

2026 Book Club Selection List for Survey

(In no particular order)

1. Almond: A Novel by Won-pyung Sohn

This story is, in short, about a monster meeting another monster.

One of the monsters is me.

Yunjae was born with a brain condition called Alexithymia that makes it hard for him to feel emotions like fear or anger. He does not have friends—the two almond-shaped neurons located deep in his brain have seen to that—but his devoted mother and grandmother provide him with a safe and content life. Their little home above his mother’s used bookstore is decorated with colorful Post-it notes that remind him when to smile, when to say "thank you," and when to laugh.

Then on Christmas Eve—Yunjae’s sixteenth birthday—everything changes. A shocking act of random violence shatters his world, leaving him alone and on his own. Struggling to cope with his loss, Yunjae retreats into silent isolation, until troubled teenager Gon arrives at his school, and they develop a surprising bond.

As Yunjae begins to open his life to new people—including a girl at school—something slowly changes inside him. And when Gon suddenly finds his life at risk, Yunjae will have the chance to step outside of every comfort zone he has created to perhaps become the hero he never thought he would be.

2. Dinner for Vampires: Life on a Cult TV Show (While also in an Actual Cult!) by Bethany Joy Lenz

In the early 2000s, after years of hard work and determination to break through as an actor, Bethany Joy Lenz was finally cast as one of the leads on the hit drama *One Tree Hill*. Her acting career was set to soar, but her personal life was beginning to unravel in ways her fans could never imagine. Unknown to the millions of viewers and even her costars, Lenz led a secret double life within a cult.

As an only child seeking belonging, Lenz thought she found a safe haven in a Bible study group with fellow Hollywood creatives. However, the group morphed into something more sinister—a web of manipulation and fear under the guise of a church covenant called The Big House Family. Piece by piece, Lenz surrendered her autonomy, eventually moving to the Family’s Pacific Northwest compound overseen by a domineering minister who convinced her to marry his son and secretly drained millions from her TV income without her knowledge. Family “minders” assigned to her on set, “Maoist struggle session”—inspired meetings in the basement of a filthy house, and regular counseling with “Leadership” were just part of the tactics used to keep her loyal.

Only when she became a mother did Lenz find the courage to escape and spare her child from a similar fate. After nearly a decade (and with the unlikely help from a devoted *One Tree Hill* fan), she broke free from the family’s grip, beginning her healing journey from deep trauma that reshaped her faith and identity.

Written with powerful honesty and dark humor, *Dinner for Vampires* is a “tart, refreshing” (*The New York Times Book Review*) story about the importance of identity and understanding what you believe.

3. How to Read a Book: A Novel by Monica Wood

Our Reasons meet us in the morning and whisper to us at night. Mine is an innocent, unsuspecting, eternally sixty-one-year-old woman named Lorraine Daigle...

Violet Powell, a twenty-two-year-old from rural Abbott Falls, Maine, is being released from prison after serving twenty-two months for a drunk-driving crash that killed a local kindergarten teacher.

Harriet Larson, a retired English teacher who runs the prison book club, is facing the unsettling prospect of an empty nest.

Frank Daigle, a retired machinist, hasn’t yet come to grips with the complications of his marriage to the woman Violet killed.

When the three encounter each other one morning in a bookstore in Portland—Violet to buy the novel she was reading in the prison book club before her release, Harriet to choose the next title for the women who remain, and Frank to dispatch his duties as the store handyman—their lives begin to intersect in transformative ways.

How to Read a Book is an unsparingly honest and profoundly hopeful story about letting go of guilt, seizing second chances, and the power of books to change our lives. With the heart, wit, grace, and depth of understanding that has characterized her work, Monica Wood illuminates the decisions that define a life and the kindnesses that make life worth living.

4. The Last Garden in England by Julia Kelly

Present day: Emma Lovett, who has dedicated her career to breathing new life into long-neglected gardens, has just been given the opportunity of a lifetime: to restore the gardens of the famed Highbury House estate, designed in 1907 by her hero Venetia Smith. But as Emma dives deeper into the gardens’ past, she begins to uncover secrets that have long lain hidden.

1907: A talented artist with a growing reputation for her ambitious work, Venetia Smith has carved out a niche for herself as a garden designer to industrialists, solicitors, and bankers looking to show off their wealth with sumptuous country houses. When she is hired to design the gardens of Highbury House, she is determined to make them a triumph, but the gardens—and the people she meets—promise to change her life forever.

