Parkdale Book Club

October 2026 – Master Butchers Singing

2026-2027 Schedule – 2nd Saturday each month, 10 am, Zoom

14 November	*Finding Flora*	Elinor Florence	Beth
12 December	*Still Life at Eighty*	Abigail Thomas	Ruth
9 January 2027	*I Am, I Am, I Am*	Maggie O'Farrell	Deb
13 February (Family Day w/e)	*How to Read a Book*	Monica Wood	Lynn
13 March	*How to Share an Egg*	Bonnie Reichart	Roz
10 April	*The Correspondent*	Virginia Evans	Ruth
8 May	*When God was a Rabbit*	Sarah Winman	Janine
12 June (Shavuot)	*Endling*	Maria Reva	Lynn

Our book club has a Facebook page. See https://www.facebook.com/ParkdaleBookClub

Need we say? No AI here.



Time sensitive: **October 13 – 18** Single tickets for **wordfest** are now available, or you can buy a pass that allows you to attend as many events as you wish. Read the Festival at a Glance for the schedule of all 41 experiences.



November's book

Saturday, November 14th at 10:00 am

FINDING FLORA

by Elinor Florence

From Goodreads:

"A rollicking historical novel set in turn-of-the-century Alberta about a young woman on the run from her abusive husband who uses a legal loophole to claim a homestead in the Wild West — perfect for fans of *Outlawed* and *Giver of Stars*.

In 1905, Scottish newcomer Flora Craigie jumps from a moving train to escape her abusive husband. Desperate to disappear, she claims a homestead near Alix, Alberta, determined to start a new life for herself. She finds that her nearest neighbours are also a Welsh widow with three children; two American women raising chickens; and a Métis woman who makes a living by breaking in wild horses.

While battling the harsh environment (and draconian local attitudes toward female farmers), the five women grapple with the differences of their backgrounds and the secrets each struggles to keep. When their homes are threatened with expropriation

by the hostile federal Minister of the Interior, the women join forces to "fire the heather," a Scottish term meaning raising a ruckus. And as the competition for land along the new Canadian Pacific Railway line heats up, Flora's violent husband closes in, and an unscrupulous land agent threatens the lives and livelihoods of the women just as they're coming into their own."

Join Zoom Meeting:
https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82432011683?pwd=SEgwSFFlOTRZODVtSmVuYW1vOXNwdz09
Meeting ID: 824 3201 1683
Passcode: 284356

If you're not able to join the meeting, you are welcome to send your comments about *Finding Flora* to sloanelm@shaw.ca or bethbalshaw@shaw.ca before November 14th so they can be shared with the group and included in our next Book Club Newsletter.

Master Butchers Singing Club

Eight of us met during Thanksgiving weekend to talk about this wonderful book. Okay, some of us thought it more wonderful than others, who were, nevertheless, 'engaged enough to finish it.' Here are some reactions we had:

I loved how the book captured romantic longing. These were my favourite quotes:

"He looked at Delphine and his eyes were white blue. Their stares locked. Delphine's cheeks went fever hot and she looked down first. Clouds flew across the sun. Light shuddered in and out of the room, and the red mouths of the geraniums on the windowsill yawned."

"Then he stilled his heart, his breath, his thoughts, and leaned into her until his heart knocked hard and his breath tore through his lungs and thoughts turned into shifting colors that ripped softly into many pieces and rained down all around them as ordinary light."

Also enjoyed this note from the author:

"This book is fiction except for snout salad, the bull's pizzle, and my grandmother's short stint as a human table in a vaudeville act."

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- This book invites a second reading because there is a lot to take in – setting (two continents, old world vs new world), time period, background context, characters, themes, plot. There is a mix of joyous and tragic times as well as suspenseful moments and unsolved mysteries. Foreshadowing helps to create suspense, particularly when the young boys were digging the tunnel (you just know something bad is going to happen!) and when Sheriff Albert Hock used blackmail and physical aggression to try to force Clarisse to have sex with him (he got a bad surprise when she fought back!). The author does a good job of character development. You learn about their external appearance and habits but also about their inner thoughts and feelings – sometimes by being directly told and sometimes by inference.
- I was intrigued by the title. I expected the Singing Club to be a central part of the story in the same way that the orchestra provided solace and comfort in the midst of the chaos of war in *La's Orchestra Saves the World* (Alexander McCall Smith). For me, the title doesn't capture what the story is about. One theory suggests that the title is a metaphor for balancing extremes, contrasting butchering with singing. In the same way, the characters in the book try to balance cold precision with vulnerability and emotion.
- I was struck by what I experienced as the theme of disappearing men, contrasted with the strength demonstrated by the women. Fidelis is the first character we meet but he's not the central character. We learn that his best friend, Johannes, died in the war (not his fault) and disappeared from his pregnant girlfriend Eva's life. Fidelis kept his promise to Johannes to marry Eva. Years later, Fidelis essentially disappeared into grief after Eva died and became unavailable to his children. His business and his family fell apart because he wasn't able to be there for them. Delphine's father, Roy, disappeared into alcohol. He was unavailable to his daughter who raised

