is the caretaker at a cemetery in a small town in Bourgogne. Her daily life is lived to the rhythms of the hilarious and touching confidences of random visitors and her colleagues—three gravediggers, three groundskeepers, and a priest.

Violette's routine is disrupted one day by the arrival of police chief Julien Seul, wishing to deposit his mother's ashes on the gravesite of a complete stranger. Julien is not the only one to guard a painful secret: his mother's story of clandestine love breaks through Violette's carefully constructed defences to reveal the tragic loss of her daughter, and her steely determination to find out who is responsible.

The funny, moving, intimately told story of a woman who believes obstinately in happiness, Fresh Water for Flowers brings out the exceptional and the poetic in the ordinary. A delightful, atmospheric, absorbing tale.

Rebanks, James – The Place of Tides

How far do you have to go to find yourself?

One afternoon many years ago, James Rebanks met an old woman on a remote Norwegian island. She lived and worked alone on a tiny rocky outcrop, caring for wild Eider ducks and gathering their down. Hers was a centuries-old trade that had once made men and women rich, but had long been in decline. Still, somehow, she seemed to be hanging on.

Back at home, Rebanks couldn't stop thinking about the woman on the rocks. She was fierce and otherworldly – and yet strangely familiar. Years passed. Then, one day, he wrote her a

letter, asking if he could return. Bring work clothes, she replied, and good boots, and come quickly: her health was failing. And so he travelled to the edge of the Arctic to witness her last season on the island.

This is the story of that season. It is the story of a unique and ancient landscape, and of the woman who brought it back to life. It traces the pattern of her work from the rough, isolated toil of bitter winter, to the elation of the endless summer light, when the birds leave behind their precious down for gathering, like feathered gold.

Slowly, Rebanks begins to understand that this woman and her world are not what he had previously thought. What began as a journey of escape becomes an extraordinary lesson in self-knowledge and forgiveness.

Salam, Anbara – Hazardous Spirits

Edinburgh, 1923. Evelyn Hazard is a young woman living a comfortable and unremarkable middle-class life. One day, her quiet existence is shattered when her steady, reliable husband Robert makes a startling announcement: he can communicate with the dead. As the couple are pulled into the spiritualist movement that emerged following the mass deaths caused by the First World War and the Spanish Flu, Evelyn's life becomes increasingly unsettled as dark secrets from her past threaten to surface. Faced with the prospect of losing all that is dear to her, Evelyn finds herself asking: is the man she loves a fraud, a madman or - most frighteningly - is he telling the truth?

Shafak, Elif – The Island of Missing Trees

You don't fall in love in Cyprus in the summer of 1974. Not here, not now.

In 1974, two teenagers, from opposite sides of a divided Cyprus, meet at a tavern in the city they both call home. The tavern is the only place that Kostas, who is Greek, and Defne who is Turkish, can meet in secret, hidden beneath the leaves of a fig tree growing through the roof of the tavern. This tree will witness their hushed happy meetings, and will be there when the war breaks out and the teenagers vanish.

Decades later in north London, sixteen-year-old Ada has never visited the island where her parents were born. She seeks to untangle years of her family's silence, but the only connection she has to the land of her ancestors is a fig tree growing in the garden of their home . . .

Tyler, Anne – Three Days in June

The happily ever after is only part of the story... A funny, touching, hopeful gem about love, marriage and second chances

It's the day before her daughter's wedding and things are not going well for Gail Baines. First thing, she loses her job – or quits, depending who you ask. Then her ex-husband Max turns up at her door expecting to stay for the festivities. He doesn't even have a suit. Instead, he's brought memories, a shared sense of humour – and a cat looking for a new home.

Just as Gail is wondering what's next, their daughter Debbie discovers her groom has been keeping a secret...

As the big day dawns, the exes just can't agree on what's best for Debbie. Gail is seriously worried, while Max seems more concerned with whether to opt for the salmon or prime rib at the reception, if they make it that far.

The day after the wedding, Gail and Max prepare to go their separate ways again. But all the questions about the future of the happy couple have stirred up the past for Gail. Because 'happy' takes many forms, and sometimes the younger generation has much to teach the older about secrets, acceptance and taking the rough with the smooth.