1944: When land girl Beth Pedley arrives at a farm on the outskirts of the village of Highbury, all she wants is to find a place she can call home. Cook Stella Adderton, on the other hand, is desperate to leave Highbury House to pursue her own dreams. And widow Diana Symonds, the mistress of the grand house, is anxiously trying to cling to her pre-war life now that her home has been requisitioned and transformed into a convalescent hospital for wounded soldiers. But when war threatens Highbury House’s treasured gardens, these three very different women are drawn together by a secret that will last for decades.

In this sweeping novel reminiscent of Kate Morton’s *The Lake House* and Kristin Harmel’s *The Room on Rue*

Amélie, Julia Kelly explores the unexpected connections that cross time and the special places that bring people together forever.

5. The Borrowed Life of Frederick Fife by Anna Johnston

“Would you mind terribly, old boy, if I borrowed the rest of your life? I promise I’ll take excellent care of it.”

Frederick Fife was born with an extra helping of kindness in his heart. If he borrowed your car, he’d return it washed with a full tank of gas. The problem is, at age eighty-two, there’s nobody left in Fred’s life to borrow from, and he’s broke and on the brink of eviction. But Fred’s luck changes when he’s mistaken for Bernard Greer, a missing resident at the local nursing home, and takes his place. Now Fred has warm meals in his belly and a roof over his head—as long as his look-alike Bernard never turns up.

Denise Simms is stuck breathing the same disappointing air again and again. A middle-aged mom and caregiver at Bernard’s facility, her crumbling marriage and daughter’s health concerns are suffocating her joy for life. Wounded by her two-faced husband, she vows never to let a man deceive her again.

As Fred walks in Bernard’s shoes, he leaves a trail of kindness behind him, fueling Denise’s suspicions about his true identity. When unexpected truths are revealed, Fred and Denise rediscover their sense of purpose and learn how to return a broken life to mint condition.

Bittersweet and remarkably perceptive, *The Borrowed Life of Frederick Fife* is a hilarious, feel-good, clever novel about grief, forgiveness, redemption, and finding family.

6. The Nine Lives of Charlotte Taylor by Sally Armstrong

Charlotte Taylor lived in the front row of history. In 1775, at the young age of twenty, she fled her English country house and boarded a ship to Jamaica with her lover, the family’s black butler. Soon after reaching shore, Charlotte’s lover died of yellow fever, leaving her alone and pregnant in Jamaica. In the sixty-six years that followed, she would find refuge with the Mi’kmaq of what is present-day New Brunswick, have three husbands, nine more children and a lifelong relationship with an aboriginal man. Using a seamless blend of fact and fiction, Charlotte Taylor’s great-great-great-granddaughter, Sally Armstrong, reclaims the life of a dauntless and unusual woman and delivers living history with all the drama and sweep of a novel.

7. The Wilderness by Samantha Harvey

It’s Jake’s birthday. He is sitting in a small plane, being flown over the landscape that has been the backdrop to his life – his childhood, his marriage, his work, his passions. Now he is in his mid-sixties, and he isn’t quite the man he used to be. He has lost his wife, his son is in prison, and he is about to lose his past. Jake has Alzheimer’s.

As the disease takes hold of him, Jake struggles to hold on to his personal story, to his memories and identity, but they become increasingly elusive and unreliable. What happened to his daughter? Is she alive, or long dead? And why exactly is his son in prison? What went so wrong in his life? There was a cherry tree once, and a yellow dress, but what exactly do they mean? As Jake fights the inevitable dying of the light, the key events of his life keep changing as he tries to grasp them, and what until recently seemed solid fact is melting into surreal dreams or nightmarish imaginings. Is there anything he’ll be able to salvage from the wreckage? Beauty, perhaps, the memory of love, or nothing at all?

From the first sentence to the last, *The Wilderness* holds us in its grip. This is writing of extraordinary power and beauty.

8. Orbital by Samantha Harvey

A slender novel of epic power and the winner of the Booker Prize 2024, *Orbital* deftly snapshots one day in the lives of six women and men traveling through space. Selected for one of the last space station missions of its kind before the program is dismantled, these astronauts and cosmonauts—from America, Russia, Italy, Britain, and Japan—have left their lives behind to travel at a speed of over seventeen thousand miles an hour as the earth reels below. We glimpse moments of their earthly lives through brief communications with family, their photos and talismans; we watch them whip up dehydrated meals, float in gravity-free sleep, and exercise in regimented routines to prevent atrophying muscles; we witness them form bonds that will stand between them and utter solitude. Most of all, we are with them as they behold and record their silent blue planet. Their experiences of sixteen sunrises and sunsets and the bright, blinking constellations of the galaxy are at once breathtakingly awesome and surprisingly intimate.

Profound and contemplative, *Orbital* is a moving elegy to our environment and planet.

