

# PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

## Reading List 2021– 2022

### AUGUST 10

#### **The Storyteller** by Jodi Picoult.

Sage Singer is a baker, a loner, until she befriends an old man who's particularly beloved in her community. Josef Weber is everyone's favorite retired teacher and Little League coach. One day he asks Sage for a favor: to kill him. Shocked, Sage refuses—and then he confesses his darkest secret – he deserves to die because he had been a Nazi SS guard. And Sage's grandmother is a Holocaust survivor. How do you react to evil living next door? Can someone who's committed truly heinous acts ever atone with subsequent good behavior? Should you offer forgiveness to someone if you aren't the party who was wronged? And, if Sage even considers the request, is it revenge...or justice?

*Free Library and McLinc--480 pages*

### SEPTEMBER 14

#### **My Russian Grandmother and Her American Vacuum Cleaner: A Memoir** by Meir Shalev

Here we meet Shalev's amazing Grandma Tonia, who arrived in Palestine by boat from Russia in 1923 and lived in a constant state of battle with what she viewed as the family's biggest enemy in their new land: dirt. Grandma Tonia was never seen without a cleaning rag over her shoulder. She received visitors outdoors. She allowed only the most privileged guests to enter her spotless house. Hilarious and touching, Grandma Tonia and her regulations come richly to life in a narrative that circles around the arrival into the family's dusty agricultural midst of the big, shiny American sweeper sent as a gift by Great-uncle Yeshayahu (he who had shockingly emigrated to the sinful capitalist heaven of Los Angeles!). America, to little Meir and to his forebears, was a land of hedonism and enchanting progress; of tempting luxuries, dangerous music, and degenerate gum-chewing; and of women with painted fingernails. The sweeper, a stealth weapon from Grandpa Aharon's American brother meant to beguile the hardworking socialist household with a bit of American ease, was symbolic of the conflicts and visions of the family in every respect.

*Free Library and McLinc—224 pages*

### OCTOBER 12

#### **The Tunnel** by A. B. Yehoshua

A suspenseful and poignant story of a family coping with the sudden mental decline of their beloved husband and father - an engineer who they discover is involved in an ominous secret military project.

*Free Library and McLinc—317 pages*

### NOVEMBER 9

#### **The Vixen** by Francine Prose

On June 19, 1953, narrator Simon Putnam and his parents grimly watch a TV reporter announce that the Rosenbergs have been executed as Soviet spies. With her customary deft hand, Prose sketches the family dynamic as they comment on the coverage: Recent Harvard grad Simon loves his idealistic mother and cynical father but is embarrassed by the immigrant origins they share with the Rosenbergs. His mother grew up with Ethel on the Lower East Side, which is not something Simon wants getting around at Landry, Landry, and Bartlett, the distinguished publishing house where his uncle Madison, a feared literary critic, gets him an entry-level job. Simon hopes to follow Madison's tracks out of Coney Island, so he's thrilled when charismatic Warren Landry asks him to edit a manuscript, until he realizes that *The Vixen*, *The Patriot*, and *The Fanatic* depicts Ethel Rosenberg as a communist Mata Hari seducing every man in sight and, by the way, as guilty as hell. The firm is in dire financial shape, Warren confides; if Simon can make this mess "less bad" they could have a sorely needed bestseller. Tantalized by the prospect of a promotion, plus the alluring photo of author Anya Partridge, Simon

suppresses his qualms and gets to work. He gets a stinging reality check in the novel's climax, but he also gets a partial revenge and finds his life's direction in the mildly improbable but touching final developments.

*Free Library and McLinc—432 pages*

## DECEMBER 14

### **Florence Adler Swims Forever** by Rachel Beanland

What makes this novel fascinating is there are not many stories depicting Jewish immigrants already living for a generation in America in 1934. The novel centers on a Jewish family no longer struggling to assimilate, but rather dealing with the challenges of economic survival, antisemitism, and intermarriage. Beanland's portrayal of the hardships of obtaining immigration papers to get from Europe to America during the prewar years feels painfully accurate. The endless, exhaustive, Sisyphean hoops the American Jews jumped through, desperately trying to help their friends in Germany escape, but which often lead nowhere. These chapters of the book also feel incredibly relevant to our current moment, in which it is increasingly difficult for those fleeing life-threatening circumstances to find safety in America. Despite the serious tone and content, the book is by and large an uplifting and fast-paced read.

