

2018-2019 BHI Book Club: Summary of Books

Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine by Gail Honeyman

No one's ever told Eleanor that life should be better than fine. Meet Eleanor Oliphant: She struggles with appropriate social skills and tends to say exactly what she's thinking. Nothing is missing in her carefully timetabled life of avoiding social interactions, where weekends are punctuated by frozen pizza, vodka, and phone chats with Mummy.

But everything changes when Eleanor meets Raymond, the bumbling and deeply unhygienic IT guy from her office. When she and Raymond together save Sammy, an elderly gentleman who has fallen on the sidewalk, the three become the kinds of friends who rescue one another from the lives of isolation they have each been living. And it is Raymond's big heart that will ultimately help Eleanor find the way to repair her own profoundly damaged one.

Soon to be a major motion picture produced by Reese Witherspoon, *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* is the smart, warm, and uplifting story of an out-of-the-ordinary heroine whose deadpan weirdness and unconscious wit make for an irresistible journey as she realizes: The only way to survive is to open your heart.

Lilac Girls by Martha Hall Kelly

New York socialite Caroline Ferriday has her hands full with her post at the French consulate and a new love on the horizon. But Caroline's world is forever changed when Hitler's army invades Poland in September 1939—and then sets its sights on France.

An ocean away from Caroline, Kasia Kuzmerick, a Polish teenager, senses her carefree youth disappearing as she is drawn deeper into her role as courier for the underground resistance movement. In a tense atmosphere of watchful eyes and suspecting neighbors, one false move can have dire consequences.

For the ambitious young German doctor, Herta Oberheuser, an ad for a government medical position seems her ticket out of a desolate life. Once hired, though, she finds herself trapped in a male-dominated realm of Nazi secrets and power.

The lives of these three women are set on a collision course when the unthinkable happens and Kasia is sent to Ravensbrück, the notorious Nazi concentration camp for women. Their stories cross continents—from New York to Paris, Germany, and Poland—as Caroline and Kasia strive to bring justice to those whom history has forgotten.

The Great Alone by Kristin Hannah

Alaska, 1974. Unpredictable. Unforgiving. Untamed. For a family in crisis, the ultimate test of survival. Ernt Allbright, a former POW, comes home from the Vietnam war a changed and volatile man. When he loses yet another job, he makes an impulsive decision: he will move his family north, to Alaska, where they will live off the grid in America's last true frontier.

Thirteen-year-old Leni, a girl coming of age in a tumultuous time, caught in the riptide of her parents' passionate, stormy relationship, dares to hope that a new land will lead to a better future

for her family. She is desperate for a place to belong. Her mother, Cora, will do anything and go anywhere for the man she loves, even if means following him into the unknown.

At first, Alaska seems to be the answer to their prayers. In a wild, remote corner of the state, they find a fiercely independent community of strong men and even stronger women. The long, sunlit days and the generosity of the locals make up for the Allbrights' lack of preparation and dwindling resources. But as winter approaches and darkness descends on Alaska, Ernt's fragile mental state deteriorates and the family begins to fracture. Soon the perils outside pale in comparison to threats from within. In their small cabin, covered in snow, blanketed in eighteen hours of night, Leni and her mother learn the terrible truth: they are on their own. In the wild, there is no one to save them but themselves.

In this unforgettable portrait of human frailty and resilience, Kristin Hannah reveals the indomitable character of the modern American pioneer and the spirit of a vanishing Alaska—a place of incomparable beauty and danger. *The Great Alone* is a daring, beautiful, stay-up-all-night story about love and loss, the fight for survival, and the wildness that lives in both man and nature.

Everything I Never Told You by Celeste Ng

“Lydia is dead. But they don’t know this yet.” So begins this exquisite novel about a Chinese American family living in 1970s small-town Ohio. Lydia is the favorite child of Marilyn and James Lee, and her parents are determined that she will fulfill the dreams they were unable to pursue. But when Lydia’s body is found in the local lake, the delicate balancing act that has been keeping the Lee family together is destroyed, tumbling them into chaos. A profoundly moving story of family, secrets, and longing, *Everything I Never Told You* is both a gripping page-turner and a sensitive family portrait, uncovering the ways in which mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and husbands and wives struggle, all their lives, to understand one another.

All My Puny Sorrows by Miriam Toews

Elf and Yoli are sisters. While on the surface Elfrieda's is an enviable life (she's a world-renowned pianist, glamorous, wealthy, and happily married) and Yolandi's a mess (she's divorced and broke, with two teenagers growing up too quickly), they are fiercely close—raised in a Mennonite household and sharing the hardship of Elf's desire to end her own life. After Elf's latest attempt, Yoli must quickly determine how to keep her family from falling apart, how to keep her own heart from breaking, and what it means to love someone who wants to die.

All My Puny Sorrows is the latest novel from Miriam Toews, one of Canada's most beloved authors not only because her work is rich with deep human feeling and compassion, but because her observations are knife-sharp and her books wickedly funny. And this is Toews at her finest: a story that is as much comedy as it is tragedy, a goodbye grin from the friend who taught you how to live.

Lots of Candles, Plenty of Cake by Anna Quindlen

In this candid, moving, funny memoir, Anna Quindlen writes about a woman’s life, from childhood memories to manic motherhood to middle age, using the events of her life to illuminate ours. Considering—and celebrating—everything from marriage, girlfriends, our

mothers, parenting, faith, loss, to all the stuff in our closets, and more, Quindlen says for us here what we may wish we could have said ourselves. As she did in her beloved *New York Times* columns, and in *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*, Quindlen uses her past, present, and future to explore what matters most to women at different ages. With sharp insights and revealing observations, Quindlen talks about:

Marriage: “A safety net of small white lies can be the bedrock of a successful marriage. You wouldn’t believe how cheaply I can do a kitchen renovation.”