herself. Franz stepped back from his relationship with Mazarine because of her lower social class; then, with Delphine's urging to both of them, married Mazarine. Sadly, Franz suffered a catastrophic brain injury as a pilot in WW2, became comatose and unresponsive before dying, leaving Mazarine to raise their child alone. Fidelis and Eva's twin boys, Erich and Emil disappeared when Fidelis' nasty sister, Tante Maria Theresa, took them back to Germany. They ended up serving in the German army where Emil was killed and Erich was a POW. Both disappeared from the family. Cyprian, Delphine's good friend and partner in the circus, disappeared to resume his life as a performer. The characters that demonstrated the most strength in my mind, were Delphine, Mazarine and Step-and-a Half. I admire their strength and their capacity to keep on keeping on, even when their situation was very challenging.

We had a little discussion about the title, thanks to Beth's comment. Most people thought it was the right title, because the singing, if not the club, wove a strand through the story. The music is a gift they give each other, different from now when mostly we let machines make the music. Also, Fidelis' singing to his boys even though he didn't talk with them much; Erich developing as rich a voice as his father, which helped Fidelis and Markus locate him. Lindsay thought *Sausage Wars* was fitting. I thought it was essentially Delphine's Story, although I liked that the title underlined the significance of the master butcher.

A little discussion about Cyprian's name too. Cyprian's an interesting choice given his heritage. Cypriot? Cypress trees? Then Sue mentioned Cypress Hills, and I wondered if that's the connection? On the border of southeastern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan, maybe where his family was? Or an anglicization of his Ojibwe name?

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I love this book. I've listened to it once and 'read' it once, although reading very speedily after the first 30% because I ran out of time. I will read it again, and I purchased copies for birthday gifts for people I love. This is not a book that lends itself to speeding or skimming though because it is so richly dense and evocative. There were numerous sentences that invited me to just lie back in them and be held, as the ideas and images expand fractally, calling. And this makes me think of a fabulous bit from Anne Carson in *Paris Review* 2004 interviewed by Will Aitkin: "I think a poem, when it works, is an action of the mind captured on a page, and the reader, when he engages it, has to enter into that action. His mind repeats that action and travels again through the action, but it is a movement of yourself through a thought, through an activity of thinking, so by the time you get to the end you're different than you were at the beginning and you feel that difference."

At the risk of reproducing most of the book, here are some of the tiny poems and phrases that stand out:

- "(Fidelis) brought Eva over the empty sea into the emptiness of sky and earth."
- "in song he was a happy man. There was no darkness in him, no heaviness. He was weightless light, all music."
- (Delphine's father) "was a pallid little crooked man with the fat nose of a sinister clown."
- (Cyprian) "he fell directly into a fabulous well of sleep in which he dreamed phenomenally."
- "He dreamed of trees with their limbs cracked and creaking in wind, of hopping from ice floe to floe in a

roaring torrent, of a sneaky gunpowder booby trap that blew up every time he tried to talk."

