

# Mary Baldwin College Alumnae/i Book Club

March 2008

What we are reading in  
2007/2008:

Apr 5: *Handmaiden's Tale* by  
Margaret Atwood

May 3: *The Glass Castle* by  
Jeanette Walls

June 7: *The Bean Trees* by  
Barbara Kingsolver

July 5: *The Last  
Witchfinder* by James  
Morrow

Aug 2: *Snow Flower and the  
Secret Fan* by Lisa See

Sept 6: *Tortilla Curtain* by  
T.C. Boyle

Oct 4: *The Girls Who Went  
Away* by Ann Fessler

Nov 1: *The Same Sweet  
Girls* by Cassandra King

Dec 6: *The Secret Agent* by  
Joseph Conrad

Jan 3: *I Got Somebody in  
Staunton* by William Henry  
Lewis

Feb. 7: *Love* by Toni  
Morrison

Mar 6: *The Kite Runner* by  
Khaled Hosseini

Apr 3: *The Lovely Bones* by  
Alice Sebold

## *Time to Pick Books!!*

We are going to pick the books this month!! Here are a few more suggestions.....I am open to picking up to the next 12 books for us to read and discuss. The Excerpts are taken from [www.bn.com](http://www.bn.com).

### **The Thirteenth Tale** by Diane Setterfield (Fiction)

*All children mythologize their birth.* . . . So begins the prologue of reclusive author Vida Winter's beloved collection of stories, long famous for the mystery of the missing thirteenth tale. The enigmatic Winter has always kept her violent and tragic past a secret. Now old and ailing, she summons a biographer to tell the truth about her extraordinary life: Margaret Lea, a young woman for whom the secret of her own birth remains an ever-present pain.

Disinterring the life she meant to bury for good, Vida mesmerizes Margaret with the power of her storytelling. Hers is a tale of gothic strangeness, featuring the Angelfield family -- including the beautiful and willful Isabelle, and the feral twins Adeline and Emmeline -- a ghost, a governess, and a devastating fire. Struck by a curious parallel between their stories, Margaret demands the truth from Vida, and together they confront the ghosts that have haunted them.

### **Eat, Pray, Love** by Elizabeth Gilbert (Women's Studies)

Oddly but aptly titled, *Eat, Pray, Love* is an experience to be savored: This spiritual memoir brims with humor, grace, and scorching honesty. After a messy divorce and other personal missteps, Elizabeth Gilbert confronts the "twin goons" of depression and loneliness by traveling to three countries that she intuited had something she was seeking. First, in Italy, she seeks to master the art of pleasure by indulging her senses. Then, in an Indian ashram, she learns the rigors and liberation of mind-exalting hours of meditation. Her final destination is Bali, where she achieves a precarious, yet precious equilibrium. Gilbert's original voice and unforced wit lend an unpretentious air to her expansive spiritual journey.

### **The Pillars of the Earth** by Ken Follett (Fiction)

*The Pillars of the Earth* sweeps through four decades of 12th Century England drawing the listener into the raw, flamboyant middle ages. It is a shining saga of good and evil, treachery and intrigue, violence and beauty. Not-so-noble knights, righteous heroes, valiant heroines and both virtuous and immoral men of God highlight this story. They manipulate, and are in turn manipulated by, the political turmoil and unrest between the reigns of Henry I and Henry II.

We are on the MBC website!!  
[www.mbc.edu/alumnae](http://www.mbc.edu/alumnae)

Join us online!!  
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MBCAlumBookClub>

If you are in the Richmond, VA area we would love for you to join us! All meeting times are 7pm and last approximately 1 hour.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact Theresa Cash Lewis '99 at [pinkferrets@gmail.com](mailto:pinkferrets@gmail.com) or the Alumnae/i office at 1-800-763-7359.

### **Devil in the White City by Erik Larson (True Crime)**

Two men, each handsome and unusually adept at his chosen work, embodied an element of the great dynamic that characterized America's rush toward the twentieth century. The architect was Daniel Hudson Burnham, the fair's brilliant director of works and the builder of many of the country's most important structures, including the Flatiron Building in New York and Union Station in Washington, D.C. The murderer was Henry H. Holmes, a young doctor who, in a malign parody of the White City, built his "World's Fair Hotel" just west of the fairgrounds—a torture palace complete with dissection table, gas chamber, and 3,000-degree crematorium. Burnham overcame tremendous obstacles and tragedies as he organized the talents of Frederick Law Olmsted, Charles McKim, Louis Sullivan, and others to transform swampy Jackson Park into the White City, while Holmes used the attraction of the great fair and his own satanic charms to lure scores of young women to their deaths. What makes the story all the more chilling is that Holmes really lived, walking the grounds of that dream city by the lake.

