



Book Discussion Kit Titles

Atkinson, Kate. ***Case Histories***. New York: Back Bay Books, 2005.

“There is nothing fancy about the way Kate Atkinson’s...novel unfolds...she simply starts her story, grabs hold of the reader and doesn’t let go.” Case 1: Beloved youngest daughter disappears and is never seen again. Thirty years later, her sisters unearth shocking clues amid the clutter of their childhood home. Case 2: Lawyer delights in his daughter’s wit, effortless beauty and selfless love. Then his world is turned upside down. Case 3: Young wife trapped in a hell of her own making with needy baby and demanding husband...a fit of rage creates a grisly bloody escape. All three cases woven into a denouement “that taps into collective wishful thinking and suggests that warmth and safety may be found in the aftermath of blood and abandonment...author’s meaty, satisfying prose will attract many eager readers.”

Austen, Jane. ***Pride and Prejudice***. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

Wealthy Mr. Darcy and spirited Elizabeth Bennett dislike each other at first sight, and each must contend with their pride and prejudices while Elizabeth's mother plots economically advantageous marriages for all her daughters.

Bohjalian, Chris. ***Before You Know Kindness***. New York: Vintage Books, 2005.

After a decade of spending the delightful summer week at their country house in New Hampshire, the members of the extended Seton family are confronted by a terrible accident when a loaded hunting rifle in the wrong hands leads to tragedy, testing the values, convictions, and relationships that hold the family together.

Boyle, T. C (Coraghessan). ***Tortilla Curtain***. New York: Penguin, 1995.

A “timely and provocative” account of immigration in California where men and women risk everything to cross the Mexican border to take part in the American Dream. This is a novel about two families reflecting the intersection of the opposing worlds of starving illegal immigrants and wealthy Americans which subsequently reveals a tragicomedy of error and misunderstanding.

Brooks, Geraldine. ***March***. New York: Penguin, 1995.

An extraordinary novel woven out of the lore of American history and winner of the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. This novel is an exploration of the devastation and moral complexities of the Civil War through the persona of Mr. March, the absent father from Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. Mr. March struggles to reconcile duty to his fellow man with duty to his family during one of the most grim periods in American history.

Bryson, Bill. ***A Walk in the Woods: rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail***. New York: Broadway Books, 1998.

Returning to his native country after a long absence, Bill Bryson decides to hike the Appalachian Trail; he shares with readers both his experiences – often hilarious – and the trail’s fascinating history. Comedy is contributed by his very out-of-shape hiking partner, and their encounters along the way, both human and animal.

Conway, Jill Ker. ***The Road from Coorain***. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

One woman's journey from a childhood in Australia's outback to adulthood as a successful American career woman. *The Road from Coorain* is about Everywoman, for it is about childhood loneliness, anguished parent-child relationships, dawning sensibility, discovering a vocation, and finding one's own sense of self.

Edwards, Kim. ***The Memory Keeper's Daughter, The***. New York: Penguin, 2006.

In a tale spanning twenty-five years, a doctor delivers his newborn twins during a snowstorm and, rashly deciding to protect his wife from their baby daughter's affliction with Down Syndrome, turns her over to a nurse, who secretly raises the child.

Enger, Leif. ***Peace Like a River***. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press ; [Berkeley, CA] : Distributed by Publishers Group West, c2001.

The quiet 1960s midwestern life of the Land family--father Jeremiah, and children, Reuben, Davy and Swede--is upended when Davy kills two teenage boys who have come to harm the family. On the morning of his sentencing, Davy escapes from his cell and the Lands set out in search of him. Their search is at once a heroic quest, a tragedy, a love story, and a haunting meditation on the possibility of magic in the everyday world.

Eugenides, Jeffrey. ***Middlesex***. New York: Picador, 2002.

Cal(liope) Stephanides is a forty-one-year-old man who was raised until puberty as a girl. Beginning in Smyrna, Greece and moving on to Detroit, Michigan, this story is "an uproarious epic, at once funny and sad, about misplaced identities and family secrets."

Ferris, Joshua. ***Then We Came to the End***. New York: Back Bay Books (Little Brown & Co.), 2007.

Riot of a novel about characters caught in the office politics of the modern world as the remaining employees at an office affected by a business downturn spend their time indulging in secret romances, elaborate pranks and frequent coffee breaks while trying to make sense of their only remaining 'work,' a mysterious pro-bono ad campaign. "Wildly funny debut...delightfully freakish and entirely credible...a large generous book about work." (The Office meets Kafka).

Fforde, Jasper. ***The Eyre Affair***. New York: Penguin, 2002.

