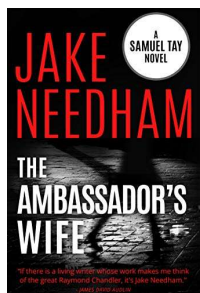


FOM Books Groups : recent reviews

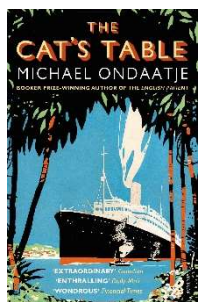
May 2019



Were people actually more evil now than they used to be? Perhaps he was dealing with some new form of malevolence entirely, some modern twist of human nature..."

Couples' book group met at the home of Jenni & Eric over Taco dinner to discuss **The Ambassador's Wife by Jake Needham** - a murder mystery with Inspector Samuel Tay as an overweight, cranky, chain-smoking Singaporean policeman assigned to a high profile murder case. The first body was at Orchard's Marriott Hotel. The second in Bangkok. Both American women, beaten viciously and stripped naked. The saga includes the foul-mouthed American Ambassador and Embassy, FBI, and CIA. Was it an act of terrorism? Serial killer?

We were not impressed with the style of writing nor the typos in the book. (Spell check anyone?) Ratings were 2 for Style, 3 for Content, 3 for Recommend to another FOM book group; and 4 for Discussion the book inspired (out of 5). Always fun to read stories set in familiar places and delving a bit into the underbelly of Singapore crime lead to fun discussions.



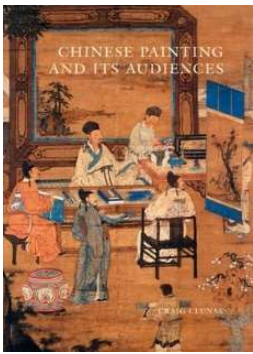
Our read for April was **The Cat's Table by Michael Ondaatje**. Though I missed the meeting, the group reported that overall they enjoyed the book and rated it a 4. They felt the second half was rather rushed with information and details that were probably unnecessary but overall the writing style and the amazing characters made the book a good read. They also felt that the story was partly biographical despite the caveat it was a work of fiction.



For the month of April, the Wednesday FOM Book Club read **Sweet Bean Paste by Durian Sukegawa**. This charming tale that lingers long after its brief pages revolves around the relationship between two main characters: Sentaro, a man with a checkered past who now sells lackluster dorayaki (pancakes filled with sweet bean paste) to pay off debts, and Tokue, an elderly woman who bears the marks of leprosy and the secrets to making delicious sweet bean paste. An odd pairing at first, they complement each other in unexpected ways.

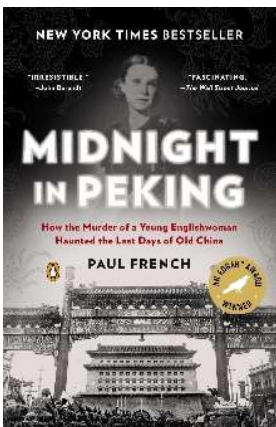
The major themes of seeking meaning in life, of suffering prejudice, and the importance of craftsmanship and dedication are prevalent throughout the novel. Heavy in symbolism yet delicate in its unveiling, the translation from the original Japanese (we guessed) must have been particularly tricky, and would have liked to know a bit more about the translator, Alison Watts. We thought the author set up each scene beautifully, incorporating the changing seasons to underscore emotions. Many of us noted that exposing Japan's past discriminatory laws on those afflicted with leprosy was eye-opening. And the emphasis that each of our lives can positively contribute to the world without the usual socially-imposed yardsticks ultimately made it an uplifting, albeit bittersweet gem, that stands apart from usual contemporary Japanese literature.

We are delighted to find out that the novel was also adapted into a film, sparking a potential movie night in the near future! We collectively scored it 4.3.



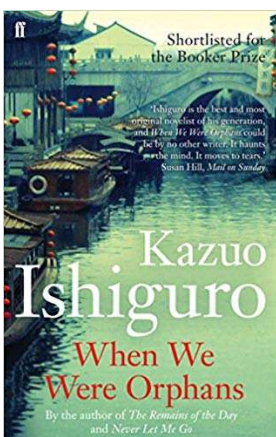
The Non-Fiction book group recently gathered to discuss "**Chinese Painting and Its Audiences**", the book based on the lectures renowned Chinese art historian **Craig Clunas** gave at the National Gallery of Art (DC/USA) in 2012 under the AW Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts series. Quite rightly, Clunas says that this book is NOT a survey of Chinese art, but instead shows us the development of Chinese paintings in history from the Ming to present day through its viewers and how they were received by the "audiences" mentioned in the title. Crucially, he first debates the question what is meant by "'Chinese' painting"? How is different from just 'painting' as we know it from a Western art history perspective? Through a discussion of the "audiences" of these paintings, Clunas gives us evidence of what constitutes Chinese paintings from the Ming (16th c) to the present. These audiences include: the Gentleman (Literati scholar), the Emperor, the Merchant, the Nation, the People.

The book is lavishly illustrated (worth the expense!) so that it provides us readers the the myriad of forms that Chinese paintings take through the centuries because of its changing audiences. Now we know why no gentleman-scholar is ever shown painting even though it is one of the constituents of the "Four Arts" of the Scholar (Zither, Weiqi (Go), Calligraphy, Painting). Our group learned so much about this topic and enjoyed how it upturned our own preconceived notions of Chinese paintings. We gave the content of the book a 5 out of 5 with the style a 4. Occasionally, it had the whiff of the Ivory Tower.



