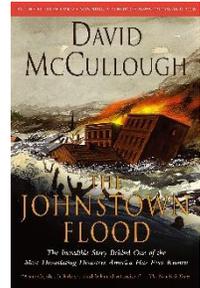


Avondale Book Club Reading List 2017-2018

October 14, 2017

The Johnstown Flood by David McCullough

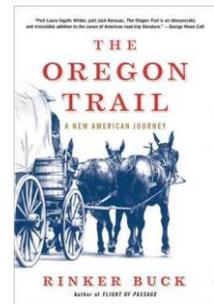
The history of civil engineering may sound boring, but in David McCullough's hands it is, well, riveting. His award-winning histories of the Brooklyn Bridge and the Panama Canal were preceded by this account of the disastrous dam failure that drowned Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in 1889. Written while the last survivors of the flood were still alive, McCullough's narrative weaves the stories of the town, the wealthy men who owned the dam, and the forces of nature into a seamless whole. His account is unforgettable: "The wave kept on coming straight toward him, heading for the very heart of the city. Stores, houses, trees, everything was going down in front of it, and the closer it came, the bigger it seemed to grow.... The height of the wall of water was at least thirty-six feet at the center.... The drowning and devastation of the city took just about ten minutes." A powerful, definitive book, and a tribute to the thousands who died in America's worst inland flood.



November 11, 2017

The Oregon Trail by Rinker Buck

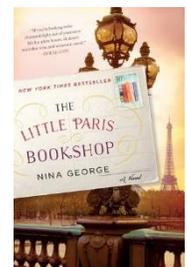
Award-winning journalist and author Buck (*Flight of Passage*) has ostensibly written a book about his experiences retrekking the 2,000-mile Oregon Trail from St. Joseph, MO, to Baker City, OR, in a mule-drawn covered wagon with his brother Nick and Nick's dog Olive Oyl. As romantic as the adventure sounds, this is not a casual summer endeavour—don't try to imitate it. There's a second, parallel story, a description of another covered wagon trip he took at age seven in 1958 with his father and siblings. The family set out from central Jersey across the Delaware River to south central Pennsylvania for a month-long "see America slowly" expedition. This adventure, tamer than the Oregon one, is now as much a part of Buck as his DNA. The Oregon trip is fraught with mishaps, near-death experiences, and plain bad luck. But there were also angels along the way helping them get through and guiding Jake and the other two mules. The parallel story is, at times, more compelling than the contemporary one, and the book could have been cut by a quarter and still be a solid read. It shouldn't take longer to read the book than to actually cross the Oregon Trail. Recommended for folk interested in the Oregon Trail, pioneer history, or mules.



December 9, 2017

Little Paris Bookshop by Nina George

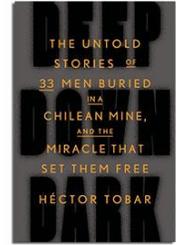
Fifty-year-old Jean Perdu is a literary apothecary on his barge bookshop moored on the Seine in Paris. Gifted at prescribing just the right book for what ails his devoted customers, he is unable to cure his own heart, broken two decades earlier when Manon, the married love of his life, vanishes after leaving behind just a letter that Perdu refused to read—that is, until now, with devastating consequences. Walking out on his first tender encounter with a woman in 20 years, Perdu flees south, setting sail with Max, a young, best-selling author with writer's block, as his uninvited guest. Triumph over tragedy is played out in the beauty of France's canals, in the quirky goodness of its people, and in Perdu's determination to seek forgiveness and reclaim joy. Verdict: George's exquisite, multilayered love story enchanted Europe for more than a year, and the U.S. publication of this flawless translation will allow gob-smacked booklovers here to struggle with the age-old dilemma: to race through each page to see what happens next or savor each deliciously enticing phrase. Do both; if ever a book was meant to be read over and over, this gem is it.



January 13, 2018

***Deep Down Dark* by Hector Tobar**

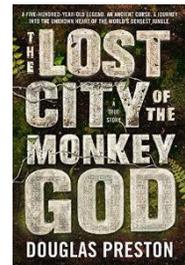
Tobar (*The Barbarian Nurseries*) relates the story of the 33 Chilean miners who were trapped thousands of feet underground for over two months. A significant portion of the narrative portrays the initial, critical days of survival against starvation. Before rescuers could reach the group, the men managed without assistance by rationing what little food was available, drinking water that was meant for their equipment, and depending on one another for support. As their time trapped below ground lengthened, and rescue efforts grew ever more complex, the men became the object of worldwide media attention. *Deep Down Dark* details that international rescue effort and the perseverance of those above ground, including mining experts from the United States and Chile, scientists from NASA, and family members who lived near the mine in a tent city for the duration of the rescue. A compelling account of a modern miracle for readers interested in survival narratives and contemporary accounts of recent mining disasters.



