

# Parkdale Book Club

## March 2023 – The Art of Leaving

**Schedule** – 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday each month, 10 am, Zoom

April 8	<i>The Children's Blizzard</i> by Melanie Benjamin	Margaret
May 13	<i>Sufferance</i> by Thomas King	Janine
June 10	<i>The Woman Outside My Door</i> by Rachel Ryan	Sue



**Saturday, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
at 10:00 am**

### *The Children's Blizzard*

by Melanie Benjamin

From Amazon:

"The morning of January 12, 1888, was unusually mild, following a punishing cold spell. It was warm enough for the homesteaders of the Dakota Territory to venture out again, and for their children to return to school without their heavy coats—leaving them unprepared when disaster struck. At the hour when most prairie schools were letting out for the day, a terrifying, fast-moving blizzard blew in without warning. Schoolteachers as young as sixteen were suddenly faced with life and death decisions: Keep the children inside, to risk freezing to death when fuel ran out, or send them home, praying they wouldn't get lost in the storm?"

Based on actual oral histories of survivors, this gripping novel follows the stories of Raina and Gerda Olsen, two sisters, both schoolteachers — one becomes a hero of the storm and the other finds herself ostracized in the aftermath. It's also the story of Anette Pedersen, a servant girl whose miraculous survival serves as a turning point in her life and touches the heart of Gavin Woodson, a newspaperman seeking redemption. It was Woodson and others like him who wrote the embellished news stories that lured northern European immigrants across the sea to settle a pitiless land. Boosters needed them to settle territories into states, and they didn't care what lies they told these families to get them there — or whose land it originally was.

At its heart, this is a story of courage, of children forced to grow up too soon, tied to the land because of their parents' choices. It is a story of love taking root in the hard prairie ground, and of families being torn asunder by a ferocious storm that is little remembered today — because so many of its victims were immigrants to this country."

Please note the author — we're not reading the book by same title written by David Laskin.

**Join Zoom Meeting:**

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

Meeting ID: 824 3201 1683

Passcode: 284356

If you're not able to join us, please feel free to send your comments about *The Children's Blizzard* to [sloanelm@shaw.ca](mailto:sloanelm@shaw.ca) before April 8<sup>th</sup> so they can be shared with the group and included in our next Book Club Newsletter.

## Next year's choices

As we approach voting month, we need some more nominations, and more different nominators, for next year.

Facilitating is easy; in this group of smart and interested readers, many people will contribute ideas and background...

Here's what we have so far.

1. ***The Boy in the Woods*** by Maxwell Smart (not agent 86) nominated by Lee.
2. Beth added a nomination: ***Demon Copperhead*** by Barbara Kingsolver.
3. ***Good Eggs*** by Rebecca Hardiman, nominated by Debbie.
4. Lynn is nominating Genki Kawamura's ***If Cats Disappeared from the World***.
5. Doreen is recommending two books for a fun change of pace, from her summer reading for next year: ***The Invention of Wings*** by Sue Monk Kidd.
6. Heidi suggested a couple of books her Book Club read that she said were really good, fun reads, both Canadian Authors: ***Letters to Singapore*** by Kelly Kaur – The setting is a University of Calgary student writing home.
7. Doreen's second: ***The Little Old Lady Who Broke All the Rules***, by Catherina Ingleman Sunberg.
8. ***Magpie*** by Elizabeth Day
9. From Lynn: Shelby Van Pelt's ***Remarkably Bright Creatures***.
10. Heidi's second suggestion is ***The Shoe on The Roof*** by Will Ferguson.
11. ***Son of Elsewhere*** by Elamin Abdelmehmoud is nominated by Lee.
12. Deb is nominating Sara Whinman's ***Still Life***.

Please add to the list of nominations with any book you think would make for a good discussion. Our parameters are quite inclusive, with a consideration only that the book be available in formats in addition to hardback by the time we're reading it. Send nominations to [sloanelm@shaw.ca](mailto:sloanelm@shaw.ca).

## March's Discussion -- *The Art of Leaving*

Eleven of us met on the 11th to discuss this interesting story. Here are some of our reactions:

Story is really about the grief Ayelet encounters in the passing of her dad at an early age in life. It was interesting to know that in Israel all youth, automatically serve in the military when becoming 18 years of age, not just male persons. Ayelet used her travels as an escape from her grief, moving around to many places for short periods of time. She isn't able to find comfort in any one place, she is able to settle in her own life. She lived a very simple life, material items were not important which helped her to move so often, trying out different things in life, some in excess, maybe to her a way to forget about her grief and try and move forward. That really didn't work well for her. As I read this I felt her life was so chaotic, a real mess, she just couldn't find how to be comfortable until she decided to have a baby.

Her travelling was different from that of her grandmother's. When her grandmother traveled she had to deal with discrimination and prejudices. She had the danger of being physically abused which Ayelet didn't seem to encounter on her travelling journey's.