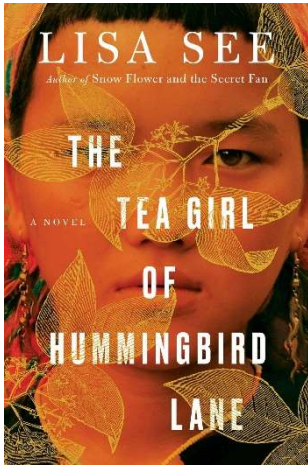
Couples book group met over potluck dinner, hosted by Rosie, to discuss "**Midnight in Peking**" by **Paul French**. It's the true story of the 1937 unsolved murder of Pamela Werner, a 19 year old daughter of a retired British consul and scholar. The expatriate community in Peking was shocked at the killing and mutilation of her body. Speculation ranged from a Japanese secret society, a case of mistaken identity, to an American organized sex ring.

Ratings were 4 and 5 across the board (out of 5) and we enjoyed the easy portrayal of various foreign legations of Peking in this time period.



Thursday morning book club's read for March was **Kazuo Ishiguro's When We Were Orphans**. An easy book to read that most of us enjoyed. Like Ishiguro's other books, it gave us much to think and talk about.

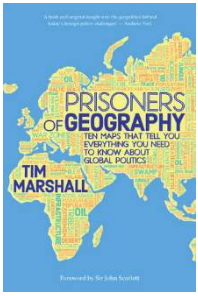
We discussed how our perception of our ourselves can be so different from how others see us and we also debated whether the protagonist had (mild) Asperger's (no evidence found via Google so we have put it down as the Thursday Book Club's hypothesis). It was rated an average of 3.5 mostly because we felt that the storyline and characters did not meet expectations (of a book by Ishiguro) and could have been developed a bit more.



The Wednesday book club read **The teagirl of Hummingbird Lane by Lisa See** (who also wrote *Shanghai girls*). This fiction story, which benefits from thorough background research on the tea-growing communities from Southern Yunnan, follows the life of Jin, a young woman of Akha ethnicity. Her community has been growing tea for many generations ; through the description of her daily life, we discover the customs and religious beliefs of the Akha. We understand better the frenzied financial speculation around the world-famous Pu'er tea (which supposedly is better appreciated after you've attained the wise age of 40). Another side of the story revolves around Haley, the daughter Jin had to abandon at birth and who was adopted by an American family. The point of view of a teenage American adoptee of Chinese origin is thoughtfully brought forward.

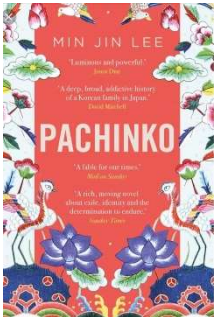
We didn't find the love story of Jin with a millionaire very credible though, but this romantic aspect of the story perhaps was meant to attract a readership who wouldn't otherwise have picked up a book centred around a Chinese minority. Perhaps the story would have benefited from less clichés but we enjoyed it nevertheless. We gave it a score of 3.6.

We recommend this book to someone who is interested in any of the following : Yunnan / tribal culture / Chinese tea / adoption.



The month we read for the Thursday Morning Book Group **Prisoners of Geography** by **Tim Marshall**. With ten maps, the author explains to you how geography has shaped the politics of the world and why countries and their leaders behave as they have/do.

This book has been recommended within our book club many times over the past few years. As non-fiction, it does not fall within the mandate of our book group but since it was so highly recommended and all of us were interested in reading it, we decided to adopt it into our reading circle. A very useful read, which explains the importance of geo-politics in simple language. We enjoyed reading it, though most of us had to look at a map often to understand the references in the text. We rated it an average of 4.5

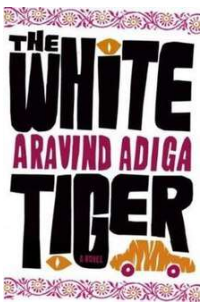


The Wednesday FOM Book Club discussed **Pachinko** by **Min Jin Lee**. This multi-generational saga that spans locations in Korea, Japan, and New York from 1910 to 1989 tells a tale centred around family, identity, love, and survival.

We all thought this novel revealed a lot about the complex relationship between Japan and Korea, and the relatively overlooked history of the zainichi-- ethnic-Korean community in Japan. We agreed it was wonderfully descriptive and well researched. However, it could have been edited to be much shorter for a more effective narrative arc. With so many generations and characters that branch off, it began to become repetitive. There are interesting themes of patriarchy vs. matriarchy, the resilience of women even in historically constricted roles, nature versus nurture in bringing up children, and the questions of identity and home. The average score was 3.5, with the lowest at 2.5 and highest at 4.0.

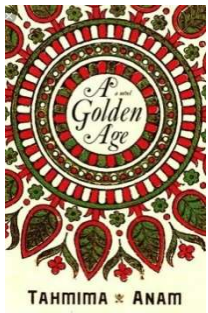


The Friday FOM Book Club read "**Familiar Things**" by **Hwang Sok-Yong**. This book brings us to a vast landfill site called Flower Island on the outskirts of South Korea's glittering metropolis and tells a story of a 13-year-old boy who makes a living out of the trash. Many of us agreed that it is hard to relate such a life to today's South Korea but we all thought that it certainly shows the darker side of modernization and consumerism and makes us think about problems in any big cities. Quite a unique experience to explore the life of dumpsite and fantasy worlds with lively characters and mysterious blue lights(spirits). We rated it 3.8.



"I was looking for the key for years / But the door was always open." - Aravind Adiga.

Couples' Book Group met over dinner in a gorgeous garden setting hosted by Jane & Sunder Iyer, to discuss "The White Tiger" by Aravind Adiga (former Time magazine correspondent). Winner of the 2008 Man Booker prize for his debut novel at age 33, Adiga exposed the dark side of India's corruption, inequality, and societal constraints. We see the world through the eyes of a new hired chauffeur, an uneducated son of a rickshaw puller, as he eventually becomes a successful entrepreneur and killer. The story is told in the form of letters he writes (but not post) in his Bangalore office to the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao, for his upcoming visit to India. Just about everyone found it to be a worthwhile read - impressed with such a young author's ability to be poignant and insightful. Ratings averaged 5 for Content, Style, and Recommend to another FOM group; 4 for Discussion the book inspired (out of 5).

