

# Parkdale Book Club

## Embroideries, November 2023

**Schedule** – Normally, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday each month, 10:00 am on Zoom

### 2023

December 09                      *Enchantment*, by Katherine May                      Lindsay

### 2024

January 13                      *Hotline*, by Dimitri Nasrallah                      Beth, Janine

February 10                      *The Truth About Stories*, by Thomas King                      Ruth

March 09                      *Still Life*, by Sarah Winman                      Deb

April 13 \*                      *Demon Copperhead*, by Barbara Kingsolver                      Beth

May 11 \*                      *Snow Road Station*, by Elizabeth Hay                      Janine

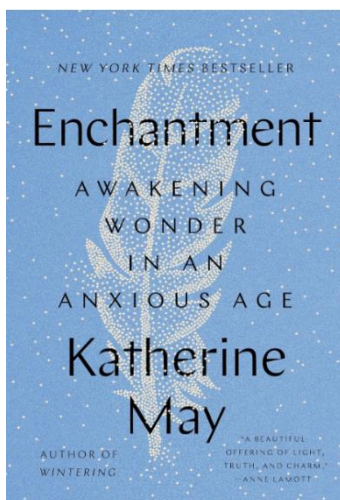
June 8                      *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, by Shelby Van Pelt                      Lynn

*Next Book Club is December 9<sup>th</sup>*

## Enchantment

Our December book is Lindsay's nomination, *Enchantment* by Katherine May.

From Amazon: "Many of us feel trapped in a grind of constant change: rolling news cycles, the chatter of social media, our families split along partisan lines. We feel fearful and tired, on edge in our bodies, not quite knowing what has us perpetually depleted. For Katherine May, this low hum of fatigue and anxiety made her wonder what she was missing. Could there be a different way to relate to the world, one that would allow her to feel more rested and at ease, even as seismic changes unfold on the planet? Might there be a way for all of us to move through life with curiosity and tenderness, sensitized to the subtle magic all around?"



In *Enchantment*, May invites the reader to come with her on a journey to reawaken our innate sense of wonder and awe. With humor, candor, and warmth, she shares stories of her own struggles with work, family, and the aftereffects of pandemic, particularly feelings of overwhelm as the world rushes to reopen. Craving a different way to live, May begins to explore the restorative properties of the natural world, moving through the elements of earth, water, fire, and air and identifying the quiet traces of magic that can be found only when we look for them. Through deliberate attention and ritual, she unearths the potency and nourishment that come from quiet reconnection with our immediate environment. Blending lyricism and storytelling, sensitivity and empathy, *Enchantment* invites each of us to open the door to human experience in all its sensual complexity, and to find the beauty waiting for us there." ❖

### Zoom link for December 9<sup>th</sup> Book Club

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82432011683?pwd=SEgwSFFIOTRZODVtSmVuYW1vOXNwdz09>

Meeting ID: 824 3201 1683

Passcode: 284356

# Embroideries

## by Marjane Satrapi

Definitions from Oxford Languages

em·broi·der·y

əm'broɪd(ə)rē, em'broɪd(ə)rē

noun

1. the art or pastime of embroidering cloth.  
"my mother decided I should learn embroidery"
  2. embellishment or exaggeration in the description or reporting of an event.  
"fanciful embroidery of the facts"
- and, according to Marjane Satrapi,
3. surgery to reinstate virginity as in  
"the full embroidery"

Twelve of us gathered on Zoom on November 11<sup>th</sup> to discuss Deb's book suggestion, *Embroideries*, a graphic novel by Marjane Satrapi. All three definitions of "embroidery" were woven into our discussion of this book. We'll start with a photo of beautiful embroidery done by Lynn's grandmother in the 1950s. They are still treasured items. Lynn says it's possible she stitched the roses herself. Thanks for these photos, Lynn!



It was a first graphic novel for our Book Club and a first graphic novel for lots of the members. It was a playful introduction to the genre, with drawings to add to the fun. Amazon calls it a "gloriously entertaining and enlightening look into the sex lives of Iranian women." *Elle* magazine calls it "bold, bewitchingly humorous and politically astute."

