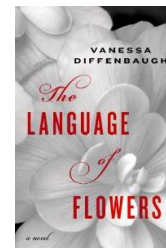


OPLA Readers' Advisory Committee 2011 Top 5 Reads

Sharron Smith's Picks

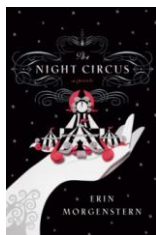
The Language of Flowers by Vanessa Diffenbaugh

A product of the foster-care system, Victoria Jones's past has taught her many lessons, most of them based on abuse, neglect, anger and mistrust. Growing up, she used the hidden meaning of flowers as a way to communicate. Emancipated out of the system, and forced either to support herself or live on the streets, she falls back on what she knows and trusts: the language of flowers. She starts to build a life through a job with a florist, but is then forced to confront her past and the one time she made a connection with another person.



The Sea Captain's Wife by Beth Powning

In this 19th-century story, a community scandal sends a young wife and her daughter on a worldwide sea-faring journey, filled with adventure and life-threatening danger from starvation and pirates. Although Azuba Bradstock had always dreamed of a life at sea, the reality is grim and harsh, and the journey she takes will reveal much about her and her sea captain husband. Not a new title, this was a favourite of my book club this year.



The Night Circus by Erin Morgenstern

In this almost dreamlike novel, a magical circus disappears only to suddenly reappear in another place entirely. Those who visit leave feeling that, more than just seeing a circus, they are awakening from a dream. Behind the scenes, a fierce battle is taking place between two magicians and only one will be allowed to survive. The reader is drawn into the hypnotic world of the circus where, despite an intriguing cast, the main character is in fact the circus. Anyone who enjoyed *Shadow of the Wind* by Carlos Ruiz Zafon or *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* by Susanna Clarke will want to pick this book up.

When She Woke by Hillary Jordan

In the near future, criminals must bear the mark of their crime. Science has devised a process called "chroming," in which the skin is genetically altered to match the class of crime. Hannah Payne's life has been devoted to church and family. However, when she is arrested and convicted for the murder of her unborn baby following an affair with a married man, a prominent minister, her sentence will be to spend 14 years as a chromed Red. Ostracized by her family and church, she is forced to make choices and seek her own way. Fans of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* will want to look for this one, a great choice for book clubs.

Before I Go to Sleep by S.J. Watson

Every day Christine wakes with no memory. The room is strange, the man in bed beside her is unknown, and each morning begins with him explaining that he is her husband, and she is now forty-seven, a victim of a brutal accident 20 years ago. Christine's world tilts when she receives a call from a doctor, who claims to be working with her, using a hidden journal to help her recover her memory. As she reads the journal, which begins with a warning not to tell her husband, the race is on for Christine to find her past and the truth. This is a tension-filled read, a true page turner.

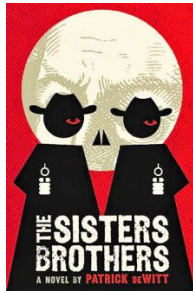


Nicole Adams's Picks

Caleb's Crossing by Geraldine Brooks

This is the story of Bethia Mayfield, a girl living in Massachusetts in the 1660s, and Caleb, the son of a chieftain she encounters by chance. Although it is frowned upon in Puritan society for girls to be educated, Bethia's thirst for knowledge drives her to learn in secret by eavesdropping on her brother's lessons. Bonding with her fellow outsider, she begins to school Caleb in English, Greek and Latin, for which he has an amazing aptitude. Caleb's talents are discovered by Bethia's minister father, who decides to have him formally educated. Bethia, as the narrator of this tale, observes Caleb's crossing into the world that had long been closed to them both. Brooks, the author, took her inspiration for this story from the life of a man who, in 1665, became the first Native American to graduate from Harvard College.

The Sisters Brothers by Patrick deWitt



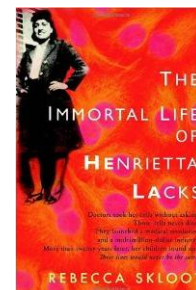
Two brothers, Charlie and Eli Sisters, set out across the country on an errand for their employer. They are on their way from Oregon City to kill a powerful man in gold-rush era California. On their journey, they encounter all manner of shady characters and get themselves into situations rife with violence, tragedy and even comedy. Eli, the somewhat complex narrator of the tale, has started to have doubts about the life that he and Charlie have made for themselves. Through Eli, the author gives us a unique view into the dynamic between these two brothers and makes them almost likeable, despite and sometimes because of their considerable shortcomings. deWitt has taken elements of the classic western and added inventive and often bizarre touches to create a niche genre all his own.

