# Gold Coast Book Lovers

GCBL Volume 6, Issue 1 January 2010

## Our January Meeting by Alexa

Our first meeting for the year was held in a charming heritage house where it was lovely to have the place to ourselves for an interesting and informative discussion of the chosen books, *Broken April* by Ismail Kadare and *Songs for the Butcher's Daughter* by Peter Manseau. *Broken April* was considered a grim, depressing and unsettling book that soon became plodding in its attempt to be didactic about the Albanian mountaineers' traditions regarding the blood feud. Nevertheless, some members found the book to be insightful and illuminating regarding such unfamiliar and alien customs.. Overall, members thought that it was interesting to learn about another culture.

*Songs for the Butcher's Daughter* had a mixed reaction. While the book was too close to comfort for one member, the others once again loved learning about the history of Judaism and found that the poetry linked well the many lives contained within this book. On the other hand, Malpesh was scorned as a person representing the Yiddish people who continue to live in their ghettoes, refusing to relate to the outside world. Yet some members loved the structure and the stories within the novel, even re-reading certain parts many times over. The character of Sasha evoked feelings of admiration as a forward-looking person. The humour was remarked upon as a light touch that saved the book from being dull. For one reader, this novel is a treasure trove that will stay with her.

Perhaps choosing two books was a bit demanding for everyone to complete so it is recommended to select one for the group in future for a more manageable task.

See you all next month and happy reading!

## About us

We are a discussion group dedicated to enhancing our enjoyment of well-written books by developing our literary knowledge and reading skills, by sharing our impressions and opinions and by expanding our reading experiences among other book lovers. Our aim is to satisfy our passion for the written word.

We meet at the Nerang Bicentennial Community Centre, Room 4 on the second Monday of every month from 7 to 9 p.m. excluding January, Easter and June when the Centre is closed. The centre is located adjacent to the Council Chambers on the Nerang–Southport Rd, Nerang. Entrance to the building is at the rear. A small contribution is required towards the rent of the room. The amount depends on the number of people attending.

One book title is chosen each month and we all read that book. There is a 'host' who introduces and co-ordinates the discussion. The role of host is rotated around the group so that each member has the opportunity to nominate their book (it could also be an author, theme or genre). The host also acts as chairperson for that meeting.

Although we are not a social club—we are readers- we occasionally attend literary events, relevant movies or plays here at the Gold Coast, Brisbane or Byron Bay.

We conform to basic meeting practices and everyone has an equal opportunity to express their opinion. Everyone's interpretation is valid, as long as it's expressed respectfully.

We welcome any new members who share our aims and are happy to contribute to our group. Newcomers are not required to have read the book to attend the first meeting and no contribution is required the first time.

## Upcoming Books

8/02/10

**The Leopard** by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

Hosted by Claudia

8/03/10

**The Tree of Man** by Patrick White

Hosted by Nicola

12/04/10

**The Fifth Child** by Doris Lessing

Hosted by Kim

10/05/09

**Ther Razor's Edge** by W. Somerset Maugham

Hosted by Leonore

### Contact Details

Until and including March 2010 we will meet from 7 to 9 PM on the 2nd Monday of every month EXCLUDING PH at CERAMIC HOUSE located on Bischof Park, Nerang Street ( next corner White St), Nerang , next door to shops at 54 Nerang Street.

From April we will meet in our usual place at the Nerang Bicentennial Community Centre, Room 4. The centre is located next door to the Nerang Gold Coast City Council Chambers

For more information, please contact Claudia on
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Or email us
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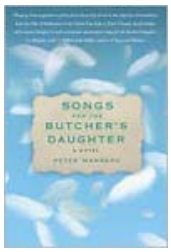
http://sites.google.com/site/goldcoastbooklovers/

# Books of the Month




## Broken April by Ismail Kadare and Songs for the Butcher's Daughter by Peter Manseau – Alexa

*Songs for the Butcher's Daughter* by Peter Manseau

This book has a unique style where the narrator, as the translator, inserts his commentaries and becomes part of the story. This narrator is a Catholic college student learning Yiddish and Hebrew and you could say that it was *bashert* that this college student came to translate the memoirs of Malpesh (Monkey Piss). *Bashert*, Yiddish for 'destiny', brought Malpesh together with Sasha Bimko, who he believed saved his life on the day of his birth by shaking her fist at the intruders during the Russian pogrom when only 4 years old. This unlikely event formed the basis of Malpesh's poetry and his lifelong love for Sasha.

