

## New Best Books for Book Clubs

***A Long Way Gone; Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*** by Ishmael Beah. This memoir came out to well-deserved literary acclaim. What sold the book to me is Ishmael's voice. He speaks calmly and simply about his life as a boy soldier in Sierra Leone and the horrific life he lived. Somehow it makes the violence easier to read, because his voice is clear and unafraid as he describes the details of killing and the struggle to survive. Rescued by UNICEF and given the gift of rehabilitation, he learned to forgive himself. Beah moved to the United States in 1998 and graduated from Oberlin College in 2004. He is an active member of Human Rights Watch Children's Division. Discussions will be lively; while readers will have differing opinions about war and the military, all will agree that children shouldn't be subjected to the horrors of war. There's a discussion guide at:

[www.readinggroupguides.com/guides](http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides)

***Lit*** is a memoir of motherhood and drinking, and about learning to write by living life so you have something to say. ***The Liars' Club*** brought to vivid, indelible life Mary Karr's hardscrabble Texas childhood. ***Cherry***, her account of her adolescence, "continued to set the literary standard for making the personal universal" (*Entertainment Weekly*). ***Lit*** explores her own experience with alcoholism and madness, and her resurrection. ***Lit*** is about getting drunk and getting sober; becoming a mother by letting go of a mother; learning to write by learning to live. Karr's desire for a solid family seems realized when she marries a poet and produces a son. But she hasn't outrun her past, and it begins gradually to discolor her present. She drinks herself into numbness like her charismatic mother, reaching the brink of suicide. A time spent in treatment with a group of misfits awakens her to the possibility of happiness and leads her to find her own higher power. Her story rings with truth and unexpected laughter. Being a recovering alcoholic myself, I loved the book and can see lots of possibilities for discussion (almost all of us have some experience with a relative or friend in recovery). [www.harpercollins.com/author/microsite/readingguide](http://www.harpercollins.com/author/microsite/readingguide)

***Cherry*** by Mary Karr is the story of Karr's teen years, written with her usual sass, will leave you laughing and crying, sometimes simultaneously. Her adolescent

suicide attempt is rendered carefully and with some humor....Mary finds herself in the throes of adolescence, as she clashes with authority and hooks up with a gang of wild and genius youth. **Cherry** will yourself nodding your head as your group discussion hits upon memories of your own adolescence.

<http://us.penguinroup.com/static/rguides/us/cherry.html>

***The Glass Castle*** by Jeanette Walls.. Walls grew up with parents whose ideals and stubborn nonconformity were both their curse and their salvation. Rex and Rose Mary Walls lived like nomads, moving among desert towns, camping more often than not. Rex was a brilliant man who, when sober, captured his children's imagination and taught them how to enjoy life. Rose Mary, who painted and wrote, couldn't stand the responsibility of providing for her family. Later, when the allure of a vagabond life faded, the Walls returned to the West Virginia mining town, which Rex Walls had done everything he could to escape. He began to drink heavily and disappeared for days at a time. The children had to learn to fend for themselves, supporting one another & finally finding the internal strength to leave. Walls describes her parents with affection and understanding. Hers is a positive story about her family, who gave her the will to live a successful life on her own terms. Reading group discussion guide can be found at:

[www.books.simonandschuster.com/glass-castle](http://www.books.simonandschuster.com/glass-castle)

***Half Broke Horses*** by Jeanette Walls is the story of Lily Casey Smith, Walls's resourceful and compelling grandmother. By age six, Lily was helping her father break horses. At fifteen, she left home to teach in a frontier town—riding five hundred miles on her pony, alone, to get to her job. With her husband Jim she ran a ranch in Arizona. She raised two children, one of whom is Jeannette's mother, Rosemary Smith Walls, portrayed in *The Glass Castle*. Lily survived tornadoes, the Great Depression, and personal tragedy. Rosemary always told Jeannette that she was like her grandmother, and in this novel based upon Lily's life, Walls seeks the truth of her kindred spirit. *Half Broke Horses* is a great story about a great woman. Discussion will probably revolve around reading groups' female ancestors' who contributed similar strength to the task of settling the west.