The Night Circus by Erin Morgenstern

The Cirque des Rêves appears unannounced and vanishes just as mysteriously from locations all over the world, inspiring legions of followers. The story of this circus and its secrets unfolds to reveal a challenge between two magicians, each with very different ideas of how to train others in the art of magic. They each choose a young champion and bind them into an agreement in which they will compete to determine who the victor is. The protégés are Celia and Marco, and the circus is the venue for their challenges, where they create ever more fascinating wonders for the circus-goers in an attempt to better each other. For a long while, the two opponents do not know the identity of the other and when they finally meet, complications arise as they fall hopelessly and tragically in love.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot

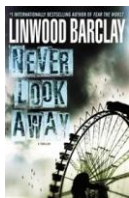
In 1951, Henrietta Lacks, a poor African-American woman in Baltimore, Maryland, died of cervical cancer in Johns Hopkins Hospital--but not before her surgeon extracted some tissue samples. These dime-sized slices, the first to successfully grow and replicate in a test tube, became the foundation of the HeLa cell line. These cells have made possible some of modern medicine's greatest discoveries. But who was Henrietta Lacks, beyond an unwitting tissue donor? To find out, Rebecca Skloot spent a decade researching Lacks as well as getting to know her descendants. The result is a riveting in-depth biographical portrait that also reflects on medical ethics.



Before I go to Sleep by S. J. Watson

Christine wakes each day to a blank slate. She is surprised to find that the man in bed beside her is her husband and shocked to find that she is no longer 20 years old, but well into middle age. Throughout the day, she can retain memories of what happens, but when she wakes from sleep, these short-term memories are gone. She must rediscover her life each day. She begins to write a diary with the help of a doctor, who calls her each day to explain her condition and to tell her to read her diary and write in it what she learns each day. Over time, a picture begins to build of what happened to Christine that resulted in her condition, and she starts to doubt the one person whom she thought she could trust.

Patricia Eastman's Picks



Never Look Away by Linwood Barclay

This story begins with a parent's worst nightmare: losing a child in a crowd. What follows is even more chilling as David Harwood's life is turned upside down. Balancing the demands of his work as a reporter, and his search for information about the woman he called his wife, Harwood is like a pinball, being buffeted by circumstances beyond his control. An engrossing quick read.

Faithful Place by Tana French

"Read" this one as an audio book. Who can resist Irish accents? It tells the tale of police officer Frank Mackey, whose life is already complicated by his recent divorce and his dysfunctional family, and who now finds himself embroiled in a mystery from the past. A suitcase left behind by his childhood sweetheart, whom he has always believed left him behind on the night they were to elope, opens up secrets that no one is sure they want to know.

Come, Thou Tortoise by Jessica Grant

People either love or hate this book, which is populated by quirky and memorable characters. I loved it! While Audrey/Oddly Flowers is described as "IQ challenged" in some reviews, her insights into people and situations can be startlingly apt. She deals with an accident her father has had, and with her memories of time spent in her family hometown of St. John's. Alternate chapters are narrated by her beloved tortoise, who has been left with friends while Oddly is away. What's not to love?

The Imperfectionists by Tom Rachman

A story told in chapters by the individuals who have owned and worked for an international newspaper headquartered in Rome. Memorable characters tell about the paper from its beginnings to its demise. Their stories knit together to relate their own funny, sad, and sometimes bittersweet tales, as the newspaper business changes as the age of the Internet dawns.

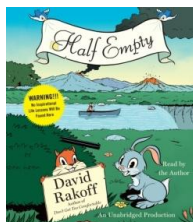


The Stone Carvers by Jane Urquhart

Should have read this when it was published...but did not. It is the story of a young woman from small-town Ontario who loves to carve wood, like her grandfather. Her passion for carving, her passion for a young man in her village, and the constant presence in the background of her often missing brother, make Klara, and those who populate her world, unforgettable characters. This is a drama that moves across the ocean to the Vimy memorial, in France.

