

# Parkdale Book Club, November 2025

## The Signature of All Things

Schedule for 2025-2026 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday each month, 10 am, Zoom

### 2025

|         |       |              |      |
|---------|-------|--------------|------|
| Dec. 13 | Clear | Carys Davies | Lynn |
|---------|-------|--------------|------|

### 2026

|          |                              |                  |         |
|----------|------------------------------|------------------|---------|
| Jan 10   | Instructions for a Heat Wave | Maggie O'Farrell | Janine  |
| Feb. 14  | The Women                    | Kristin Hannah   | Sue     |
| March 14 | Tomorrow, and Tomorrow...    | Gabrielle Zevin  | Lindsay |
| April 11 | In Winter I Get Up at Night  | Jane Urquhart    | Lynn    |
| May 9    | Prairie Edge                 | Conor Kerr       | Beth    |
| June 13  | The Bookbinder               | Pip Williams     | Debbie  |

Our book club has a Facebook page.

See <https://www.facebook.com/ParkdaleBookClub>

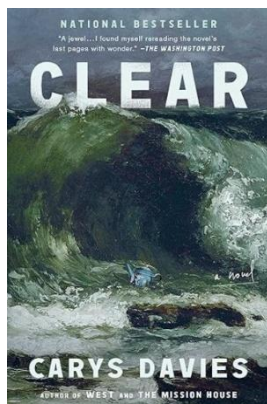
## Coming Up ...

Our next meeting is **Saturday, December 13<sup>th</sup>** at 10:00 am when we will discuss Lynn's nomination, **Clear** by Carys Davies.

From Amazon: "A 'daring and necessary ... sophisticated and playful' (*The New York Times*) novel from an award-winning writer, *Clear* is the story of a minister dispatched to a remote island to 'clear' its last remaining inhabitant — an unforgettable tale of resilience, change, and hope.

John, an impoverished Scottish minister, has accepted a job evicting the lone remaining occupant of an island north of Scotland — Ivar, who has been living alone for decades, with only the animals and the sea for company. Though his wife, Mary, has serious misgivings about the errand, he decides to go anyway, setting in motion a chain of events that neither he nor Mary could have predicted.

Shortly after John reaches the island, he falls down a cliff and is found, unconscious and badly injured,



by Ivar who takes him home and tends to his wounds. "*Clear* chronicles the surprising bond that develops between these two men...pack[ing] a great deal of power into a compact tale" (*The Wall Street Journal*) about connection, home, and hope — in which John begins to learn Ivar's language, and Ivar sees himself reflected through the eyes of another person for the first time in decades.

Unfolding during the final stages of the infamous Scottish Clearances — a period of the 19th century which saw whole communities of the rural poor driven off the land in a relentless program of forced evictions — this singular novel explores what binds us together in the face of insurmountable difference, the way history shapes our deepest convictions, and how the human spirit can endure despite all odds. Moving and unpredictable, 'a love letter to the scorching power of language' (*The Guardian*), *Clear* is 'a jewel of a novel' (*The Washington Post*) — a profound and unforgettable read." ❖

### Join Zoom Meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82432011683?pwd=SEgwSFFlOTRZODVtSmVuYW1vOXNwdz09>

Meeting ID: 824 3201 1683

Passcode: 284356

# The Signature Of All Things

Eight people gathered on Zoom on November 8<sup>th</sup> to discuss Elizabeth Gilbert's book, *The Signature of All Things*. Some people really enjoyed the book and some chose not to finish reading it. We all agreed that Gilbert had done a LOT of research. In an interview with Amy Stewart, Gilbert said she spent three years reading, travelling to botanical gardens to access their libraries, and interviewing modern moss scientists. Some people appreciated and enjoyed the amount of detail included in the story and others thought it was too much.