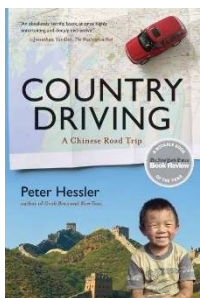


The Wednesday FOM book club discussed **A Golden Age** by Tahmima Anam, a Bangladeshi-born British writer born in 1975. This was her first novel which won many literary prizes when it was published in 2007. She then published books 2 and 3 of her Bengal trilogy : The Good Muslim in 2011 and The Bones of Grace in 2016

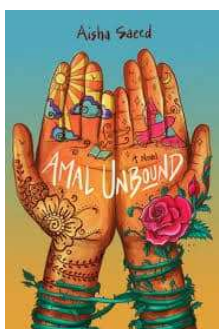
The book opens with Rehana, the main protagonist, addressing her dead husband in front of his grave, in Dhaka – Eastern Pakistan (today Bangladesh). A recent widow, she has just lost custody of her children to her in-laws and they will spend a few years away from her in Western Pakistan. Unravelling at the same time of her personal tragedy, her country is undergoing tremendous political turmoil. Her children return to her in their teenage years and become involved in the fight for freedom from Western Pakistan. Unwillingly, at first, Rehana will also get to play a role in the war for independence, all the while returning to her husband’s grave to update him on her personal story and the political developments. This is the story of a mother who wants to protect her children at all cost, while at the same time realising she needs to let them go and fight for independence.

The character of Rehana was largely inspired by the author’s own grandmother, who had helped freedom fighters by burying weapons under the rose bushes in her garden. Tahmima Anam also interviewed more than 50 witnesses from that era to write this story, which she had originally meant only as an account of the war for independence of Bangladesh in 1971.

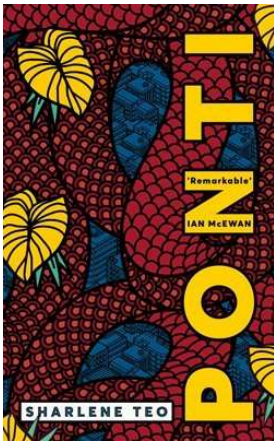
There are in the book lovely descriptions of numerous appetizing Bengali dishes. Nevertheless, they were not enough to keep our interest up until the end of the story (“boring”) : hard to relate to the characters (“hollow”), a promising opening statement “but then our hopes are let down”. At any rate, we learned a great deal on life in Bangladesh and its history, a country many of us know very little about : this book at least opened a door, even if awkwardly. To be fair, some in our group did like the book and gave it a 4. Other gave it a 2. Average was therefore a 3.



The Wednesday Non-Fiction Book Group read **Peter Hessler's "Country Driving: A Chinese Road Trip"** this month. It's a bit of a misnomer because it was not a classic road trip piece. This book is divided into three sections and the first section follows closer to what we think a road trip would be as he takes his rental car out of Beijing into the western regions of China ostensibly following the Great Wall of China (which we know is not one contiguous wall!). We meet the people he picked up as hitchhikers, we encounter many comical situations and what he says about the driving rules is worth the price of the book. The next two sections slightly veer from the driving aspects (though he still uses his rental to get to his destinations) and into a more sociological/anthropological look at China's countryside and industrial areas. Our group felt it was a wonderful read as Peter Hessler is a compelling writer bringing to life the various people he met along the way - we all want to know what happened to them as it's been over a decade since he covered them. Content 4/5 and Style 5/5.



The Friday Morning Book Club read ‘**Amal Unbound**’. A heartbreaking and ultimately uplifting story that offers a window into the practice of indentured servitude and the role of education in empowering girls. Inspired by Malala Yousafzai, this is author Aisha Saeed’s story about a girl’s determination to make the world a fairer place . A short fun read with a beautiful book cover. We rated it at 3.



In January, the Thursday Morning Fiction Book Group read **Ponti** - **Sharlene Teo's** debut novel. The novel whose central story revolves around Amisa, a movie star who plays the role of a Pontianak in a series of films, has been called "remarkable" by Ian McEwan and mentioned a few times in the local papers as a must-read.

However, for most of us the book came across as a failed creative writing exercise. It started off with several potentially interesting story lines, which did not develop enough to hold the reader's interest. The book was also filled with excessive metaphors and similes. Statements like "awkwardness that wafts over the table like a fart" and "stank up the kitchen with an odour like armpits and expired chicken" did nothing to hold us captive.

Interestingly, the extreme descriptions tapered off in the second half of the book. Whether this was because the author ran out on her creativity, or the editor finally managed to edit it is anybody's guess.

Overall, we rated *Ponti* a 2.5. Like Amisa's daughter Szu, it spread sadness over us when we read it and like Amisa, it could have gone many places but it didn't.

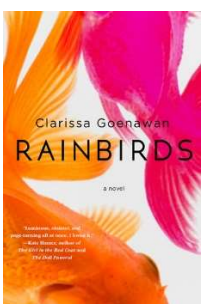


The Wednesday FOM book group read **Japanese Inn**, by **Oliver Statler** (first published in 1961).

Member of the American occupation forces in Japan at the end of WW2, Oliver Statler regularly escaped to the small seaside town of Okitsu, to find peace and quiet within the walls of the Minaguchi-Ya ryokan, an inn founded 400 years earlier and run by the Mochizuku family, a continuous succession of 18 generations (though no longer the case today). Okitsu, now almost forgotten, was for a few centuries strategically located on the Tokaido road, linking Kyoto to Edo, today Tokyo. The book narrates the story of the inn chronologically, set within the larger historical context of Japan, based on facts sprinkled with fictive – though totally credible – stories by the author. He is skilled at bringing to life real figures : the shogun Hideyoshi, the great artist Hiroshige, the Dutch traders traveling from Nejima to Edo to pay their respect to the Shogun in Edo, as well as imaginary ones : mainly commoners such as the imperial post couriers, the house maids or the pilgrims.

His depictions are so vivid that at times when we read this book, it feels we are thrown onto a kabuki stage, populated by colourful characters : samurais, geishas, farmers, Buddhist monks or Shinto priests, or little children peeking over the bamboo gate.