Linda Kent's Picks

Half Empty by David Rakoff



Canadian David Rakoff's preferred form of writing is the autobiographical, observational essay. His humour is dark, satirical, and utterly merciless. His most recent book, entitled *Half Empty*, comes with a warning on the cover that says, "No Inspirational Life Lessons Will Be Found in These Pages." No matter what the topic, the essays all deftly skewer our modern sensibility and strike straight to the heart of hypocrisy. Rakoff's description of the Disney Innovations Dream Home includes a riff on the dark side of consumer society, while a visit to a pornography convention offers up a sadly funny view of the porno industry. The art of pathos is an area where Rakoff excels.

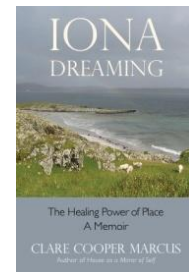
His essays invoke pity and compassion seasoned by wit and acidity, with a side order of snarkiness.

War by Sebastian Junger

Sebastian Junger is an American author and journalist who first hit the bestseller list in 2000 with his non-fiction book *The Perfect Storm*. His latest work offers a real-life account of the experiences of a platoon of American soldiers stationed in a valley in Afghanistan, known as the deadliest place on earth. Other writers and journalists have tackled the subject of war but rarely have they been this close to their subjects. The author accompanied the platoon on its missions and survived a deadly explosion only because the engine block of his vehicle absorbed most of the impact. It gave him a firsthand experience of the psychological effect of combat. The camaraderie of living in a war zone forces soldiers to rely upon each other, since inclusion in, and support from, the group is the best method of survival. Being under fire produces an adrenaline rush and excitement second to none. Individuals with personality characteristics produced by a difficult home life can make excellent combatants. Little wonder that many soldiers have difficulty readjusting to civilian life. While some readers may prefer to read war journalism that offers more political or moral commentary, Junger's goal was to get inside the heads of young American soldiers and describe their experiences. *War* offers the reader an honest, warts-and-all account of life in the front lines.

Iona Dreaming by Clare Cooper Marcus

Clare Cooper Marcus has received international recognition for her pioneering research into the psychological and sociological aspects of architecture, and the impact of public spaces such as gardens around hospitals, care homes, public housing developments, and environments for children. In her mid-seventies, Marcus left her home in California and spent six months living alone on Iona, one of the Inner Hebrides islands off the west coast of Scotland. The adventure was envisioned by the author as a healing journey and a way to recover from the life changes caused by retirement and cancer. *Iona Dreaming* recounts her experiences in a format that combines autobiography, memoir, and journal. Marcus is a lyrical writer and under her pen, the Scottish landscape becomes alive and animated, while her descriptions of the human and animal inhabitants are extremely engaging. The book balances the author's external and internal journeys and her search for the authentic self. It's a journey that anyone can embark upon and Marcus urges readers to find their own sacred place, a place where they can find peace and relax into the deepest parts of their being.



That Bird Has My Wings: The Autobiography of an Innocent Man on Death Row by Jarvis Jay Masters
Jarvis Jay Masters has been an inmate at the San Quentin Prison since he was 19 years old. The child of a drug-addicted mother and abusive father, his childhood was almost Dickensian in its unrelenting awfulness. As a teen he fell into the cycle of crime, violence, and hopelessness that characterizes the lives of many African-American inner-city youth. It was a journey that led to prison and finally death row. In 1990, at the age of 28 and while still incarcerated, Masters was convicted of conspiracy in the murder of a prison guard and sentenced to death. As Masters has now been awaiting execution for 21 years, you might expect his book to concentrate on making arguments for his appeal. Instead, he offers the reader an honest account of the bad choices he made and wrong turns his life has taken. It's the heartbreaking true-life story of a child who sought love and protection but rarely received it, and turned into a youth who wasn't strong enough to resist peer pressure in the form of gang violence and drug abuse. Ultimately, it's a tale of redemption because Masters is able to face his past, accept it and rise above it despite his current circumstances.



