

Rusland Reading Group - Books for 2007-2008 Season

The group meets on the 3rd Thursday of each month (apart from August and December) at 08:00 p.m..

<i>Meeting Date</i>	<i>Where</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Author</i>
September 20th	Helen Pierce, Ulverston	Testament of Youth	Vera Brittain
<p>In 1914 Vera Brittain was 21 years old, and an undergraduate student at Somerville College, Oxford. When war broke out in August of that year, Brittain "temporarily" disrupted her studies to enrol as a volunteer nurse, nursing casualties both in England and on the Western Front. The next four years were to cause a deep rupture in Brittain's life, as she witnessed not only the horrors of war first hand, but also experienced the quadruple loss of her fiancé, her brother, and two close friends. <i>Testament of Youth</i> is a powerfully written, unsentimental memoir which has continued to move and enthral readers since its first publication in 1933. Brittain, a pacifist since her First World War experiences, prefaces the book with a fairy tale, in which Catherine, the heroine, encounters a fairy godmother and is given the choice of having either a happy youth or a happy old age. She selects the latter and so her fate is determined: "Now this woman," warns the tale, "was the destiny of poor Catherine." And we find as we delve deeper into the book that she was the destiny of poor Vera too.</p>			

<i>Meeting Date</i>	<i>Where</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Author</i>
October 18th	Mandy Lane, Lilac Cottage, Oxen Park	A Spot of Bother suggested by Lin	Mark Haddon
<p>George Hall is an unobtrusive man. A little distant, perhaps, a little cautious, not at quite at ease with the emotional demands of fatherhood, or manly bonhomie. He does not understand the modern obsession with talking about everything. "The secret of contentment, George felt, lay in ignoring many things completely." Some things in life, however, cannot be ignored. At 61, George is settling down to a comfortable retirement, building a shed in his garden, reading historical novels and listening to a bit of light jazz. Then his tempestuous daughter, Katie, announces that she is getting re-married, to the deeply inappropriate Ray. Her family is not pleased – as her brother Jamie observes, Ray has "strangler's hands." Katie can't decide if she loves Ray, or loves the wonderful way he has with her son Jacob, and her mother Jean is a bit put out by all the planning and arguing the wedding has occasioned, which get in the way of her quite fulfilling late-life affair with one of her husband's ex-colleagues. And the tidy and pleasant life Jamie has created crumbles when he fails to invite his lover, Tony, to the dreaded nuptials.</p> <p>Unnoticed in the uproar, George discovers a sinister lesion on his hip, and quietly begins to lose his mind. The way these damaged people fall apart – and come together – as a family is the true subject of Haddon's disturbing yet amusing portrait of a dignified man trying to go insane politely. A SPOT OF BOTHER is Mark Haddon's unforgettable follow-up to the internationally beloved bestseller THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME. Here the madness –literally – of family life proves rich comic fodder for Haddon's crackling prose and bittersweet insights into misdirected love.</p> <p><i>(From the Publisher)</i></p>			

<i>Meeting Date</i>	<i>Where</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Author</i>
November 15th	Jan Benefield, High Dale Park	The Good Terrorist suggested by Helen Adams	Doris Lessing

The scene is contemporary London, where a loose-knit group of political vagabonds comprises an ill-defined and volatile underground. Drifting from one cause to the next, they occupy abandoned houses, demonstrate and picket, devise strategies to fit situations that may or may not arise. But, within this worlds, one particular commune - one small group of men and women whose deepest conviction seems to rest in a sense of their own largely untested radicalism - is moving inexorable toward active terrorism.
(see www.dorislessing.org/thegood.html)

<i>Meeting Date</i>	<i>Where</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Author</i>
January 17th	Jean Crabtree, Force Mills	2 books!: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Into the Wild • Cold Burial suggested by Jan and John	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jon Krakauer • Clive Powell-Williams

Into The Wild

Using the true story of a young man, who in 1992 walked deep into the Alaskan wilderness and whose SOS note and emaciated corpse were found four months later, Krakauer explores the obsession which leads some people to explore the outer limits of self, leave civilization behind and seek enlightenment through solitude and contact with nature.