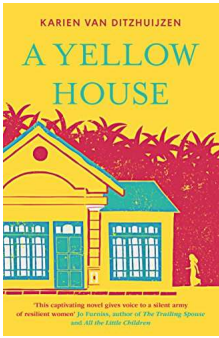
Our group found this book lively with good story telling. Although it is filled with a myriad of details about the daily life of the Japanese and the history of Japan, it was highly readable. This book is ideal to understand 350 years of Japanese history and it definitely made us to want to go to Japan, or visit it again. Oliver Statler, inspired by James Michener, was an avid collector of Japanese prints (more than a 1000) which he donated to the Art Institute of Chicago. Since many woodblock prints illustrate the book; it is perhaps best to read in paper form rather than electronically. We gave it a 4.1



In January, the Friday morning Book Club read "**Rainbirds**" by Singapore-based, Indonesian author **Clarissa Goenawan**.

Set in small town Japan in the 1990's, the story about a young man looking for answers to his sister's murder fuelled a lively discussion about Japanese culture, Japan then and now, and how an author could write from the perspective of a culture and gender other than that of their own. Overall we rated the book 3.5

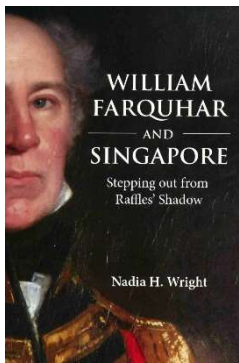
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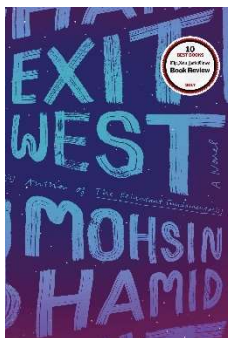
The Friday morning Book Club read **A Yellow House** by first time novelist **Karien Van Ditzhuijzen**. We had the pleasure of interacting with the author too and it was interesting to hear her perspective on the book. The author highlights various issues in this book "feminism"...and the choices a woman has to make along its path, "bullying" and its power play, about identity and belonging and above all the book grapples with the lives of domestic workers , it gives them a face and a voice and and takes us through their struggles.

An interesting read, we rated it 3.5.

November 2018



Last month, the Non-fiction book group had a close look at William Farquhar and his relationship with Raffles through **Nadia H Wright's book, William Farquhar and Singapore**. It acts as a counterpoint to the conventional view of Raffles as the main architect of modern Singapore. As a group, we questioned her impartiality as she overwhelmingly builds a case for Farquhar's contributions. She practically bends over backwards to portray Raffles as a maligner of Farquhar's good name. While we gave the book a 4 for content (good use of primary sources), it was only a 2 for style. It read too much like a PhD thesis. Still worth the read to balance some of the hagiographic portrayals of Raffles. Just in time for 2019's bicentennial commemoration of Raffles's landing.



The Wednesday book group read **Exit West** by Pakistani author **Mohsin Hamid** (same author as Reluctant fundamentalist). This story follows the lives of Saeed and Nadia, who meet and fall in love in a war-torn city somewhere in the Middle East then emigrate to London and later to California.

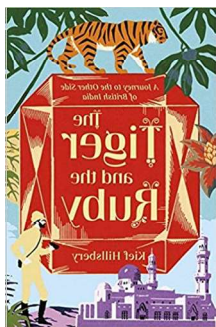
Through them, Hamid highlights the plight of refugees: first the dangers of living in a place of chaos and destruction, surrounded by religious fundamentalism ; violence creeps into daily life almost casually (a wall crumbles while one is taking a shower for example) ; the urgency to escape is palpable. The first part of the book feels almost dystopian. Then the sense that once you leave, you will never come back and see your loved ones ("But that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind"). Finally, the quasi-impossibility to become part of a new country, with its hostile citizens.

Yet we see beauty, love, poetry, companionship in this book and hope, ultimately. We liked the portrait of Nadia : a female protagonist showing strength and determination. We were thankful that a male author helped some of us to modify our judgement on women wearing a chador : not as submissive as one could think.

Hamid writes very well but some in our group found him more engaging in his precedent books than this one. While some liked the metaphor of the doors, others thought that it hides the tremendous hardship of travels for migrants. This touch of magic realism and the short parallel stories certainly piqued our interest.

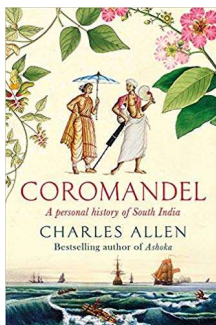
This book lingers in the reader because it addresses the idea of displacement and constantly asks "where is home ?", a question relevant to many of us.

We gave it a 3.6 score out of 5.



The Thursday morning fiction book group read **The Tiger and the Ruby** by Kief Hillsbery this month. Part biography part fiction, the story travels through India, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nepal in search of a great granduncle whose death has been a mystery for the family. The book garnered an average of 3.5 but individual ratings ranged from 2.5 to 4. While some of us enjoyed the writing style and historical details, others felt that the story-line lacked depth and had too many characters.

A decent read but not a must-read.



The Non-fiction book group recently took up the latest **Charles Allen book, Coromandel: A Personal History of South India**. While seemingly a personal account of his encounters with this southern part of India, Charles Allen wrote in the end quite an ambitious book that starts from its geologic origins all the way to contemporary India. It did not end up being a story of just the Coromandel coast, but incorporated much wider scope taking in Buddhism, Jainism, Ashoka and more. He brought in his latest research and his own interpretation of the arrival of the Arya people and how it informed its history. While we gave it a 4 out of 5 for content (learned quite a bit) we were split as to his style of writing. While some thought it was 2-3, others found it to be a 4. You will have to decide for yourself.