- "the drunks crashed, oblivious to warding-off charms and dizzy indigo."
- "Because it offended her to swallow as many as twenty or thirty lies per day, she quit school in her final year." "Delphine counted and even wrote the lies down in the margins of her textbooks and library books. Lies! More lies! She wrote so fiercely that for the next five years the nuns would admonish their students both to disregard and to bring to their attention any books bearing handwritten annotations."
- "why are we given the curse of imagining eternity when we know we can't experience it, when we ourselves are so finite?"
- "Step-and-a-Half. She was a rangy stray dog of a woman"
- "*Who are you* is a question with a long answer or a short answer. When Tante dropped it between them, bounced but did not retrieve it, Delphine was left to consider the larger meaning as she scrubbed down the meat counters and prepared to mop the floor."
- (the DeSoto) "purred, as he said, like a kitten in a butter dish."
- "tonight she was unfamiliar to herself"
- "She was in the other world of the two that existed side by side. One world was of those who would go on living. The other was centered on the one who would die."
- "She was guarding Eva and she was waiting patiently to haul her across the deep spaces of the night, the black spaces, to the other side."
- "Delphine looked into Eva's eyes expecting to become hypnotized, but this time something gave way, she could feel it. Their thoughts had pushed through an invisible barrier, a magnetic field, and there was suddenly a lightness that lifted them giddily into a storm of calm."
- "A FAMILY IN GRIEF has accidents and stumbles a lot. There are scabbed toes and the terror of eyes nearly put out. Falls off the roof, falls from bicycles, falls slipping in the sawdust of the meat-market floor. And too, the sorrow makes a path for every illness."
- "Roy was still not drinking. Perversely, this had begun to concern Delphine."
- "It was a routine, she later thought, she didn't treasure enough. An even life, without any jumps or starts. No stalls either. It was the kind of life you didn't know at the time you were living it was a happy life."
- "neither of them ever passed a day or even several hours of the day without remembering the war."
- "Steadily and with a German effectiveness and efficiency that surprised even herself, she cursed everyone"
- "brand-new piece of old information."
- "sharp, camphor-ridden, wolfish but not exactly unpleasant smell."
- "Their antagonism had abruptly turned to a magnetic loyalty."
- "Delphine began to read with a mad attention when she wanted to talk to Clarisse. She saw that in her life there was a woman-shaped hole, a cutout that led to a mysterious place. Through it, her mother, then Eva, and now Clarisse had walked."
- "This man, you love him." "No," said Delphine. Then she added, "He sings." "Oh, all right," said the Delver."
- "The pleasure of this sort of life—bookish, she supposed it might be called, a reading life—had made her isolation into a rich and even subversive thing."
- "Her ambition to leave faded and a kind of contentment set in. She hadn't exactly feared the word contentment, but had always associated it with a vague sense of failure. To be discontented had always seemed much richer a thing. To be restless, striving. That view was romantic. In truth, she was finding out, life was better lived in a tranquil pattern. As long as she could read, she never tired of the design of her days."
- "She was thinking. She pictured herself thinking. I'll never do it, she thought. I'll never really think."
- "WHEN STEP-AND-A-HALF was a very old woman she at last became beautiful**,** in the way a wind-shaped rock or the whitened bones of deer are beautiful."

Such riches, such music…

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More by Louise Erdrich. More, but not all 62 of her titles! Here are the stand-alone novels.

The Crown of Columbus, 1991
The Antelope Wife/Antelope Woman, 1998
The Master Butchers Singing Club, 2003
The Plague of Doves, 2008

Shadow Tag, 2010
The Round House, 2012
LaRose, 2016
Future Home of the Living God, 2017
The Night Watchman, 2020
The Sentence, 2021
The Mighty Red, 2024

The Love Medicine books by Louise Erdrich:
Love Medicine, 1984
The Beet Queen, 1985
Tracks, 1988
The Bingo Palace, 1994
Tales of Burning Love, 1996
The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, 2000
Four Souls, 2004
The Painted Drum, 2005

The Birchbark House books:
The Birchbark House, 1999
The Game of Silence, 2005
The Porcupine Year, 2008
Chickadee, 2012
Makoons, 2016

What else we've been reading

Remember, for November's column send your thoughts in to Beth or Lynn about what you've been reading.

DNF at 5%: *The Book of Elsewhere* by Keanu Reeves and China Mieville (2024). A military sci-fi thriller based on the BRZRKR comic series, but in the 5% I listened to, I couldn't see the point, and there was a LOT of body horror. Maybe it's wonderful, but not for me. Very expansive vocabulary. Here you go: "The great, great run of us, in the tales told by winds and mountains and trees and cities and the sea and Leviathan and the abyss and by him, my erstwhile master then companion, of whom we spoke, are full stops. We are what happens in the infinitely small instance between one moment worthy of remark and another. We are specks. Milliards of us contained within each such tiny beady ink eye.

But I believe, and I hope it is not the arrogance of love that befuddles me because I do not say I loved him and I know he never loved me, but I believe that were he ever to speak of me, if he were to write the great book of his own life, when it came to the few years I was at his side, that he, for the curl of a moment, as if raising a finger, would pause as if for breath.

That I am one of the elect, privileged forever to be a comma."

The Year of the Hare, Arto Paasilinna (1975). Interesting to shift to a book written almost 50 years earlier! This is a strange one. I appreciate the appeal of dropping out of one's life. I appreciate satire, although some of it was lost on me because I don't know the culture. There is a disconcerting contradiction between Vatanen's caring for the (un-named) hare and his hostility and cruelty to a raven and a bear (both of whom, admittedly, are competing with him for food resources). It was interesting but I don't recommend it. 3* 15926.

