Parkdale Book Club

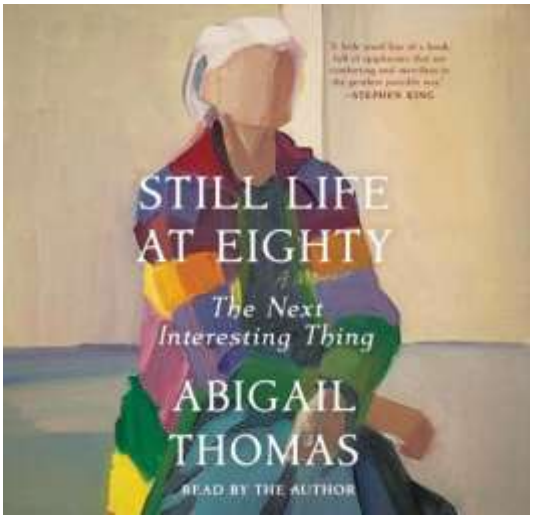
November 2026 – Finding Flora

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

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

December's Book



Next month, Dec. 12th, we'll be discussing Ruth's nomination, *Still Life at Eighty* by Abigail Thomas.

From Amazon: "In her new memoir, Abigail Thomas ruminates on aging during the confines of COVID-19 with her trademark mix of humor and wisdom, including valuable, contemplative writing tips along the way. As she approaches eighty, what she herself calls old age, Abigail Thomas accepts her new life, quieter than before, no driving, no dancing, mostly sitting in her chair in a sunny corner with three dogs for company — three dogs, vivid memories, bugs and birds and critters that she watches out her window. No one but this beloved, best-selling memoirist, could make so much over what might seem so little.

Memories fall like confetti, as time contracts, shoots forward, dawdles, and there she is, back in her twenties in Washington Square Park, drinking, having sex with strangers, falling in and out of love, believing in a better world. Whole decades evaporate as she sits in her chair, and a spider

takes up residence beside her, who will become her boon companion for the next week. Sometimes dread arrives, inhabits her body like a shadow and all she can do is write it away, pay attention to what catches her eye, sticks in her brain. Whatever keeps her in the moment.

Pull up a chair, have a cup of tea and enter Abigail Thomas's funny, mesmerizing, generous world." ❖

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 *Still Life at Eighty* to sloanelm@shaw.ca or bethbalshaw@shaw.ca before December 12th so they can be shared with the group and included in our October Book Club Newsletter.

Finding Flora

Eight of us met on Zoom on Saturday, November 14th to discuss Beth's nomination, *Finding Flora* by Elinor Florence. Lindsay's photo, capturing a field behind Calaway Park, gives us a picturesque setting for this story.



One of the things we discussed was the title of the book. We can think of "finding Flora" in many ways. One way is that Flora's violent husband, Hector, was determined to search for and find Flora. He made a frightening entry near the end of the story and quickly made his exit. Another meaning of the title is Flora's search for herself. As she struggled to survive in a harsh environment, she found her own inner strength, courage, and true identity. The title also alludes to nature – Flora, the person, connected with the flora of the prairies as she cultivated the land. A Google search revealed this symbolism of flora in the novel:

- **Sowing Roots:** Just as pioneer women had to break the tough prairie sod before planting crops, Flora has to break free from her past trauma before she can build a new life and community.
- **Wild Prairie Rose:** Alberta's provincial flower, famous for its beauty paired with sharp, protective thorns. It reflects Flora and her female neighbors — capable of creating warmth and beauty on the harsh frontier, yet fiercely defensive against men who try to take their land or freedom.
- **Buffalo Grass & Fescue:** The thick, tangled native grasses whose deep root systems made "busting the sod" backbreaking work for homesteaders. It represents the stubborn resistance of the untamed land — and the patriarchal laws of 1905 — that Flora must overcome to claim her independence.
- **Sagebrush & Wolf Willow:** Hardy, silver-leafed shrubs that survive extreme drought and bitter wind. Their distinctive, earthy scent evokes the raw, untamed atmosphere of the open plains where Flora finally feels free.

Here are some thoughts from our group:

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I really enjoyed the book *Finding Flora*. It was an easy read. Some of the hardships the women in Ladyville had to encounter reminded me of stories my dad's mom shared with me in her last few years of life about how it was working on a homestead on the prairies. Her family homesteaded near Sintaluta, Saskatchewan which is near Indian Head in the Qu'Appelle Valley.