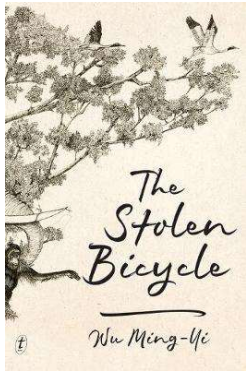


The Friday morning Book Club read **The Vegetarian** (2007) by the South Korean author **Han Kang**. Her first work to be published in English, it was translated by Deborah Smith in 2015 and won the 2016 Man Booker International Prize.

The members found the novel to be concise and swift, the language being almost rhythmic. An uncanny blend of beauty and horror, an emotional read which will linger long in one's mind.

At the center of Han's novel is Yeong-hye, a woman who first gives up eating meat and then gives up eating altogether, Yeong-hye remains in many ways a mystery. She never tells her own story. Rather, we come to understand the outlines of her story from the people around her...her oafish husband, her artistic brother-in-law and her sister.

A haunting novel, one which we are glad we read but will not be an easy recommend . We rated it 3.5 .



The Thursday morning book group read **Wu Ming-yi's The Stolen Bicycle** this month. His fifth novel uses antique bicycles to journey into Taiwan's 20th-century history.

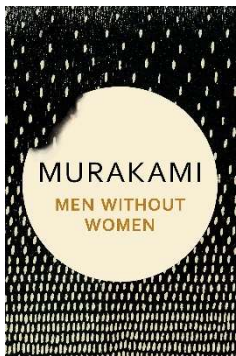
While generally the group found the book easy to read, most felt that it had too many side stories that became tedious to follow. The story alternates with chapters called "Bike Notes" which detail bicycle types, their design and pictures and this complicated the reading initially.

An online review sums up our thoughts on the book:

"The story meanders and diverges and then hooks into a subject and follows it a long way down its tributary, only to return and take another turn, meet another collector, owner, person, and even a long-lived elephant,....

....However, I admit I became somewhat fatigued by the never-ending meandering, the prolonged encounters and diversions, to the point where I began to lose interest, despite avidly not wishing to."

We rated the book 3.5.



"Like dry ground welcoming the rain, he let solitude, silence, and loneliness soak in," - Haruki Murakami.

Couples' Book group met over delicious dinner hosted by Rosie, to discuss **Men Without Women by Haruki Murakami**.

A 2014 collection of short stories published in English in 2017, his stories explore the lives of men who find themselves alone. Displayed are his trademark magical realism and abrupt endings without resolution, along with Beatles, jazz, cats, and whiskey. Ratings were 3 for Content & Style; 2 to Recommend to another FOM book group; and 4 for Discussion the book inspired (out of 5). Our reactions were mixed, but as a group, we found the stories a challenge to read. It was suggested that the elements of Japanese spiritual folklore & ghost stories were difficult for non-Japanese to follow.



-Friday Morning Book Group Review- **SWEET BEAN PASTE : Durian Sukegawa** (Translated by Alison Watts)

"Sentaro has failed. He has a criminal record, drinks too much, and his dream of becoming a writer is just a distant memory. With only the blossoming of the cherry trees to mark the passing of time, he spends his days in a tiny confectionery shop selling dorayaki, a type of pancake filled with sweet bean paste. But everything is about to change."

The story featured three generations and three unlikely friendships. Each person trapped in their own pain and life struggles. The beautiful writing brought the world of a Japanese confectionery business to life – you can almost smell the deliciousness of soft, sweet-bean pancakes wafting from the pages. This book generated great discussion on loneliness, friendship, social issues, trust and forgiveness. All our readers were moved by the emotion in the author's words. It was the first time I can remember more than one of us rating a book 5/5. Highly Recommended.



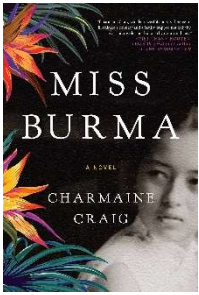
The Wednesday book group discussed **The Accusation**, a book of 7 North Korean short stories written in the mid-1990s by **Bandi** (a Korean word meaning “firefly”, i.e. a tiny light in a world of darkness”).

The author, still living in North Korea, managed to have the manuscript smuggled out of the country (described in the post-word, which itself reads like a spy novel). The short stories tell us of ordinary North Koreans (a housewife, a journalist, a factory worker, a farmer, a grandmother) and the devastating impact of the communist regime has on their daily life (unable to visit a dying mother, no right to close the curtains of living room, a family train trip turning into a tragedy...). These stories are harrowing but they also allow us to take a peek into this secretive country. These stories are also a sign of resistance and hope by the population that there will eventually be light at the end of the tunnel. As one character says “whatever the play, the curtain always falls in the end”.

Our conversation about this book was intense, discussing writers in exile, authoritarian regimes, communism in Europe/Asia/South America, Mao’s Little Red Book’s popularity in France and communist-themed lullabies in Germany.

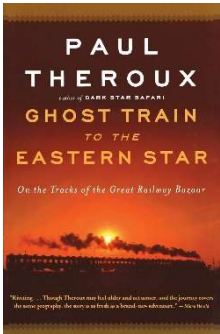
A must read for anyone curious about North Korea and/or dissident literature under totalitarian government.

We gave it a 4 out 5 (and rated our discussion 10 out of 5!)



The Thursday Morning Book Club read **Miss Burma** for September. The novel is based on the author's (**Charmaine Craig**) own history and traces a span of 40 years beginning from 1926. While we all enjoyed the book for its insight into Burma's political and racial history -which in some ways allowed us to put into context the current situation there - we felt that it lost out on writing style.

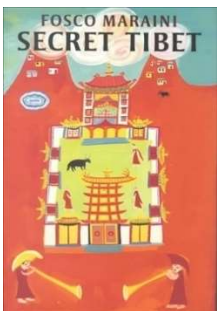
As a result the book was rated a 3.5.



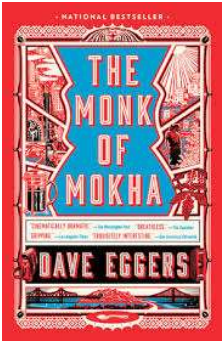
All travel is time travel... Travel gives you glimpses of the past and the future, your own and other people's." - Paul Theroux.