Cold Burial

Powell-Williams reconstructs the doomed 1927 expedition of renowned adventurer Jack Hornby to Canada's Northwest Territories, using the diary of his 18-year-old cousin and fellow traveler, Edgar Christian. Hornby was part of a wealthy, aristocratic family whose lifestyle he rejected. On a trip home to attend his father's funeral, Hornby so captivated his young cousin with romantic tales of the wilderness that Christian soon begged Hornby to allow him on a trip to the Barren Lands of the Northwest Territories. This was a return trip for Hornby, then in his mid-40s, to the harsh, uninhabited land (temperatures of -30 degrees Fahrenheit were not unusual). Yet according to the author, Hornby, driven by an exaggerated sense of his invincibility and distracted by an unrequited love affair, prepared badly for the trip. He mistakenly decided not to take sled dogs, traveled with inadequate food and clothing, and miscalculated the availability of caribou for hunting. Christian's diary, found two years later along with three dead bodies (Hornby's friend Howard Adlard had also joined them) in the rough cabin they built, describes how the men were critically weakened by starvation and cold. As the last survivor, Christian provided a harrowing account of the deaths of Hornby and then Adlard before the diary broke off. In the end, Hornby's is an arresting story of a reckless wilderness gamble that did not pay off.

<i>Meeting Date</i>	<i>Where</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Author</i>
February 21st	Helen Adams, Rusland	The Tenderness of Wolves suggested by Mandy	Stef Penney
<p>1867, Canada - As winter tightens its grip on the isolated settlement of Dove River, a man is brutally murdered and a 17-year old boy disappears. Tracks leaving the dead man's cabin head north towards the forest and the tundra beyond. In the wake of such violence, people are drawn to the township - journalists, Hudson's Bay Company men, trappers, traders - but do they want to solve the crime, or exploit it? One-by-one the assembled searchers set out from Dove River, pursuing the tracks across a desolate landscape home only to wild animals, madmen and fugitives, variously seeking a murderer, a son, two sisters missing for 17 years, a forgotten Native American culture, and a fortune in stolen furs before the snows settle and cover the tracks of the past for good. In an astonishingly assured debut, Stef Penney deftly weaves adventure, suspense, revelation and humour into a panoramic historical romance, an exhilarating thriller, a keen murder mystery and ultimately, with the sheer scope and quality of her storytelling, one of the books of the year.</p>			

<i>Meeting Date</i>	<i>Where</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Author</i>
March 20th	tba (Dane's Howe??)	Half of a Yellow Sun suggested by Helen Pierce	Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
<p><i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i> is set in Nigeria during the 1960s, at a time of the vicious Nigeria- Biafra war in which more than a million people died and thousands were massacred in cold blood. Three characters are swept up in the rapidly unfolding political events. Ugwu, a boy from a poor village, is employed as a houseboy for a university lecturer. Olanna, a young, middle-class woman, has come to live with the professor, abandoning her privileged life in Lagos for a dusty university town and the charismatic idealism of her new lover. Richard is a tall, shy Englishman, in thrall to Olanna's twin sister Kainene, who refuses to belong to anyone.</p> <p>They are propelled into events that will pull them apart and bring them together in the most unexpected ways. As Nigerian troops advance and they run for their lives, their ideals – and their loyalties to each other – are severely tested. This novel is about Africa, about moral responsibility, the end of colonialism, ethnic allegiances, class and race, and about how love can complicate all these things. (From: http://www.orangeprize.co.uk/opf/winner.php4)</p>			

<i>Meeting Date</i>	<i>Where</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Author</i>
April 17th	Lin Mackintosh, Crosslands	A Thousand Splendid Suns suggested by Carol Driver	Khaled Hosseini

Mariam is only fifteen when she is sent to Kabul to marry the troubled and bitter Rasheed, who is thirty years her senior. Nearly two decades later, in a climate of growing unrest, tragedy strikes fifteen-year-old Laila, who must leave her home and join Mariam's unhappy household. Laila and Mariam are to find consolation in each other, their friendship to grow as deep as the bond between sisters, as strong as the ties between mother and daughter. With the passing of time comes Taliban rule over Afghanistan, the streets of Kabul loud with the sound of gunfire and bombs, life a desperate struggle against starvation, brutality and fear, the women's endurance tested beyond their worst imaginings. Yet love can move a person to act in unexpected ways, lead them to overcome the most daunting obstacles with a startling heroism. In the end, it is love that triumphs over death and destruction. "A Thousand Splendid Suns" is an unforgettable portrait of a wounded country and a deeply moving story of family and friendship. It is a beautiful, heart-wrenching story of an unforgiving time, an unlikely bond and an indestructible love. (From: [Waterstones](#))

<i>Meeting Date</i>	<i>Where</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Author</i>
May 15th	Liz Cringle, Dale Park	Nella Last's War: The Second World War Diaries of "Housewife 49" Suggested by Jean Crabtree	

In September 1939 Nella Last began a diary that was to continue for nearly 30 years. She was a volunteer with the Mass Observation Archive, which was set up in 1937 by Charles Madge and Tom Harrison.