9. At a Loss for Words: Conversation in an Age of Rage by Carl Off

As co-host of CBC Radio's *As It Happens*, Carol Off spent a decade and a half talking to people in the news five nights a week. On top of her stellar writing and reporting career, those 25,000 interviews have given her a unique vantage point on the crucial subject at the heart of her new book—how, in these polarizing years, words that used to define civil society and social justice are being put to work for a completely different political agenda. Or they are being bleached of their meaning as the values they represent are mocked and distorted. As Off writes, “If our language doesn’t have a means to express an idea, then the idea itself is gone—even the range of thought is diminished.” And, as she argues, that’s a dangerous loss.

10. Who We Are: Four Questions For a Life and a Nation by Murray Sinclair

For decades, Senator Sinclair has fearlessly educated Canadians about the painful truths of our history. He was the first Indigenous judge in Manitoba, and only the second Indigenous judge in Canadian history. He was the Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and remains one of the foremost voices on Reconciliation. And now, for the first time, he shares his full story—and his full vision for our nation—with readers across Canada and beyond.

Drawing on Senator Sinclair’s perspectives regarding Indigenous identity, human rights, and justice, *Who We Are* examines the roles of history, resistance, and resilience in the pursuit of finding a path forward, one that heals the damaged relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. In doing so, it reveals Senator Sinclair’s life in a new and direct way, exploring how all of these unique experiences have shaped him as an Anishinaabe man, father, and grandfather.

Structured around the four questions that have long shaped Senator Sinclair’s thinking and worldview—Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? Who am I?—*Who We Are* takes readers into the story of his remarkable life as never before, while challenging them to embrace an inclusive vision for our shared future.

The book includes the *What We Have Learned* report, created by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC).

11. Encampment: Resistance, Grace, and an Unhoused Community by Maggie Helwig

An activist priest provides sanctuary for an encampment of unhoused people in her churchyard

The housing crisis plaguing major urban centres has sent countless people into the streets. In spring 2022, some of them found their way to the yard beside the Anglican church in Toronto's Kensington Market, where Maggie Helwig is the priest. They pitched tents, formed an encampment, and settled in. Known as an outspoken social justice activist, Helwig has spent the last three years getting to know the residents and fighting tooth and nail to allow them to stay, battling various authorities that want to clear the yard and keep the results of the housing crisis out of sight and out of mind.

Encampment tells the story of Helwig's life-long activism as preparation for her fight to keep her churchyard open to people needing a home. More importantly, it introduces us to the Artist, to Jeff, and to Robin: their lives, their challenges, their humanity. It confronts our society's callousness in allowing so many to go unhoused and demands, by bringing their stories to the fore, that we begin to respond with compassion and grace.

12. Finding Flora by Elinor Florence

Scottish newcomer Flora Craigie jumps from a moving train in 1905 to escape her abusive husband. Desperate to disappear, she claims a homestead on the beautiful but wild Alberta prairie, determined to create a new life for herself. She is astonished to find that her nearest neighbours are also female: a Welsh widow with three children; two American women raising chickens; and a Métis woman who supports herself by training wild horses.

While battling both the brutal environment and the local cynicism toward female farmers, the five women with their very different backgrounds struggle to find common ground. But when their homes are threatened with expropriation by a hostile government, they join forces to "fire the heather," a Scottish term meaning to raise a ruckus. To complicate matters, there are signs that Flora's violent husband is still hunting for her. And as the competition for free land along the new Canadian Pacific Railway line heats up, an unscrupulous land agent threatens not only Flora's livelihood, but her very existence.

13. Still Life by Sarah Winman

In the wine-cellar of a Tuscan villa, as the Allies advance and bombs fall around them, two people meet and share an extraordinary evening: Ulysses Temper is a young British soldier from London's East End; Evelyn Skinner is a worldly older art historian and possible spy. She has come to Italy to rescue paintings from the ruins and relive her memories of the time she encountered E.M. Forster and had her heart stolen by an Italian maid in a particular Florentine room with a view.

Evelyn's talk of truth and beauty plants a seed in Ulysses's mind that night, one that will shape the trajectory of his life—and the lives of those who love him—for the next four decades. Moving from war-ravaged Tuscany to the boozy confines of The Stoat and Parrot pub in London and the piazzas of post-war

Florence, *Still Life* is both sweeping and intimate, mischievous and deeply felt. It is a novel about beauty, love and fate, about the things that make life worth living, and the things we're prepared to die for.

14. **Memorial Days: A Memoir by Geraldine Brooks**

Many cultural and religious traditions expect those who are grieving to step away from the world. In contemporary life, we are more often met with red tape and to-do lists. This is exactly what happened to Geraldine Brooks when her partner of more than three decades, Tony Horwitz – just sixty years old and, to her knowledge, vigorous and healthy – collapsed and died on a Washington, D. C. sidewalk.