Manseau's theme of reality is an interesting one – Malpesh's version of the true nature of his birth and love portray a person who naïvely romanticizes his existence. His ability to misread events and people can be both frustrating and yet it is difficult to hate this man, or do we? When his naivety leads to tragic events, it is Sasha who shines through the narrative. Take her plaintiff cry, for instance: "If you had given your family a moment's thought without the intention of making poetry of their suffering, I believe even you would have realized that your birth didn't protect your mother or any other woman or girl in that room" (p. 323). And later, "I grew up knowing that Itsik Malpesh was a name heavy with all the grief I have ever hoped to leave behind" (p.323). These words hark back to the German-Jewish critic, T.W. Adorno, who in 1949 was one of the first to assert the problem with writing poetry after the Holocaust by claiming: "after Auschwitz it is barbaric to write poetry".

On Sasha's return to Malpesh, she states: "My earliest memories are of violence. And I have long known I am capable of it myself. I can no longer stand to be around it…" How ironic, then, are her next words: "After you left last night, I felt grateful to have found you. You were born of the same violence that has shaped me, and yet you are such a gentle soul. You believed that I had been hurt, and yet you did not seek revenge. You simply went out and made a book. You are a creator, Isaac. Not the destroyer I sometimes fear I am fated to be. And I love you for it. I need you for it. How do you turn pain into words? How do you transform the violence of our lives into something beautiful?" (p. 339)

Therein lies a possible answer to Adorno's criticism. Whilst the violence perpetrated on the Jews (or anyone else, for that matter) is not a thing of beauty, the writings about it becomes a vehicle for remembering, for non-Jews to reach some sort of understanding, compassion and empathy, and a sign of the love that binds people together, despite their most dire circumstances.

The translator's commentaries expose his dishonesty to Clara in not revealing his Catholic faith. This raises the question of why people hide features of their own identity and for what purpose they do so. Yet *bashert* brings the translator to Malpesh and the full circle is closed between him and Sasha. Perhaps this is the main reason for including the role of the translator as part of the story. Furthermore, the translator's commentaries are appealing to any lover of language and its workings. Of particular interest are the lines: "…one must decide from the outset if one's intention is merely to convey, word by word, an approximation of the meaning of the text, or if it is to create a work with merit all its own" (p. 260). With such reminders, the reader hovers above the text with a critical eye on both the poetry and how the story is woven in such a way as to be completely believable.

The Yiddish language is one of fascination for me, and Malpesh's Yiddish identity is remarkable. Paradoxically, Sasha has the most scornful comment regarding this: "I told him [Hershl Shveig] that in Palestine, Yiddish is thought the language of only the worst kinds of Jews, and no one could think of a worse Jew than Jesus" (p. 338). Manseau chooses letters of the Yiddish alphabet as chapter headings, the reason for which I don't know.

Yiddish possibly originated in the Rhineland, Germany, at around the 10th century. It is referred to as 'mama-loshn' which means 'mother tongue'. It actually has 2 dialects of Eastern Yiddish (of Slavic origin) and Western Yiddish (spoken in Germany, Holland, Switzerland, France and Hungary).

Anyone wishing to look up any Yiddish words, particularly during the reading of this book, can visit http://www.yiddishdictionaryonline.com.

As an aside, the newspaper referred to in the book as "Yiddish Forwards" actually exists and was founded in 1897.

My overall assessment of this book is that it is a thing of beauty containing all the elements of excellent narration; it is original and I lingered over each sentence, rereading several times to savour the language and the ideas. I still carry elements of the story with me, as there is so much to think about. Anyone interested in further themes and discussion questions can visit the following Simon & Schuster website:

http://books.simonandschuster.net/Songs-for-the-Butcher's-Daughter/Peter-Manseau/9781416538714/reading_group_guide

**Ratings : Alexa 4.5 ,Claudia 3 , Deb 4 , Denise 4.5, Di 4, Kim N/A, Leonore 4.**

## About the Author

Peter Manseau lives with his wife and two daughters in Washington, D.C., where he studies religion and teaches writing at Georgetown University. He has written a memoir called Vows: The Story of a Priest, a Nun, and Their Son - he is the son.