February 10, 2018

***The Lost City of the Monkey God* by Douglas Preston**

National Geographic and New Yorker writer and novelist Preston shares the story of his involvement in the search for a historic lost city in the rainforests of Honduras. Preston is one member of a team that managed to use a combination of historical research and state-of-the-art technology to examine the rainforests in the Mosquitia region, an area filled with all manner of dangers, from disease to drug traffickers. Preston's writing brings the reader along with the team as they discover 500-year-old artifacts, encounter huge and deadly snakes, and face the political and academic fallout the search brings with it. Listeners hear several interesting side stories, such as the discovery of historical fraud in their research and the battle half the team had with a deadly parasite picked up at the ruins. Preston's journalistic experience is on full display as he gives not only the viewpoint of those in the expedition but also those on the outside. Bill Mummy's reading is straightforward and engaging. The final disc includes 16 pages of photos. Verdict: A great story with many paths to interest fans of history, archaeology, adventure, environmentalism, South America, or diseases.

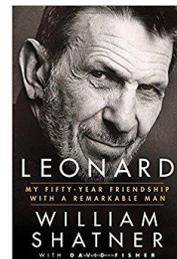


March 10, 2018

Leonard: My Fifty-year Friendship with a Remarkable Man

by William Shatner

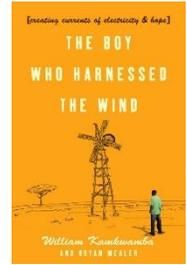
Fans of TV shows might wonder if the people who portray the characters are friends in real life. As Shatner explains in this biography of Leonard Nimoy, actors form close bonds when working together and swear their undying friendship when it's over but more likely never see one another again. That was not the case with Shatner and Nimoy, who starred in three seasons of cult favorite *Star Trek* as Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock respectively, though -Shatner reveals that they were wary of each other at first. He tells stories about the show, such as Nimoy's creation of the iconic Vulcan salute and nerve pinch, yet also shares little-known personal information, such as Nimoy's alcoholism and the price of celebrity. However, the heart of this book is Shatner's description of their friendship that grew from the *Star Trek* movies and the Trekkie conventions they attended as a pair. Shatner discusses his own life and the parallels in Nimoy's, but he does not upstage his friend, rather giving him center stage with his usual Shatner self-deprecating humor. Trekkies will want this for the insider stories from Captain Kirk himself, but fans of candid, emotion-filled biographies will adore this account because it's a treasure trove of information.



April 14, 2018

***The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* by William Kamkwamba**

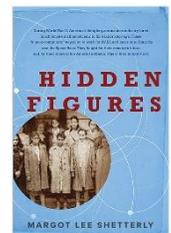
This is the remarkable story of an African teenager who, by courage, ingenuity, and determination, defeated the odds. Born in 1987 in a drought-ravaged Malawi where hope and opportunity were hard to find, Kamkwamba read about windmills in a library book and dreamed of building one that would bring electricity to his village and improve the lives of his family. At the age of 14, Kamkwamba had to drop out of school and help his family forage for food, but he never let go of his dream. Over a period of several months, using scrap metal, tractor, and bicycle parts, the resourceful young man built a crude yet operable windmill that eventually powered four lights. Soon reports of his "electric wind" project spread beyond the borders of his village, earning him international recognition and, with the help of mentors worldwide, he now attends a high school in South Africa. Verdict: Demonstrating the power of imagination, libraries, and books, Kamkwamba's heartwarming memoir, with Mealer's (All Things Must Fight To Live: Stories of War and Deliverance in Congo) contribution, is sure to inspire all readers.



May 12, 2018

***Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly**

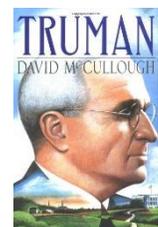
In this debut, Shetterly shines a much-needed light on the bright, talented, and wholly underappreciated geniuses of the institution that would become NASA. Called upon during the labor shortage of World War II, these women were asked to serve their country and put their previously overlooked skills to work all while being segregated from their white coworkers. The author tells the compelling stories of Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, Katherine Johnson, and Christine Darden as they navigated mathematical equations, the space race, and the civil rights movement over three decades of brilliant computing and discoveries. The professional and private lives of the ladies of Langley Research Center are documented through an impassioned and clearly well-researched narrative. Readers will learn how integral these women were to American aeronautics and be saddened by the racism and sexism that kept them from deserved recognition. VERDICT Shetterly's highly recommended work offers up a crucial history that had previously and unforgivably been lost. We'd do well to put this book into the hands of young women who have long since been told that there's no room for them at the scientific table.