This is a unique detective novel by a Welsh author. Thursday Next is a book-loving, gun-toting, wit-slitting heroine detective with the Literate Division charged with solving crimes related to literature. Acheron Hades is a one-time college professor turned criminal evil genius. This novel has been described as "Masterpiece Theater meets James Bond." With witty wordplay and a colorful cast of characters, Fforde pokes fun at literature's highbrow status and reminds readers that the classics are not just regal old chestnuts for decorating the bookshelves; they are living, breathing tales that remain as exhilarating and vibrant as they were when first written.

Franklin, Ariana . **Mistress of the Art of Death**. New York: Penguin, 2007.

#1 of the Adelia Aguilar series, an original historical thriller. Adelia is an extraordinary woman for the times: a University of Salerno medical forensic expert when women were not permitted to study medicine in England, and, most importantly, an independent thinker. She is sent to medieval Cambridge at the request of Henry II because the Jewish community has been accused of ritual child murder. It is up to Vesuvia Adelia Rachel Ortese Aguilar to reveal the secrets of the dead; her lack of religious prejudice and skill at detective pathology make her a 'mistress of the art of death.'

Gilbert, Elizabeth. Eat, Pray, Love: **One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India, and Indonesia**.

Memoir detailing three distinct journeys taken by the author following a rough divorce in her quest to find spiritual and personal happiness. Wildly popular, the readership has adopted a "love it or loathe it" attitude toward the book: be prepared for a lively discussion!

Goldberg, Myla. **Bee Season**. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.

Powerful first novel about a troubled family's unraveling. With courage and all-consuming love, 9 year old Eliza attempts to pull her family back together by an act of will, yet each character in the book makes a choice that will eventually rend the fabric of the entire family. It is a complex novel dealing with family relationships, secrets, selfishness, competition, guilt, cults, mysticism and mental health. *Please do not consider the feature film of the same title as representative of the novel.*

Gruen, Sara. **Riding Lessons**. New York: Harper, 2004.

This first novel tells of a world class equestrienne and Olympic contender whose riding career and beloved horse are destroyed by a tragic accident. Twenty years later, jobless and abandoned by her husband, she brings her troubled teenage daughter back to her father's New Hampshire horse farm. This is a novel of human triumph and defeat as well as mistakes made and corrected.

Gruen, Sara. **Water for Elephants**. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2007.

A ninety-year-old veterinarian reminisces about his time with the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth during the Great Depression. Memories of a circus world filled with "freaks and clowns and wonder and pain and anger and passion; a world with its own narrow irrational rules, its own way of life and its own way of death...a salvation and a living hell."

Haddon, Mark. **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time**. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2003.

Despite his overwhelming fear of interacting with people, Christopher, a mathematically-gifted, autistic fifteen-year-old boy, decides to investigate the murder of a neighbor's dog and uncovers secret information about his mother.

Hamilton, Steve. **A Cold Day in Paradise**. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Fourteen years after being shot by a psychopath named Rose, former police detective Alex McKnight learns that she has been released from prison.

Hart, Erin. ***Haunted Ground***. New York: Scribner, 2003.

The Irish landscape holds secrets past and present as archaeologist Cormac O'Callaghan and pathologist Nora Gavin encounter a mystery when a decapitated woman is found in the bogs who may be related to a recent mother/child disappearance.

Hosseini, Khaled. ***The Kite Runner***. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003.

Traces the unlikely friendship of a wealthy Afghan youth and a servant's son, in a tale that spans the final days of Afghanistan's monarchy through the atrocities of the present day.

Jones, Edward P. ***The Known World***. New York: Amistad, 2004.

"Transforming a little-known historical footnote into an epic novel with few certified villains or heroes, this Pulitzer Prize-winning novel goes right to the heart of slavery as it tells of a black slave owner in 1850's Virginia and others who survive by negotiating mazes of moral contradiction...The book illustrates how slavery corrupts good intentions and underwrites bad ones, yet allows for the odd act of decency...Jones has an exceptional ear for speech now buried in the past...and the freshness of his story lies in its very incongruity and strangeness."

Kallos, Stephanie. ***Broken for You***. New York: Grove Press, 2007.

Margaret Hughes, a septuagenarian living in Seattle, takes in a series of boarders who help her cope with her illness, and whose lives become unexpectedly connected to each other.

Kingsolver, Barbara. ***The Poisonwood Bible: a novel***. New York: HarperTorch, 2003, c1998.

The family of a fierce evangelical Baptist missionary--Nathan Price, his wife, and his four daughters--begins to unravel after they embark on a 1959 mission to the Belgian Congo, where they find their lives transformed over the course of three decades.

Krauss, Nicole. ***The History of Love***. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005

"There are two types of people in the world, one of Nicole Krauss' characters decides, those who prefer to be sad among others and those who prefer to be sad alone. A lost book reappears, drawing together the lives of the irrepressible Leo Gursky who has arrived at the end of this life, a locksmith searching for the son who's never known him, and young Alma Singer, desperate to find her namesake and a cure for her mother's loneliness. Gradually their stories merge into a single triumph of the imagination over loss.