*By Alexa*

# Books of the Month


## Broken April by Ismail Kadare and Songs for the Butcher's Daughter by Peter Manseau – Alexa

***Broken April*** By Ismail Kadare

Written in 1978, this is the story of the intricacies of a blood feud of 2 Albanian families, the Berisha family and the Kryeqyqe family, which began 70 years before the protagonist, Gjorg, becomes directly involved. Since then, 44 graves have been dug, 22 for each family. It started with the Berisha family following the strict Code of providing shelter for a stranger, even protecting the stranger until he leaves the village. This particular 'unknown guest' had just reached the outer limits of the village when he was killed. The Code states that if the stranger is killed before your very eyes, it is your duty to avenge him.

And so on every page we learn of the countless number of rules that guide (constrict) these people's lives. Gjorg questions his fate, wondering if only the first incident had not happened.

Here is a society in the mountains in the north of Albania where honour is the greatest virtue.

A couple, Bessian and Diana, on their honeymoon from Tirana, depict how the mountain regions have their own peculiar customs. We are observers, like Diana, listening with horror to Bessian's explications. We learn that, above all, the guest has the greatest position, greater than kinship. Thus, in such very ordinary and boring lives, any person can experience temporary deification.

My initial reaction to this book is that these mountaineers have an absurd system of rules to live by. But then I start to question whether this is so, considering our own over-regulated society. Other cultures live by such codes of revenge, such as the Mafia and their 'vendetta' and the Australian Aboriginals' payback system. Socially, people feel a great sense of satisfaction when they can avenge a lover who has scorned them. So this raises the questions: which forms of justice are right? How can we criticize a culture that makes death so prominent via the wearing of black armbands and rock cairns covering the body of a person who had died on that spot? Are their rules and regulations archaic? Should people allow the deeds of their ancestors rule their lives? How cynical can we be about the collection of taxes by the steward of the blood on behalf of a prince who in reality is not a prince, but someone living off the taxes scraped together by these poverty-stricken mountaineers? And what about the whole industry of people who are interpreting the law for the villagers and coming up with such absurd solutions such as the old man schlepping the unbearably heavy rock to the new border?

There is not much story here, but an exposition of a society that Kadare wishes to expose for its absurdities. As such, I like this book for raising the many ideas and cultural values of the Albanian mountain people, even though they are foreign and bizarre for me. I find it extreme that these people need to fulfil their duty in continuing the blood feud to try to bring excitement and honour to their otherwise mundane and harsh lives. The alternative of remaining in the tower of refuge seems barbaric and cruel. The sensible thing is to wander off the mountains to become a woodcutter, but this is not ideal, either. It is obvious that education is lacking, because these young men would surely wish to escape such a horrid fate, if only they knew of the world outside their boundaries. But it's the women I really feel sorry for, as illustrated by the old woman left in the village with no men to help her.

Albania:

- A Mediterranean country bordered by Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia and Greece
- 3.6 million people live there
- The Kanun is a set of laws in place from the 15th to 20th centuries and used in northern Albania and Kosovo. These laws are divided into the areas of: Church, Family, Marriage, House, Livestock and Property, Work, Transfer of Property, Spoken Word, Honor, Damages, Law Regarding Crimes, Judicial Law, and Exemptions and Exceptions. Thus, they cover all sorts of disputes, including the blood feud

The communists were routed in the March 1992 elections, after which time the blood feud returned after 40 years' abolishment and nearly 10,000 people killed since 1991. Blood feuds are supposed to continue until all the male members of a family are killed.

**Ratings : Alexa 4, Claudia 3.5 , Deb 3.5 , Denise 3, Di 4, Kim N/A, Leonore 3.5.**

### About the Author

Ismail Kadare:

- Won the Man Booker International Prize in 2005
- He attacked totalitarianism
- Writings draw on Balkan history and legends
- A recurring theme is how the past affects the present

He claims he was never a dissident, saying that one cannot do so without facing the firing squad