I Feel Great About My Hands: And Other Unexpected Joys of Aging
edited by Shari Graydon

The title of this book plays upon Nora Ephron's book *I Feel Bad About My Neck*. Shari Graydon is a Canadian women's advocate and journalist. As past president of Media Action, a non-profit women's organization dedicated to challenging stereotyping and sexual objectification in the media, Graydon has long been concerned about the narrow picture of female aging offered in the media. When she read an article, written by a female newspaper columnist she respected, that offered little more than a list of complaints, it motivated her to produce this uplifting work. The book contains a collection of essays, poetry, a play, and some sketches and photographs. Graydon's list of contributors includes 41 notable Canadian women from all walks of life. Some are artists, lawyers, teachers, writers, health care professionals, photographers, film makers, and well-known personalities such as CBC correspondent Alison Smith, Green Party Leader Elizabeth May, writers Linda Spalding and Susan Musgrave, and social activist Judy Rebick. By turns amusing (don't miss Mary Walsh's riff on being a "loud, opinionated old bag") and thought-provoking (Bonnie Sherr Klein's claim that assisting seniors teaches people to become better and more generous people), the collection captures a diverse spectrum of viewpoints. The reader learns of the benefits that come with the experience that is accumulated through aging and the process of maturity.

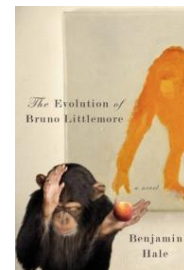
Diana Krawczyk's Picks

Clara Callan by Richard B. Wright

It's a little "Sex in the City" for the pre-WWII woman. Wright shines a light on the life of the single girl in the 1930s from rural Ontario to New York to Hollywood. As the story is told through letters and journal entries, we become intimates with Clara, her sister Nora, and their friend Evelyn. Clara, the small-town sister, experiences her fair share of heartbreak, as does Nora who moves to New York to pursue a career in radio. Playing the role of mentor, Evelyn shares a friendship with these sisters and becomes inexorably linked with both. All three women are fully realized and have their share of romantic challenges. Although it was published nearly a decade ago, this book ever remains a treasure for new readers who appreciate complex women characters. It doesn't pull any punches, and it has a lot to tell modern women about the trials and joys of being single.

The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore by Benjamin Hale

It is easy to imagine Hale's first novel as a creative writing experiment gone wild. Bruno Littlemore is a chimpanzee who has learned to speak the language of humans. He not only speaks it, he is erudite and, at times, verbose. The novel is his autobiography as dictated to an amanuensis (that would be one who takes dictation). Bruno learns to speak English from the mentally-challenged janitor who begins to communicate with the chimp by imitating him. Luckily, Bruno possesses unusual intelligence and begins to translate the sounds into dialogue. Bruno's description of his own history and his observations are insightful and often uncontrollably hilarious. In particular, he relates his early days in the zoo, where his father became addicted to the cigarettes that were provided by fascinated visitors who marvelled at his father's ability to mime the universal "bum a smoke?" Bruno becomes smitten with his researcher and enters into a unique relationship that can only end tragically.



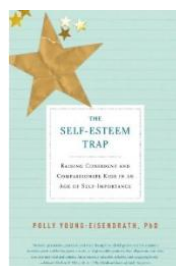
The Last Days of Ptolemy Grey by Walter Mosley

In his 91 years, Ptolemy Grey has experienced enough sorrow to be nearly completely spent. With his cluttered and joyless apartment mirroring his mind and memories, Ptolemy is living out his last days in a fog of recollections from his past. After his grandnephew Reggie's death in a drive-by shooting, Ptolemy meets a young woman, Robyn, who will soothe his loneliness and help him reclaim his life. After an experimental medical treatment, Ptolemy's memory becomes clear, and he replays his life in fascinating detail, from a shack on a white man's farm to South Central L.A. Despite having a number of blood-relatives, Ptolemy determines that Robyn's love and respect prove her worthiness as his heir. Before he dies, Ptolemy wants to know who killed Reggie, but he also knows this will reveal too much about his own family's alliances. A well-written and challenging book, this story is in turn real and heartbreaking. Readers won't soon forget Ptolemy Grey and the power that love has to triumph over loneliness.

Room by Emma Donoghue

Five-year old Jack is sure of two things: he loves his mom and they are both in room. Ma and Jack have their routines and these help to sustain them in a world deprived of others. Donoghue invites the reader to become a voyeur in this world, ripped from the headlines, which seems both brutal and comforting. Ma is the victim of a violent crime, and this novel takes us from the dark days of room to the turbulent days of outside. Everything is new to Jack and things don't make a lot of sense to him, but his mother fights to protect his innocence at every twist in their story. Freedom, so coveted in room, is as elusive on the outside, in the glare of the media spotlight. At turns disturbing and uplifting, *Room* help us see the wonder of real life, the kind that's not TV.