They wanted to record the views of ordinary British people, and recruited volunteers to observe British life, and diarists to record a day-to-day account of their lives. These archives now give a unique insight into the lives of British civilians who found themselves going through a period when their country was at war.

Nella Last was a housewife, married to a shop-fitter and joiner. Their younger son, Cliff, was in the Army and the older son, Arthur, was a tax inspector and therefore exempted from conscription. Both were now living away from home. The Lasts lived in Barrow-in-Furness - a shipbuilding town. During the Blitz, it became a target for German bombing. This was a period when families were separated, and sometimes coping with the loss of a family member. Cities were being bombed, and housewives such as Nella had to find new ingenious ways to keep their homes together. This remarkable account depicts clearly what it was like for ordinary families living through World War Two.

<i>Meeting Date</i>	<i>Where</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Author</i>
June 19th	Helen Pierce	The Inheritance of Loss	Kiran Desai
<p>Kiran Desai takes us to the northeastern Himalayas where a rising insurgency challenges the old way of life. In a crumbling, isolated house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga lives an embittered old judge who wants to retire in peace when his orphaned granddaughter Sai arrives on his doorstep. The judge's chatty cook watches over her, but his thoughts are mostly with his son, Biju, hopscotching from one New York restaurant job to another, trying to stay a step ahead of the INS, forced to consider his country's place in the world. When a Nepalese insurgency in the mountains threatens Sai's new-sprung romance with her handsome Nepali tutor and causes their lives to descend into chaos, they, too, are forced to confront their colliding interests. The nation fights itself. The cook witnesses the hierarchy being overturned and discarded. The judge must revisit his past, his own role in this grasping world of conflicting desires-every moment holding out the possibility for hope or betrayal. A novel of depth and emotion, Desai's second, long-awaited novel fulfills the grand promise established by her first.</p>			

<i>Meeting Date</i>	<i>Where</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Author</i>
July 17th	John Walton	Notes from an Exhibition	Patrick Gale
<p>The new novel from the bestselling Patrick Gale. Renowned Canadian artist Rachel Kelly -- now of Penzance -- has buried her past and married a gentle and loving Cornish man. Her life has been a sacrifice to both her extraordinary art and her debilitating manic depression. When troubled artist Rachel Kelly dies painting obsessively in her attic studio in Penzance, her saintly husband and adult children have more than the usual mess to clear up. She leaves behind an extraordinary and acclaimed body of work -- but she also leaves a legacy of secrets and emotional damage it will take months to unravel. A wondrous, monstrous creature, she exerts a power that outlives her. To her children she is both curse and blessing, though they all in one way or another reap her whirlwind, inheriting her waywardness, her power of loving -- and her demons. Only their father's Quaker gifts of stillness and resilience give them any chance of withstanding her destructive influence and the suspicion that they came a poor second to the creation of her art. The reader becomes a detective, piecing together the clues of a life -- as artist, lover, mother, wife and patient -- which takes them from contemporary Penzance to 1960s Toronto to St Ives in the 1970s. What emerges is a story of enduring love, and of a family which weathers tragedy, mental illness and the intolerable strain of living with genius. Patrick Gale's latest novel shines with intelligence, humour and tenderness.</p>			

Rusland Valley Reading Group: Suggested books:

Book	Author	Who suggested
A Spot of Bother	Mark Haddon	Lin
Into the Wild	Jon Krakauer	Jan
Cold Burial	Clive Powell-Williams	John
The Good Terrorist	Doris Lessing	Helen A
The Tenderness of Wolves	Stef Penney	Mandy
Half of a Yellow Sun	Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	Helen Pierce
A Thousand Splendid Suns	Khaled Hosseini	Carol Driver
Housewife 49		Jean
Notes from an Exhibition	Patrick Gale	Fiona
		Sarah
		Carol McNeill
		Liz
The Inheritance of Loss	Kiran Desai	
A Prayer for Owen Meany	John Irving	
Galileo's Daughter	Dava Sobel	
Skating to Antarctica	Jenny Diski	