June 9, & July 14 2018

***Truman* by David McCullough**

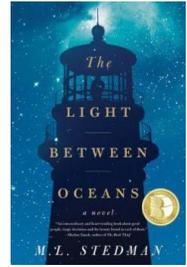
McCullough's life of Harry Truman is a Sandburg's Lincoln for the 1990s. Biographer of Theodore Roosevelt, historian of the Johnstown flood, the Brooklyn Bridge, and Panama Canal, clearly McCullough found not just a new subject but a hero too when he began research in 1982. As with Roosevelt in Mornings on Horseback (LJ 5/15/81), he is concerned above all with defining Truman's character. With poetry and reverence he writes of the farmer, haberdasher, and local official whom accident and ambition raised to unprecedented power, yet who left the White House an American everyman. Skeptics uneasy with McCullough's Truman in mystic communion with America's spirit will recall the raw politics described by Richard Miller in Truman: The Rise to Power (LJ 12/85). For detailed treatment of policy, scholars will often need a specialized monograph. Yet McCullough's Truman is not quite a saint, and his own scholarship is exhaustive in portraying Truman the man. No biography approaches the richness, depth, or grace of this one.



August 11, 2018

***The Light Between Oceans* by M.L. Stedman**

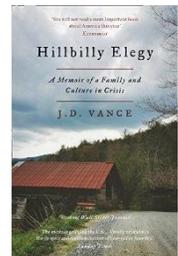
In Stedman's deftly crafted debut, Tom Sherbourne, seeking constancy after the horrors of WWI, takes a lighthouse keeper's post on an Australian island, and calls for Isabel, a young woman he met on his travels, to join him there as his wife. In peaceful isolation, their love grows. But four years on the island and several miscarriages bring Isabel's seemingly boundless spirit to the brink, and leave Tom feeling helpless until a boat washes ashore with a dead man and a living child. Isabel convinces herself-and Tom-that the baby is a gift from God. After two years of maternal bliss for Isabel and alternating waves of joy and guilt for Tom, the family, back on the mainland, is confronted with the mother of their child, very much alive. Stedman grounds what could be a far-fetched premise, setting the stage beautifully to allow for a heart-wrenching moral dilemma to play out, making evident that "Right and wrong can be like bloody snakes: so tangled up that you can't tell which is which until you've shot 'em both, and then it's too late." Most impressive is the subtle yet profound maturation of Isabel and Tom as characters.



September 8, 2018

***Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance**

Growing up in Appalachia may leave a person open to harsh criticism and stereotype, yet Vance delves into his childhood and upbringing to make a clear distinction between perception and reality. Born in Kentucky and shuffling among homes in Ohio, the author ended the cycle of poverty, abuse, and drug use after becoming a U.S. Marine and Yale Law School graduate. His memoir is less about his triumph and more about exposing the gritty truth of how a culture fell into ruin. Using examples from his own life with references to articles and studies throughout, Vance's intent is to show that what was once the fulfillment of the American Dream-moving to the Rust Belt for a better life-has now left families in peril. His plea is not for sympathy but for understanding. Both heartbreaking and heartwarming, this memoir is akin to investigative journalism. While some characters seem too caricature like, it is often those terrifyingly authentic traits that make people memorable. Vance is careful to point out that this is his recollection of events; not everyone is painted in a positive light. A quick and engaging read, this book is well suited to anyone interested in a study of modern America, as Vance's assertions about Appalachia are far more reaching.



October 13, 2018

***Radium Girls* by Kate Moore**

Moore (Roses Are Red...) details the tragic stories of dozens of young women employed as dial painters during World War I. Often the daughters of immigrants, these women were lured to these prestigious and well-paying jobs unaware of the dangers of the radioactive paint present in their workplace-which caused their bodies and clothes to glow, even outside of work. With America's entry into World War I, demand for painted dials and painters skyrocketed. Soon, many employees suffered aching teeth and jaws, sore joints, and sarcomas. As their ailments worsened, many sought answers from their employers. They were met with denials and misinformation even as evidence mounted that radium poisoned these women. After nearly 20 years, several trials, and thousands of dollars in doctor and attorney fees, the women won a small measure of justice, but for some, it was too late. Moore's well-researched narrative is written with clarity and a sympathetic voice that brings these figures and their struggles to life. Verdict: A must-read for anyone interested in American and women's history, as well as topics of law, health, and industrial safety.