### **The Shadow of the Wind by Carlos Ruiz Zafon (Fiction)**

Barcelona, 1945-A great world city lies shrouded in secrets after the war, and a boy mourning the loss of his mother finds solace in his love for an extraordinary book called *The Shadow of the Wind*, by an author named Julian Carax. When the boy searches for Carax's other books, it begins to dawn on him, to his horror, that someone has been systematically destroying every copy of every book the man has ever written. Soon the boy realizes that *The Shadow of the Wind* is as dangerous to own as it is impossible to forget, for the mystery of its author's identity holds the key to an epic story of murder, madness, and doomed love that someone will go to any lengths to keep secret.

### **The Friday Night Knitting Club by Kate Jacobs (Fiction)**

Juggling the demands of her yarn shop and single-handedly raising a teenage daughter has made Georgia Walker grateful for her Friday Night Knitting Club. Her friends are happy to escape their lives too, even for just a few hours. But when Georgia's ex suddenly reappears, demanding a role in their daughter's life, her whole world is shattered.

Luckily, Georgia's friends are there, sharing their own tales of intimacy, heartbreak, and miracle making. And when the unthinkable happens, these women will discover that what they've created isn't just a knitting club: it's a sisterhood.

### **Water for Elephants By Sara Gruen (Fiction)**

As a young man, Jacob Jankowski was tossed by fate onto a rickety train that was home to the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth. It was the early part of the great Depression, and for Jacob, now ninety, the circus world he remembers was both his salvation and a living hell. A veterinary student just shy of a degree, he was put in charge of caring for the circus menagerie. It was there that he met Marlina, the beautiful equestrian star married to August, the charismatic but twisted animal trainer. And he met Rosie, an untrainable elephant who was the great gray hope for this third-rate traveling show. The bond that grew among this unlikely trio was one of love and trust, and, ultimately, it was their only hope for survival.

### **The Cloister Walk by Kathleen Norris (Self-Improvement)**

Why would a married woman with a thoroughly Protestant background and often more doubt than faith be drawn to the ancient practice of monasticism, to a community of celibate men whose days are centered around a rigid schedule of prayer, work, and scripture? This is the question that Kathleen Norris herself asks as, somewhat to her own surprise, she found herself on two extended residencies at a Benedictine monastery. Yet upon leaving the monastery, she began to feel herself transformed, and the daily events of her life on the Great Plains - from her morning walk to her going to sleep at night - gradually took on new meaning. She found that in the monastery, time slowed down, offering a new perspective on community, family, and even small-town life. By coming to understand the Benedictine practice of celibacy, she felt her own marriage enriched; through the communal reading aloud of the psalms every day, her notion of the ancient oral tradition of poetry came to life; and even the mundane task of laundry took on new meaning through the lens of Benedictine ritual. Writing with lyrical grace, Kathleen Norris here takes us through a liturgical year, as she experienced it both within the monastery and outside it. She shows us, from the rare perspective of someone who is both insider and outsider, how immersion in the cloistered world - its liturgy, its rituals, its sense of community - can impart meaning to everyday events and deepen our secular lives. Through her masterly prose and rare insight, the monastery, often considered archaic or otherworldly, becomes immediate, accessible, and relevant to us, no matter what our faith may be.

### **Middlesex: A Novel by Jeffrey Eugenides (Fiction)**

For the first fourteen years of life, Calliope Helen Stephanides, the narrator and main character of this second novel from the author of *The Virgin Suicides*, is a coltish schoolgirl, the bright, coddled daughter of a hard-working Greek family who own a chain of hotdog stands in Detroit. But for Calliope, the transformations of puberty do not consist of the usual ripening of womanly curves, but rather the solid musculature, husky voice and nascent mustache of shocking, unsuspected manhood. Named for the muse of epics—of which this wonderful comic novel is surely a modern version—Calliope is the rarest form of hermaphrodite. "Like Tiresias," she explains, "I was first one thing and then the other."