I do like how the women came together to share their knowledge on how to do things, or learned together in order to survive. Yes, in the end it became o love story but in both cases the women would have survived without finding love.

The story also brought to life that even in the early 1900's lesbians were around, but it was very difficult for them to come out.

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Fun facts about Sintaluta, SK – At its peak, in 1911, the town housed around 400 residents and seven grain elevators. At the 2021 census, there were 124 residents.

Sintaluta made Canadian agricultural history in 1902 when farmers successfully sued the CPR over the unfair allocation of grain cars.

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Thoughts while reading:

1. Can one cow make enough milk to produce the amount of butter Mrs. Penrose is selling every week? No. about 2.5 gallons of milk are required to produce a pound of butter. It might be possible now, with little milk left over to sell or use, but cows produced about 1/6 as much milk in 1910 as they do now, a little over a gallon a day. (this is what you notice when you've taken four years of agriculture in HS)
2. When the doc showed up when baby had scarlet fever, I thought, oh no, here is the romantic element. And the book is, overall, a romance. Clearly, Hector's going to have to die before the end…
3. Why was Flora so hostile initially to alliance with Mrs. Penrose and the others?
4. A good companion piece to this book is *Wild People Quiet* by Tara Geroux. (see books read in this newsletter)
5. This would have been a great history book at about the grade 6 level.
6. Sourdough is an interesting character – so aggressive yet hugely helpful in clearing & ploughing and teaching them how to survive and thrive.
7. This reminds me of two wonderful Connie Kaldor songs: "Harsh and Unforgiving" and also "Spring in the Prairies." (You can listen to *Harsh and Unforgiving* and *Spring in the Prairies* on Spotify.)

Harsh and Unforgiving



I come from a land that is harsh and unforgiving
Winter snows can kill you
And the summer burn you dry
When a change in the weather
Makes a difference to your living
You keep one eye on the banker
And another on the sky.

But oh, I get caught by those wide-open spaces
Caught by the sight of those straight horizon lines
Caught by the sight of those lined open faces
Weathered over trouble and time
'Cause that big old flatland
She doesn't suffer fools lightly
Watch your step if you're new around
Brown broke down in a blizzard last winter
Tried to walk and froze to death fifty feet from town.

I come from a land that is harsh and unforgiving
Winter snows can kill you
And the summer burn you dry
When a change in the weather
Makes a difference to your living
You keep one eye on the banker
And another on the sky.

But oh, I get caught by those blue spring ditches
Farmers seeding hoping it will pay
Hoping that July won't see their hearts
Caught in that topsoil
Watching the wind blow it away
You can work all year
You can get it in the bin
There's no telling what price you get or when it sells
You just hope you can hold on so
You don't end up like the neighbors
Him and her they're weeping as the auctioneer yells.

I come from a land that is harsh and unforgiving
Winter snows can kill you
And the summer burn you dry
When a change in the weather
Makes a difference to your living
You keep one eye on the banker
And another on the sky.

©Connie Kaldor, Coyote Entertainement, PQ

8. The insistent maintenance of the class system. I do not enjoy reading books about the sexism and classism of the past – what we still have today is bad enough. I think this accounts for some of the differences in women's rights, comparing U.S. and Canada.
9. I got much more engaged with the book later on, especially at the time of the fire intended to burn Flora out and the subsequent barn-raising. Found family/community, kindness.
10. Little dancing grain plants, burned down in their prime – Flora's intimate relationship with her land, separating wild oat seeds from the Marquis seeds…
11. Hector is set up as distally responsible for his own death by syphilis, even though Wren shot him.

12. And speaking of Wren – Boston marriages. In Wren and Robbie's story was there a little borrowing from the play (and subsequent movie) *The Children's Hour*? (Inspired by the true story of two Scottish school teachers in 1810, Miss Marianne Woods and Miss Jane Pirie, whose lives were destroyed when one of their students accused them of engaging in a sexual relationship.) Some of the Boston marriages were platonic. Earlier similar alliances were ignored because it was assumed women had no sexual desire, so they must be platonic. (e.g., in U.K., lesbianism was never illegal because sexual offence was defined as penile penetration.)
13. Some parts of this book reminded me of my reaction to *The Splendid and the Vile*, Eric Larson: Larson tells us, for example, the name of the specific spermicidal jelly used by the woman who decided it was time to no longer be a virgin. This did not forward the story. Just because you've done the research doesn't mean you have to include all of it – lists of provisions, etc.