[www.books.simonandschuster.net/half-broke-horses](http://www.books.simonandschuster.net/half-broke-horses)

***House Rules*** by Jodi Picoult. Jacob Hunt is a teen with Asperger's syndrome. He's hopeless at reading social cues or expressing himself well to others, though he is brilliant in many ways. But he focuses his attention on forensic analysis. A

police scanner in his room clues him in to crimes when they occur, and he frequently shows up to coach the cops on proper procedure. Jacob's behaviors are normal in people with Asperger's, but they look like guilt to the local police when a young woman who has been working with Jacob is murdered. Jacob's brother Theo is also somehow implicated. This is a murder mystery, among other things, and it will spark many discussions about autism, forensic science, single parenting and more. [www.books.simonandschuster.com/house-rules](http://www.books.simonandschuster.com/house-rules)

- ***Luncheon of the Boating Party*** by Susan Vreeland. Auguste Renoir's famous painting depicts a gathering of his real friends enjoying a Sunday on a terrace along the Seine. A wealthy painter, an art collector, an Italian journalist, a war hero, a celebrated actress, and someone who turns out to be Renoir's future wife are asked to pose for this portrait of a time when social constraints were loosening. Parisians were bursting with a desire for pleasure and a yearning to create something extraordinary. The story is told by Renoir and seven of the models, and is set in Paris and on the Seine. Vreeland does a great job of portraying the *joie de vivre* (*sp?*), hedonism, and art of the era. Her characters come to life in a brilliant portrait of her own. [www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/luncheon\\_of\\_the\\_boating\\_party1.asp](http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/luncheon_of_the_boating_party1.asp)

***Clara and Mr. Tiffany*** by Susan Vreeland. Vreeland again succeeds in telling the story of a work of art in this novel, and brings a woman, once lost to history, to life. In 1893, at the Chicago World's Fair, Louis Comfort Tiffany decides on an exhibition of stained-glass windows, which he hopes will earn him international recognition. Working in his New York studio is Clara Driscoll, head of his women's division. Not acknowledged by Tiffany, Clara actually designed most of the leaded-glass lamps for which he is remembered. Clara struggles with her desire for recognition. She wants Tiffany to acknowledge the contribution of the women who work there. She also desires love and companionship (Tiffany enforces a strict policy: he does not hire married women, and any who do marry while under his employ must resign). Clara must decide what she wants most—her art or marriage and companionship. For support materials: [www.randomhouse.com/.../2010/12/16/susan-vreelands](http://www.randomhouse.com/.../2010/12/16/susan-vreelands)

- ***The Worst Hard Time*** by Timothy Egan. Dust storms terrorized America's High Plains in the dark years of the Depression; they were like nothing ever seen before. Egan tells the story of people who held on through the nightmare of dust and death. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Timothy Egan

follows six families and their communities through the rise and fall of wheat farming in the region, going from sod huts to framed houses to basements with windows sealed by damp sheets in a futile effort to keep the dust out.

The biggest dust storm on record descended over five states, from the Dakotas to Amarillo, Texas, on April 14, 1935. People could not see each other; if they touched, they risked being knocked over by the static electricity that the dust created in the air. The Dust Bowl resulted from market-driven farming that destroyed the prairie, so that, when dry weather came, the wind lifted up millions of acres of topsoil which blew as far as New York. Farmers were reduced to gathering tumbleweed as food for their cattle and then, for their children. You will enjoy (believe it or not), discussing this horrific tale and sharing family stories about the depression.