Gilbert said she set her story in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because that is the last point in history when an amateur could follow what was going on. She drew inspiration from the real female scientist [Elizabeth Gertrude Britton](#) who was a bryologist in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gilbert modelled Alma after some of Britton's thinking. Henry Whittaker's palatial estate, White Acre, is modelled after an 18th-century mansion called [The Woodlands](#) in West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This historic site was built by William Hamilton and now also serves as a cemetery and arboretum. Gilbert says The Woodlands provided her with "marvelous details which, I believe, help the book spring to life." The promotional trailer for *The*



*Signature of All Things* (2013) was filmed at [The Woodlands](#). Click on the picture and scroll down to find the video. It provides a peek at the mansion and the grounds of the estate that inspired White Acre.

The title of the book, *The Signature of All Things*, alludes to the theory developed by Jakob Böhme, a 15<sup>th</sup> century mystic, philosopher and theologian. Gilbert explores the intersection of the natural, scientific world with the divine.

Here are some comments from the group ...



Thanks, Lindsay, for sending a link to listen to [Caroline Baum interviewing Elizabeth Gilbert](#) about *The Signature of All Things*.

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At the beginning of this book, I thought, ugh, this is a book about racism, colonialism, sexism ... but ultimately, I enjoyed the book a great deal. The obvious huge amount of research on so many different topics. The history and philosophy of science. The question of altruism. I loved the vocabulary – ensorcelled, anodyne, gallimaufry ... I liked Reverend Wells who let go of the colonial approach to missionary work and nurtured an integration, do you see? By the end, I was thinking this is like several different good books squashed together, but I did persevere.

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And speaking of women's roles in science over the years, as we did during the discussion, it was the groundbreaking X-ray crystallography work of Rosalind (not Rosamund, sorry) Franklin that provided the critical evidence to reveal DNA's double helix. Franklin's high-quality X-ray diffraction images, especially the famous "Photo 51," provided clear evidence of the helical structure of DNA.

And further on this, Margaret W. Rossiter identified the Matilda Effect: the systematic theft of credit from women scientists, whose discoveries were claimed by men or buried beneath their shadows. "If history erases them," Rossiter said, "then history must be rewritten." Rossiter named the phenomenon after Matilda Joselyn Gage, an abolitionist and suffragist who, back in 1883, had warned that women's scientific achievements were being stolen or ignored. Then Gage's warning was itself forgotten. Rosalind Franklin, whose X-ray work made DNA's structure visible, was overlooked while Watson and Crick won the Nobel. Lise Meitner co-discovered nuclear fission

— her male colleague took the credit. Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin discovered what stars are made of; her findings were dismissed, then “rediscovered” by a man years later. Chien-Shiung Wu disproved a fundamental law of physics but watched her male collaborators accept the Nobel.

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Sue reminded us that this occurred in Bonnie Garmus’ book, *Lessons in Chemistry*. That novel highlighted the struggle of women seeking equality in a male-dominated field. Set in the 1960s, the main character Elizabeth Zott is a brilliant scientist whose male colleagues stole and took credit for her work.

In our discussion of *The Signature of All Things*, we suspected that Alma may have been hesitant to publish her theories of evolution because she and her ideas would likely have been dismissed.

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I found the book more interesting near the end when Elizabeth allows her manuscript to be read by her uncle. It was beautiful when Alma invited Wallace to the family home and botanical garden – she shared her theories with him and showed him her moss exhibit. She received a very positive, affirming response. It was very special when he acknowledged that there were three of them – Darwin, Wallace and Whittaker. What a rush to be included in that trio. I loved Alma’s drive to understand everything she encountered. She persisted until she found answers. Her father encouraged her exploration from a young age – probably an unusual thing for the time.

I was happy to learn that Wallace and Darwin respected each other and welcomed input from each other, rather than being competitive. In the book, both Alma and Wallace acknowledged that Darwin had come up with his ideas first and deserved the recognition that he got. In real life, Darwin presented Wallace’s ideas alongside his own and credited him with the theories of evolution he presented. In a 2013 article in *Current Biology*, Janet Browne writes, “The scientific friendship between Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin has become one of the most famous relationships in the history of science. It could so easily have degenerated into an ugly priority dispute after Wallace’s surprising letter to Darwin from Ternate in 1858, in which Wallace

outlined his own theory of evolution by natural selection; yet, the relationship was characterized throughout by personal generosity and high scientific esteem. No two authors thrown together in such a fashion tried harder than Darwin and Wallace to treat each other fairly. Wallace greatly admired *On the Origin of Species*. In turn, Darwin regarded Wallace as the one man who truly understood the idea of evolution by natural selection.” The three scientists – Darwin, Wallace and (in the book) Alma Whittaker, independently come up with similar theories about evolution. It was clear that they didn’t copy from one another but were validated by another person of intellect coming up with a similar explanation.