*By Alexa*

**Attention Members**

Feel free to rate or not

**1.Abysmal**

**2.Lame**

**3.Good Effort**

**4.Engaging**

**5. Masterpiece**

*Continues next page*

# Other Books We Read This Month

## The Lacuna by Barbara Kingsolver— Claudia

A skinny young boy holds his breath and dives into the mouth of an underwater cave — a lacuna — swimming toward pale blue light as his lungs scream for oxygen. He emerges, gasping, in a ghostly cenote, a sinkhole in the Mexican jungle fringed with broken coral, wedged with human bones: a place of sacrifice and buried remembrance. When the tide rushes out, it will take the boy with it, "dragging a coward explorer back from the secret place, sucking him out through the tunnel and spitting him into the open sea." He'll paddle to shore and walk home, obsessed forever after by hidden passages that contain deeper meanings — meanings that only art may recapture. He'll acquire a notebook and fill it with stories and memories; when it's full, he'll begin another and then another. But were he to consign these notebooks to the scrapheap, how would their mysteries be known? Who dares plunge into the wreckage of a discarded history, not knowing the risks of retrieval?

Barbara Kingsolver's breathtaking new novel, *The Lacuna* follows this quiet, dreamy boy, Harrison William Shepherd, from 1929 to 1951. When we first meet him, he's 12 years old, living at a hacienda on Isla Pixol with his self-dramatizing mother, Salomé, both of them petrified by the howling monkeys in the trees above, which they believe to be carnivorous demons. "You had better write all this in your notebook," Salomé tells Shepherd, "so when nothing is left of us but bones, someone will know where we went."

A year earlier, Salomé, a slang-slinging Mexican beauty, had ditched her drab American husband (Shepherd's father) in Washington, D.C., and chased an oilman back to his Mexican estate. On Isla Pixol, as Salomé sulks over her love life like a bobby-soxer, lonely Shepherd befriends the hacienda's cook, who turns the boy into a sous-chef while innocently cluing the kid into his sexuality (which bobby-soxers will never unleash). Shepherd's other close companions are the volumes in the hacienda library and his notebook, which he regards as "a prisoner's plan for escape." In the short term, though, it's Salomé who escapes Isla Pixol, dragging the boy with her, bolting for Mexico City in pursuit of an American she calls "Mr. Produce the Cash" — and, after him, others.

His mother is not a puta, Shepherd reflects, with detached sympathy, even as he overhears her "bedroom jolly-ups" through thin walls. She's just a romantic woman who yearns for "an admirer" as she tries to put a roof over their heads. Nonetheless, while still in his teens the boy embarks upon a different path, toward a life unruled by passion. "People contort themselves around the terror of being alone, making any compromise against that," he observes later in life. "It's a great freedom to give up on love and get on with everything else." But it's a freedom more easily imagined than lived.

Leaving his mother to her Mme. Bovary messes, Shepherd parlays his domestic skills into a job mixing plaster for Diego Rivera's murals ("It's like making dough for pan dulce") and joins the Rivera household as cook and typist for Rivera, his artist wife, Frida Kahlo, and later for their guest, the exiled Communist leader Leon Trotsky. In this incendiary, revolutionary household, Shepherd keeps mum and lets louder egos roar, just as he did on Isla Pixol. Baking bread by day, he records the daily dramas of this entourage by night, along with a draft of his first novel, an epic of the Aztec empire. But in 1940, when Trotsky is assassinated, Shepherd leaves Mexico, spooked by the virulent press that denounces his employers and their murdered ward "like the howlers on Isla Pixol." At the age of 24, he returns to the United States and settles in Asheville, N.C. There he becomes a reclusive, gentlemanly author of swashbuckling Mexican historical novels (*Vassals of Majesty,Pilgrims of Chapultepec)* until the ungentlemanly House Un-American Activities Committee drags him into the spotlight, rewriting his character in crude strokes for the public stage.

Shepherd had thought discretion would protect him, since his private thoughts were safely interred in his journals. "Dios habla por el que calla," he likes to tell his devoted Asheville secretary, Violet Brown: " God speaks for the silent man." But Brown, who knows that God doesn't always speak as loudly as Senator -McCarthy, tells her boss that unlike another local writer, Thomas Wolfe, he was prudent to set his fiction outside Asheville — and America. "People love to read of sins and errors, just not their own," she remarks. "You were wise to put your characters far from here." As it turns out, they weren't far enough. The book we read today, Brown reveals, was assembled by herself in 1959 from Shepherd's junked notebooks and sealed for 50 years, to be opened in 2009 — when she hoped it could inform readers about "those who labored and birthed the times they have inherited."

How can the experiences of a fictional loner merge with those of larger-than-life figures who played a pivotal role in world politics? And what can readers learn from their intersection?

