

PEOPLE OF THE BOOK Reading List 2019 – 2029

SEPTEMBER 10

The Weight of Ink, by Rachel Kadish, fiction, 592 pages

When Helen Watt receives a phone call from a former student about centuries-old documents secreted away in his posh residence, she doesn't hold out much hope for their importance. Close to retirement, Helen's seen it all. But a cursory look at the papers tells her she's holding something special. She returns to the house with Aaron Levy, an eager American graduate student, in tow. Despite butting heads over process, the unlikely pair of literary detectives uncover a stunning truth: the writer of the documents is a 17th-century woman who chronicled the Jewish diaspora, from the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition to the rich trade city of Amsterdam and the relative safe haven of London. Kadish deftly weaves contemporary scholarly intrigue with the voice of Ester Velasquez, an incandescent 17th-century mind who longed to engage with the brilliant men of her day. Ester risks everything to wrestle with ideas that counter rabbinical teachings, developing a secret identity to protect her family from harm—and relishing her newfound freedom.

FLP: 1 MCLINC: 16 Amazon

OCTOBER 16

The Ruined House by Ruby Namdar, fiction, 514 pages

Picking up the mantle of legendary authors such as Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, an exquisite literary talent makes his debut with a nuanced and provocative tale of materialism, tradition, faith, and the search for meaning in contemporary American life. Namdar wrote this book and received Israel's most lucrative literary award, the Sapir Prize. Having lived in New York for decades, he was the first expatriate ever to gain that particular honor, and it looks as if he'll remain the only one. After his win, the rules were changed to exclude those who live abroad. *

FLP: 3 MCLINC: 4 Amazon

*Ruby Namdar will be at GJC on October 27 sponsored by the Israel Programming group. He will discuss and sign books. The Little Shop will have the book for sale beginning in July.

NOVEMBER 12

Naamah, by Sarah Blake, fiction, 298 pages

With the coming of the Great Flood—the mother of all disasters—only one family was spared, drifting on an endless sea, waiting for the waters to subside. We know the story of Noah, moved by divine vision to launch their escape. Now, in a work of astounding invention, acclaimed writer Sarah Blake reclaims the story of his wife, Naamah, the matriarch who kept them alive. Here is the woman torn between faith and fury, lending her strength to her sons and their wives, caring for an unruly menagerie of restless creatures, silently mourning the lover she left behind. Here is the woman tormented by dreams and questions of her own—questions of service and self-determination, of history and memory, of the kindness or cruelty of fate.

FLP: 2 MCLINC: 10 Amazon

DECEMBER 10

Spies of No Country by Matti Friedman, non-fiction, 272 pages

This tale of Israel's first spies reads like an espionage novel--but it's all true. The four agents at the center of this story were part of a ragtag unit known as the Arab Section, conceived during World War II by British spies and Jewish militia leaders in Palestine. Intended to gather intelligence and carry out sabotage operations, the unit consisted of Jews who were native to the Arab world and could thus easily assume Arab identities. *Spies of No Country* is about the slippery identities of these young spies, but it's also about the complicated identity of Israel, a country that presents itself as Western but in fact has more citizens with Middle Eastern roots and traditions, like the spies of this narrative. Meticulously researched and masterfully told, *Spies of No Country* is an eye-opening look at the paradoxes of the Middle East.

FLP: 4 MCLINC: 4 Amazon

JANUARY 14

Lioness: Golda Meir and the Nation of Israel, by Francine Klagsbrun, non-fiction, 856 pages

Francine Klagsbrun's prodigious biography is more than just a biography of a seminal figure in Jewish history. Almost 40 years after her death, Golda, as she was universally known, stands as one of the most important Jewish women of the 20th Century. Russian born, American educated and a fierce Zionist since her teenage years, she immigrated to Palestine in 1921. As a young woman, she worked on a kibbutz and later navigated the shoals of Israeli politics for 50 years, sometimes nobly and sometimes with rock-solid stubbornness.

FLP: 1 MCLINC: 5 Amazon

FEBRUARY 11

The Last Watchman of Old Cairo by Michael David Lukas, fiction, 288 pages

Joseph, a literature student at Berkeley, is the son of a Jewish mother and a Muslim father. One day, a mysterious package arrives on his doorstep, pulling him into a mesmerizing adventure to uncover the tangled history that binds the two sides of his family. For generations, the men of the al-Raqb family have served as watchmen of the storied Ibn Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo, built at the site where the infant Moses was taken from the Nile. Joseph learns of his ancestor Ali, a Muslim orphan who nearly a thousand years earlier was entrusted as the first watchman of the synagogue and became enchanted by its legendary--perhaps magical--Ezra Scroll. The story of Joseph's family is entwined with that of the British twin sisters Agnes and Margaret, who in 1897 depart their hallowed Cambridge halls on a mission to rescue sacred texts that have begun to disappear from the synagogue.