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Here are some favourite quotes:

**“I would like never to travel again.** I would like to spend the rest of my days in a place so silent -- and working at a pace so slow -- that I would be able to hear myself living.” (Ambrose Pike)

**“Divine Time,** Geological Time, Human Time, Moss Time.”

**“Despair is a tedious business** and quickly becomes repetitive.”

**“She heard her father's voice** as she prepared, remembering all the times she had taken dictation for him, or had overheard him instructing young botanists. 'Be wakeful and watchful,' she heard Henry say. 'Make sure you are not the only member of your party who can write or read a letter. If you need to find water, follow a dog. If you are starving, eat insects before you waste your energy on hunting. Anything that a bird can eat, you can eat. Your biggest dangers are not snakes, lions, or cannibals; your biggest dangers are blistered feet, carelessness, and fatigue. Be certain to write your diaries and maps legibly; if you die, your notes may be of use to a future explorer. In an emergency, you can always write in blood.”

**“For a long while,** the natives at Matavai Bay believed that the Bible Reverend Welles carried was, in fact, his god. “They found it most disturbing that I carried my god so casually tucked under my arm, or that I left my god sitting unattended on the table, or that sometimes I lent my god to others! I tried to explain to them that my god was everywhere, you

see. They wanted to know, ‘Then why can we not see him?’ I said, ‘Because my god is invisible,’ and they said, ‘Then how do you not trip over your god?’ and I said, ‘Verily, my friends, sometimes I do!’ “

“**I will tell you why** we have these extraordinary minds and souls, Miss Whittaker,” he continued, as though he had not heard her. “We have them because there is a supreme intelligence in the universe, which wishes for communion with us. This supreme intelligence longs to be known. It calls out to us. It draws us close to its mystery, and grants us these remarkable minds, in order that we try to reach for it. It wants us to find it. It wants union with us, more than anything.”

“**The old cobbler** had believed in something he called ‘the signature of all things’ – namely, that God had hidden clues for humanity’s betterment inside the design of every flower, leaf, fruit, and tree on earth. All the natural world was a divine code, Böehme claimed, containing proof of our Creator’s love.” (Gilbert)

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The choice and discussion of *The Signature of All Things* brought to mind the following books which I’m likely to reread at some point. They overlap elements of time and place as well as the theme of discovery and scientific illustration. And boats ... most have boats. All of them just happen to be by Canadian authors.

- **The Naturalist** by Alissa York  
<https://www.cbc.ca/books/the-naturalist-1.4030429>
- **Curiosity** by Joan Thomas – historical fiction of Mary Anning, palaeontologist  
<https://quillandquiere.com/review/curiosity/>
- **Creation** by Katherine Govier – historical fiction based on exploration of the Strait of Belle Isle by John James Audubon.  
<https://quillandquiere.com/review/creation/>
- **The Difference** by Marina Endicott – less about discovery, the main theme is colonialism at home and abroad in the early 1900s.  
<https://quillandquiere.com/review/the-difference/>
- **Washington Black** by Esi Edugyan – 11-year old Wash is taken as a manservant to Christopher Wilde, an abolitionist, naturalist, and explorer.

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/es-edugyan/washington-black/>

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For those who are interested in scientific illustration, Janine *highly* recommends the exhibit at U of C Nickle Gallery, **Ecologies – Eveline Kolijn**. It runs until **December 6**. “Stimulated by her study of natural science as a creative force, Calgary-based artist and author Eveline Kolijn marries science with art; generating through printmaking, video and installation, a fantastical vision of our natural world.” Read more about [Eveline Kolijn’s Ecologies](#).