The Self-Esteem Trap: Raising Confident and Compassionate Kids in an Age of Self-importance by Polly Young-Eisendrath



As a therapist, Young-Eisendrath was seeing more and more young people dissatisfied with their lives despite adequate wealth and opportunities. As she treated these people, she realized that they were mostly dissatisfied with their own failure to be more than ordinary. Baby-boomers often supported their parents socially, financially and emotionally – a responsibility they did not want to thrust upon their own children. The author suggests this lack of respect for duty to others is at the heart of Gen Me's angst. These children were never tested with responsibility and rewarded for minor accomplishments. Their exclusive focus on themselves sets up a trap concerning their self-esteem because, as adults, they do not receive the same rewards from society for their half-hearted efforts.

Young-Eisendrath makes some suggestions for reversing this trend and dealing with disappointment, turning to her own Buddhist beliefs and practices. This book offers a fascinating consideration of the growing social problems of entitlement and unhappiness in young adults.

Chris Sheehy's Picks

Best Laid Plans by Terry Fallis

A great tale of a guy who has a life-changing experience, and decides to go back to academia, but is foiled by a favour to his former boss. What follows is a comedic heartfelt romp, that is delightful to read and will put a smile on your face. I enjoyed this book immensely, and would recommend it to any Canadian who has even a little inkling into our political system, or loves hovercrafts.

Ghost Story by Jim Butcher

In the latest in the Dresden files saga, Harry Dresden is dead, and his ghost has come back for payback. In his ongoing quest to help his friends and others, Harry investigates his murder. He struggles to come to grips with his death and how to survive as a ghost. There is a lot more back story involved, which is interesting, and helps to round out his character development. As always, there are explosions, battles and magic; still a very entertaining read even after all this time.

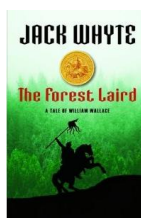


Eye of the World by Robert Jordan

When I completed the Wheel of Time series, I decided to reread the series from the beginning. I have always maintained that *Eye of the World* is the best book in the series, and rereading it has only confirmed my opinion. This is a fast-paced read, with plenty of adventure, mystery and thrills. The interplay between the characters is great, something I think that becomes lost in the later books. *Eye of the World* is a great book, and if you do not read the rest, I think you will be satisfied with this.

Sharp's Eagle by Bernard Cornwell

This is the first book written in Bernard Cornwell's Sharp Series. There are others that refer to events before it chronologically, but this is the first that introduces the main character, Richard Sharpe, an orphan from the slums of England. Through a deed of heroism, he is raised to the rank of an officer in the British army during the Napoleonic Wars. Because of this, he is doomed to suffer as an outsider, since he is neither a gentleman/noble, nor is he any longer accepted among the ranks from which he came. The series is a great read, fast and exciting, providing great historical facts and details, with war, love and adventure. Also a great TV miniseries from the BBC.



The Forest Laird by Jack Whyte

Another bit of historical fiction from adopted Canadian writer Jack Whyte. This book follows the life of Scottish hero William Wallace. Whyte is a great writer who fleshes out the historical facts with great story telling and insight. There is plenty in this tale to appeal to all types of readers: war, love, adventure, and for the historical traveller, an untouched Scotland of old, with wilde forests and fields, not the landscaped and well-maintained countryside of today.

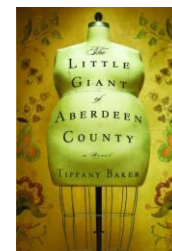
Bessie Sullivan's Picks

Secret Daughter by Shilpi Somaya Gowda

In this book the reader is almost immediately presented with two opposing but heart-wrenching concerns: infertility among North American women, and the disregard for girls in India. Through the intertwining stories of two families, the American Thakkars, both doctors, and the poverty-stricken merchants in rural India, the reader gains some understanding about why people sometimes need to do the things they do.

Little Giant of Aberdeen County by Tiffany Baker

Truly is born into a life of suffering and tragedy. Her mother dies in childbirth, and her father is ill-equipped to deal with either of his two daughters. Truly's sister, Serena Jane, is the acknowledged town beauty, while Truly suffers from an illness that causes her to grow way beyond normal size. When their father also dies, the girls are split up, and their lives diverge and reconnect in ways neither could imagine. Woven into the story of the sisters is a larger story of women and the ways they are forced to navigate the world.