FLP: 1 MCLINC: 6 Amazon

March 3

The Family Tabor, by Cherise Wolas, fiction, 400 pages

Harry Tabor is about to be named Man of the Decade, a distinction that feels like the culmination of a life well lived. Gathering together in Palm Springs for the celebration are his wife, Roma, a distinguished child psychologist, and their children: Phoebe, a high-powered

attorney; Camille, a brilliant social anthropologist; and Simon, a big-firm lawyer, who brings his glamorous wife and two young daughters. But immediately, cracks begin to appear in this smooth facade: Simon hasn't been sleeping through the night, Camille can't decide what to do with her life, and Phoebe is a little too cagey about her new boyfriend. Roma knows her children are hiding things. What she doesn't know, what none of them know, is that Harry is suddenly haunted by the long-buried secret that drove him, decades ago, to relocate his young family to the California desert. As the ceremony nears, the family members are forced to confront the falsehoods upon which their lives are built.

FLP: 7, MCLINC: 6 Amazon

April 21

Button Man, by Andrew Gross, fiction, 371 pages

Readers are introduced to the Rabinowitz family—including brothers Morris, Sol, and Harold. They live in the rough-and-tumble of pre-war New York's Lower East Side, where they are forced to grow up quickly in the wake of their father's sudden death. To help support his family, 12-year-old Morris drops out of school and becomes an apprentice to a garment cutter in a clothing factory; Sol attends college to become an accountant, and Harry—scarred by his involvement in childhood tragedy—falls under the influence of a neighborhood bully turned mobster, Louis "Lepke" Buchalter. Morris, despite his wise mouth and presumptuous nature, quickly proves himself indispensable to the operation, learning the tricks of the trade and eventually opening his own business—a livelihood that is threatened when the mafia sets their sights on the unions that control the clothing industry. With the requisite thriller elements firmly intact, Gross sets his eyes on a much larger story. At its heart is a sweeping, multi-generational tale about the pursuit of the America dream and the sacrifices that are often required to become a success—one that recalls his grandfather's own coming-of-age in the clothing industry. Very much a portrait of New York City in the 1920s and '30s, it captures the hope and turbulence of the era, which was amplified by the rise of organized crime; further, the author exposes the influence of the Jewish American mafia, which actually outmaneuvered its Italian counterpart then—a fact that has been largely obscured by history.

FLP: 3, MCLINC: 13 Amazon

MAY 12

The Secret Chord, by Geraldine Brooks, fiction, 302 pages

Peeling away the myth to bring the Old Testament's King David to life in Second Iron Age Israel, Brooks traces the arc of his journey from obscurity to fame, from shepherd to soldier, from hero to traitor, from beloved king to murderous despot and into his remorseful and diminished dotage. The Secret Chord provides new context for some of the best-known episodes of David's life while also focusing on others, even more remarkable and emotionally intense, that have been neglected. We see David through the eyes of those who love him or fear him—from the prophet Natan, voice of his conscience, to his wives Mikhal, Avigail, and Batsheva, and finally to Solomon, the late-born son who redeems his Lear-like old age. Brooks has an uncanny ability to hear and transform characters from history, and this beautifully written, unvarnished saga of faith, desire, family, ambition, betrayal, and power will enthrall her many fans. (less)

FLP: 2 MCLINC: 32 Amazon

JUNE 9

Not Our Kind by Kitty Zeldis, fiction, 252 pages

One rainy morning in June, two years after the end of World War II, a minor traffic accident brings together Eleanor Moskowitz and Patricia Bellamy. Their encounter seems fated: Eleanor, a teacher and recent Vassar graduate, needs a job. Patricia's difficult thirteen-year-old daughter Margaux, recovering from polio, needs a private tutor. Though she feels out of place in the Bellamys' rarefied and elegant Park Avenue milieu, Eleanor forms an instant bond with Margaux. Soon the idealistic young woman is filling the bright young girl's mind with Shakespeare and Latin. Though her mother, a hat maker with a little shop on Second Avenue, disapproves, Eleanor takes pride in her work, even if she must use the name "Moss" to enter the Bellamys' restricted doorman building each morning, and feels that Patricia's husband, Wynn, may have a problem with her being Jewish. Invited to keep Margaux company at the Bellamys' country home in a small town in Connecticut, Eleanor meets Patricia's unreliable, bohemian brother, Tom, recently returned from Europe. As the summer wears on, the two women's friendship grows—until one hot summer evening, a line is crossed, and both Eleanor and Patricia will have to make important decisions—choices that will reverberate through their lives.

FLP: 6 MCLINC: 8 Amazon