Those are the questions answered by this dazzling novel, which plunges into Shepherd's notebooks to dredge up not only the perceptions they conceal but also a history larger than his own, touching on everything from Trotskyism, Stalinism and the Red scare to racism, mass hysteria and the media's intrusion into personal and national affairs.

*Continues next page*


MUST READ

# Other Books We Read This Month

## The Lacuna by Barbara Kingsolver— Claudia

More than half a century on, names like Trotsky, Rivera, Kahlo and McCarthy can lose their definition, like coins with the faces rubbed off. Shepherd's reminis-cences step in where the historical record can't, restoring human contours. To Shepherd, working as a cook in the Rivera kitchen, Trotsky was more than a defender of the working man; he was a person of flesh and blood — "compact, muscular," with the build of a peasant, who clasped a pen "as if it were an ax handle" and liked to feed chickens when he wasn't unspooling his thoughts on the Fourth Inter-national. Trotsky's optimism — while he was in exile and under death threats — leads Shepherd to marvel, "Does a man become a revolutionary out of the belief he's entitled to joy rather than submission?"

Frida KAHLO tells Shepherd he has a "pierced soul" like her own and respects his artistic commitment, even as she teases him cruelly for his closeted sexual drives. "To be a good artist you have to know something that's true," she tells him; and reputation isn't worth worrying about. "People will always stare at the queer birds like you and me," she says, in a spirit of defiance, not empathy. Coasting on a pleasure boat through the floating gardens of Xochimilco with Trotsky (who was briefly her lover), Shepherd and Trotsky's secretary, Van, whom Shepherd secretly loves, Kahlo buys a woven toy called a trapanovio "for catching boyfriends" and taunts him to try it on Van. Shepherd keeps the toy as a "souvenir of a remarkable humiliation." Yet Shepherd, who learned compassion for others, if not for himself, at his diva mother's knee, soothes Kahlo when Rivera wants a divorce. "Even in her disconsolate state she looked like a peacock," he notices. "Perfectly dressed in a green silk skirt and enough jewelry to sink a boat. Even drowning, Frida would cling to vanity."

Such texture doesn't interest the heavies from the House Un-American Activities Committee, for whom the names Trotsky, Rivera and Kahlo set off - Communist-menace alarm bells. In 1947, meeting with his lawyer in North Carolina to discuss a letter from J. Edgar Hoover, Shepherd doesn't understand why the F.B.I. would care about his Mexican past. "I was a cook," he explains. "Let me just say," the lawyer replies, "these subtleties are lost."

*The Lacuna* can be enjoyed sheerly for the music of its passages on nature, archaeology, food and friendship; or for its portraits of real and invented people; or for its harmonious choir of voices. But the fuller value of Kingsolver's novel lies in its call to conscience and connection. She has mined Shepherd's richly imagined history to create a tableau vivant of epochs and people that time has transformed almost past recognition. Yet it's a tableau vivant whose story line resonates in the present day, albeit with different players. Through Shepherd's resurrected notebooks, Kingsolver gives voice to truths whose teller could express them only in silence.

*From the Internet*

Barbara Kingsolver is one of my favourite writers. I don't only like how she writes but we have common interests. She is very didactic and each time you read one of her books you learn a lot apart from it being a very enjoyable reading experience.

I especially recommend, *The Poisonwood Bible, Prodigal Summer, Small Wonder and Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: Our Year of Seasonal Eating.*

*By Claudia*

**Bibliography**

- Animal Dreams (1987)
- The Bean Trees (1988)
- Pigs in Heaven (1993)
- The Poisonwood Bible (1998)
- Prodigal Summer (2000)
- The Lacuna (2009)

**Collections**

- Homeland: And Other Stories (1989)
- Another America (poems) (1992)

**Non fiction**

- Mid-Life Confidential: The Rock Bottom Remainders Tour America With Three Cords and an Attitude (1994) (with Dave Barry, Stephen King, Tabitha King and Amy Tan)
- High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never (1995)
- Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983 (1996)
- Barbara Kingsolver: in Conversation (1998)
- Small Wonder: Essays (2002)
- Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands (2002)
- Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: Our Year of Seasonal Eating (2007)

**Rating 5**


MUST READ

# Other Books We Read This Month

## The Housekeeper + Professor by Yoko Ogawa — Leonore

Last December the death of a man named Henry Gustav Molaison made headlines in The New York Times and around the world. He was famous in scientific circles for not being able to remember anything new longer than 15 minutes, due to an accident. He had spent the later part of his life in a Connecticut nursing home being a subject known only as H. M. in psychology experiments.