Couples Book Group met over delicious Indian fish curry dinner hosted by Esme & Martin. In "**Ghost Train to the Eastern Star,**" **Paul Theroux** re-visits his train travel 33 years later, through former Soviet Union, India, Southeast Asia, and Japan. Sounding somewhat like a grumpy older man with attitude, he noted changes with the outside world and within himself. (He was pretty sour on Singapore, where he had worked for three years teaching at NUS.) Though a talented writer, a few of us felt that the book was a little too much about him, and there was also no shortage of descriptions of sex workers. Ratings were 3-4 for Content & Recommend to another FOM book group; and 4-5 for Style & Discussion the book inspired (out of 5).

"Travel is at its most rewarding when it ceases to be about your reaching a destination and becomes indistinguishable from living your life" - Paul Theroux

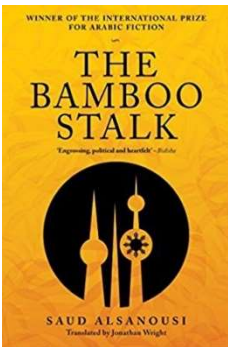


The Wednesday non-fiction book group recently discussed **Fosco Maraini's Secret Tibet**, originally published in 1951 and later updated in 1993. He wrote this book after 2 trips spent in Tibet in 1937 and 1948, documenting its people and culture. What makes the book especially poignant is that the world he wrote about has now virtually disappeared. He is especially cogent about the different strands of Tibetan Buddhism, particularly good for ACM docents. We believe it to be one of the best books of the year - 5/5 for content and style. The translation is especially good. It also contains many photographs taken by Maraini and one particular edition has his camera settings!



The Thursday morning fiction book group read **Dave Eggers' The Monk of Mokha** this month. A fascinating account of coffee's origins and the story of one man's mission to reintroduce Yemeni coffee to the world. The book was a good read in terms of educating most of us on the history of coffee and the intricacies of production and processing but many of us felt that it's storyline and characters lacked detail and depth.

Though we ranked it a 3.5, it was a book that all of us enjoyed reading.



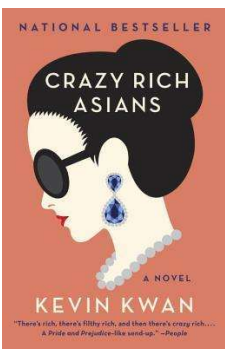
The Wednesday book group (only 5 of us this time, many still traveling overseas) just read and reviewed **Saud Alsanousi's The bamboo stalk**. This recent novel describes the life of teenager José/Isa, the son of a Filipino domestic worker and her Kuwaiti employer. After living most of his childhood in the Philippines, José travels back to Kuwait where he was born, full of hope for a new life in his father's land. His optimism soon faces strong opposition from his paternal grandmother and aunts and harsh racism from a number of people.

The author is a Kuwaiti journalist who lived a few months in a small village in the Philippines in order to research for this book.

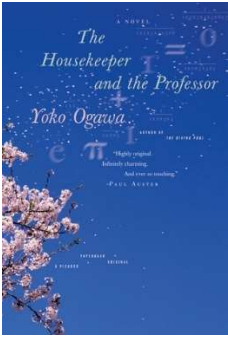
While we lamented the simplistic plot and young-adults writing style (both really brought the score down), this book gave us an unusual insight on life in Kuwait : we learned a lot about domestic life, the political scene, social and family interactions, outcasts (foreign workers but also bidoons), etc.

We also found interesting the progressive reflections on Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. We were surprised that an author living in a strict Muslim country could write openly about these topics, which could be considered controversial in a conservative society.

Total score : 2.75 for the book and 5/5 for the food from Gisella who had prepared scrumptious Filipino and Middle Eastern cuisine for us.



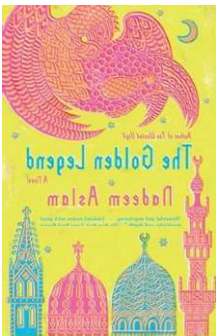
What else but **Crazy Rich Asians**? Talking about the **Kevin Kwan** book, that is - a romantic comedy mostly set in Singapore. Couples book group kicked off the end of summer vacation at Jenni & Eric's poolside BBQ, enjoying a double whammy of a discussion of the book and the movie. It wasn't literature but good fun, although a few people could not stomach past a couple of chapters. Ratings were 3 for style (out of 5) 4 for content, 4 to recommend to another FOM group, and 5 for discussion. Also a 5 on sadness scale for Susan & Woody's last meeting as they depart Singapore



The Thursday Fiction Book Group's book for June was **Yoko Ogawa's The Housekeeper and The Professor**. A lovely read, the book was enjoyed by most of us and rated an average of 4.

Between complex mathematical equations, Ogawa spins a simple yet touching story of a professor who has a memory of only 80 minutes, and a housekeeper and her son. Just as the professor ties together random numbers into meaningful associations, Ogawa similarly connects her characters together.

If you are looking for an uplifting and easy read this summer, this is your book. Happy summer to all!

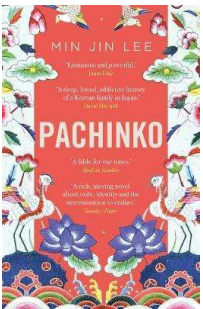


The Thursday morning fiction group read **Nadeem Aslam's The Golden Legend** for the month of May. The book was rated an average of 4.5 . We loved it for its storyline and writing style and though there were a few areas where we felt the story became a little fairy tale-ish, overall it was a well written story of discrimination, terror and love.

This month we also said goodbye to Tassy Vasi Moochhala, the group's amazing coordinator. Tassy has run the group with incredible efficiency for the last 13 years and can probably count on her fingertips the sessions she's missed. Tassy moves to Karachi in September and to remind her of all the books she's read over the years we got her a

little memento with the names of all the 132 books she's read.