After spending their early years together in conflict zones as foreign correspondents, Geraldine and Tony settled down to raise two boys on Martha's Vineyard. The life they built was one of meaningful work, good humor, and tenderness, as they spent their days writing and their evenings cooking family dinners or watching the sun set with friends at the beach. But all of this ended abruptly when, on Memorial Day 2019, Geraldine received the phone call we all dread. The demands were immediate and many. Without space to grieve, the sudden loss became a yawning gulf.

Three years later, she booked a flight to a remote island off the coast of Australia with the intention of finally giving herself the time to mourn. In a shack on a pristine, rugged coast she often went days without seeing another person. There, she pondered the various ways in which cultures grieve and what rituals of her own might help to rebuild a life around the void of Tony's death.

A spare and profoundly moving memoir that joins the classics of the genre, *Memorial Days* is a portrait of a larger-than-life man and a timeless love between souls that exquisitely captures the joy, agony, and mystery of life.

15. **Clear Caryl Davies**

John, an impoverished Scottish minister, has accepted a job evicting the lone remaining occupant of an island north of Scotland—Ivar, who has been living alone for decades, with only the animals and the sea for company. Though his wife, Mary, has serious misgivings about the errand, he decides to go anyway, setting in motion a chain of events that neither he nor Mary could have predicted.

Shortly after John reaches the island, he falls down a cliff and is found, unconscious and badly injured, by Ivar who takes him home and tends to his wounds. "*Clear* chronicles the surprising bond that develops between these two men... pack[ing] a great deal of power into a compact tale" (*The Wall Street Journal*) about connection, home, and hope—in which John begins to learn Ivar's language, and Ivar sees himself reflected through the eyes of another person for the first time in decades.

Unfolding during the final stages of the infamous Scottish Clearances—a period of the 19th century which saw whole communities of the rural poor driven off the land in a relentless program of forced evictions—this singular novel explores what binds us together in the face of insurmountable difference, the way history shapes our deepest convictions, and how the human spirit can endure despite all odds. Moving and unpredictable, "a love letter to the scorching power of language"

16. We begin at the end by Chris Whitaker

Duchess Day Radley is a thirteen-year-old self-proclaimed outlaw. Rules are for other people. She is the fierce protector of her five-year-old brother, Robin, and the parent to her mother, Star, a single mom incapable of taking care of herself, let alone her two kids.

Walk has never left the coastal California town where he and Star grew up. He may have become the chief of police, but he's still trying to heal the old wound of having given the testimony that sent his best friend, Vincent King, to prison decades before. And he's in overdrive protecting Duchess and her brother.

Now, thirty years later, Vincent is being released. And Duchess and Walk must face the trouble that comes with his return. *We Begin at the End* is an extraordinary novel about two kinds of families—the ones we are born into and the ones we create.

17. Raising Hare by Chloe Dalton

Imagine you could hold a baby hare and bottle-feed it. Imagine that it lived under your roof and lolloped around your bedroom at night, drumming on the duvet cover when it wanted your attention. Imagine that, over two years later, it still ran in from the fields when you called it and snoozed in your house for hours on end. This happened to me.

When lockdown led busy professional Chloe to leave the city and return to the countryside of her childhood, she never expected to find herself custodian of a newly born hare. Yet when she finds the creature, endangered, alone and no bigger than her palm, she is compelled to give it a chance at survival.

Raising Hare chronicles their journey together and the challenges of caring for the leveret and preparing for its return to the wild. We witness an extraordinary relationship between human and animal, rekindling our sense of awe towards nature and wildlife. This improbable bond of trust serves to remind us that the most remarkable experiences, inspiring the most hope, often arise when we least expect them.

18. Intermezzo by Sally Rooney

Aside from the fact that they are brothers, Peter and Ivan Koubek seem to have little in common.

Peter is a Dublin lawyer in his thirties – successful, competent and apparently unassailable. But in the wake of their father's death, he's medicating himself to sleep and struggling to manage his relationships with two very different women – his enduring first love, Sylvia, and Naomi, a college student for whom life is one long joke.

Ivan is a twenty-two-year-old competitive chess player. He has always seen himself as socially awkward, a loner, the antithesis of his glib elder brother. Now, in the early weeks of his bereavement, Ivan meets Margaret, an older woman emerging from her own turbulent past, and their lives become rapidly and intensely intertwined.

For two grieving brothers and the people they love, this is a new interlude – a period of desire, despair and possibility – a chance to find out how much one life might hold inside itself without breaking.

