**A Dewey-Ordered Book Talk – 2015**

**“A Loose” Interpretation of the Joys of Reading by Subject**

**Presentation by Mary Frances Burns**

**000’s**

As you know, the 000’s in the Dewey Decimal System are a mélange of different subject areas: encyclopedias, bibliographies, compendiums, general knowledge, trivia, computer science, and periodicals. Books and bookstores can fall here, as does a sentimental but delightful work called **My Bookstore: Writers Celebrate their Favorite Places to Browse, Read, and Shop, edited by Ronald Rice.** In it 84 authors, including John Grisham, Ann Patchett, Simon Winchester, and Lisa See, discuss their favorite independent bookstore and the importance of supporting them. The short essays form “a cozy collection of love letters” even as they give a feeling of character to each shop. Anyone who likes bookstores will enjoy *My Bookstore, edited by Ronald Rice.*

This brings us to **Charlie Lovett’s The Bookman’s Tale**: **A Novel of Obsession.** In it, a young antiquarian bookseller named Peter Byerly, recent widowed, is drawn to a cottage the couple had purchased in the English countryside. While there, a portrait of what appears to be his late wife that falls out of a book. It is Victorian—it can’t be her. But Peter becomes obsessed with learning its origins. Peter, communing with Amanda’s spirit, follows clues related to a Shakespearean literary artifact across time that possibly tie in with the portrait. As a reader, I became more and more worried about his sanity…as will you. This tantalizing novel will have you on the edge of your seat. *The Bookman’s Tale by Charlie Lovett*.

**100’s**

The 100’s are philosophy and psychology. This year’s book falls into the 153’s. It is called **Why We Make Mistakes: How We Look without Seeing, Forget Things in Seconds, and Are Pretty Sure We are Way Above Average.**  It is by **Joseph Hallinan**. In this very readable treatise on human errors, Hallinan delves into psychology, neuroscience, economics, consumer behavior, and more. He explores how we think, see, and remember—and, of course, how we forget, which sets us up for errors. He points out how unacknowledged bias, change blindness, and enthusiasm are factors in errors. In addition, Hallinan gives advice on making less of them. *Why We Make Mistakes by Joseph Hallinan.*

Mistakes are a common plot driver in fiction. For today’s example, I have chosen **The Weird Sisters** by **Eleanor Brown**. In it, three sisters all have made mistakes—but they don’t want the others to find out. As one puts it “We love each other—we just don’t like each other!” Their father, a renowned Shakespeare professor who speaks mainly in verse, has named the girls Rosalind, Bianca, and Cordelia. When all three return to their childhood home, ostensibly to care for their ailing mother, it is really to lick their wounds! Each is horrified to find the others there. But the sisters soon discover that everything they’ve been running from there—one another, the small town, and themselves, might offer more than expected.  *The Weird Sisters by Eleanor Brown.*

**200’s**

The 200’s are religion in all its shapes and forms. A book that was popular several years ago and which removed any stereotypes I may have had about Mennonites is a book by **Rhoda Janzen** entitled **Mennonite is a little Black Dress: A Memoir of Going Home.** It is classified in the 289’s which are Christian denominations in the Dewy Decimal System. We learn the story of Janzen’s somewhat rebellious life, and her eventual coming to terms with her background. This happens when, after experiencing a personal medical emergency and divorce, she goes home to her parents to recover. *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* by Rhoda Jackson.

There is a very humorous mystery series featuring a Mennonite woman who runs a bed and breakfast on her farm in Pennsylvania. Wacky and fun, this series is written by Tamar Myers and have humorous titles such as *Custard’s Last Stand* (as in the pudding, not the military officer). I like her earlier one better than her last one.

However, I will focus on another, lesser known title that features a Mennonite family. It is called **A Complicated Kindness** and was written by **Miriam Toews.** In it, we watch rebellious teen Nomi Nickel trying to function in a small, fundamentalist Mennonite town in Canada. Her mother was the only one who would challenge the old guard, and her mother disappeared, as has her older sister. This leaves Nomi learning by trial and error in ways her dad can’t help. This book is wickedly funny but oh so sad on another level…*A Complicated Truth* by *Miriam Toews.*