Deb kindly shared the outline she had prepared for our discussion of *Embroideries*. If you missed our discussion, here are some things you'll find interesting:

1. Marjane Satrapi -- her background. She is one of the best-known graphic novelists in the world, but prefers the term "comics".
2. Graphic novels/comics -- comparison to Art Spiegelman (*Maus*). Satrapi's goal was to reach out to as many people around the world as possible.
3. Context of Iran since the 1979 revolution. Persia has a very lengthy history of high levels of education, literacy, economic status and up to 1979, women's rights were expanding. Since that time, the various governments have clamped down, eased a bit and then the current regime is very harsh. Two women have died because they weren't wearing appropriate covering. Two women have won the Nobel Peace Prize (Shirin Ebadi in 2003 and Narges Mohammadi in 2023).
4. Women in Iran and how they manage to retain their self-respect, influence and relationships.
5. *Embroideries*

Discussion questions:

1. What did you like/not like about the book?
2. Is the graphic style enhancing or detracting?
3. Did anything surprise you about the book?
4. What are the similarities and differences in the women's relationships in Iran compared to other places?
5. Do the women manage to retain their self-respect?
6. What is the view of men? What did you think of the grandfather having a nap and then leaving again at the end of the book?



Many people enjoyed the book. Some prefer the written word to the genre of graphic novel, and some couldn't relate to the content. Here are some comments from our members with their thoughts about *Embroideries*.



I enjoyed the book, this being my first graphic novel that I have read. It had some great one-liners in it, a lot of humor but definitely told the story of how dominated women in Iran are by men. It was a bit shocking to me about the theme of the conversation that was taking place between family members, grandmother, mother, daughter, and aunts. I know I would never have been able to have a conversation like this with either my mother or grandmothers. I believe, when they are so restricted in what they can do, the door opens to almost anything when you can freely talk among the women.

I read the book twice and learned in the second reading a bit more about the meaning of embroidery. I discovered I am quite naïve since I had never heard about sewing a vagina a bit to tighten it up. I guess never too old to learn.

I prefer to think of the embroidery as the thread in which these women held themselves together in such a male dominant culture. I thought the author was very good in creating the characters through the graphics, giving them great expressions as they talked. I felt like I knew the characters quite well when I finished the book.

I also did enjoy the conversation that was held at book club on such a short novel, as I wasn't sure after reading the book what we were going to be able to speak about for 90 minutes.



Our discussion raised issues about women's **safety and freedom**. Either you lose your freedom to have safety, or you risk your safety to have freedom. It gets complicated though ... we might think we're opting for safety but end up losing our freedom and being unsafe anyway. And sometimes, taking the risk to seize freedom ends up being the safest option!

In *Embroideries*, it seemed like women used deception as a way to access freedom.



I enjoyed *Embroideries*. It reminded me of a previous book club selection, *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows* by Balli Kaur Jaswal, and making that link made me wonder if there are North American stories like these. And if not, why not? We may talk openly with peers, but few of us heard stories like this from mothers and grandmothers. I do remember stories that reinforced the guideline to maintain virginity until marriage. My mother talked about going out on dates wearing, under her skirt, a pair of shorts pinned shut at the button. Such a vivid representation that the men would try to invade, and the woman is responsible for gate-keeping.

In the discussion, I appreciated the linking of oppression and subversion, the secret languages that emerge for organizing in the face of threat. The discussions when the men left, and if a man wandered back, he was told he was not welcome. How to survive in an oppressive culture that defines a woman as worthless if she is not a virgin, if she is not beautiful... Another example of the secret language from a different culture: hair braiding was used to relay messages among enslaved people of colour. Queer people have/had hundreds of examples of coded dress and language to communicate to other queer people in a way that would have no meaning to non-queer people.

I think if we don't talk openly across generations about sex, our bodies, changes in our bodies, and the like, we ought to. Who benefits from our keeping it all secret?



Books like *Embroideries*, *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*, and *The Mother of All Questions* give voice to women's concerns and create opportunities for meaningful conversations. There are a couple of projects I know about that focus on empowering women to tell their stories.

**The Shoe Project** was mentioned in our Saturday Book Club discussion. The Shoe Project was founded by an Albertan, Katherine Govier, in 2011. "Shoes are a metaphor for journey and transformation." The Shoe Project offers an opportunity for participants to write and talk about

their own journeys, describing what it is like to walk in their shoes. The components of the program include a 10-week writing workshop, performance coaching, and sharing their stories with the public on stage. “The experience of sharing these deeply personal stories is empowering, and, for those who are there to hear, profound.” You can read more about the Shoe Project and read some of the women’s stories: <https://theshoeproject.online/>

**Bold and Visible** is another program for women, with a message that “it’s every woman’s birthright to shine bright and be seen.” It has similar components to the Shoe Project – writing your story and then performing on stage. I’ll be attending the Bold and Visible Monologues in Calgary on November 18<sup>th</sup> to hear a friend speak. <https://boldandvisible.com/>



This was my introduction to “graphic novels.” My only other experience with “graphic novels” has been reading Archie comic books as a kid or looking forward to reading the Saturday coloured comics in the newspaper. I enjoyed Satrapi’s freestyle drawing where she isn’t limited to a series of boxes with a bit of text in each one. The drawings really fit with the text of the story. It’s impressive that Satrapi can capture the personality and the emotions of a person so well with such primitive drawings.

