

Monday Evening Book Discussions 2010

January 4 th	<i>The Uncommon Reader</i> by Alan Bennett (120 pages)
February 1 st	<i>The Whistling Season</i> by Ivan Doig (345 pages)
March 1 st	<i>Stealing Buddha's Dinner</i> by Bich Minh Nguyen (256 pages)
April 5 th	<i>Still Alice</i> by Lisa Genova (293 pages)
May 3 rd	<i>The Help</i> by Kathryn Stockett (451 pages)
June	off
July 12 th	<i>The Time Traveler's Wife</i> by Audrey Niffenegger (546 pages)
August 2 nd	<i>Rabbit, Run</i> by John Updike (264 pages)
September 13 th	<i>The Heart is a Lonely Hunter</i> by Carson McCullers (359 pages)
October 4 th	<i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i> by Junot Diaz (339 pages)
November 1 st	<i>People of the Book</i> by Geraldine Brooks (372 pages)
December 6 th	<i>A Mercy</i> by Toni Morrison (167 pages)

January *The Uncommon Reader* by Alan Bennett (120 pages)

When her corgis stray into a mobile library parked near Buckingham Palace, the Queen feels duty-bound to borrow a book. Discovering the joy of reading widely (from J. R. Ackerley, Jean Genet, and Ivy Compton-Burnett to the classics) and intelligently, she finds that her view of the world changes dramatically. Abetted in her newfound obsession by Norman, a young man from the royal kitchens, the Queen comes to question the prescribed order of the world and loses patience with the routines of her role as monarch. Her new passion for reading initially alarms the palace staff and soon leads to surprising and very funny consequences for the country at large.

February *The Whistling Season* by Ivan Doig (345 pages)

"Can't cook but doesn't bite." So begins the newspaper ad offering the services of an "A-1 housekeeper, sound morals, exceptional disposition" that draws the hungry attention of widower Oliver Milliron in the

fall of 1909. And so begins the unforgettable season that deposits the noncooking, nonbiting, ever-whistling Rose Llewellyn and her font-of-knowledge brother, Morris Morgan, in Marias Coulee along with a stampede of homesteaders drawn by the promise of the Big Ditch-a gargantuan irrigation project intended to make the Montana prairie bloom. When the schoolmarm runs off with an itinerant preacher, Morris is pressed into service, setting the stage for the "several kinds of education"-none of them of the textbook variety-Morris and Rose will bring to Oliver, his three sons, and the rambunctious students in the region's one-room schoolhouse.

A paean to a vanished way of life and the eccentric individuals and idiosyncratic institutions that made it fertile, *The Whistling Season* is Ivan Doig at his evocative best.

March *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* by Bich Minh Nguyen (256 pages) (2009
Great Michigan Read selection)

As a Vietnamese girl coming of age in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Nguyen is filled with a rapacious hunger for American identity, and in the pre-PC-era Midwest (where the Jennifer's and Tiffany's reign supreme), the desire to belong transmutes into a passion for American food. More exotic- seeming than her Buddhist grandmother's traditional specialties, the campy, preservative-filled delicacies of mainstream America capture her imagination.

In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, the glossy branded allure of Pringles, Kit Kats, and Toll House Cookies becomes an ingenious metaphor for Nguyen's struggle to become a real American, a distinction that brings with it the dream of the perfect school lunch, burgers and Jell- O for dinner, and a visit from the Kool-Aid man. Vivid and viscerally powerful, this remarkable memoir about growing up in the 1980s introduces an original new literary voice and an entirely new spin on the classic assimilation story.

April *Still Alice* by Lisa Genova (293 pages)

An extraordinary debut novel about an accomplished woman who slowly loses her thoughts and memories to a harrowing disease -- only to discover that each day brings a new way of living and loving

Alice Howland is proud of the life she worked so hard to build. At fifty years old, she's a cognitive psychology professor at Harvard and a world-renowned expert in linguistics with a successful husband and three grown children. When she becomes increasingly disoriented and forgetful, a tragic diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's disease changes her life.

As the inevitable descent into dementia strips away her sense of self, fiercely independent Alice struggles to live in the moment. While she once placed her worth and identity in her celebrated and respected academic life, now she must reevaluate her relationship with her husband, a respected scientist; her expectations of her children; and her ideas about herself and her place in the world. At once beautiful and terrifying, *Still Alice* is a moving and vivid depiction of life

with early-onset Alzheimer's disease that is as compelling as *A Beautiful Mind* and as unforgettable as *Ordinary People*.

May *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett (451 pages)

Three ordinary women are about to take one extraordinary step.

Twenty-two-year-old Skeeter has just returned home after graduating from Ole Miss. She may have a degree, but it is 1962, Mississippi, and her mother will not be happy till Skeeter has a ring on her finger. Skeeter would normally find solace with her beloved maid Constantine, the woman who raised her, but Constantine has disappeared and no one will tell Skeeter where she has gone.

Aibileen is a black maid, a wise, regal woman raising her seventeenth white child. Something has shifted inside her after the loss of her own son, who died while his bosses looked the other way. She is devoted to the little girl she looks after, though she knows both their hearts may be broken.

Minnie, Aibileen's best friend, is short, fat, and perhaps the sassiest woman in Mississippi. She can cook like nobody's business, but she can't mind her tongue, so she's lost yet another job. Minny finally finds a position working for someone too new to town to know her reputation. But her new boss has secrets of her own.

Seemingly as different from one another as can be, these women will nonetheless come together for a clandestine project that will put them all at risk. And why? Because they are suffocating within the lines that define their town and their times. And sometimes lines are made to be crossed.

