**Evening Book Group - River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

Informal discussion of recent fiction, non-fiction, and an occasional older classic. Meets September though June on the second Monday from 7:30 to 9:00pm. If Veteran's Day or Columbus Day fall on a meeting date, the meeting will be held on the second Tuesday. March is also second Tuesday.

**Mar 13 – Tues** I thought we should dive deeper into espionage with this well-reviewed novel.

 **LEAVING BERLIN**. By Joseph Kanon. Amazon readers 4 stars. 384 p. MCPL 25 copies, 17 avail.

In Kanon’s thriller, a German-born American writer becomes a spy in East Berlin. Compare to John LeCarre and Alan Furst. “Engaging. . . . deftly captures the ambience of a city that’s still a wasteland almost four years after the Nazis’ defeat. . . . Kanon keeps the story humming along, enriching the main narrative with vignettes that heighten the atmosphere of duplicity and distrust.” (The New York Times Book Review) “Joseph Kanon’s thought-provoking, pulse-pounding historical espionage thriller [is] stuffed with incident and surprise. . . . Mr. Kanon, author now of seven top-notch novels of period political intrigue, conveys the bleak, oppressive, and creepy atmosphere of occupied Berlin in a detailed, impressive manner. . . . Leaving Berlin is a mix of tense action sequences, sepia-tinged reminiscence, convincing discourse and Berliner wit.” (Wall Street Journal) “The old-fashioned spy craft, the many plot twists and the moral ambiguities that exist in all of the characters make Leaving Berlin an intriguing, page-turning thriller. There’s also a star-crossed love story — and an airport farewell — that might remind some readers of Bogie and Bergman. But it’s the author’s attention to historical detail — his ability to convey the sights, sounds and feel of a beaten-down Berlin — that makes this book so compelling.”(Ft. Worth Star Telegram)

 **Apr 9 The Sympathizer: A Novel** by Viet Thanh Nguyen (Pulitzer Prize for Fiction) 384 p Many copies in mcpl, but popular. Amazon 4.2 out of 5 stars. The winner of the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, as well as six other awards, The Sympathizer is the breakthrough novel of the year. With the pace and suspense of a thriller and prose that has been compared to Graham Greene and Saul Bellow, The Sympathizer is a sweeping epic of love and betrayal. The narrator, a communist double agent, is a “man of two minds,” a half-French, half-Vietnamese army captain who arranges to come to America after the Fall of Saigon, and while building a new life with other Vietnamese refugees in Los Angeles is secretly reporting back to his communist superiors in Vietnam. The Sympathizer is a blistering exploration of identity and America, a gripping espionage novel, and a powerful story of love and friendship.

 **June 11 The Life We Bury** by Allen Eskens, 2014 303 p Amazon readers 4.5 stars mcpl has 13 copies, but popular.

 College student Joe Talbert has the modest goal of completing a writing assignment for an English class. His task is to interview a stranger and write a brief biography of the person. With deadlines looming, Joe heads to a nearby nursing home to find a willing subject. There he meets Carl Iverson, and soon nothing in Joe's life is ever the same. Carl is a dying Vietnam veteran--and a convicted murderer. With only a few months to live, he has been medically paroled to a nursing home, after spending thirty years in prison for the crimes of rape and murder. As Joe writes about Carl's life, especially Carl's valor in Vietnam, he cannot reconcile the heroism of the soldier with the despicable acts of the convict. Joe, along with his skeptical female neighbor, throws himself into uncovering the truth, but he is hamstrung in his efforts by having to deal with his dangerously dysfunctional mother, the guilt of leaving his autistic brother vulnerable, and a haunting childhood memory. Thread by thread, Joe unravels the tapestry of Carl’s conviction. But as he and Lila dig deeper into the circumstances of the crime, the stakes grow higher. Will Joe discover the truth before it’s too late to escape the fallout?