Walsh, Colin – Kala

In the seaside village of Kinlough, on Ireland's west coast, three old friends meet for the first time in years. They - Helen, Joe and Mush - were part of an original group of six inseparable teenagers in the summer of 2003, with motherless, reckless Kala Lanann at its white-hot centre. But later that year, Kala disappeared without a trace. Now human remains have been discovered in the woods - including a skull with a Polaroid photo tucked inside - and the town is both aghast and titillated at the reopening of such an old wound. On the eve of this gruesome discovery, Helen had reluctantly returned for her father's wedding; the world-famous musician Joe had come home to dry out and reconnect with something authentic; and Mush had never left. But when two more girls go missing, they are forced to confront their own complicity in the events that led to Kala's disappearance.

Whitaker, Chris – All the Colours of the Dark

Late one summer, the town of Monta Clare is shattered by the abduction of local teenager Joseph 'Patch' Macauley. Nobody more so than Saint Brown, who is broken by her best friend's disappearance. Soon, she will eat, sleep, breathe, only to find him. But when she does: it will break her heart. Patch lies in a pitch-black room - all alone - for days or maybe weeks. Until he feels a hand in his. Her name is Grace and, though they cannot see each other, she takes him from the darkness and paints their world with her words. In this hopeless place, they fall in love. But when he escapes: there is no sign she ever even existed. To find her again, Patch charts an epic search across the country. And, to set him free, Saint will shadow his journey: on a darker path to hunt down the man who took them. Even if finding the truth means losing each other forever.

Winn, Alice – In Memoriam

It's 1914, and talk of war feels far away to Henry Gaunt, Sidney Ellwood and the rest of their classmates, safely ensconced in their idyllic boarding school in the English countryside. At seventeen, they're too young to enlist, and anyway, Gaunt is fighting his own private battle - an all-consuming infatuation with his best friend, the dreamy, poetic Ellwood - not having a clue that Ellwood is in love with him, always has been. When Gaunt's German mother asks him to enlist as an officer in the British army to protect the family from anti-German attacks, Gaunt signs up immediately, relieved to escape his overwhelming feelings for Ellwood. The front is horrific, of course, and though Gaunt tries to dissuade Ellwood from joining him on the battlefield, Ellwood soon rushes to join him, spurred on by his love of Greek heroes and romantic poetry. Before long, their classmates have followed suit.

Yousafzai, Malala – Finding my Way

This is not the story you think you know. It's the one I've been waiting to tell.

How do you rebuild yourself when your whole world changes overnight?

Thrust onto the public stage at fifteen years old after the Taliban's brutal attack on her life, Malala quickly became an international icon known for bravery and resilience. But away from the cameras and crowds, she spent years struggling to find her place in an unfamiliar world. Now, for the first time ever, Malala takes readers beyond the headlines in *Finding My Way* - a vulnerable, surprising memoir that buzzes with authenticity, sharp humour and tenderness.

Finding My Way is a story of friendship and first love, of anxiety and self-discovery, of trying to stay true to yourself when everyone wants to tell you who you are. In it, Malala traces her path from high school loner to reckless college student to a young woman at peace with her past. Through candid, often messy moments like nearly failing exams, getting ghosted and meeting the love of her life, Malala reminds us that real role models aren't perfect - they're human.

In this astonishing memoir, Malala reintroduces herself to the world, sharing how she navigated life as someone whose darkest moments threatened to define her - while seeking the freedom to find out who she truly is. *Finding My Way* is an intimate look at the life of a young woman taking charge of her destiny - and a deeply personal testament to the strength it takes to be unapologetically yourself.

Yuzuki, Asako – Butter

Gourmet cook Manako Kajii sits in Tokyo Detention Centre convicted of the serial murders of lonely businessmen, who she is said to have seduced with her delicious home cooking. The case has captured the nation's imagination but Kajii refuses to speak with the press, entertaining no visitors. That is, until journalist Rika Machida writes a letter asking for her

recipe for beef stew and Kajii can't resist writing back. Rika, the only woman in her news office, works late each night and survives on cheap, convenience store fare, rarely cooking more than ramen. As the visits unfold between her and the steely Kajii, they are closer to a masterclass in food than journalistic research. Rika hopes this gastronomic exchange will help her soften Kajii but it seems that she might be the one changing. With each meal she eats, something is awakening in her body, might she and Kajii have more in common than she once thought?