In pitch-perfect voices, Kathryn Stockett creates three extraordinary women whose determination to start a movement of their own forever changes a town, and the way women, mothers, daughters, caregivers, and friends view one another. A deeply moving novel filled with poignancy, humor, and hope, *The Help* is a timeless and universal story about the lines we abide by, and the ones we don't.

June off

July *The Time Traveler's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger (546 pages)

A dazzling novel in the most untraditional fashion, this is the remarkable story of Henry DeTamble, a dashing, adventuresome librarian who travels involuntarily through time, and Clare Abshire, an artist whose life takes a natural sequential course. Henry and Clare's passionate love affair endures across a sea of time and captures the two lovers in an impossibly romantic trap, and it is Audrey Niffenegger's cinematic storytelling that makes the novel's unconventional chronology so vibrantly triumphant.

An enchanting debut and a spellbinding tale of fate and belief in the bonds of love, *The Time Traveler's Wife* is destined to captivate readers for years to come.

August *Rabbit, Run* by John Updike (264 pages)

Harry Angstrom was a star basketball player in high school and that was the best time of his life. Now in his mid-20s, his work is unfulfilling, his marriage is moribund, and he tries to find happiness with another woman. But happiness is more elusive than a medal, and Harry must continue to run--from his wife, his life, and from himself, until he reaches the end of the road and has to turn back....

September *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers (359 pages) (2004 Oprah's Book Club Pick)

With the publication of her first novel, *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER*, Carson McCullers, all of twenty-three, became a literary sensation. With its profound sense of moral isolation and its compassionate glimpses into its characters' inner lives, the novel is considered McCullers' finest work, an enduring masterpiece first published by Houghton Mifflin in 1940. At its center is the deaf-mute John Singer, who becomes the confidant for various types of misfits in a Georgia mill town during the 1930s. Each one yearns for escape from small town life. When Singer's mute companion goes insane, Singer moves into the Kelly house, where Mick Kelly, the book's heroine (and loosely based on McCullers), finds solace in her music. Wonderfully attuned to the spiritual isolation that underlies the human condition, and with a deft sense for racial tensions in the South, McCullers spins a haunting, unforgettable story that gives voice to the rejected, the forgotten, and the mistreated -- and, through Mick Kelly, gives voice to the quiet, intensely personal search for beauty.

Richard Wright praised Carson McCullers for her ability "to rise above the pressures of her environment and embrace white and black humanity in one sweep of apprehension and tenderness." She writes "with a sweep and certainty that are overwhelming," said the *NEW YORK TIMES*. McCullers became an overnight literary sensation, but her novel has endured, just as timely and powerful today as when it was first published. *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER* is Carson McCullers at her most compassionate, endearing best.

October *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz (339 pages) (2008 winner Pulitzer Prize for Fiction)

This is the long-awaited first novel from one of the most original and memorable writers working today.

Things have never been easy for Oscar, a sweet but disastrously overweight, lovesick Dominican ghetto nerd. From his home in New Jersey, where he lives with his old-world mother and rebellious sister, Oscar dreams of becoming the Dominican J. R. R. Tolkien and, most of all, of finding love. But he may never get what he wants, thanks to the curse that has haunted the Oscar's family for generations, dooming them to prison, torture, tragic accidents, and, above all, ill-starred love. Oscar, still waiting for his first kiss, is just its most recent victim.

Diaz immerses us in the tumultuous life of Oscar and the history of the family at large, rendering with genuine warmth and dazzling energy, humor, and insight the Dominican-American experience, and,

ultimately, the endless human capacity to persevere in the face of heartbreak and loss. A true literary triumph, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* confirms Junot Diaz as one of the best and most exciting voices of our time.

November *People of the Book* by Geraldine Brooks (372 pages)

The complex and moving (*The New Yorker*) novel by Pulitzer Prize winner Geraldine Brooks follows a rare manuscript through centuries of exile and war

Inspired by a true story, *People of the Book* is a novel of sweeping historical grandeur and intimate emotional intensity by an acclaimed and beloved author. Called a tour de force by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, this ambitious, electrifying work traces the harrowing journey of the famed Sarajevo Haggadah, a beautifully illuminated Hebrew manuscript created in fifteenth-century Spain. When it falls to Hanna Heath, an Australian rare-book expert, to conserve this priceless work, the series of tiny artifacts she discovers in its ancient binding—an insect wing fragment, wine stains, salt crystals, a white hair—only begin to unlock its deep mysteries and unexpectedly plunges Hanna into the intrigues of fine art forgers and ultra-nationalist fanatics.

December *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison (167 pages)

A powerful tragedy distilled into a jewel of a masterpiece by the Nobel Prize-winning author of *Beloved* and, almost like a prelude to that story, set two centuries earlier.

In the 1680s the slave trade was still in its infancy. In the Americas, virulent religious and class divisions, prejudice and oppression were rife, providing the fertile soil in which slavery and race hatred were planted and took root.

Jacob is an Anglo-Dutch trader and adventurer, with a small holding in the harsh north. Despite his distaste for dealing in “flesh,” he takes a small slave girl in part payment for a bad debt from a plantation owner in Catholic Maryland. This is Florens, “with the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady.” Florens looks for love, first from Lina, an older servant woman at her new master’s house, but later from a handsome blacksmith, an African, never enslaved.

There are other voices: Lina, whose tribe was decimated by smallpox; their mistress, Rebekka, herself a victim of religious intolerance back in England; Sorrow, a strange girl who’s spent her early years at sea; and finally the devastating voice of Florens’ mother. These are all men and women inventing themselves in the wilderness.

A Mercy reveals what lies beneath the surface of slavery. But at its heart it is the ambivalent, disturbing story of a mother who casts off her daughter in order to save her, and of a daughter who may never exorcise that abandonment.

Acts of mercy may have unforeseen consequences.