*Free Library and McLinc-- 333 pages*

## JANUARY 11

### **The Light of Days: The Untold Story of Woman Resistance Fighters in Hitler's Ghetto** by Judy Batalion

The forgotten stories of Polish "ghetto girls" — dozens of Jewish women who did not ask "for pity" or flee the Nazis. Instead, they stayed and fought them. Or flirted with them, then shot and killed them. They also led groups of Jewish fighters into combat against the Wehrmacht. Batalion centers her book on one such group of exceptional women, some as young as 15, all part of the armed underground Jewish resistance that operated in more than 90 Eastern European ghettos, from Vilna to Krakow. Knowing that there would be no mercy in capture, only torture and a brutal death, the women bribed executioners; smuggled pistols, grenades and cash inside teddy bears, handbags and loaves of bread; helped hundreds of comrades to escape; and seduced Nazis with wine and whiskey before killing them with efficient stealth.

*Free Library and McLinc--576 pages*

## FEBRUARY 8

### **The Last Kings of Shanghai, the Rival Jewish Dynasties that helped create Modern China** by Jonathan Kaufman

Shanghai, 1936. The Cathay Hotel, located on the city's famous waterfront, is one of the most glamorous in the world. Built by Victor Sassoon--billionaire playboy and scion of the Sassoon dynasty. By the 1930s, the Sassoons had been doing business in China for a century, rivaled in wealth and influence by only one other dynasty--the Kadoories. These two Jewish families, both originally from Baghdad, stood astride Chinese business and politics for more than 175 years, profiting from the Opium Wars; surviving Japanese occupation; courting Chiang Kai-shek; and losing nearly everything as the Communists swept into power. In *The Last Kings of Shanghai*, Jonathan Kaufman tells the remarkable history of how these families participated in an economic boom that opened China to the world, but remained blind to the country's deep inequality and to the political turmoil at their doorsteps.

*Free Library and McLinc--384 pages*

## MARCH 8

### **The Adventure of the Peculiar Protocols** by Nicholas Meyer

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, are summoned by Holmes' brother Mycroft to embark on a secret investigation. An agent of the British Secret Service has been found dead in the River Thames. In the agent's pocket is a document that appears to be the notes of a meeting of a secret society that's focused on taking over the world. As they travel from Paris into the heart of Russia, Holmes and Watson attempt to trace the origins of the dangerous document. Hot on their heels

are men of dubious loyalty, who will stop at nothing to prevent the release of the secret plans. As they contemplate the mystery that is currently unfolding they also ponder the changing world.

*Free Library and McLinc—256 pages*

## **APRIL 12**

### **Second Person Singular** by Sayed Kashua

Second Person Singular follows two tracks, one in the third person following a lawyer, Sayed Kashua, the other in the first person by Amir Lahab, a poor Arab from the occupied territories who moves to Jerusalem to study and become a social worker. The lawyer, too, is from a small village in the territories, and as their stories unfold, it becomes clear each is trying to leave not only class, but a large part of their Arabic heritage behind. Amir lands a job as a caretaker for a comatose Jew about his own age, working the overnight hours in the young man's house shared with his wealthy mother. Plot paths emerge; the plot here is merely the vehicle through which Kashua keenly dissects issues of identity and class. Both the lawyer and Amir leave their villages in flights from their pasts, and as steps to different futures. The lawyer is the more transparent of the two. Ambitious to a fault, he works hard to become accepted among upper-class Arabs in Israel, and by Jews, as well. He has constructed a persona, pursued his career simply because it buys him the social access and acceptance he so craves. Amir, by contrast, is driven less by ambition than a fear of returning to his village and his mother's scandal-racked past. He goes one step further than the lawyer in trying to create a new sense of self.

*Free Library and McLinc—256 pages*

## **MAY 10**

### **Haven** by Ruth Gruber

In 1943, nearly 1,000 European Jewish refugees from 18 different countries were chosen by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration to receive asylum in the United States. All they had to do was get there. Ruth Gruber, with the support of Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, volunteered to escort them on their secret route across the Atlantic from a port in Italy to a "safe haven" camp in Oswego, New York. The dangerous endeavor carried the threat of Nazi capture with each passing day.

*Free Library and McLinc--374 pages*

## **JUNE 14**

### **Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor** by Yossi Klein Halevi

Yossi Klein Halevi left his home in New York when he was in his 20s and moved to Israel. Over the decades since then, he has tried to sort out for himself how these two peoples, the Israelis and the Palestinians, have been locked in their intractable conflict for generations. In this book, Halevi tries to reach beyond the failed politics and toxic narratives to connect with the neighbors that he does not know.

*Free Library and McLinc—204 pages*