**Sept 10 One Summer: America 1927** by Bill Bryson 544 p. Amazon readers 4.6 stars. MCPL 25 copies

A *Chicago Tribune* Noteworthy Book
A GoodReads Reader's Choice

The summer of 1927 began with Charles Lindbergh crossing the Atlantic. Meanwhile, Babe Ruth was closing in on the home run record. In Newark, New Jersey, Alvin “Shipwreck” Kelly sat atop a flagpole for twelve days, and in Chicago, the gangster Al Capone was tightening his grip on bootlegging. The first true “talking picture,” Al Jolson’s *The Jazz Singer*, was filmed, forever changing the motion picture industry.
        All this and much, much more transpired in the year Americans attempted and accomplished outsized things—and when the twentieth century truly became the American century. *One Summer* transforms it all into narrative nonfiction of the highest order.

Review

“Rollicking, immensely readable. . . . [Bryson’s] subject isn't really a year. It’s human nature in all its odd and amazing array.” —*Chicago Tribune*

“A wonderful romp . . . . Fascinating. . . . Written in a style as effervescent as the time itself.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“Addictively readable.” —*The Wall Street Journal*

**Oct 9 THE WHITES**. By Richard Price writing as Harry Brandt. 333 p, Amazon 3.5 stars, Plenty available in mcpl.

 “A masterpiece, to stand with such earlier Price classics as Clockers and Lush Life . . . [The Whites has] a compelling plot, yet the real joy of the book lies page by page, line by line, in its brilliant characterizations, rich detail, endless surprises, crackling dialogue, [and] absurdist humor.” ―The Washington Post Most readers will never come close to a New York homicide investigation, but they will instinctively know that Price’s insightful crime novel has this world down right.

**Nov 12 – Tues The Underground Railroad**, by Colson Whitehead. Amazon readers 4 stars, 320 pages Many copies in mcpl, but popular.

 For a smart melding of realism and allegory that combines the violence of slavery and the drama of escape in a myth that speaks to contemporary America. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, the #1 New York Times bestseller from Colson Whitehead, a magnificent tour de force chronicling a young slave's adventures as she makes a desperate bid for freedom in the antebellum South.

 **Dec 10 THE INCARNATIONS**. By Susan Barker. Amazon readers 4 stars, 400 p, 10 copies in mcpl and available.

 New York Times Notable Book of 2015 Kirkus Reviews Best Fiction Book of 2015 In Barker’s astonishing novel, a Beijing taxi driver learns of his previous lives as a bit player during 15 centuries of China’s past. [A] kaleidoscopically imaginative novel…Barker stitches together an unnervingly perceptive portrait of China and of the enduring influence that its past has on the present.” (The New Yorker) “Wildly ambitious . . . [Barker’s] dazzling use of language and natural storytelling gifts shine from every paragraph. As with David Mitchell, whose books can similarly hopscotch through times and places, each episode stands alone as a terrific tale in itself. You can become so immersed in one story that you have to almost physically drag yourself away to commit to the next. . . . Mesmerizing storytelling.” (Sarah Lyall The New York Times) “Astonishing, amazing . . . It’s the small sagas of Chinese history contained in the letters, together with Barker’s vivid descriptions of today’s China, that set this book apart as a work of considerable, if unnerving, importance. . . . Tightly wound, intensely wrought, fantastically exciting . . . Beguiling, readable, intense . . . The book’s stellar narrative carries us briskly along.” (Simon Winchester The New York Times Book Review)

**Jan 7 LINCOLN IN THE BARDO,** by George Saunders 368 pages. Amazon readers 3.5 stars. MCPL 49 copies, 150 holds. Man-Booker Prize.

[An Amazon Best Book of February 2017:](https://www.amazon.com/b/?node=390919011) *Lincoln in the Bardo* is hilariously funny, horribly sad, and utterly surprising. If you can fight past an initial uncertainty about the identity of its narrators, you may find that it’s the best thing you’ve read in years. The year is 1862. President Lincoln, already tormented by the knowledge that he’s responsible for the deaths of thousands of young men on the battlefields of the Civil War, loses his beloved eleven-year-old son, Willie, to typhoid. The plot begins after Willie is laid to rest in a cemetery near the White House, where, invisible to the living, ghosts linger, unwilling to relinquish this world for the next. Their bantering conversation, much of it concerned with earthly -- and earthy – pleasures, counterbalances Lincoln’s abject sorrow.