Larson, Erik. ***The Devil in the White City: murder, magic, and madness at the fair that changed America***. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

A fascinating example of popular history, this is a parallel recounting of the white city, constructed for the 1892 World's Fair in Chicago, and the serial killer preying on young female fair goers.

Lee, Harper. ***To Kill a Mockingbird***. New York: HarperPerennial, 2001.

Published in 1960, this famous novel tells the story of Scout Finch, the daughter of an Alabama lawyer. Scout's narrative describes how she and her brother learn about fighting prejudice and upholding human dignity through the example of their father, who defends a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman.

Lipman, Elinor. ***The Inn at Lake Devine***. New York: Vintage Books, 1999, c1998.

A young Jewish woman finagles an invite to a "Gentiles-only" inn and through this humorous book, succeeds in entering the world that has tried to exclude her.

Martel, Yann. ***Life of Pi: a novel***. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, 2002, c2001.

Possessing encyclopedia-like intelligence, unusual zookeeper's son Pi Patel sets sail for America, but when the ship sinks, he escapes on a life boat and is lost at sea with a dwindling number of animals until only he and a hungry Bengal tiger remain.

McBride, James. ***The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother (memoir)***

This national bestseller tells the story of James McBride and his mother – a rabbi's daughter, born in Poland and raised in the South, who fled to Harlem, married a black man, founded a church and put 12 children through college.

Around the narrative of Ruth McBride Jordan, a.k.a. Rachel Deborah Shilsky, the daughter of an angry, failed Orthodox Jewish rabbi in the South, her son James writes of the inner confusions he felt as a black child of a white mother and the love and faith with which his mother surrounded their large family. The result is a powerful portrait of growing up, a meditation on race and identity, and a poignant beautifully crafted hymn from a son to his mother.

McCall Smith, R. A. ***The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency***. New York: Anchor Books, 2002, c1998.

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, located in Gaborone, Botswana, consists of one woman, the engaging Precious Ramotswe. A cross between Kinsey Milhone and Miss Marple, this unlikely heroine specializes in missing husbands, wayward daughters, con men and imposters.

McEwan, Ian. ***Atonement : a novel***. New York : N.A. Talese/Doubleday, 2002, c2001.

Briony Tallis, at three stages of her life, narrates this searing account of lives ruined and, perhaps, salvaged. Told with an exquisite detail that captures the heat of an English day, the passion of young lovers, the chaos of war and retreat, and a conscience that tries to right past wrongs, McEwan is at his best as he recreates Briony's life and her struggle to tell the truth about a childhood error that ruined many lives.

Moon, Elizabeth. ***The Speed of Dark***. New York: Ballantine Books, 2003

"A compelling exploration of the concept of normalcy," this novel creates a near-future where technology has caught up with autism. Lou Arrendale, high-functioning and gainfully employed, faces the profound dilemma of whether to be cured or to remain a unique individual, however 'different,' he is. The controversial concepts presented in the novel provide excellent opportunities for stimulating discussions, such as 'how far from the norm is it comfortable or possible to be?'

Nafisi, Azar. ***Reading Lolita in Tehran***. New York: Random House, c2003.

Biography that follows the lives of seven girls in a secret reading group in 1995 Iran; an inspired blend of memory and literary criticism.

Oates, Joyce Carol. ***The Falls***. New York: Harper Perennial. 2004.

Oates, considered one of the most prolific of contemporary authors writing today, has set this sage in Niagara Falls beginning in the 1950s when Ariah Little is widowed on her wedding night after her new husband throws himself into the falls. She is immediately dubbed the “Widow-Bride” by the press - her life contains family and happiness, but she has an inability to trust herself or anyone else. The novel is a huge literary melodrama and follows Ariah’s family as well as involvement with the poisonous Love Canal. “A haunting story in which nature and humans are equally rapacious and self destructive.”

Patchett, Ann. ***Bel Canto : a novel***. New York : HarperCollins, 2001.

In an unnamed South American country, what begins as an elegant dinner party turns into a kidnapping. When the government refuses to give in to the terrorists’ demands, the hostage situation continues for a number of weeks during which a pleasant domesticity, enlivened by opera singing, begins to blur the lines between captive and captor.

Patchett, Ann. ***Truth and Beauty: a friendship***. New York: Perennial, 2005.

Tender but brutal, this portrait of unwavering commitment shines light on the little-explored world of women’s friendships through the author’s relationship with critically acclaimed and recently deceased Lucy Greal.

Picoult, Jodi. ***My Sister's Keeper : a novel***. New York: Washington Square Press, 2005, c2004.