I definitely didn’t have conversations like this with my grandmother or my mother or while drinking tea with their friends. Sex wasn’t a topic that was discussed openly in my family. Is this really how Iranian women talk to each other?? Or at least in Satrapi’s family? What was familiar to me was that, after a family meal, in the era that I grew up in, the men would sit in the living room and enjoy a cigarette and game of cards while the women would be in the kitchen clearing the table, putting leftovers away, doing the dishes, and preparing an after-dinner evening snack for the men. The women would definitely be chatting and visiting, and maybe even gossiping a bit, but sex wouldn’t have been a topic of discussion. At least not

within reach of my ears. And my aunties wouldn’t have been telling me the benefits of being a mistress rather than a wife. They were more likely exchanging recipes or planning a bake sale at the church. Who knows what they talked about when I wasn’t there but I would be very surprised if it were sex. I’m very happy that times have changed in my world and the men are as likely to be in the kitchen cleaning up as the women.

I enjoyed the irony of the claim of the women not to spread stories, right after they had been doing just that. Marjane’s grandmother wanted her to tell the others what happened to Shideh, a story Marjane had told her grandmother in confidence. All the women were asking her to tell the story, even while saying, “no pressure.” When Marjane decided to tell the story, she made them all promise not to tell others. They insisted they weren’t the kind of people to talk about others behind their backs. Ha ha! You know they’re going to repeat the story as soon as they can. Sadly, the practice of gossip is still alive and well and still as damaging in my own culture as much as with these Iranian women.

It’s interesting how the women are giving advice on how to deceive their husbands to think they are virgins. Satrapi does a good job of pointing out the double standards between men and women – no problem if men are promiscuous but women have to be virgins when they marry.

Satrapi also points out the disparity between how a man would treat his wife and how he would be on his best behavior with his mistress. The women make a case for why being a mistress is a better choice, if that’s how it is!

Satrapi paints men in a very bad light and makes marriage sound awful. This is not my experience. The men in my life are very respectful of women and treat their wives well. Not all men are like the ones she describes in the book, thankfully.

I like Satrapi's irreverent, "in-your-face" style of writing. She doesn't dance around things but just dives straight in. It seems like nothing is off limits.

As we move towards a more non-binary view of gender and more gender fluidity, I wonder what will happen to these gender stereotypes. ❖

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## Literary Kaleidoscope

Literary Kaleidoscope hosts in-person meetings on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of each month at Marda Loop Community Centre, 3031 – 16<sup>th</sup> St. SW. Admission is \$15. Presentations begin at 9:30 am and run between 60 and 75 minutes. If you want to get a preview of our April book, take note of the January book – *Demon Copperhead*.

### Winter Schedule

#### Wednesday January 17

Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead*  
Presenter: Professor Faye Halpern

#### Wednesday February 21

Lea Ypi's *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History*  
Presenter: Professor Adrienne Kertzer

#### Wednesday March 20

Marina Endicott's *The Observer*  
Presenter: Professor Aritha van Herk

See <https://literarykaleidoscope.ca/> for more details on these two presentations. ❖

## Best Books of 2023

Voting is now open for the **Goodreads Choice Awards for 2023**. There are 15 categories of books so cast a vote for your favorites! I see Ann Patchett has an entry in the Fiction category – *Tom Lake*. (Patchett authored our September book, *Bel Canto*.) Prince Harry's *Spare* is on the list in the Memoirs category. It's not calling to me but my daughter said it was interesting.



The Opening Round of voting is Nov. 14-26. Final Round is Nov. 28 to Dec. 3. You can vote in any or all of the categories. Winners will be announced on Dec. 7. Here is the link for casting your vote:

[Best Books 2023 — Goodreads Choice Awards](#) ❖

## What else are you reading?

Janine is reading Nora Ephron's book, *I Feel Bad About My Neck: And Other Thoughts on Being a Woman*. Janine said the book had her laughing out loud! This would be a great book to read following our discussion of women's bodies as represented in *Embroideries*. Movie-goers may know that Nora Ephron also wrote the romantic comedy, *When Harry Met Sally*. ❖