



# BOOK CLUB BOOKS

*Below are this summer's Book Club selections. Chosen to represent a range of interests, it is hoped these books will stimulate thought and discussion among our diverse group of readers. As always, your comments and suggestions are welcome.*

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## SUMMER 2007

### **Arthur and George** by Julian Barnes

Shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, this novel is based on the true story of how famous author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle came to befriend a shy, friendless, half-Indian lawyer named George. When George is falsely accused of abominable crimes, Doyle, like his alter ego Sherlock Holmes, sets out to prove his innocence. In doing so, he also helps himself through a difficult personal crisis. Barnes adeptly handles themes of love, guilt, identity and honor in this engrossing story.

### **Eat, Pray, Love** by Elizabeth Gilbert

Gilbert decides to go on a yearlong trip of recovery after a long, agonizing divorce. Her three main stops are Rome, an Indian ashram, and Bali, in an attempt to explore her competing desires for earthly pleasures and divine transcendence. In describing her experiences in each locale, her exuberance, wit, self-deprecating humor, and hard-won wisdom are insightful and delightful.

### **Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change** by Elizabeth Kolbert

This calm and compelling report on the consequences of global warming lets facts rather than emotions tell the story. For example, nearly every major glacier in the world is melting rapidly. On a more upbeat note, Kolbert tells how one American city's energy conservation campaign has been a great success and should be a model for us all. This book's clear, powerful writing has been compared to *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. A real eye-opener.

### **Gatsby's Girl** by Caroline Preston

This novel was inspired by the intense relationship between F. Scott Fitzgerald and his first love, Chicago socialite Ginevra King. Preston reimagines Ginevra's life from the heady, romantic first meeting with the struggling writer, then a Princeton undergrad, through her later disaffected, not so happy years. Ginevra was the basis for Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*. This is a fascinating glimpse into the tragic life of Fitzgerald and the woman who was the inspiration for many of his female characters.

### **The Good, Good Pig** by Sy Montgomery

When the author adopts a sickly runt, naming him Christopher Hogwood, little does she realize what a huge impact the pet will have on the whole community. He becomes a local celebrity, fomenting friendships, outpourings of caring, and new perspectives on the human-animal relationship. The author blends facts on animal behavior and natural history with humorous stories and insights into her own personal growth. A fresh look at the importance of caring for all the earth's creatures.

### **Lapham Rising** by Roger Rosenblatt

A wickedly comic sendup of the elites living in the Hamptons. Harry March, a 60 year old writer, is a recluse living in his family's ancestral home with Hector, his born-again Christian talking dog. When "new money" billionaire Silas Lapham decides to build a mansion near his home, Harry becomes obsessed with sabotaging the new construction. A rich collection of satiric swipes at the self-importance that comes with being rich.

### **The Madonnas of Leningrad** by Debra Dean

As Russian émigré Marina descends into Alzheimer's, her recollections of her early years working at the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad become more vivid. When the city came under siege during World War II, museum workers stowed away treasures as their families sheltered in the basement. This novel shifts between these memories and contemporary America, where Marina's granddaughter prepares for her wedding. Dean writes movingly of the power of memory, the difficulty of letting go, and the precarious state of mind that can come with age.

### **Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War** by Nathaniel Philbrick

A reconsideration of the "myth" we've all learned about the voyage of the Mayflower and the founding of the Plymouth Rock colony. Philbrick's mesmerizing account details the desperate circumstances of the settlers, the help they received from the Wampanoag Indians, the later strange war between the two camps, and the fascinating personalities of their leaders, including Miles Standish.

### **Plum Wine** by Angela Davis-Gardner

It is 1966 and Barbara Jefferson is a young, lonely English teacher in Japan. She is befriended by Michiko, a fellow teacher and Hiroshima survivor. When she dies, she leaves Barbara a chest full of bottles of plum wine, each wrapped in rice paper covered with writing that turns out to be Michiko's life story. Barbara enlists the help of Seiji to help her translate the papers. As she and Seiji fall in love, she learns more about their pasts and how much the Japanese civilians suffered when the United States bombed them. Meanwhile her students are questioning her about America's war in Vietnam. This novel is a sensitive, quietly intense exploration of the divide between cultures, and the juxtaposition of love and war.

**Stumbling on Happiness** by Daniel Gilbert

Do we really know what makes us happy? In this witty and surprising book, Harvard professor Gilbert sets out to reveal how our imaginations may be getting in the way of our ability to know what happiness really is. While humans spend a lot of time thinking about our futures and what needs to happen so we'll be happy, we're not very successful. Gilbert wants to know why we're so bad at getting it right, and how we can improve. Often funny and playful, his book makes complicated ideas come alive, from psychology to cognitive neuroscience.

**Suite Francaise** by Irene Nemirovsky

The author wrote this in France during 1941-1942, before she was sent to her death in Auschwitz. She was born a Russian Jew, but converted to Catholicism. The manuscript was preserved by her daughters, unread for 60 years. Finally published in France, where it has been a bestseller, it is composed of two novellas. The first describes the interconnected lives of a group of Parisians, all fleeing the city in advance of the German troops. In the second part, peasant farmers in 1941 find ways to coexist with their Nazi rulers. Nemirovsky was skilled at describing daily life, focusing on the emotional and very human dramas that go on, whether from the perspective of a farmer's daughter or a bourgeois collaborator.

**Sweet and Low: A Family Story** by Rich Cohen

This is the "inside" story of a family business that became a global success, only to be nearly destroyed by that family's bitter falling out. Cohen's grandfather, Ben Eisenstadt was a short order cook who invented the famous pink packet of sugar substitute. While he amassed a great fortune, the company became infiltrated by corrupt Jewish gangsters, and a terrible scandal erupted involving Ben's heirs. Both bittersweet and hilarious, Cohen has written a tender and tragic history of one amazing family and their American dream.

**Theft** by Peter Carey

Taking on the contemporary art world, Booker Prize-winning Carey's latest novel is passionate, humorous and fresh. His story shows a fascination for the demonic side of creativity, as Michael Boone, an ex-famous painter, and his autistic brother become involved in a scheme to steal valuable paintings belonging to the father-in-law of femme fatale Marlene. Part thriller, part love story, Carey knows how to make characters come alive.

**The Whistling Season** by Ivan Doig

Set in the 1950s in rural eastern Montana, Doig has written a nostalgic story that begins with the closing of all of Montana's one-room schoolhouses. As the Superintendent of Schools, Paul Milliron agonizes that the closings will also mean the death of rural neighborhoods. As he tries to come to terms with this, he remembers his own childhood in just such a school. Paul's charming recollections show a love for the landscape and people he knew as a boy. Especially important was the brother of the family's housekeeper, a bookish man who becomes the local schoolteacher and an inspiration. Doig's writing soars with the sheer pleasure of language and character in a story of families struggling in a remote, harsh land.



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