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Elinor Florence includes real historical people (e.g., Alix Westhead, William Van Horne, Irene Parlby, Frank Olver) and real events in her novel (e.g., expansion of CPR, legal barriers for women re land ownership, dispossession of Métis land). Mainly, the blending of fact and fiction seems to work well and adds a degree of credibility to the story.

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The author does a good job of describing the harshness of the prairies in the early 1900s and the added barriers that women faced. The first barrier Flora encountered was the violence she experienced with her husband. She jumped from a train, without knowing if she'd survive, because that was preferable to a subservient life with Hector. She soon discovered the barrier of the Dominion Lands Act that prohibited single or married women from obtaining free land grants. Thankfully, she found a loophole with the help of Grace Godwin, a nurse veteran. Without any previous farming experience, Flora faced relentless challenges of meeting homestead requirements (build a dwelling, dig a well, clear and cultivate the land) at a time when the failure rate was about 50%. Snowstorms, hail, fire, illness, and negative attitudes of others all stood in her way. Flora's courage and determination helped her overcome adversity; she also developed a supportive community of people who helped her to succeed. Reading this book reminds us of the stamina of our pioneer ancestors.

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Elinor Florence says she imagines that Flora in her shack would look something like this photo of Petrina Peterson Pogreba, a homesteader in Montana. You can read more about where Florence got her inspiration on Elinor Florence's website.

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I found an interesting but disturbing article about the Dominion Land Act (1872) in *Canadian Encyclopedia*. It describes how land in Western Canada (previously purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1869 but how did HBC come to "own" it????) was surveyed and made available to individuals, municipalities, and companies. Not surprisingly, the Indigenous inhabitants of the land were not consulted about its sale. The Act was repealed in 1930 when [expropriated] land was transferred to the prairie provinces. Settlement on the prairies was slow in the late 1800s until the Minister of the Interior, Clifford Sifton, aggressively promoted it. Immigration and settlement increased dramatically at the turn of the century at the time when Hector and Flora arrived from Scotland. It's very uncomfortable to read our Canadian history. There are a couple of very short videos that are worth watching – Go West! Settling Canada's Prairies and The Last Best West.

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Although *Finding Flora* was an interesting read, I found that the characters were not as well-developed as I hoped, the plot was cliché and predictable, and the romance part was a little sappy (e.g., Flora "swooned" or felt weak in the knees or had a fluttery heart every time the young handsome doctor was near). These scenes were almost comical. How Flora acted with Samuel didn't match the portrayal of her as a strong, independent woman. After working so hard for her homestead, she was prepared to give up her own pursuits to become a doctor's wife and helpmate. Thankfully, Samuel recognized how important the homestead was for her. He bought the yellow house from Roberta and Wren so that Flora could continue to work the land.❖

Book Reviews by Lynn

Books from mid October to mid November 2026

Eliza Sunshine*,* Michelle Good (2026, 368 pages). What a book to start the month off with! Good has said, "... it is not only the story of my mother, but also of every indigenous woman touched by the dehumanizing influence of colonialism." Have a hankie ready. Starting when the buffalo still nourished the people, this is an interesting companion piece to ***Prairie Edge***, which we read last year. "Given our kinship with the buffalo, it was almost impossible for us to imagine a future of scarcity. Our brothers were not only taken from us; they were taken from the prairie grasslands. Their wallows no longer provided shallow pools for small birds and prairie dogs, swift foxes and coyotes to slake their thirst. Their beards no longer spread seeds and their dung no longer fertilized the grasses. The loss to the earth was as profound as the loss to us." "I was born at the beginning of the end. An old woman now, no longer an oblivious child, I look back realizing what I didn't know."

One of the few books to leave me with a book hangover, reluctant to start anything new. A good example of the category, "This book killed me; you HAVE to read it." 5☆

"They want to teach you to hate yourself and bow to their ways. If there are no children, there is no future for us. My girl, do as they expect, but not in your true self."

"Water always makes a way for itself and is a sacred example to us of how we are to live in the world, in balance with everything around us.

"I see my parents' and grandparents' faces as I knew them as a child, so filled with love and confidence. But the truth of that ending is also etched on their faces."

"I pray each night … that the Ancestors will protect her true heart while she's alone and at those people's mercy, in that place so far from us."

"Sometimes I feel that I wasn't born at all, rather sculpted and formed by the storms of my grandmother's life."

"To do what? Finish off what those white bastards started? Turn us all into little white Indians? Have you thought for a minute that you're doing to me what that Indian School tried to do to you – what you fought so hard against? You just told me that your grandmother gave you all she had so you could survive as yourself and not become some pretend white woman."