19. **The Exvangelicals: Loving, Living, and Leaving the White Evangelical Church by Sarah McCammon**

Growing up in a deeply evangelical family in the Midwest in the '80s and '90s, Sarah McCammon was strictly taught to fear God, obey him, and not question the faith. Persistently worried that her gay grandfather would go to hell unless she could reach him, or that her Muslim friend would need to be converted, and that she, too, would go to hell if she did not believe fervently enough, McCammon was a rule-follower and—most of the time—a true believer. But through it all, she was increasingly plagued by fears and deep questions as the belief system she'd been carefully taught clashed with her expanding understanding of the outside world.

After spending her early adult life striving to make sense of an unraveling worldview, by her 30s, she found herself face-to-face with it once again as she covered the Trump campaign for NPR, where she witnessed first-hand the power and influence that evangelical Christian beliefs held on the political right.

Sarah also came to discover that she was not alone: she is among a rising generation of the children of evangelicalism who are growing up and fleeing the fold, who are thinking for themselves and deconstructing what feel like the “alternative facts” of their childhood.

Rigorously reported and deeply personal, *The Exvangelicals* is the story of the people who make up this generational tipping point, including Sarah herself. Part memoir, part investigative journalism, this is the first definitive book that names and describes the post-evangelical movement: identifying its origins, telling the stories of its members, and examining its vast cultural, social, and political impact.

20. **James by Percival Everett**

When the enslaved Jim overhears that he is about to be sold to a man in New Orleans, separated from his wife and daughter forever, he decides to hide on nearby Jackson Island until he can formulate a plan. Meanwhile, Huck Finn has faked his own death to escape his violent father, recently returned to town. As all readers of American literature know, thus begins the dangerous and transcendent journey by raft down the Mississippi River toward the elusive and too-often-unreliable promise of the Free States and beyond.

While many narrative set pieces of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* remain in place (floods and storms, stumbling across both unexpected death and unexpected treasure in the myriad stopping points along the river's banks, encountering the scam artists posing as the Duke and Dauphin...), Jim's agency, intelligence and compassion are shown in a radically new light.

Brimming with the electrifying humor and lacerating observations that have made Everett a “literary icon” (*Oprah Daily*), and one of the most decorated writers of our lifetime, *James* is destined to be a major publishing event and a cornerstone of twenty-first century American literature.

21. Moral Ambition: Stop Wasting Your Talent and Start Making a Difference by Rutger Bregman

A career consists of 2,000 workweeks, and how you spend that time is one of the most important decisions of your life. Still, millions of people are stuck in in mind-numbing, pointless, or just plain harmful jobs.

There's an antidote to this waste of talent, and it's called moral ambition. Moral ambition is the will to be among the best, but with different measures of success. Not a fancy title, fat salary, or corner office, but a career dedicated to the best solutions to the world's biggest problems— whether that means tackling climate change, making pandemics history or fighting Big Tobacco.

In *Moral Ambition*, internationally bestselling author Rutger Bregman reveals how our conventional definitions of success are harming us and the planet, and shows how we can shift the focus from personal gain to societal benefit. In the process, he explains, we will join a growing movement of pioneers who are already living out this ethos. They're the builders, the problem-solvers, the doers who have chosen a path less traveled. A guidebook to finding that path for ourselves, *Moral Ambition* reminds us that the real measure of success lies not in what we accumulate, but in what we contribute, and shows how we, too, can build a legacy that truly matters.

22. The Dressmaker of Khair Khana: Five Sisters, One Remarkable Family, and the Woman Who Risked Everything to Keep Them Safe by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon

The life Kamila Sidiqi had known changed overnight when the Taliban seized control of the city of Kabul. After receiving a teaching degree during the civil war—a rare achievement for any Afghan woman—Kamila was subsequently banned from school and confined to her home. When her father and brother were forced to flee the city, Kamila became the sole breadwinner for her five siblings. Armed only with grit and determination, she picked up a needle and thread and created a thriving business of her own.

The Dressmaker of Khair Khana tells the incredible true story of this unlikely entrepreneur who mobilized her community under the Taliban. Former ABC Newsreporter Gayle Tzemach Lemmon spent years on the ground reporting Kamila's story, and the result is an unusually intimate look at the daily lives of women in Afghanistan. These women are not victims; they are the glue that holds families together; they are the backbone and the heart of their nation.

23. A different Kind of Power: A memoir by Jacinda Ardern

What if we could redefine leadership? What if kindness came first? Jacinda Ardern grew up the daughter of a police officer in small-town New Zealand, but as the 40th Prime Minister of her country, she commanded global respect for her empathetic leadership that put people first. This is the remarkable story of how a Mormon girl plagued by self-doubt made political history and changed our assumptions of what a global leader can be.