Once Ayelet starting writing again she started finding comfort in her life. This writing brought her closer to her father again, a positive step in the grieving process.

I loved her answer when she was asked "Where is home for you?" and she replied home is where my family is. Our memories and stories go wherever we go. Home is collecting stories, writing them down, and sharing them. To her the writing was home, it grounded her, sustained her and nourished her. Ayelet worked hard as a mother to let her daughter understand what home was, letting her know she belonged wherever her family was, reassuring her that she would never be left alone, she would always be with her mother or at least reassured her that if Ayelet travelled for work she would come back. Ayelet grew through her grieving to become a powerful role model for her daughter.



- This book took a while for me to get into.
- It felt like a long section at the beginning of the book, the author was writing about all the times she was stoned or drunk or getting into trouble in the army or being sexually promiscuous. It felt like it just went on and on and I was getting bored. Maybe it was a literary technique to illustrate that's what that part of her life felt like to her – long and boring and meaningless.
- I did admire some of her gutsiness when she was in the army. She seemed to be fearless (or maybe reckless and foolish). She was so opposite from who I was at that age – I was much more compliant and she was always getting into trouble. I wouldn't have dared talk to authority figures the way she did.
- The loss of her father at such a young age had a huge influence on her. They were very close. I enjoyed reading about her relationship with him and how things he said to her stuck with her throughout her life.
- She had a lot of losses in her early life – first, her father; then her good friend Danny moved away. It's understandable that she seemed to have an expectation that everyone would eventually leave her so why bother getting close to them.
- I related more to her story in Vancouver.
- Her experience getting assaulted on the bus in Vancouver was awful. It was upsetting to read how no one on the bus helped her or tried to intervene. At least Constable Louie was nice to her. The way she wrote about the assault – in bits and pieces, rather than all at once – was very effective. It seemed that she could only tolerate looking at a little bit at a time and then had to take a break and write about something else.
- She changed a lot when she became a mother. That seemed to be when she developed the art of staying. It seemed like her relationship with Sean came as a surprise to her. I don't

think she expected to grow to love someone enough to make a life with them. She was so used to leaving or being left. It was brave of her to allow herself to love her partner and her child.

- Her mother's decision to sell the family home, knowing it was going to be bulldozed, reminded me of our recent move (although our house wasn't being bulldozed). You're leaving behind the place attached to a lot of memories. I don't think I was as attached to the actual building as Tsabari was to her childhood home. It was important to me to have a family ritual that included story-telling, in order to honour the place where our children grew up, but I haven't looked back since moving.
- It was interesting reading about Tsabari's great-grandmother and what a different story she learned when she met her cousin Yifat (who she didn't know existed). She had only heard one version of what happened – that the great-grandmother abandoned her 2-year-old children and was “a selfish bitch and a terrible mother.” Yifat told her a different story. It was a reminder not to judge people for their actions because you never know the whole story of what their circumstances were that led to their actions.
- I didn't know anything about Yemeni Jews before reading this book. It was interesting to learn about the relationship between Yemeni Jews and Ashkenazi Jews.



- I like the book. I found myself frustrated with Ayelet when she was taking drugs and moving from place to place. I think her inability to feel a sense of belonging began with the death of her father. His death upended her life and she felt lost. Also, the difference in status between the Ashkenazi and Mizrahi didn't help her sense of belonging. I was glad when she began talking

to her grandmother and her cousin and parts of her history were revealed to her that altered her perspective on her family. I was also glad when she took an interest in cooking and began to appreciate her culture. Her misgivings about motherhood were interesting. The more she learned about her own culture the more contented she seemed.

I watched her on YouTube. She did a good job of combining motherhood and writing in the end.



- I enjoyed the Art of Leaving very much, although I found myself impatient at times with Ayelet. While I had empathy for her, I also worried that she was going to do serious damage to herself. Although I knew that she'd come through her years of leaving and her difficulties with attachment, as she had written the book. It was an interesting portrayal of Israel and Judaism and I learned a lot (from the book and from Roz) and about the different Jewish groups around the world. I enjoyed reading about the lifestyle of the different peoples within the book--the foods, the holidays, the family gatherings, the clothing. Overall, an excellent and harrowing description of grief and the search for identity, connection and intimacy and meaning. Throughout the book, the themes of parenting and home resonated.



A central theme of *The Art of Leaving* echoed that of our previous book, *Migrations*. In both books, a woman who was separated from her parents in childhood, spends a significant part of her young adult life grappling with issues of identity and belonging. Both central figures travel internationally in their search and demonstrate some difficulty forming meaningful relationships.

I think the format of short segments was suitable for biography, rather than try to force life experiences into the type of story arc one might find in a linear work of fiction.

Half way into the book, I was very tired of the frequent impulsive choices re. relationships, locations, and drug choices to numb her grief. Underlying reasons weren't usually explored. If they had been, I may have found myself drawn into this book.



Frecha song on  
YouTube. <https://youtu.be/4tkGNEHnnS4>