Irma Voth by Miriam Toews

In this novel, love, longing and dark family secrets are entangled. The stifling, reclusive Mennonite life of 19-year-old Irma Voth - newly married and newly deserted - is irrevocably changed when a film crew moves in to make a movie about the community. She embraces the absurdity, creative passion, and warmth of their world but her intractable and domineering father is determined to keep her from it at all costs. The confrontation between them sets her on an path toward something that feels like freedom, as she and her young sister, Aggie, wise beyond her teenage years, flee to the city, upheld only by their love for each other and their smart wit.

Annabel by Kathleen Winter

Wayne, born into the harsh, rural landscape of Labrador, Canada, in 1968, is a hermaphrodite. It is his father who ultimately decides to raise him as a male and names him. Only Wayne's parents and their friend Thomasina Baikie, also present at his birth, are aware of his gender duality. The two women silently battle against Wayne's father's gender assignment, and as Wayne grows older, he must contend with the two genders struggling for dominance within him. His father, Treadway, a trapper who spends most of his time outdoors, works hard to steer Wayne away from his feminine side. His mother, Jacinta, becomes increasingly estranged from her husband as she mourns the loss of her female child

Best Laid Plans by Terry Fallis

A burnt-out political aide wants to quit just before an election but is forced to run a hopeless campaign on the way out. He makes a deal with a crusty old Scot, Angus McLintock: no need to campaign, certain to lose, and so on. Then a great scandal blows away his opponent, and to their horror, Angus is elected. He decides to see what good an honest M.P., who doesn't care about being re-elected, can do in Parliament. The results are hilarious and with chess, a hovercraft, and the love of a good woman thrown in, this very funny book has something for everyone.



Cecilia Vespa's Picks



Before I go to Sleep by SJ Watson.

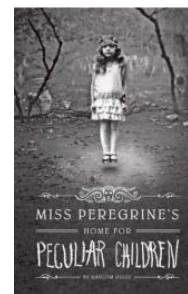
Imagine if you lost your memories every time you went to sleep, and the only person you trust you really shouldn't? This is the reality of Christine, after an accident leaves her with a form of amnesia that means she must relearn everything about her life every day. This is a first-person psychological thriller, from a debut British author, and recommended for those who desire an engaging and unnerving escape. Film rights have been sold.

Please look after Mom by Kyung-Sook Shin, translated by Chin-Young Kim

Bestselling South Korean author Shin's first translated title takes us on an emotional journey, when a family searches for their mother who has disappeared from a train station in Seoul. As each member recalls their relationship with this woman, and we learn what happened on that fateful day, we are guided to revelations about motherhood so powerful and unforgettable they will linger in your mind days after you have finished the book. Shin is an exceptional new international voice to note.

Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children by Ransom Riggs.

By far, one of the quirkiest books of the year and a wonderful Adult/YA crossover title. Riggs has built a fantasy novel around a collection of very peculiar photographs of people. The story centers on 16-year-old Jacob, who must solve the mystery surrounding the death of his grandfather. Jacob believes the death is connected to the stories and peculiar photographs his grandfather shared with him when he was little. As Jacob finds out, the people and the circumstances of these photographs are quite strange indeed. A compelling read that must be experienced in print because of the beautiful black and white photography scattered throughout the novel. Riggs' thematic collection of found old photographs, entitled *Talking Pictures*, is being published by Harper Collins in January.



Left Neglected by Lisa Genova.

After the enormous success of *Still Alice*, I was a little sceptical that Lisa could pull off another blockbuster hit. However, I was pleasantly surprised that *Left Neglected* left me with the same feeling of awe and amazement as her previous book. Lisa can explore the feelings of people with very complex medical conditions using a down-to-earth writing style that really draws you into their challenges. Sarah Nickerson, a busy working mom, is racing to work one day when she has an accident that renders her with a brain injury which impairs awareness of the left side of her body. We experience what she goes through as she trains her mind to see the world as whole again. As Sarah goes through a re-examination of her life, we the readers feel compelled to join her and apply the same questions asked in the novel to our own personal journeys. A very thought-provoking and haunting read from a very talented writer.

The Sisters Brothers by Patrick DeWitt.

Not since McMurty's *Lonesome Dove* has a western made this much buzz. *Sisters Brothers* has been nominated for both the Giller and the Commonwealth Prize. It tells the story of two brothers, Eli and Charlie Sisters, who are sent by the Commodore to kill a man. During the trek to their target, Eli starts to question who he is and what he is doing. With a colourful set of characters and compelling narration, this sometimes violent adventure illuminates the elements of frontier life remaining true to the grit of the Old West.

