



**PHIL's BOOK CLUB
READING LIST
SUMMARIES
2023**

January 9- River of the Gods: Genius, Courage and Betrayal in the Search of the Nile by Candace Millard

For millennia the location of the Nile River's headwaters was shrouded in mystery. In the 19th century, there was a frenzy of interest in ancient Egypt. At the same time, European powers sent off waves of explorations intended to map the unknown corners of the globe – and extend their colonial empires.

Richard Burton and John Hanning Speke were sent by the Royal Geographical Society to claim the prize for England. Burton spoke twenty-nine languages, and was a decorated soldier. He was also mercurial, subtle, and an iconoclastic atheist. Speke was a young aristocrat and Army officer determined to make his mark, passionate about hunting, Burton's opposite in temperament and beliefs.

From the start the two men clashed. They would endure tremendous hardships, illness, and constant setbacks. Two years in, deep in the African interior, Burton became too sick to press on, but Speke did, and claimed he found the source in a great lake that he christened Lake Victoria. When they returned to England, Speke rushed to take credit, disparaging Burton. Burton disputed his claim, and Speke launched another expedition to Africa to prove it. The two became venomous enemies, with the public siding with the more charismatic Burton, to Speke's great envy. The day before they were to publicly debate, Speke shot himself.

Yet there was a third man on both expeditions, his name obscured by imperial annals, whose exploits were even more extraordinary. This was Sidi Mubarak Bombay, who was enslaved and shipped from his home village in East Africa to India. When the man who purchased him died, he made his way into the local Sultan's army, and eventually traveled back to Africa, where he used his resourcefulness, linguistic prowess and raw courage to forge a living as a guide. Without Bombay and men like him, who led, carried, and protected the expedition, neither Englishman would have come close to the headwaters of the Nile, or perhaps even survived.

HC 368 pages

February 13 The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears by Dinaw Mengetsu

Seventeen years ago, Sepha Stephanos fled the Ethiopian Revolution for a new start in the United States. Now he finds himself running a failing grocery store in a poor African-American section of Washington, D.C., his only companions two fellow African immigrants who share his bitter nostalgia and longing for his home continent. Years ago and worlds away Sepha could

never have imagined a life of such isolation. As his environment begins to change, hope comes in the form of a friendship with new neighbors Judith and Naomi, a white woman and her biracial daughter. But when a series of racial incidents disturbs the community, Sepha may lose everything all over again.

PB 240 pages

March 13- Eleanor by David Michaelis

In the first single-volume cradle-to-grave portrait in six decades, acclaimed biographer David Michaelis delivers a stunning account of Eleanor Roosevelt's remarkable life of transformation. An orphaned niece of President Theodore Roosevelt, she converted her Gilded Age childhood of denial and secrecy into an irreconcilable marriage with her ambitious fifth cousin Franklin. Despite their inability to make each other happy, Franklin Roosevelt transformed Eleanor from a settlement house volunteer on New York's Lower East Side into a matching partner in New York's most important power couple in a generation.

When Eleanor discovered Franklin's betrayal with her younger, prettier, social secretary, Lucy Mercer, she offered a divorce and vowed to face herself honestly. Here is an Eleanor both more vulnerable and more aggressive, more psychologically aware and sexually adaptable than we knew. She came to accept her FDR's bond with his executive assistant, Missy LeHand; she allowed her children to live their own lives, as she never could; and she explored her sexual attraction to women, among them a star female reporter on FDR's first presidential campaign, and younger men.

Eleanor needed emotional connection. She pursued deeper relationships wherever she could find them. Throughout her life and travels, there was always another person or place she wanted to heal. As FDR struggled to recover from polio, Eleanor became a voice for the voiceless, her husband's proxy in the White House. Later, she would be the architect of international human rights and world citizen of the Atomic Age, urging Americans to cope with the anxiety of global annihilation by cultivating a "world mind." She insisted that we cannot live for ourselves alone but must learn to live together or we will die together.

PB 720 pages

April 10- In the Woods by Tana French

As dusk approaches a small Dublin suburb in the summer of 1984, mothers begin to call their children home. But on this warm evening, three children do not return from the dark and silent woods. When the police arrive, they find only one of the children gripping a tree trunk in terror, wearing blood-filled sneakers, and unable to recall a single detail of the previous hours.

Twenty years later, the found boy, Rob Ryan, is a detective on the Dublin Murder Squad and keeps his past a secret. But when a twelve-year-old girl is found murdered in the same woods, he and Detective Cassie Maddox—his partner and closest friend—find themselves investigating a case chillingly similar to the previous unsolved mystery. Now, with only snippets of long-buried memories to guide him, Ryan has the chance to uncover both the mystery of the case before him and that of his own shadowy past.

PB 448 pages

May 8- A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail by Bill Bryson

The Appalachian Trail stretches from Georgia to Maine and covers some of the most breathtaking terrain in America—majestic mountains, silent forests, sparkling lakes. If you're going to take a hike, it's probably the place to go. And Bill Bryson is surely the most entertaining guide you'll find. He introduces us to the history and ecology of the trail and to some of the other hardy (or just foolhardy) folks he meets along the way—and a couple of bears.