When Jacinda Ardern became Prime Minister at age thirty-seven, the world took notice. But it was her compassionate yet powerful response to the 2019 Christchurch mosque attacks, resulting in swift and sweeping gun control laws, that demonstrated her remarkable leadership. She guided her country through unprecedented challenges—a volcanic eruption, a major biosecurity breach, and a global pandemic—while advancing visionary new policies to address climate change, reduce child poverty, and secure historic

international trade deals. She did all this while juggling first-time motherhood in the public eye.

Ardern exemplifies a new kind of leadership—proving that leaders can be caring, empathetic, and effective. She has become a global icon, and now she is ready to share her story, from the struggles to the surprises, including for the first time the full details of her decision to step down during her sixth year as Prime Minister.

Through her personal experiences and reflections, Jacinda is a model for anyone who has ever doubted themselves, or has aspired to lead with compassion, conviction, and courage. *A Different Kind of Power* is more than a political memoir; it's an insight into how it feels to lead, ultimately asking: What if you, too, are capable of more than you ever imagined?

24. This is How It Always Is by Laurie Frankel

This is how a family keeps a secret... and how that secret ends up keeping them.

This is how a family lives happily ever after... until happily ever after becomes complicated.

This is how children change... and then change the world.

This is Claude. He's five years old, the youngest of five brothers, and loves peanut butter sandwiches. He also loves wearing a dress, and dreams of being a princess.

When he grows up, Claude says, he wants to be a girl.

Rosie and Penn want Claude to be whoever Claude wants to be. They're just not sure they're ready to share that with the world. Soon the entire family is keeping Claude's secret. Until one day it explodes.

Laurie Frankel's *This Is How It Always Is* is a novel about revelations, transformations, fairy tales, and family. And it's about the ways this is how it always is: Change is always hard and miraculous and hard again, parenting is always a leap into the unknown with crossed fingers and full hearts, children grow but not always according to plan. And families with secrets don't get to keep them forever.

25. Beijing Confidential: A Tale of Comrades Lost and Found by Jan Wong

In the early 1970s Jan Wong became one of only two Westerners permitted to study at Beijing University. One day a young stranger, Yin Luoyi, asked for help in getting to America. Wong, then a starry-eyed Maoist, immediately reported her to the authorities, and Yin disappeared. Wong chronicled that brief meeting in her bestselling book *Red China Blues*. Now, a decade after *Red China Blues* and thirty-four years after that fateful encounter, Jan Wong revisits the Chinese capital to begin her search for the woman who has haunted her conscience. She wants to apologize, to somehow make amends. At the very least she wants to discover whether Yin survived.

Emotionally powerful and rich with detail, *Beijing Confidential* weaves together three distinct stories—Wong's journey from remorse to redemption, Yin's journey from disgrace to respectability, and Beijing's stunning journey from communism to capitalism.

26. The Covenant of Water by Abraham Verghese

“One of the best books I’ve read in my entire life. It’s epic. It’s transportive . . . It was unputdownable!”—Oprah Winfrey, OprahDaily.com

An instant *New York Times* and indie bestseller and an Oprah Book Club Pick, *The Covenant of Water* has sold more than two million copies worldwide and was widely named as a best book of the year. Spanning the years 1900 to 1977, Abraham Verghese’s long-awaited, masterful novel follows three generations of a Christian family in Kerala, South India, that suffers a peculiar affliction: in every generation, at least one person dies by drowning. As the novel opens, a twelve-year-old girl is sent by boat to her wedding, where she meets her husband for the first time. She joins a prosperous household and becomes known as Big Ammachi, the matriarch of an extraordinary family that will endure hardship, celebrate triumph, and witness unthinkable changes over the coming decades.

An exquisite modern classic finally available in paperback, *The Covenant of Water* is an unforgettable and stunning epic of love, faith, and medicine.

27. The Spoon Stealer by Leslie Crewe

Born into a basket of clean sheets—ruining a perfectly good load of laundry—Emmeline never quite fit in on her family’s rural Nova Scotian farm. After suffering multiple losses in the First World War, her family became so heavy with grief, toxicity, and mental illness that Emmeline felt their weight smothering her. And so, she fled across the Atlantic and built her life in England. Now she is retired and living in a small coastal town with her best friend, Vera, an excellent conversationalist. Vera is also a small white dog, and so Emmeline is making an effort to talk to more humans. When she joins a memoir-writing course at the library, her classmates don’t know what to make of her. Funny, loud, and with a riveting memoir, she charms the lot. As her past unfolds for her audience, friendships form, a bonus in a rather lonely life. She even shares with them her third-biggest secret: she has liberated hundreds of spoons over her lifetime—from the local library, Cary Grant, Winston Churchill. She is a compulsive spoon stealer.