[www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers\\_guides/egan\\_worst.shtml](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/egan_worst.shtml)

***Stormy Weather*** by Paulette Jiles. Paulette Jiles is another poet turned novelist; she writes with fabulous I can-see-exactly-what-you're-describing imagery. *Stormy weather* is about three sisters and their mother, who are trying to survive the Great Depression living on a previously abandoned family farm after their father is killed in an explosion. The three girls are as different as night and day; Mayme wants to get married and live happily ever after; Bea wants to be a famous writer; Jeanine just wants the house painted white, a good mare to mate with her racehorse Smoky Joe, crops growing, and a quiet life. Their mother Elizabeth wants a guidebook that will tell her how to live this difficult life without a husband. I read ***Stormy Weather*** just before I read ***The Worst Hard Times***, and they do work well together, if you want to try pairing fiction and nonfiction books about the Depression. [www.harpercollins.com/books/Stormy-Weather](http://www.harpercollins.com/books/Stormy-Weather)

***Enemy Women*** by Paulette Jiles is an amazing story about the women in the Confederate States who were accused of aiding Confederate Army soldiers or Confederate militia with shelter, food or clothing. The main character, Adair is a sassy, smart-mouthed girl who gets sent to a prison for women in St. Louis. Adair is beautiful and spunky, and her interrogator, a union officer, falls in love with her. He helps her escape from the prison and vows to come find her when the war is over. *Like Cold Mountain*, the real story is the main character's struggle to get back home and the beloved's effort to find her once the war is over. Each chapter begins with letters written by Confederate and Union soldiers in Missouri, and quotes from survivors of the Confederate war in Missouri. [www.harpercollins.com/books/Enemy-Women](http://www.harpercollins.com/books/Enemy-Women)

Discussions will be lively and will cover the spectrum of experience – war, the particular horrors of the Confederate War, love between people on opposing sides of a war, the cruelty of enemies towards one another...

[www.harpercollins.com/author](http://www.harpercollins.com/author)

***The Whistling Season*** by Ivan Doig begins with a newspaper ad offering the services of an "A-1 housekeeper" that draws the hungry attention of widower Oliver Milliron in the fall of 1909. And so begins the unforgettable season that deposits the non-cooking, ever-whistling Rose Llewellyn and her brother Morris Morgan, into 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 education—not of the textbook variety—that Morris and Rose bring to Oliver, his three sons, and the rambunctious students in the region's one-room schoolhouse. This is a charming story, fun to read, fun to talk about. [www.ivandoig.com/whistlings](http://www.ivandoig.com/whistlings)

***Work Song*** by Ivan Doig A decade after he left Montana at the end of ***The Whistling Season***, Morrie Morgan is back—this time in post-WWI Butte, the copper-mining capital of the world. When Morrie gets caught up in the clash between the mining company, some outside agitators, and the miners, he finds a way to give a voice to those who truly need one. The final chapters to *Work Song* are light-hearted in comparison to the real history of the town. But Doig, who was raised in White Sulphur Springs, gets Butte right, beginning with the rhythms of the language. Doig lays out the plot somewhat predictably, but he also makes room for reflective moments in which Morrie confronts his fears. Doig has published nine novels and three works of nonfiction. You'll know he's good; the book has perfect pacing, and never gets cynical. When he recreates another time and place, it seems as real as your own. [www.ivandoig.com/guide](http://www.ivandoig.com/guide)

***The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*** by Aimee Bender On the eve of her ninth birthday, Rose Edelstein bites into her mother's homemade lemon-chocolate cake and discovers she has a gift: she can taste her mother's emotions in the slice. To her horror, she finds that her apparently cheerful mother tastes of despair. Soon, she's totally submerged in secret knowledge that most families don't talk about - her father's remoteness, her mother's infidelity, her brother's retreat from the world. What really drew me was the character of Rose, the scenes in which I could see through her eyes the loneliness of her family...the

magic of Bender's writing is that we come to see ourselves (or someone we know) in Rose. Discussions will revolve around the empathic and psychic connections which exist between family members, and the pain that's felt by people who care too much. [www.bookmovement.com/app/readingguide](http://www.bookmovement.com/app/readingguide)