PB 397 pages

June 12- Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte

The story follows the experiences of its eponymous heroine, including her growth to adulthood and her love for Mr. Rochester, the brooding master of Thornfield Hall.

The novel revolutionized prose fiction by being the first to focus on its protagonist's moral and spiritual development through an intimate first-person narrative, where actions and events are colored by a psychological intensity. Charlotte Brontë has been called the first historian of the private consciousness, and the literary ancestor of writers like Proust and Joyce.

The book contains elements of social criticism, with a strong sense of Christian morality at its core, and is considered by many to be ahead of its time because of Jane's individualistic character and how the novel approaches the topics of class, sexuality, religion and feminism.

PB 280 pages

July 10- Sediments of Time by Meave Leakey

Meave Leakey's thrilling, high-stakes memoir—written with her daughter Samira—encapsulates her distinguished life and career on the front lines of the hunt for our human origins, a quest made all the more notable by her stature as a woman in a highly competitive, male-dominated field.

In *The Sediments of Time*, preeminent paleoanthropologist Meave Leakey brings us along on her remarkable journey to reveal the diversity of our early pre-human ancestors and how past climate change drove their evolution. She offers a fresh account of our past, as recent breakthroughs have allowed new analysis of her team's fossil findings and vastly expanded our understanding of our ancestors.

Meave's own personal story is replete with drama, from thrilling discoveries on the shores of Lake Turkana to run-ins with armed herders and every manner of wildlife, to raising her children and supporting her renowned paleoanthropologist husband Richard Leakey's ambitions amidst social and political strife in Kenya. When Richard needs a kidney, Meave provides him with hers, and when he asks her to assume the reins of their field expeditions after he loses both legs in a plane crash, the result of likely sabotage, Meave steps in.

HC 400 pages

August 14- A Town Like Alice by Nevil Shute

Jean Paget, a young Englishwoman living in Malaya, is captured by the invading Japanese and forced on a brutal seven-month death march with dozens of other women and children. A few years after the war, Jean is back in England, the nightmare behind her. However, an unexpected inheritance inspires her to return to Malaya to give something back to the villagers who saved her life. But it turns out that they have a gift for her as well: the news that the young Australian soldier, Joe Harmon, who had risked his life to help the women, had miraculously survived. Jean's search for Joe leads her to a desolate Australian outpost called Willstown, where she finds a challenge that will draw on all the resourcefulness and spirit that carried her through her war-time ordeals.

PB 368 pages

September 11- The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek by Kim Michele

This is a novel following Cussy Mary, a packhorse librarian and her quest to bring books to the Appalachian community she loves.

The hardscrabble folks of Troublesome Creek have to scarp for everything—everything except books, that is. Thanks to Roosevelt's Kentucky Pack Horse Library Project, Troublesome's got its very own traveling librarian, Cussy Mary Carter.

Cussy's not only a book woman, however, she's also the last of her kind, her skin a shade of blue unlike most anyone else. Not everyone is keen on Cussy's family or the Library Project, and a Blue is often blamed for any whiff of trouble. If Cussy wants to bring the joy of books to the hill folks, she's going to have to confront prejudice as old as the Appalachias and suspicion as deep as the holler.

Inspired by the true blue-skinned people of Kentucky and the brave and dedicated Kentucky Pack Horse library service of the 1930s, *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek* is a story of raw courage, fierce strength, and one woman's belief that books can carry us anywhere—even back home.

PB 320 pages

October 9- Under the Tuscan Sun by Frances Mayes

More than twenty years ago, Frances Mayes—widely published poet, gourmet cook, and travel writer—introduced readers to a wondrous new world when she bought and restored an abandoned Tuscan villa called Bramasole. *Under the Tuscan Sun* inspired generations to embark on their own journeys—whether that be flying to a foreign country in search of themselves, savoring one of the book's dozens of delicious seasonal recipes, or simply being transported by Mayes's signature evocative, sensory language.

PB 320 pages

November 13- After Lives by Abdulrazak Gurnah

From the winner of the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature, a sweeping, multi-generational saga of displacement, loss, and love, set against the brutal colonization of east Africa.

When he was just a boy, Ilyas was stolen from his parents on the coast of east Africa by German colonial troops. After years away, fighting against his own people, he returns home to find his parents gone and his sister, Afiya, abandoned into de facto slavery. Hamza, too, returns home from the war, scarred in body and soul and with nothing but the clothes on his back—until he

meets the beautiful, undaunted Afiya. As these young people live and work and fall in love, their fates knotted ever more tightly together, the shadow of a new war on another continent falls over them, threatening once again to carry them away.

HC 320 pages

December 11- March by Geraldine Brooks

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize--a powerful love story set against the backdrop of the Civil War, from the author of *The Secret Chord*.

From Louisa May Alcott's beloved classic *Little Women*, Geraldine Brooks has animated the character of the absent father, March, and crafted a story "filled with the ache of love and marriage and with the power of war upon the mind and heart of one unforgettable man". Brooks follows March as he leaves behind his family to aid the Union cause in the Civil War. His experiences will utterly change his marriage and challenge his most ardently held beliefs. A lushly written, wholly original tale steeped in the details of another time.

PB 320 pages