You will be missed Tassy. All the best with your move and we look forward to having you back soon!

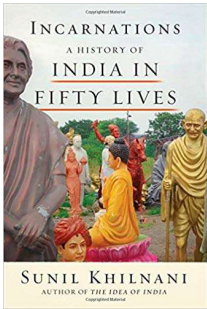


Couples' Book Group discussed "**PACHINKO**" over Korean and Japanese inspired dinner, courtesy of Gulcin & Phil!

"History has failed us, but no matter" is the powerful, attention-grabbing start of the book that foreshadows what is to come. The book begins in a humble Korean fishing village in early 1900's and takes us through generations of poverty, harsh discrimination, and suffering of a Korean family that migrated to Japan, through colonial rule and beyond.

PACHINKO is only Korean-American **Min Jin Lee's** second novel ("Free Food for Millionaires" was her first) - Very readable explorations of identity, faith, and duty for the large ethnic minority of Koreans in Japan - a neglected topic of history.

Ratings were between 4-5 (out of 5) for Style, Content, Recommend book and Discussion it inspired. A few members felt it was the best book he/she has read in a long time.

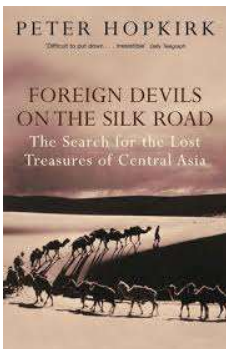


At Jane & Sunder's lovely garden setting while feasting on Indian food and celebrating Steve's birthday, the Couples' Book Group discussed "**Incarnations: India in 50 Lives,**" by **Sunil Khilnani**, A professor at Kings College London. He journeyed across India, both in space and time, to explore 50 lives that shaped the vast country through stories and epics, not just in book form but originally in a BBC Radio 4 series. Some of us felt that the stories worked better in audio form than written, where it was often dry. Some recommended the book to be digested piecemeal and not consumed like a novel. Starting with the Buddha, Khilnani painted portraits of kings, warriors, poets, film directors, artists, corporate titans, etc. He endeavored to be accurate and unromantic in his presentation of characters; where Ashoka, for example, was "short, fat, and famously afflicted by bad skin - a bit of a lens-breaker as they say in Bollywood". "By insisting that figures from India's past be preserved in memory as saints, we deny them not just their real natures, but their genuine achievements."-Sunil Khilnani. Ratings (out of 5) were almost 5 for Content, 4 for Style, 3.5 for Recommend and Discussion it inspired.



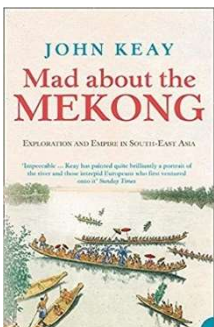
The Thursday Morning Fiction Book Group read **The Green Island by Shawna Yang Ryan**. The book covers a period of six decades as the narrator's personal life shadows the course of Taiwan's history from the end of Japanese colonial rule to the decades under martial law and, finally, to Taiwan's transformation into a democracy.

It was rated a 4 by the group.



The Wednesday book group read and reviewed **Peter Hopkirk's Foreign devils on the Silk Road**. This non-fiction book describes the late 19th/early 20th C archeological expeditions to the various sites in the infamous Taklamakan desert. The lives and adventures of these real-life Indiana Jones are fascinating. On the other hand, the race for archeological treasures led to massive removal (theft ?) of religious relics, historical artefacts and works of art from Western China in order to increase the collections of museums in London, Paris, Tokyo, Berlin, St Petersburg, etc....

As one can imagine, our discussion was intense. We gave the book 4.5.

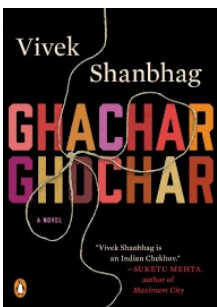


The Wednesday Non-fiction book recently read **Mad about the Mekong by John Keay**, an account of the 1866-68 journey of the Mekong River by the members of the French-led Mekong Exploration Commission. Because of this well-documented (though not necessarily well-remembered) expedition, France was able to build its own empire of "Indo-China" in what's known as the "Little Game". We gave the book a content score of 3.5 and a style score of 4. It was very readable book, but less meaty than we usually like for this type of book. Edward Gargan's The River's Tale was further suggested reading about the Mekong River but from China down, rather than from Vietnam up. We gave our discussion a 5 as our discussion leader blew up the maps which gave insight to the book. It is a very good complement to the new Angkor exhibition at the ACM.

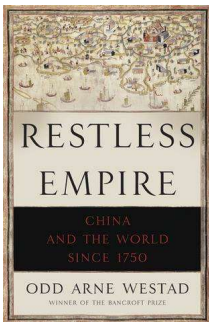


The Couples' book group read "**The Spice Garden**" by long-term journalist **Michael Vatikiotis**. Over a fabulous dinner hosted by Gilat & Steve, the group discussed the book's shortcomings as a formulaic caricature of fictionalized characters depicted from the Christian-Muslim conflict in Indonesia's history. However, we recognized the book's value, which Time Magazine referred to as "the first serious novel in English about the sectarian violence in Indonesia after the fall of Suharto." Ratings were 2-3 for Style & Content; 3-4 for Recommend book and Discussion it inspired.

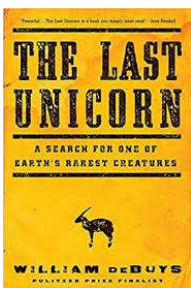
"The ferry would come, and then leave. Then they would be alone and cut off from the world again, protected by a wall of coral that kept most things out, but which, of course, was no help against the evil within."- by Michael Vatikiotis.



The Thursday book group read **Ghachar Ghuchar** this month. The novella by **Vivek Shanbhag** is a very quick read and has been translated from Kannada by Srinath Perur, an acclaimed English-language novelist in his own right. The book was rated between 4 and 5 by the members because of the measured writing style and cleverly hidden symbolism in the storyline- which is a narration by an unnamed male member of a tightly knit Bangalore family as they progress from rags to riches. Not your usual Indian english fiction.