**300’s**

The 300’s in the Dewey Decimal System are the Social Sciences. You’ll find everything from social life and customs to costumes, with real estate, law, and many other subjects in between. Our next book falls in the 333’s, which are the “economics of land”. It is called **Traveling the Power Line: from the Mojave Desert to the Bay of Fundy** and is written by **Julianna Couch.**  In this highly engaging “energy” travelogue, Couch offers a clear, inside look at the many ways electrical power is produced. The result is an informed, even-handed discussion of the production and consumption of power on national, regional, local and personal levels. *Traveling the Power Line by Juliana Couch.*

For the 300’s fiction selection this time I have chosen **The City of Light by Lauren Belfer**. Where Couch addresses the issues of the grid in contemporary times, Belfer takes us back to the dawn of hydro-electrical power. Her novel is set in Buffalo, New York just after the turn of the last century, when the city is known for its wealth and sophistication. Because of Niagara Falls, it is a seat of electrical production. Two of the four turbines planned for this site are on line, It is hoped that the other two will be ready for President McKinley to activate when he comes in the fall to attend Buffalo’s Pan-American Exposition.

The story is told mainly from the perspective of Louisa Barrett, the headmistress at the prestigious Macaulay School for Girls. She was the closest friend of the main engineer’s now dead wife, and is Godmother of their daughter. Louisa floats effortlessly between the echelons of high society, and the world of immigrant families. She sees the growing pains of both society and industry, and the dark side of power-brokering. In fact, Louisa comes to realize that her security and quality of life are because of it. But things are about to change…. This is a poignant novel that stays with the reader long after it is finished. *The City of Light* by Lauren Belfer.

**400’s**

The 400’s in the Dewey Decimal System are languages, and the 420’s are English language. Our next book falls in the 427’s and is called **Trip of the Tongue: Cross Country Travels in search of America’s Languages.** The author, Elizabeth Little, is a language buff. She knows that our languages here in the states are as varied as our origins. These languages shape the American experience.

In this work, she explores not only languages that came with our immigrant ancestors such as German, Spanish, Haitian French, Gullah, and Basque, but examines some Native American languages as well—hoping that they won’t completely disappear. Witty and insightful, this is a must for people who love words and how they affect us. *Trip of the Tongue by Elizabeth Little*.

Gullah has been mentioned in several books I have read recently. The language was a dialect once spoken by blacks inhabiting the coastal areas of South Carolina and Georgia. It features prominently in *The Invention of Wings* by Sue Monk Kidd, an excellent read by an excellent writer.

However, I want to feature a book by another Southern author named **Anne Rivers Siddons**. Her books are often considered “beach reads” because they flow so well. They may be. However, when the reader emerges at the other end of one of her books, there is a real feel for the place the book is set and the situation she describes. Perhaps the biggest impediment to her literary fame is that there is always an unexpected “twist” at the end. That is the case with **Sweet Water Creek,** our companion book today.

Twelve-year old Emily Parmeter has a fairly solitary life. Her mother disappeared; her beloved elder brother died. Emily has built an almost magical life around the faded plantation where the Parmeters live in the low country, and where her remote father and other brothers raise prize-winning hunting dogs. Emily is an excellent puppy trainer for the family business. She has a puppy named Elvis that she raised, and Elvis is her best friend. Deep-sea dolphins come to play in the nearby creek. A black housekeeper and an aunt help keep the family reasonably “centered.”

But into this male-centric world comes Lulu, an upper class debutante, who wants to escape her coming-out season and her parents. Lulu has a powerful enchantment of her own, that Southern charm that can be turned on and off at will. Emily’s father sees Lulu as a way to break into high society,and she brings back feelings of the man he once was. He lets her live in the apartment over the dog barn. Emily becomes her confidant and is privy to Lulu’s destructive adult compulsions and behavior -- the very ones from which Lulu is trying to escape. They will ultimately blow Emily’s world apart. *Sweetwater Creek by Anne Rivers Siddons.*

**500’s**

The 500’s in the Dewey Decimal System are the sciences, and our next book falls in the 590’s, which is Zoology. It is Hal Herzog’s **Some We Like, Some We Hate, Some We Eat.** The subtitle sums up the book’s premise beautifully: **Why it’s So Hard to Think Straight About Animals.** This book is a somewhat controversial exploration of the psychology behind the inconsistent and paradoxical ways we think, feel, and behave towards animals.