"… nothing prepared me for rounding a bend to see – there, grazing beyond the barricades – a massive bull buffalo and, almost out of sight behind him, a mature cow. I gasped, remembering Nôhkom's stories about the herds, the hunts, and the trail leading under the mountain. Suddenly I really wanted to go home. Eleanor was also deeply moved by the sight of those beautiful creatures, the gift of heaven, trapped here for the white man's enjoyment, just as their ancestors had been trapped and slaughtered to feed the white man's greed. Our carefree excitement waned as the stories we'd grown up with rose inside each of us, reminding us that we were barely a blink in time away from war and deceit, careless violence and starvation… it was as if a cloud had replaced the spectacular sunshine."

"I felt guilty at times, like an escapee"

"All of this went completely over Billy's head." (the racism at the hospital opening party, over Eliza's white husband's head)

Winter Hours: Prose, Prose Poems, and Poems, Mary Oliver (1999, 128 pages). Wonderful. The section on the four poets was less wonderful (for me) – I skimmed that part. 5☆

"I have not written here out of imagination and invention, but out of meditation and memory. No doubt my memory has the usual partiality of the individual, and is not entirely trustworthy. Still, I have been loyal here to the experiences of my own

life and not, as is required in the more designed arts, to the needs of the line or the paragraph."

"There is something you can tell people over and over, and with feeling and eloquence, and still never say it well enough for it to be more than news from abroad – people have no readiness for it, no empathy. It is the news of personal aging -- of climbing, and knowing it, to some unrepeatable pitch and coming forth on the other side, which is pleasant still but which is, unarguably, different – which is the beginning of descent. It is the news that no one is singular, that no argument will change the course, that one's time is more gone than not, and what is left waits to be spent gracefully and attentively, if not quite so actively."

"Not Indolence, surely, but something, all the same, that balances with Ambition."

"For some years now, I have eaten almost no meat. Though, occasionally, I crave it. It is a continually interesting subject of deep ambiguity."

"winged needles" (mosquitoes)

"inherited responsibility"

"I don't think I am old yet, or done with growing. But my perspective has altered — I am less hungry for the busyness of the body, more interested in the tricks of the mind."

"Whatever a house is to the heart and body of man – refuge, comfort, luxury – surely it is as much or more to the spirit. Think how often our dreams take place inside the houses of our imagination!"

"You can have the other words -- chance, luck, coincidence, serendipity. I'll take grace. I don't know what it is exactly, but I'll take it."

"Try to live through one day believing nothing is significant, nothing is governed by the unknowable, the divine. See how you feel by the end of such a day."

"Maybe the idea of the world as flat isn't a tribal memory or an archetypal memory, but something far older -- a fox memory, a worm memory, a moss memory. Memory of leaping or crawling or shrugging rootlet by rootlet forward, across the flatness of everything. To perceive of the earth as round needed something else -- standing up! -- that hadn't yet happened. What a wild family! Fox and giraffe and wart hog, of course. But these also: bodies like tiny strings, bodies like blades and blossoms! Cord grass, Christmas fern, soldier moss! And here comes grasshopper, all toes and knees and eyes, over the little mountains of the dust. When I see the black cricket in the woodpile, in autumn, I don't frighten her. And when I see the moss grazing upon the rock, I touch her tenderly, sweet cousin."

Whitman: "I loafe and invite my soul, I lean and loafe at my ease… observing a spear of summer grass."

"I can think for a little while; then, it's the world again."

"Morning, for me, is the time of best work. My conscious thought sings like a bird in a cage, but the rest of me is singing too, like a bird in the wind. Perhaps something is still strong in us in the morning, the part that is untameable, that dreams willfully and crazily, that knows reason is no more than an island within us."

"What I write begins and ends with the act of noticing and cherishing."

"there exist a thousand unbreakable links between each of us and everything else, and … our dignity and our chances are one."

"One could be standing in the same place, by the same sea, a thousand years ago."