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The book Ruth mentioned is **Gathering Moss** by Robin Wall Kimmerer. “Living at the limits of our ordinary perception, mosses are a common but largely unnoticed element of the natural world. *Gathering Moss* is a beautifully written mix of science and personal reflection that invites readers to explore and learn from the elegantly simple lives of mosses.” Goodreads gives it 4.38★. ❖

## Book Reviews by Lynn

*The Signature of All Things*, Elizabeth Gilbert.  
4★

*Friends with Secrets*, Christine Gunderson. Very light story of friendship between women in a fight against pedophiles and sex traffickers. What’s not to like? Plus a strand exploring what it’s like to parent with ADHD. And a strand about class-jumping. “Motherhood was only easy if you did it the wrong way.” “Why were women expected to both give birth and remember to buy No. 2 pencils?” 3★

*Greenteeth*, Molly O’Neill. I enjoyed this morsel, packed full of legends of the United Kingdom. It’s classified as cozy fantasy, so unsurprisingly reminded me of *The Teller of Small Fortunes*, Julie Leong, but also of the Harry Dresden series by Jim Butcher, in which similarly there is a battle involving the Erl King and the master of the Wild Hunt. I liked that the main characters were women (kind of). One of my favourite characters was the

*afanc*, a lake creature with a lovely Welsh accent. I had a quibble about an apparent dramatic change in character of the main character, Jenny Greenteeth, but then reminded myself that I know nothing of the psychology of Jennys, low *fae* lake creatures. 4☆

***How to be Sick***, Toni Bernhard. One more in the thanatology course. This is as much about how to be Buddhist as it is about how to be sick. When I read books, I often think, ‘I could give this to ...’ and that thought came up often as I read *How to be Sick*. But it became clear that keeping it is the right choice, as it would be good to reread this one every year or so. Important to note that this is a book written by someone with sufficient money and a supportive partner – not a common experience. “It’s easy to look back and see what a mistake it was to continue working while sick—it probably worsened my condition—but many people who have contracted a chronic illness have done the same. First, there’s the financial need to keep working. Second, there’s the utter disbelief that this is happening to you (reinforced by people telling you that you look just fine—people who don’t see you collapse on the bed as soon as you get home)”. 4☆

***Silent Scream***, Angela Marsons. This was entertaining. I listened to it at the same time that my TV focus is *Bones*, the 12-season series based on Kathy Reichs’ books, and found myself wondering if the author had also been watching *Bones*, or reading Reichs’ books, although the characteristics of Reichs’ forensic anthropologist were transposed to the detective. This is the first in a 22-book series (so far), and I will read others. 3.75☆

***Killer Potential***, Hannah Deitch. In L.A., an SAT tutor finds herself suspected of murder and on the run with a mysterious woman who remains silent and un-named for the first part of the story. Interesting exploration of the class structure in the U.S. The dark side of this – too long and detailed descriptions of big fancy houses. The sex scenes did not improve the novel – not credible in the context, and not well-written IMHO. “I kissed her clit, her face twisted in suffering.” Hey, Evie, you’re doing it wrong. Apparently, there’s a TV series in the works. 3.5☆

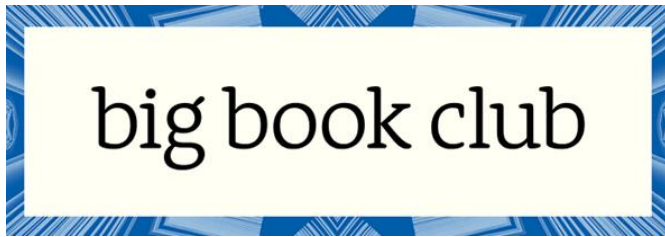
DNF ***California Bear***, Dwayne Swierczynski. Ugh.