Research on animal rights, cockfighting, professional dog show handlers, veterinary students, pet owners, and animal research is included. Blending anthropology, behavioral economics, evolutionary psychology and philosophy, Herzog creates a seamless narrative enriched with real life anecdotes. In a style that is a cross between Michael Pollan and Bill Bryson, this book offers an illuminating exploration of the moral conundrums we face every day regarding the creatures with which we share our world. *Some We like by Hal Herzog.*

I first though of using P.G. Wodehouse’s **A Wodehouse Bestiary** for the fiction companion for this. It has creatures we love, hate, and even eat—but as wonderful and well-written as the short stories are, they need to be taken in small does to really appreciate them. Too much of Wooster and Jeeves, is well…too much! Then there is also Delia Ephron’s book, **The Lion is in**. It is in the vain of *Thelma and Louise,* and has a writing style one would expect from the daughter of Nora Ephron. In it, three “runaway” women come to terms with their previously complicated lives because of a retired circus lion.

Instead I’ve chosen **The Tower, the Zoo, and the Tortoise** by Julia Stuart. It is a whimsical novel featuring contemporary residents of the Tower of London. Balthazar Jones is a Beefeater who lives there with his wife, Hebe and their 140 year old turtle named Mrs. Cook. Hebe works in the Lost Things Department of the London Underground. Their marriage is strained following the unexpected death of their 8-year old son, Milo. By day, life is full of tourists and re-uniting travelers with the numerous odd items lost on the tube, including a safe, a magician’s box, and 147 pairs of false teeth, among other things. By night, they are lonely.

But when the Queen decides to move the foreign creatures she has received as gifts to the Tower from the London Zoo, Jones is chosen at the keeper because of his excellent care of Mrs. Cook. There is precedent for animals at the Tower, of course. There had been a menagerie there off and on in the past.

When the news is announced, the keeper of the ravens is jealous; the other residents of the Tower are concerned. The transport of the animals is fraught with humor. The penguins get lost. The residents become fond of the new residents, and pitch in with their care. The tourists love them. But all things good and bad must come to an end. In this delightful book, we learn that animals can be the catalyst for change, and that, what was once lost, can be found. *The Tower, The Zoo and the Tortoise by Julia Stuart.*

**600’s**

The 600’s are technology in the broadest sense of the word, and the 641’s are food and drink. Our next book “exemplifies” both of those areas. It is **Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation** by Michael Pollan, the author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. In it, Pollan explores how the power of the four classical elements: fire, water, air and earth, are used to transform things found in nature to the wonderful things we like to eat and drink. To do so, he apprentices himself to different culinary masters and in the process, acquires a deeper understanding of the natural world. As he recounts his experiences, history and interesting facts about each element are revealed. At this moment in time, when more people than ever are watching cooking shows on TV, yet abandoning the kitchen for eating out, *Cooked* *by Michael Pollan* is a must read for “foodies”.

There are many fictional books revolving around food—one only has to think of the plethora of cooking mysteries that are now available. They may or may not come complete with the recipes. Two of my favorites are the **Bruno, Chief of Police** series by Martin Walker, where the Chief of Police in a small French village by the Dordonne River is an excellent cook. It has no recipes, but the village ambience and the cooking scenes really appeal. Then there are the more light-hearted Minnesota-based mysteries by **Joanna Fluke**. It features cookie shop owner Hannah Swensen and has many recipes that I have made and enjoyed.

However, one recently discovered book features two of my main interests, both books and cooking. It is entitled **A Cookbook Conspiracy** **by Kate Carlisle.** It is in a series entitled “the Bibliophile Mysteries.” The protagonist’s name is Brooklyn, and as a book binder, she restores old books. Her sister Savannah is a successful chef who attended the Cordon Bleu in Paris. Savannah asks Brooklyn to restore a tattered cookbook that is probably 200 years old.