When Emmeline unexpectedly inherits the farm she grew up on, she knows she needs to leave her new friends and go see the farm and what remains of her family one last time. She arrives like a tornado in their lives, an off-kilter Mary Poppins bossing everyone around and getting quite a lot wrong. But with her generosity and hard-earned wisdom, she gets an awful lot right too. A pinball ricocheting between people, offending and inspiring in equal measure, Emmeline, in her final years, believes that a spoonful—perhaps several spoonfuls—of kindness can set to rights the family so broken by loss and secrecy.

The Spoon Stealer is a classic Crewe book: full of humour, family secrets, women’s friendship, lovable animals, and immense heart.

28. The Keepsake: A thrilling dual-time novel of long-buried family secrets by Julie Brooks

Saturday: Pot-au-feu for luncheon. Father willed away inheritance. Betrayed by Edward.

1832. The morning after her father’s funeral, Prudence Merryfield wakes to the liberating thought that this is the first day of her new life. At thirty-five and unmarried, she is now mistress of her own fate. But a cruel revelation at the reading of her father’s will forces Prudence to realise that taking only the most drastic action will set her free.

Present day. Eliza is gifted a family heirloom by her aunt - a Georgian pocket book, belonging to her

ancestor, Prudence Merryfield, whose existence reverberates through the lives of generations of Eliza's family, the Ambroses. Intrigued by what she reads inside, Eliza is drawn more and more into the infamous 'Merryfield Mystery'. What happened to Prudence who so bravely dared to defy convention two hundred years ago - then disappeared?

29. The Forest of Vanishing Stars by Kristin Harmel

After being stolen from her wealthy German parents and raised in the unforgiving wilderness of eastern Europe, a young woman finds herself alone in 1941 after her kidnapper dies. Her solitary existence is interrupted, however, when she happens upon a group of Jews fleeing the Nazi terror. Stunned to learn what's happening in the outside world, she vows to teach the group all she can about surviving in the forest—and in turn, they teach her some surprising lessons about opening her heart after years of isolation. But when she is betrayed and escapes into a German-occupied village, her past and present come together in a shocking collision that could change everything.

Inspired by incredible true stories of survival against staggering odds, and suffused with the journey-from-the-wilderness elements that made *Where the Crawdads Sing* a worldwide phenomenon, *The Forest of Vanishing Stars* is a heart-wrenching and suspenseful novel from the #1 internationally bestselling author whose writing has been hailed as “sweeping and magnificent” (Fiona Davis, *New York Times* bestselling author), “immersive and evocative” (*Publishers Weekly*), and “gripping” (*Tampa Bay Times*).

30. The girl with Seven Names: a North Korean defector story by Hyeonseo Lee

An extraordinary insight into life under one of the world's most ruthless and secretive dictatorships – and the story of one woman's terrifying struggle to avoid capture/repatriation and guide her family to freedom.

As a child growing up in North Korea, Hyeonseo Lee was one of millions trapped by a secretive and brutal communist regime. Her home on the border with China gave her some exposure to the world beyond the confines of the Hermit Kingdom and, as the famine of the 1990s struck, she began to wonder, question and to realise that she had been brainwashed her entire life. Given the repression, poverty and starvation she witnessed surely her country could not be, as she had been told “the best on the planet”?

Aged seventeen, she decided to escape North Korea. She could not have imagined that it would be twelve years before she was reunited with her family.

31. The Schopenhauer Cure: A Novel by Irvin D. Yalom

Suddenly confronted with his own mortality after a routine checkup, eminent psychotherapist Julius Hertzfeld is forced to reexamine his life and work - and seeks out Philip Slate, a sex addict whom he failed to help some 20 years earlier. Yet Philip claims to be cured - miraculously transformed by the pessimistic teachings of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer - and is himself a philosophical counselor in training.

Philip's dour, misanthropic stance compels Julius to invite Philip to join his intensive therapy group in exchange for tutoring on Schopenhauer. But with mere months left, life may be far too short to help Philip or to compete with him for the hearts and minds of the group members. And then again, it might be just long enough.

32. The Keeper'n Me by Richard Wagamese

When Garnet Raven was three years old, he was taken from his home on an Ojibway Indian reserve and placed in a series of foster homes. Having reached his mid-teens, he escapes at the first available opportunity, only to find himself cast adrift on the streets of the big city.

Having skirted the urban underbelly once too often by age 20, he finds himself thrown in jail. While there, he gets a surprise letter from his long-forgotten native family.