***A Killer in the Low Country***, Candice Fox. Two high-school teachers in South Carolina become obsessed with a true-crime podcast. This audiobook has multiple very good narrators, so it’s like listening to a movie. I preferred Fox’s mysteries set in Australia – *Crimson Lake*, *Redemption Point*, *Gone by Midnight*. 3☆

***Return of the Trickster***, Eden Robinson. The final book in the Trickster trilogy. Robinson built a world and a story based on her Haisla and Heiltsuk First Nations’ traditions, and also addresses current issues such as rez living, environment, and problematic attempts at reconciliation for residential school survivors (the requirement to describe residential school experiences can re-traumatize the survivors in a life-changing way). In the midst of run-away organs, a power-sucking Ogress, and torturing coywolves, it’s also funny -- main character Jared and cousin Kota call their family drama *As the Bannock Burns*. And there’s a Wild Man of the Woods who doesn’t like to be called a sasquatch, who doesn’t eat people – a hugan, like a vegan, but with people. 4☆

***Nobody’s Fool***, Harlan Coben. An interesting trend in mystery novels can only have developed in the internet world – crowd-sourcing investigations. One example is the true-crime-podcast aficionados who collaborate to address cold cases (as in the Candice Fox book, above). This one has a smaller reach – the members of Sami Kierce’s class where people learn how to be private detectives. This is the second Sami Kierce mystery (#1 is *Fool Me Once*). Coben reliably provides an engaging main character and a twisty smart story. 4☆

***False Witness***, Karin Slaughter. This is a stand-alone from the writer who brought us the brilliant Will Trent series. Intense, many triggers, horrific, and completely absorbing. Set in the COVID times, with many references to how our lives changed. “The man said, “The vaccine put microchips in my brain.” Callie confided, “I’m worried my cat is saving up to buy a motorcycle.” 5☆ ❖



The **big book club** (formerly Literary Kaleidoscope) meets on the third Wednesday of each month from September to May. Meetings are held at the Marda Loop Community Hall, 3130-16 St SW, 10:00 to 11:30 am. Each month, a prominent guest speaker guides the discussion. \$10 at the door or register ahead. \$12 for livestream meetings. Here are the presenters and books for upcoming meetings:

Nov. 19 – Natalie Meisner presents **Remarkably Bright Creatures** by Shelby Van Pelt.

Jan. 21 – Aritha Van Herk presents **The Island of Missing Trees** by Elif Shafak.

Feb. 18 – Teresa Wong presents **All Our Ordinary Stories** by Teresa Wong. Virtual event. Zoom link sent to registrants.

Read more about the [big book club](#) and sign up for their newsletter to receive announcements of meetings. ❖



It's that time of year again – the **17th Annual Goodreads Choice Awards**. Vote now for your favorite books in 15 categories! The opening round runs from Nov. 11-23, final round Nov. 25-30 and winners announced Dec. 4. Elizabeth Gilbert and Cher both have books in the Memoir category and Fredrik Backman (*A Man Called Ove*) has a new book in the Fiction category. Even if you don't want to vote, you can get ideas for what you'd like to read next. Go to [Goodreads Choice Awards](#). ❖



**Wordfest** hosts authors all through the year – not just at *Imaginairium* in October. Here are some upcoming author talks:

- Nov. 15, 7:00 pm, Memorial Park Library – Susan Orlean presents **Joyride**, her memoir of finding her creative calling.
- Nov. 25, 7:00 pm, Memorial Park Library – Rick Westhead presents **We Breed Lions**, a powerful look at hockey's moment of reckoning in Canada.
- Nov. 29, 7:00 pm, Patricia Whelan Theatre, Central Library – Comedian Mark Critch presents **Sorry, Not Sorry**, exploring Canada's national identity with sharp wit.
- Dec. 2, 7:00 pm, Memorial Park Library – Four writers discuss books on Canadian history, culture and identity. Jordan Abel and David Chariandy (**NISHGA**) and Kim Thúy and Sharon Bala (**Ru**).

Sadly, presentations by Chris Hadfield, Alan Doyle, Josie Balka and Margaret Atwood are already sold out! So, get your tickets early if you're interested in the other presenters. Go to [Wordfest](#) for details on these author talks and to purchase tickets. ❖

## You Don't Have to Finish Every Book!

Thank you, Ruth, for sending a delightful poster by

Daniel Pennac called The Rights of the Reader.

Illustrations by Quentin Blake bring it to life. How liberating to be reminded we don't always have to eat everything we're served and we don't have to finish every book we start! Click on the mini thumb print to see the full-size poster, [The Rights of the Reader](#). ❖