Savanah wants it in time for a reunion of her class of chefs. They all are getting together in San Francisco to celebrate the opening of a restaurant owned by Savanah’s ex-boyfriend. It was he who originally gave it to Savannah. She wants to present the book back to him as a gift. Of course, the inevitable happens: the boyfriend is murdered at the opening, and the rare book disappears. The plot may seem trite, but the details on both the world of cookery and that of the area of bookbinding make *A Cookbook Conspiracy by Kate Carlisle* a fascinating read*.*

**700**

The 700’s are the broad category of Arts in the Dewey Decimal System. Our next book falls in the 712’s which includes planning in civil areas. **Andrea Wulf** has penned **Founding Gardeners: The Revolution Generation, Nature, and the Shaping of the American Nation.** In it, we learn that gardening, agriculture, and botany were elemental passions of the Founding Fathers. The Author follows Washington, Jefferson, John Adams and Monroe both on their farms and in office, and how this agricultural interest helped shape the new America. Besides the stories of each man’s land and its development, this book has maps, plans, and tables of interest. A good read for both gardeners and history buffs alike, I heartily recommend *Founding Gardeners by Andrea Wulf.*

Now, think about wandering around a famous garden, and coming upon a quiet, almost secret space. This brings us to a short jewel of a novel called **The Lost Garden** **by** **Helen Humphreys.** Set in 1941 England when the war seems endless, Horticulturist Gwen Davis has signed up to supervise “land girls” in order to get away from London. Their task is to grow food on a long-neglected Devon estate, which also billets a regiment of Canadian Men awaiting posting abroad. In the course of her duties, she discovers a small garden in three sections created for great love. As she herself falls in love, Gwen brings the garden back to life—only to realize the meaning of the garden after love has left her. This is a heart-breaking, word-perfect story from a different time and place. The Lost Garden by Helen Humphreys.

**800’s**

The 800’s are literature in the Dewey Decimal System, and includes essays. Our next book is by Sue Monk Kidd, and her daughter, Ann Kidd Taylor. It is called **Traveling with Pomegranates**. Many of you will be familiar with the Greek Myth featuring Persephone and her time underground in Hades as the result of eating pomegranate seeds.

In modern times, the pomegranate represents a special bond between mothers and daughters. We see this in this book. It tells of their journeys, primarily in Greece. It has a unique format by which each author gives her perspective on the same place / event. It is beautifully written and possesses the insight and quiet humor that we expect from the author of *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Mermaid’s Chair.* *Traveling with Pomegranates* by Sue Monk Kidd and Ann Kidd Taylor.

In the above book, during the timeline of most of these essays, Ann (the daughter) has something she won’t talk about, even though her mother senses it and knows that it colors Ann’s perceptions and actions on their trip. Thinking about this situation brought to mind a famous short story by Edith Wharton called **“The Pomegranate Seed”**.

In it, too, one of the characters has a secret. Charlotte has married a widower, Charles Ashby. Her friends warned her against this action, as the former couple was absolutely besotted with each other, and the dead wife is reputed to have been the stronger of the two. Despite this, Charlotte’s marriage to Charles is good with one exception. Periodically Charles gets a sealed, hand-delivered note. It is addressed in a bold but faint writing, and after receiving the letters, Charles is a changed man, looking ghastly, not of this world, and seemingly physically ill. Charlotte has come to dread the days when these come. What are they? And why does Charlotte get a deadly feeling in the pit of her stomach each time she sees one? You’ll have to read it to find out!

“The Pomegranate Seed” can be found in a collection with other famous short works called **Twenty-One Essential American Short Stories,** edited by Leslie Pockell. You’ll be sure to discover some old favorites in it! Another collection of short stories that I found really appealing is **The Pomegranate Lady and her Sons** by Goli Taraghi. It has short stories filled with compassion, curiosity, humor, and mischief that happen to be set in Iran. It is a delicious read.

**900’s**

The 900’s are history and travel in the Dewey Decimal System. As books often feature in this year’s talk, I’m going back to an old favorite entitled **How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland’s Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe by Thomas Cahill** for the non-fiction selection for this area. It falls in the 941.5’s, which are Irish history.

In it, Cahill gives an overview of the heritage of western civilization that was destroyed following the “fall” of Rome. He then describes how, far away from the despoliation of the continent, Irish monks and scribes laboriously, lovingly, and yes, even playfully, preserved the written works of the known world by copying any books they could obtain. Years later, Irish scholars spread the learning back to the continent, shaping medieval thought.

This book is resplendent with Celtic lore and samples of early Irish literature. For example, before reading this, I didn’t know that the shape-shifters made popular by *Deep Space Nine* and other modern “Sci –Fi” works come to us from the Irish. Did you? Contrast that example with the *Book of Kells*, one of the most famous illuminated works of the period, and one can see how imagination helped the art work in it. How the Irish Saved Civilization by Thomas Cahill.