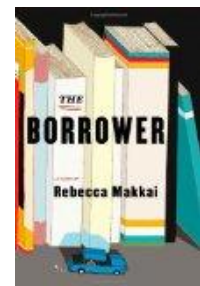
Alexandra Yarrow's Picks

The Meagre Tarmac by Clark Blaise

One of my university professors claimed that one of the biggest mistakes the Montreal writing community made was "letting" Blaise and his wife, novelist Bharati Mukherjee, leave Montreal for Toronto, and, eventually, the US, where they still live. He maintained (far before recent Canadian press reviews joined the chorus) that Blaise was one of the great underappreciated Canadian writers of the 20th century. He's right: this collection of linked short stories is a tremendous study of the human spirit - more specifically, a study of Indian immigration to contemporary America (and, occasionally, migration back to India). Blaise's grasp of the power of guilt, tradition, envy, confusion, belonging, hope, strength, and the human capacity for reinvention is masterful. For readers who enjoy Jhumpa Lahiri.

The Borrower by Rebecca Makkai

I'm kind of a sucker for books about twentysomethings who haven't got their act together. So, the story of Lucy, a 26-year old children's library clerk living above a small town theatre, grabbed my attention. When I learned that Lucy unwittingly kidnaps a young patron early in the novel, I was hooked (how can someone "unwittingly" kidnap a child? Guess you will have to read this to find out). Lucy and her young charge, the child of strict religious parents, embark on an aimless road trip, stopping to visit Lucy's parents (her shady Russian businessman father is worth the price of admission alone) and some unique tourist destinations. Many chapters begin in the vein of a classic children's novel, and this manages to be just the right side of twee. A delightful read; this novel might also appeal to readers of Jasper Fforde's *Tuesday Next* books (literary nerds) or readers of Julia Stuart's *The Tower, the Zoo, and the Tortoise* (sentimentalists).

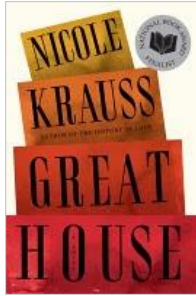


Mr. Chartwell by Rebecca Hunt

This understated, thoughtful reflection on depression blew me away. The conceit of this novel is that Winston Churchill's depression (which he called his Black Dog) is actually here incarnate as a black dog. Said canine (who prefers to be known as Black Pat) shows up at the door of one Esther Hammerhans, an unhappy librarian (I know, cue the stereotype here; but really, she's not that bad...). Although I thought the talking dog thing could be potentially very annoying, I was drawn in by the fact that Esther is initially as mystified and upset by (and indignant about) Black Pat as I was. Following her as she figures out who he is, and why she is "stuck" with him, is an interesting journey. The scenes between Black Pat and Churchill, and one between Black Pat and Clementine Churchill, are especially well done. Readers of Jane Gardam will find much to enjoy here.

This Cake is for the Party: Stories by Sarah Selecky

This may be an example, for me, of a book that came at the right time. I am the worst short story reader; I just generally can't get into short story collections, but since several made it onto the Giller list last year, I felt compelled to make the effort. Selecky's stories are perfectly crafted, and exude a sense of reverence for the characters to which I really responded. The story "Where Are You Coming From, Sweetheart?" moved me to open tears on the bus, causing me to close the book entirely for several minutes.



Great House by Nicole Krauss

I loved 2005's *The History of Love*. *Great House* is less neatly tied together in terms of plot. *The History of Love* was full of somewhat unlikely coincidences, and a lot more humour to relieve the tension of some of the heartache. *Great House* is a different kind of book: less neatly structured, and showing a less perfect set of human relationships. Ostensibly, the plot is about a desk: a big, hulking, wooden writing desk with 19 drawers, one of which is locked. This desk figures prominently in the lives of the novel's four, linked, main characters; their stories unfold as the desk changes hands from a shady antiques dealer, to a woman fleeing the Holocaust, to a young Chilean poet, to a contemporary New York writer and, potentially, the Chilean poet's daughter.

The Telegraph said that Krauss, in this novel, "gives us her tragic vision pure. It is a high-wire performance, only the wire has been replaced by an exposed nerve, and you hold your breath, and she does not fall." I would agree. This is *Sarah's Key* for the reader of postmodernist lit.