The Road to Tender Hearts**,** Annie Hartnett (2025, 384 pages). My first impression was that this was too light to be worthwhile, one of those books written with the intention of it being made into a movie (not that those two necessarily go together). Cute and thin. But increasingly, *The Road to Tender Hearts* felt like an exploration of grief and our need to be truly witnessed. "For so many years, when he told people about what had happened to Kate, he hated what they always said: "I can't imagine." Try to imagine, he always wanted to say, and sometimes he did. Try to imagine how our family was destroyed overnight." And parenting. "Kids aren't resilient. That's something adults like to say to make themselves feel better. To pretend that kids don't feel as deeply as adults do. But kids are everything that happens to them. They're sponges. Everything bad, everything good. Every hurtful thing you say. Every loving one." 3☆

The Fellowship of the Ring, JRR Tolkein. (1954, 432 pages). Weird that this was published when I was 2 years old! I first read this in undergraduate uni, practically compulsory reading where I lived in residence. And, really, hobbits are kind of models for undergraduate uni students – 2nd breakfasts, smoking dope, sitting around drinking and talking …. On my revisit to the book, I've been listening to this every night since June to fall asleep. It's pretty good for

falling asleep. There are many debates about what shall we do now? Which way shall we go now? Shall we go now, or later? And many songs. JRRT never met a situation that did not merit a song:

"Sing hey! for the bath at close of day
that washes the weary mud away!
A loon is he that will not sing:
O! Water Hot is a noble thing!"

But I like hero stories, and this is an archetypal hero's journey, with a found-family subtext. "You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin – to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours – closer than you yourself keep it. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo. Anyway: there it is. We know most of what Gandalf has told you. We know a good deal about the ring. We are horribly afraid – but we are coming with you; or following you like hounds." 4☆ Now on to *The Two Towers*.

Wild People Quiet, Tara Geroux. (2026, 304 pages). " I anticipate that ... it will require considerable management to keep these wild people quiet." Prime Minister John A MacDonald, 1869. Shortlisted for the 2026 Giller Prize, *WPQ* is a heart-wrenching story of racism in Canada, seen through the lens of a white-passing Métis woman, Florence. The depth and intensity of anti-Indigenous bias was underlined in the reactions of the people of Torduvalle, SK, who had known and respected Florence for 11 years when they learned that she was Métis: she lost her friends, lost her job, was shunned in the street …. My library copy was returned when I had about 40 minutes left in the recording, so I bought the audiobook in order to finish. 4☆

Finding Flora, Elinor Florence. 3☆ ❖

What We're Reading

Sue is enjoying ***A Founding Mother: A Novel of Abigail Adams*** by Stefanie Dray and Laura Kamoie.

Sue says, "This novel takes place in America in the late 1700s in and around Boston. I am thoroughly enjoying the book, not finished yet. Abigail encounters some of the same hardships the women in *Finding Flora* do, even though she is married to John Adams. He is away lots and she has to keep the farm and the family going on next to nothing."

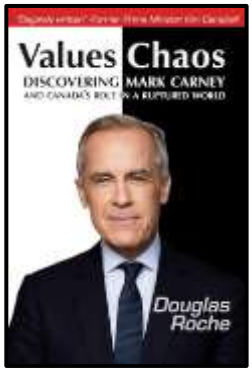
From Amazon: "In the heart of revolutionary Boston, Abigail Adams (wife of one president and mother to another) raises her children amid riots, blockades, and the outbreak of war. While her husband, John Adams, rises from country lawyer to nation-builder, often away for years at a time, Abigail builds her own independence—managing their farm, making lucrative investments, amassing savings, battling plague and loss, and defending their home. Unafraid to speak her mind, she famously offers fearless political counsel, urging John to "remember the ladies" in the new government. Through it all, she becomes his most trusted confidante and indispensable ally."

Deb is reading ***Learned by Heart*** by Emma Donaghue. Amazon: "A heartbreakingly gorgeous novel based on the true story of two girls who fall secretly, deeply and dangerously in love at boarding school in nineteenth century York.

Drawing on years of investigation and Anne Lister's five-million-word secret journal, *Learned by Heart* is the long-buried love story of Eliza Raine, an orphan heiress banished from India to England at age six, and Anne Lister, a brilliant, troublesome tomboy, who meet at the Manor School for Young Ladies in York in 1805 when they are both fourteen.

Emotionally intense, psychologically compelling and deeply researched, *Learned by Heart* is an extraordinary novel. Full of passion and heartbreak, the tangled lives of Anne Lister and Eliza Raine form a love story for the ages."

Doreen recommends ***Values|Chaos: Discovering Mark Carney and Canada's Role in a Ruptured World*** by Douglas Roche.



The book reflects on Carney's rise to office — following his tenure as an economist and central banker—and his pivot toward a pragmatic "value-based realism" in response to geopolitical ruptures, shifts in U.S. relations under President Donald Trump, and increased military spending. Roche questions whether a heavy focus on military strength and pragmatic statecraft risks sidelining traditional United Nations peace agendas and common security principles. ❖