Girlfriends: “Ask any woman how she makes it through the day, and she may mention her calendar, her to-do lists, her babysitter. But if you push her on how she really makes it through her day, she will mention her girlfriends.”

Our bodies: “I’ve finally recognized my body for what it is: a personality-delivery system, designed expressly to carry my character from place to place, now and in the years to come.”

Parenting: “Being a parent is not transactional. We do not get what we give. It is the ultimate pay-it-forward endeavor: We are good parents not so they will be loving enough to stay with us but so they will be strong enough to leave us.”

Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis by J. D. Vance

Hillbilly Elegy is a passionate and personal analysis of a culture in crisis—that of white working-class Americans. The disintegration of this group, a process that has been slowly occurring now for more than forty years, has been reported with growing frequency and alarm, but has never before been written about as searingly from the inside. J. D. Vance tells the true story of what a social, regional, and class decline feels like when you were born with it hung around your neck.

The Vance family story begins hopefully in postwar America. J. D.’s grandparents were “dirt poor and in love,” and moved north from Kentucky’s Appalachia region to Ohio in the hopes of escaping the dreadful poverty around them. They raised a middle-class family, and eventually one of their grandchildren would graduate from Yale Law School, a conventional marker of success in achieving generational upward mobility. But as the family saga of *Hillbilly Elegy* plays out, we learn that J.D.’s grandparents, aunt, uncle, sister, and, most of all, his mother struggled profoundly with the demands of their new middle-class life, never fully escaping the legacy of abuse, alcoholism, poverty, and trauma so characteristic of their part of America. With piercing honesty, Vance shows how he himself still carries around the demons of his chaotic family history. A deeply moving memoir, with its share of humor and vividly colorful figures, *Hillbilly Elegy* is the story of how upward mobility really feels. And it is an urgent and troubling meditation on the loss of the American dream for a large segment of this country.

Pachinko by Min Jin Lee

In this insightful, page-turning saga, four generations of a poor Korean immigrant family fight to control their destiny in 20th-century Japan, exiled from a home they never knew. In the early 1900s, teenaged Sunja, the adored daughter of a crippled fisherman, falls for a wealthy stranger at the seashore near her home in Korea. He promises her the world, but when she discovers she is pregnant—and that her lover is married—she refuses to be bought. Instead, she accepts an offer of marriage from a gentle, sickly minister passing through on his way to Japan. But her decision to abandon her home, and to reject her son’s powerful father, sets off a dramatic saga that will

echo down through the generations. Richly told and profoundly moving, *Pachinko* is a story of love, sacrifice, ambition, and loyalty. From bustling street markets to the halls of Japan's finest universities to the pachinko parlors of the criminal underworld, Lee's complex and passionate characters—strong, stubborn women, devoted sisters and sons, fathers shaken by moral crisis—survive and thrive against the indifferent arc of history.

Weight of Ink by Rachel Kadish

Set in London of the 1660s and of the early twenty-first century, *The Weight of Ink* is the interwoven tale of two women of remarkable intellect: Ester Velasquez, an emigrant from Amsterdam who is permitted to scribe for a blind rabbi, just before the plague hits the city; and Helen Watt, an ailing historian with a love of Jewish history. When Helen is summoned by a former student to view a cache of newly discovered seventeenth-century Jewish documents, she enlists the help of Aaron Levy, an American graduate student as impatient as he is charming, and embarks on one last project: to determine the identity of the documents' scribe, the elusive "Aleph." An electrifying and ambitious novel, *The Weight of Ink* is about women separated by centuries—and the choices and sacrifices they must make in order to reconcile the life of the heart and mind.

Last Hope Island by Lynne Olson

In 1940, Europe was on the brink of collapse. Country after country had fallen to the Nazis, and Britain was known as 'Last Hope Island', where Europeans from the captive nations gathered to continue the war effort. In this epic, character-driven narrative, acclaimed historian and New York Times-bestselling author Lynne Olson takes us back to those perilous days when the British and their European guests joined forces to combat the mightiest military force in history. From the Polish and French code breakers who helped crack Enigma, to the Czech pilots who protected London during German bombings, Olson tells the stories of the courageous men and women who came together to defeat Hitler and save Europe.

Love and Ruin by Paula McLain

The bestselling author of *The Paris Wife* returns to the subject of Ernest Hemingway in a novel about his passionate, stormy marriage to Martha Gellhorn—a fiercely independent, ambitious young woman who would become one of the greatest war correspondents of the twentieth century. In 1937, twenty-eight-year-old Martha Gellhorn travels alone to Madrid to report on the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War and becomes drawn to the stories of ordinary people caught in the devastating conflict. It's the adventure she's been looking for and her chance to prove herself a worthy journalist in a field dominated by men. But she also finds herself unexpectedly—and uncontrollably—falling in love with Hemingway, a man on his way to becoming a legend. In the shadow of the impending Second World War, and set against the turbulent backdrops of Madrid and Cuba, Martha and Ernest's relationship and their professional careers ignite. But when Ernest publishes the biggest literary success of his career, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, they are no longer equals, and Martha must make a choice: surrender to the confining demands of being a famous man's wife or risk losing Ernest by forging a path as her own woman and writer. It is a dilemma that could force her to break his heart, and hers.