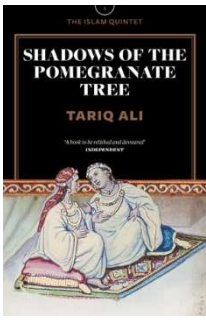


The (now-Wednesday morning) Non-fiction book group had a lively discussion on **Odd Arne Westad's** book about Chinese foreign relations from 1750 onwards, "**Restless Empire**". We gave the book a 5 for content because it is a great book for the general reader with lots of new insights and the analysis is better the most. We thought it was a 4.5 for style as it sums up quite nicely the various books on China that we had read in the past (Pomfret's Beautiful Country and Middle Kingdom, Rana Mitter's China's War with Japan, Dikotter's Tragedy of Liberation, etc). The thematic chapters sometimes read like a series of essays or college lectures. If you ever want to know why China is behaving in a certain way under present circumstances, this book would point you in the right direction.

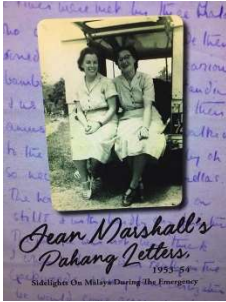


The Wednesday book group read **William deBuys' The last unicorn**. Nature writer DeBuys and biologist Robichaud trek through central Laos searching for the very rare soala, a horned bovine discovered only in 1992, a critically endangered species.

We gave this non-fiction book 4 out of 5 : we thought it was an honest account on how difficult it remains to explore a deep and remote jungle, to encounter isolated settlements and navigate the economics of poaching and corruption. Many felt that the title didn't represent the book well and suggested that the word 'unicorn' was misleading. Some of us found the topic of exploitation of natural resources and endangered species depressing.



The Thursday fiction book group read **Tariq Ali's Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree** in April . The novel is a saga of a Muslim family living in Granada after the reconquest of Spain by Isabella and Ferdinand in the 15th century. The book was rated 4/5 by the group and many members commented that this was the first time they were getting another perspective of the historical events.

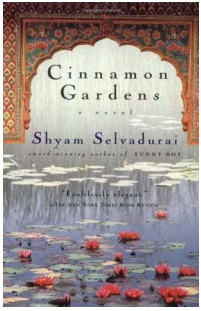


“I ate my first papaya...slept under my first mosquito net, and sweated my first quart of sweat,” recalled Jean Marshall.

Over juicy BBQ sausage at Catherine & Francois’s lovely home, couples’ book group discussed **“Jean Marshall’s Pahang Letters, 1953-54: Sidelights on Malaya during The Emergency”** edited by Mandakini Arora. Letters written by the young, sharp & perceptive rural Red Cross field officer (and later married to Singapore’s first elected chief minister-to-be) were re-discovered, illuminating the social and political life of

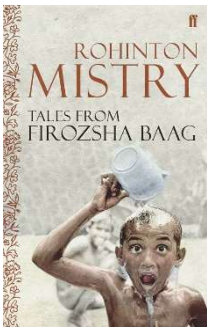
Malaya during this time.

Our group valued learning about this little-known time, but felt it would have been helpful to fill in more background info between the letters to provide some context. Ratings were 2 for Style; 3 for Content, Recommend, and Discussion of the book.



Our book this month was **Cinnamon Gardens by Shyam Selvadurai**. Set in the 1920's, the book is written in a Jane Austenish style about colonial Sri Lanka. We all enjoyed the book as the characters are well defined and the plot easy to follow.

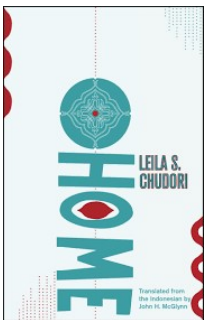
The group rated the book between a 3.5 to 4.



The Wednesday Book Group read **Rohinton Mistry's Tales from Firozsha Baag**. The compilation of short stories by this Canadian-Indian writer (famous for his later novels : A fine balance and Family Matters) takes us back to the late 1960s in Mumbai. There we take a peek at the everyday lives of members of the Parsi community who live in the same apartment complex. Together with them we laugh (especially in the story Squatters), we cry, we empathise and we see how these neighbours interact, not always peacefully. We also feel the strong sense of community, which the author reflects with nostalgia once he emigrates to Canada.

As readers, we were a bit unsettled at the beginning by the lack of glossary at the back of the book (a number of terms in Gujarati, hindi, Parsi) but we soon overcame the hurdle as the context gave us many clues. We all found that this book was a good opportunity to know more about the Parsi culture.

For once, as this is a first in our group to all agree, we gave it a unanimous score of 4 out of 5.



The Thursday Fiction Group read **Home by Leila Chudori** in January. The book is set in post-1965 Indonesia and traces the lives of political exiles both at home and in France. An interesting read which most of us felt could be recommended to others. It lost out a bit on style and content as some of the narrative was repeated multiple times and some relationships seemed too romanticised. But this could be due to losses in translation as the book was written in Bahasa Indonesia and translated into English by John McGlynn.

Leila S. Chudori is Indonesia's most prominent female journalist. Home is her debut novel and won Indonesia's most important literary prize in 2013.



The Non-fiction Book Group started 2018 with a book which had a polarising effect on the group, with the seemingly innocuous (and slightly misleading*) title, **Travels with a Tangerine: A Journey in the Footnotes of Ibn Battutah**. You either really enjoyed the book or... didn't. Kind of like reactions to Marmite/Vegemite. For some, Tim Mackintosh-Smith's book reflected his playfulness with words while for others, it was not deep enough on the subject of Ibn Battutah and too much of a vanity piece (not to mention too many searches for saints' tombs). Content: 2-2.5; Style: 1 or 4.5, depending on how much you enjoyed it.

*The tangerine in the title did not refer to the fruit, but a denizen of Tangier, Morocco (in this book, that's Ibn Battutah).