### **The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (Historical Fiction)**

It's just a small story really, about among other things: a girl, some words, an accordionist, some fanatical Germans, a Jewish fist-fighter, and quite a lot of thievery. . . .

Set during World War II in Germany, Markus Zusak's groundbreaking new novel is the story of Liesel Meminger, a foster girl living outside of Munich. Liesel scratches out a meager existence for herself by stealing when she encounters something she can't resist—books. With the help of her accordion-playing foster father, she learns to read and shares her stolen books with her neighbors during bombing raids as well as with the Jewish man hidden in her basement before he is marched to Dachau.

### **Daughter of Destiny: An Autobiography by Benazir Bhutto**

Prime Minister of Pakistan, Bhutto writes with poise and passion in this autobiography, both a catharsis and a coming to terms with her past. In the poignant opening chapter, she describes the brutal murder in 1977 of her father, Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, by General Zia ul-Haq. Under Zia's 11-year military dictatorship, propped up by the CIA and the Reagan administration, the author was kept under house arrest, then imprisoned for years in a cell, where guards encouraged her to commit suicide. She writes lovingly of her brother Shah Nawaz, whose highly suspicious death may have been a CIA murder, she speculates. She is evasive or reticent on sundry personal matters, such as her arranged marriage in 1987. Reading Bhutto's reminiscences about prison, schooling at Harvard and Oxford and her valuable work during her political exile, the reader grows impatient to learn more about what she intends to do for Pakistan, but the book ends on the eve of her triumphant election in late 1988.

**Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia by Jean Sasson (Women's Studies)**

Sultana is a Saudi Arabian princess, a woman born to fabulous, uncountable wealth. She has four mansions on three continents, her own private jet, glittering jewels, designer dresses galore. But in reality she lives in a gilded cage. She has no freedom, no vote, no control over her own life, no value but as a bearer of sons. Hidden behind her black floor-length veil, she is a prisoner, jailed by her father, her husband, her sons, and her country. Sultana is a member of the Saudi royal family, closely related to the king. For the sake of her daughters, she has decided to take the risk of speaking out about the life of women in her country, regardless of their rank. She must hide her identity for fear that the religious leaders in her country would call for her death to punish her honesty. Only a woman in her position could possibly hope to escape from being revealed and punished, despite her cloak of anonymity. She tells of her own life, from her turbulent childhood to her arranged marriage - a happy one until her husband decided to displace her by taking a second wife - and of the lives of her sisters, her friends, and her servants. Although they share affection, confidences and an easy camaraderie within the confines of the women's quarters, they also share a history of appalling oppressions, everyday occurrences that in any other culture would be seen as shocking human rights violations: thirteen-year-old girls forced to marry men five times their age, young women killed by drowning, stoning, or isolation in the "woman's room," a padded, windowless cell where women are confined with neither light nor conversation until death claims them. Servants are forced into sexual servitude and severely beaten if they attempt escape. By speaking out, Sultana risks bringing the wrath of the Saudi establishment upon her head and the heads of her children. In the barren, hopeless wasteland that is the life of Saudi women today, free speech is punishable by death.

This book is actually the first in a series of three. The next two books in the series are:

**Princess Sultana's Daughters**

Sasson's sequel to *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil* is another page-turner related by "Princess Sultana." A member of the royal family of Saudi Arabia, Sultana now is married to a progressive prince, but this privileged status does not protect her or her two daughters from the country's repressive laws against women. Though a devout Muslim, Sultana believes the entrenched male power structure has perverted religious doctrine to justify veiling women and depriving them of basic civil liberties.

The lack of opportunity to forge equal relationships with men before and after marriage, Sultana argues, is why one of her daughters became fanatically religious and the other suffered a mental breakdown. This eye-opening account is limited to life among the royals rather than a critique of Saudi Arabian society, although Sultana describes the brutal custom of female circumcision practiced by the poor.

**Princess Sultana's Circle, Vol. 3**

With *Princess Sultana's Circle*, the extraordinary story of Sultana continues. The forced marriage of Sultana's niece to a cruel and depraved older man, and Sultana's discovery of the harem of sex slaves kept by a royal cousin, makes her more determined than ever to fight the oppression of women in Saudi Arabia. *Princess Sultana's Circle* paints a horrifying reality for women of the desert kingdom. It is a haunting look at the danger of Saudi male dominance and the desperate lives of the women they rule.