Conceived to provide a bone marrow match for her leukemia-stricken sister, teenage Kate begins to question her moral obligations in light of countless medical procedures and decides to fight for the right to make decisions about her own body.

Radish, Kris. ***Annie Freeman’s Fabulous Traveling Funeral***. New York: Bantam Dell, 2006.

An attorney and divorced mother finds her uneventful life turned upside down when she receives an unexpected bequest which takes her and four friends on a wild and life-transforming road trip from the deserts of New Mexico to the shores of Lake Superior as they celebrate the bonds of female friendship.

Robinson, Marilynne. ***Gilead***. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2004.

As the Reverend John Ames approaches the hour of his own death, he writes a letter to his son chronicling three previous generations of his family, a story that stretches back to the Civil War and reveals uncomfortable family secrets.

Rodriguez, Deborah and Kristen Ohlson. ***Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil***.

Soon after the fall of the Taliban, in 2001, Deborah Rodriguez went to Afghanistan as part of a group offering humanitarian aid to this war-torn nation. Surrounded by men and women whose skills – as doctors, nurses, and therapists – seemed eminently more practical than her own, Rodriguez, a hairdresser and mother of two from Michigan, despaired of being of any real use. Yet she soon found she had a gift for befriending Afghans, and once her profession became known she was eagerly sought out by Westerners desperate for a good haircut and by Afghan women, who have a long and proud tradition of running their own beauty salons. Thus an idea was born.

Russell, Mary Doria. ***The Sparrow***. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1997, c1996.

When transmissions from an alien society reach Earth, a Jesuit-sponsored mission is sent to make first contact. The story slowly uncovers the love, learning and ultimate misunderstandings that doom the mission. Beautifully drawn characters, a convincing journey that doesn't rely on fantastic details, and an exploration of individuals' relationships with God, this is science fiction with a strong moral and spiritual core.

Russo, Richard. ***Empire Falls***. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2002.

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, *Empire Falls* tells the story of a Maine mill town devastated by the loss of industry, and waiting for the town's leading citizen to create new opportunities. Told through the eyes of several characters, the story mostly focuses on Miles Roby, a college drop-out who returned to Empire Falls to nurse his mother. Now in his 40's, Miles manages the Empire Grill and copes with his teenaged daughter, the wife who left him for another man, an alcoholic father, and a variety of people who test his patience and resolve.

See, Lisa. ***Snow Flower and the Secret Fan***. New York: Random House, 2005.

A story of friendship set in nineteenth-century China follows an elderly woman and her companion as they communicate their hopes, dreams, joys and tragedies through a unique secret language.

Spragg, Mark. ***An Unfinished Life***. New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

Seeking to escape her brutal boyfriend and hoping to introduce her daughter to the grandfather she has never met, a widow seeks refuge in her late husband's Wyoming hometown with her estranged father-in-law. "Complex, prodigal homecoming...a tale of love and loss...rich in character, landscape and compassion."

Tan, Amy. ***The Bonesetter's Daughter***. New York: Ballantine Books, 2002, 2001.

In this follow-up to *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan continues to explore themes of mother-daughter relationships. Ruth is a 40-something ghostwriter caring for her difficult and demanding mother, who may have Alzheimer's. The discovery of her mother's diary, written in Chinese, prompts Ruth's rediscovery of her mother, her heritage and her true family.

Vreeland, Susan. ***Luncheon of the Boating Party***. New York: Penguin 2007.

French Impressionist painter Renoir is inspired to paint "Luncheon of the Boating Party" when his other works of art are criticized by the author, Emile Zola. Renoir desires to do breakout work instead of society portraits and while casting about for an original concept for his art, he is drawn into the lives of 13 people as they enjoy a Parisian summer in the late 1880s. This novel illuminates the gusto, hedonism and art of the era.

Walls, Jeannette. ***The Glass Castle***. New York : Scribner, c2005.

Jeanette Walls, a journalist for MSNBC and an on-line camera commentator at celebrity events has written a non-fiction memoir that grips like the best fiction. Jeanette and her siblings grew up in horrible poverty and dragged from pillar to post by brilliant but crazy parents. The author's remembrances are vivid without self pity; it is an amazing story of survival and triumph without anger or apology. It is an extraordinary book that exemplifies the resilience of the human spirit.

Zusak, Markus. ***The Book Thief***. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

Set during World War II in Germany, this groundbreaking novel is the story of Liesel Meminger, a foster child living outside of Munich. Liesel scratches out a meager existence for herself by stealing...she steals books and learns to read and shares her stolen books with neighbors during bombing raids as well as with the Jewish man hidden in the basement of the house in which she lives. This is an important novel about the ability of books to feed the soul. Although this is considered a YA novel, many believe it to be best suited to 'sophisticated older readers,' as the narrator his Death, himself.