The sudden communication from his past spurs him to return to the reserve following his release from jail. Deciding to stay awhile, his life is changed completely as he comes to discover his sense of place, and of self. While on the reserve, Garnet is initiated into the ways of the Ojibway -- both ancient and modern -- by Keeper, a friend of his grandfather, and last fount of history about his people's ways.

By turns funny, poignant and mystical, **Keeper'n Me** reflects a positive view of Native life and philosophy -- as well as casting fresh light on the redemptive power of one's community and traditions.

33. Demon Copperhead by Barbara Kingsolver

Set in the mountains of southern Appalachia, *Demon Copperhead* is the story of a boy born to a teenaged single mother in a single-wide trailer, with no assets beyond his dead father's good looks and copper-colored hair, a caustic wit, and a fierce talent for survival. Relayed in his own unsparing voice, Demon braves the modern perils of foster care, child labor, derelict schools, athletic success, addiction, disastrous loves, and crushing losses. Through all of it, he reckons with his own invisibility in a popular culture where even the superheroes have abandoned rural people in favor of cities.

Many generations ago, Charles Dickens wrote *David Copperfield* from his experience as a survivor of institutional poverty and its damages to children in his society. Those problems have yet to be solved in ours. Dickens is not a prerequisite for readers of this novel, but he provided its inspiration. In transposing a Victorian epic novel to the contemporary American South, Barbara Kingsolver enlists Dickens' anger and compassion, and above all, his faith in the transformative powers of a good story. *Demon Copperhead* speaks for a new generation of lost boys, and all those born into beautiful, cursed places they can't imagine leaving behind.

34. Hijab Butch Blues: A Memoir by Lamya H

When fourteen-year-old Lamya H realizes she has a crush on her teacher—her *female* teacher—she covers up her attraction, an attraction she can't yet name, by playing up her roles as overachiever and class clown. Born in South Asia, she moved to the Middle East at a young age and has spent years feeling out of place, like her own desires and dreams don't matter, and it's easier to hide in plain sight. To disappear. But one day in Quran class, she reads a passage about Maryam that changes everything: When Maryam learned that she was pregnant, she insisted no *man* had touched her. Could Maryam, uninterested in men, be . . . like Lamya?

From that moment on, Lamya makes sense of her struggles and triumphs by comparing her experiences with some of the most famous stories in the Quran. She juxtaposes her coming out with Musa liberating his people from the pharaoh; asks if Allah, who is neither male nor female, might instead be nonbinary; and, drawing on the faith and hope Nuh needed to construct his ark, begins to build a life of her own—ultimately finding that the answer to her lifelong quest for community and belonging lies in owning her

identity as a queer, devout Muslim immigrant.

This searingly intimate memoir in essays, spanning Lamya's childhood to her arrival in the United States for college through early-adult life in New York City, tells a universal story of courage, trust, and love, celebrating what it means to be a seeker and an architect of one's own life.

35. North of Nowhere: Song of Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner by Marie Wilson

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to record the previously hidden history of more than a century of forced residential schooling for Indigenous children. Marie Wilson helped lead that work as one of just three commissioners. With the skills of a journalist, the heart of a mother and grandmother, and the insights of a life as the spouse of a residential school survivor, Commissioner Wilson guides readers through her years witnessing survivor testimony across the country, providing her unique perspective on the personal toll and enduring public value of the commission. In this unparalleled account, she honours the voices of survivors who have called Canada to attention, determined to heal, reclaim, and thrive. Part vital public documentary, part probing memoir, *North of Nowhere* breathes fresh air into the possibilities of reconciliation amid the persistent legacy of residential schools. It is a call to everyone to view the important and continuing work of reconciliation not as an obligation but as a gift.

36. Forest Euphoria: The Abounding Queerness of Nature - Patricia Ononiwu Kaishian

Growing up, Patricia Ononiwu Kaishian felt most at home in the swamps and culverts near her house in the Hudson Valley. A child who frequently felt out of place, too much of one thing or not enough of another, she found acceptance in these settings, among other amphibious beings. In snakes, snails, and, above all, fungi, she saw her own developing identities as a queer, neurodivergent person reflected back at her—and in them, too, she found a personal path to a life of science.

In *Forest Euphoria*, Kaishian shows us this making of a scientist and introduces readers to the queerness of all the life around us. Fungal species, we learn, commonly encompass more than two biological sexes—and some as many as twenty-three thousand. Some intersex slugs mutually fire calcium carbonate “love darts” at each other during courtship. Glass eels are sexually undetermined until their last year of life, a mystery that scientists once dubbed “the eel question.” Nature, Kaishian shows us, is filled with the unusual, the overlooked, and the marginalized—and they have lessons for us all.

Wide-ranging, richly observant, and full of surprises, *Forest Euphoria* will open your eyes and change how you look at the world.