"There was a half-moon, and the stars were glimmering faintly in the frozen evening. He had his own world, this one, and it was fine to be here, living alone in one's own way. The hare ambled silently along the trail ahead of the skier, like a pathfinder. Vatanen sang to it."

DNF: *Invisible Girl*, Lisa Jewell (2020). This is a psychological thriller/domestic drama/character study. For me, the darkness was not offset by story, character, or writing. So when my loan

time ran out, I had no temptation to put it on hold again.

Jonas Hassen Khemiri's *The Sisters* (2023, 656 pages). This was long (first and strongest impression) and good. Far-reaching. About the three Mikkola sisters (Tunisian mother and Swedish father) and Jonas (Swedish mother and Tunisian father, like the author). Family, friendships, effects of being mixed race, passions, depression, living with a curse on the family.... 3.5* 27926

*The Unselected Journals of Emma M. Lion, **Vol. 1** ,* Beth Brower. (2019, 107 pages). At the beginning, I thought, ho hum, I wonder why this is so popular. But soon I found it very engaging. Set in 1883 London, presenting the realities of being a young woman in that version of our sexist and classist society. It appears there are 8 volumes available, with a planned 20. 3.5* 29926

"But my true love is the evening walk, that last hour of daylight that has its way with sunlight, shadow, and soul. That was the case this evening. The lamps were lit, light coming from the houses, and there walked I, alone, and not upset to be so."

"you will look very thoughtful and intelligent. Let us hope you are. Unless you hope to marry soon. Then let us hope you are not. It takes a courageous man to marry a woman with a mind."

Every Word is a Bird We Teach to Sing: Encounters with the Mysteries and Meanings of Language, Daniel Tammet (2017, 262 pages). Tammet is one of a few people in the world with the diagnosis, high-functioning autistic savant syndrome and synesthesia. In these essays, he looks at language from this perspective, often becoming intrigued by something and then exploring it in depth, going to the source: telephone language, translating poetry, translating the bible, ASL.... A fascinating chapter was on a group of writers who use constrained writing techniques. As I read about a novel written without using the letter e, I realized this essay also was written without using the letter e. 4* 21026

"One day, intent on my reading, I happened on *lollipop* and a shock of joy coursed through me. I read it as *1011ipop*. One thousand and eleven, divisible by three, was a fittingly round number shape, and I thought it the most beautiful I had yet read: half number and half word."

Five, Ilona Bannister. (2026, 240 pages). What an interesting novel. The Goodreads blurb: Have you ever tried to pass the time by imagining the lives of the strangers standing next to you? Ilona Bannister's *Five* introduces readers to five seemingly random people waiting for a train, one of whom will die when the train arrives. It's weirdly compelling – weird because as I've said before I avoid stories about psychopaths and at least one of the five is psychopathic. A lasting impression is how very many stories are swirling around us whenever we are amidst other people. And how very assuming and judgmental some people can be, knowing nothing of someone else's life. The author occasionally addresses the reader directly, breaking the fourth wall, for example, speculating about how book club discussions will go... 4.5* 31026

"The child, the mother, the businessman, the old woman, and the gambler. One of them will die despite your attachment to them, regardless of your judgment of their behaviors or your empathy with their situation. There is probably one that you're okay with getting rid of. Of course there is. You've chosen your favorite. You don't have to admit to anyone who it is. But perhaps you should

ask yourself why, what makes them worthy of surviving in the internal universe of your brain where you are God"

Ripper, Isobel Allende (2013, 496 pages). I'm a bit self-conscious that this is the first book by Allende I've read. Although this is identified as a mystery, it's more romancey than I prefer, and seems like a series of unrelated stories loosely strung together. I'd give it a miss. 2.5* 151026

Nominations for next year

We're off to a good start! Sue was enthusiastic about Ann Patchett's latest book, *Whistler*, and I second the nomination. One of President Obama's '26 Summer Reading List Picks, "a moving, luminous novel that reminds us of the sweetness and impermanence of life and the power of connection to defy time" according the Goodreads blurb.



The **big book club** (formerly Literary Kaleidoscope) meets on the third Wednesday of each month from September to May. In-person meetings are now held at a new location: Temple B'nai Tikvah**,** 900 47 Avenue SW, 10:00 to 11:30 am. Each month, a prominent guest speaker guides the discussion.

Oct. 21 – Anthony Camara presents ***Orbital*** by Samantha Harvey. Register for Orbital.

Nov. 18 – Marcello Di Cintio presents ***Precarious*** by Marcello Di Cintio. Note that this book won Mr. Di Cintio the City of Calgary W.O. Mitchell Book Prize. Register for Precarious.

Read more about the **big book club** and sign up for their newsletter to receive announcements of meetings. ❖