Fast forward to our world, and modern archeological finds. In **The Book of Killowen**, author **Erin Hart** has a character ask “What sort of book is worth a man’s life?” We know from several of the above selections that there are many, but in this mystery, Archeologist Cormac Maguire and Pathologist Nora Gavin must answer that question. They are investigating a car pulled out of a bog, where a contemporary missing man is found buried under the body of an ancient man in the car’s trunk. Both have been brutally murdered. The modern man was TV personality know for “skewering” his guests during interviews; the ancient one has no reason to be there. This work takes the reader into the world of illumination, both ancient and modern, and is a great tie in with Cahill’s book. The Book of Killowen by Erin Hart.

**Biographies**

I recently read a wonderful memoir by the very popular author who put Tuscany on the map for American readers back in the 80’s**. Frances Mayes** wrote *Under the Tuscan Sun* and other books about Italy. If you’ve ever listened to any of her audiobooks, which I really recommend, you’ll have no doubt that she is from the South, and this book supports that. It is called **Under Magnolia.**

Frances Mayes grew up in a small town in Georgia. Her father’s family ran a textile factory; they had a black servant. Her parents had a tempestuous marriage, and we experience that too.

Alas, her father died early, and her father’s family would not support them in the manner to which they were accustomed.

They did, however, send Frances to a Southern Woman’s College in Virginia. The section on her two college years there had me calling my college roomies and recommending the book!

This book takes Frances through her early years as an adult. It tells us about her first marriage, and how she ended up in Northern California, which was her home when she bought a villa in Tuscany. This is a book I would have liked to reread immediately to re-taste her beautiful use of language and enjoy her quiet sense of humor.

Mayes’ wonderful ability for observations and descriptions that made Tuscany come alive for many of us is present in this book also. Her descriptions of the Southern town have the reader smelling the scents and hearing the sounds. It is an unflinching look at the relationship between self and culture. **Under Magnolia** by Frances Mayes.

One book I considered as a companion for Under Magnolia was **The Same Sweet Girls by Cassandra King.** Picture *The Girls from Ames,* but the women more polished, more southern, and much cattier. These six college friends, now in their middle years, took their name from a speech given by a debutante at their college. Like the women in *the Girls from Ames*, they have continued to meet over the years, and one of them died early. Despite how they behave toward each other at the end of these reunion weekends, they really do care about each other.

But as I approach the end of my career, I decided to go back where I began. The first adult book I remember reading was *The Mistress of Mellyn* by Victoria Holt. It was in the pile of library books my mom kept on the hearth. I was almost in 6th grade, and “snuck it”. I loved it, and couldn’t put it down. Later I “fessed up” to my mom and she said “Oh, honey, I brought home for you. Did you like it?” She continued to feed my interest in Gothic novels, and romantic novels of suspense by adding the early Mary Stewart offerings to the mix, and later, Phyllis Whitney. I haven’t read any of them since my early high school years, but remember them fondly.

I have chosen **Phyllis Whitney’s** **The Ebony Swan** to finish with today. While the *Mistress of Mellyn* and its ilk are probably set in the 1800’s, this novel is contemporary. It could be today, it could be earlier (post World War II)—but that isn’t important to the story. However, the setting is.

In this novel, we have a protagonist named Susan Prentiss. She is at the crossroads of her life, wanting change after having recently lost her father, and having broken off her engagement to a young, arrogant doctor.

Susan decides to make contact with her maternal grandmother who is still living in a Southern mansion, where Susan spent her early years. When Susan was seven, her mother fell down one of its staircases. After that, her father packed up and left the South for New Mexico, where Susan grew up. Susan goes back to Virginia in hopes of learning more about her family history, and finding herself. Like in the older novels I mentioned earlier, there is a darkness of spirit and a sense of foreboding upon her return. Her presence awakens nightmarish memories of a past that may threaten a future—not only hers, but that of her grandmother as well.

This novel brought back the feelings I had when I read when young. While I would never go back and reread the novels I mentioned earlier for fear that they would be diminished, I was very happy to have read this book, and to remember the young reader I once was. *The Ebony Swan* by Phyllis Whitney.

And so we come to the end of this talk. There are similarities throughout many of the books, despite the different Dewey areas: gardens and flowers almost strong enough to be characters, The South, young women who find themselves—or at least try, and animals that make the way more bearable. It is funny how it often works that way.

I thank you for being such a receptive audience today and hope that you have enjoyed this. May you always have a good book.