The "professor" in this deceptively elegant novel, which was a best seller and a movie in Japan, has been involved in a car accident and has been robbed of his ability to remember any new memories for more than 80 minutes. For him time stopped in 1975, when he was a prominent math teacher and the famed pitcher Yutaka Enatsu was mowing down batters for the Hanshin Tigers. He lives in a ramshackle cottage in his sister-in-law's backyard, doing math puzzles and walking around with reminder notes stuck to his suit, the most prominent of which says, "My memory only lasts 80 minutes."

"The Housekeeper and the Professor" tells of the adventures, such as they are, of the remarkable virtual family formed by the professor's new cook and cleaner, the single mother of a 10-year-old boy whom the professor calls Root because his flat head reminds him of the mathematical sign for a square root. Nobody except Root really has a name. Every morning the housekeeper, who narrates the story, has to introduce herself and her son to the professor all over again. He, in turn, as he does whenever he is stuck or flustered or has extended his 80-minute window, is likely to ask her shoe size or her telephone number. He always has something amazing to say about whatever number comes up.

By the standards of conventional melodrama, nothing much happens in the novel. Yet by those standards, nothing much happens when you count 1, 2, 3. . . . Still, as the professor will tell you, and the housekeeper and her son will discover, the opposite is true. This is one of those books written in such lucid, unpretentious language that reading it is like looking into a deep pool of clear water. But even in the clearest waters can lurk currents you don't see until you are in them.

Reading about Yoko Ogawa's world you will find yourself tugged by forces more felt than seen. What is the problem with all the men in the housekeeper's life? Who is the woman in the photograph buried under baseball cards in a tin on the professor's desk? Can the professor love somebody he can't remember?

And, of course: Where do numbers come from? The professor's answer is that they are already there at the beginning of time, "in God's notebook."

This is how he responds when the housekeeper has made a lucky guess about a problem: " 'Good,' he almost shouted, shaking the leather strap of his watch. I didn't know what to say. 'It's important to use your intuition. You swoop down on the numbers, like a kingfisher catching the glint of sunlight on the fish's fin.' He pulled up a chair, as if wanting to be closer to the numbers. The musty paper smell from the study clung to the professor."

If we all had learned math from such a teacher we would all be a lot smarter.

*From the Internet*

I found this novel a really quiet read. It made one thing about the importance of memory – such a terrible loss if it occurs - probably one of the worst, including sight and speech. And yet I could not put it down. A quite sad book but the undercurrent of the beauty of maths kept humming along and saved it from pathos. It was well written, with out any pretensions and a genuinely beautiful story. How do you form a relationship with a person who cannot remember? This is the question posed by Ogawa. Ogawa seems to ask whether our immediate experiences are more important than our memories, since memories inevitably fade, and the eponymous Professor's condition of limited short-term memory allows the author to explore this question with great creativity. At the same time, Ogawa invites the reader into the world of mathematics, using complex equations as a metaphor for the themes running throughout her book. The *Housekeeper and the Professor* is a rich, multilayered novel that offers much to discuss.

*By Leonore*

About the Author

Yoko Ogawa's fiction has appeared in The New Yorker, A Public Space, and Zoetrope. Since 1988 she has published more than twenty works of fiction and nonfiction, and has won every major Japanese literary award. Her last novel was *The Diving Pool* . Yoko Ogawa was born in 1962 in Okayama, Okayama Prefecture, graduated from Waseda University, and lives in Ashiya with her husband and son. Since 1988, she has published more than twenty works of fiction and nonfiction. Her novel *The Professor and his Beloved Equation* has been made into a movie. In 2006 she co-authored *An Introduction to the World's Most Elegant Mathematics* with Masahiko Fujiwara, a mathematician, as a dialogue on the extraordinary beauty of numbers.

**Rating:** 3

# Other Books We Read This Month

## Noah's Compass by Anne Tyler- Claudia

Liam Pennywell is a genial man whose life has been beset by a series of failures that he accepts without argument. When we first meet him, at age 60, he has just lost his job teaching philosophy at a middling private school and is downsizing into a prefab apartment complex next to a shopping mall on the outskirts of Baltimore. He plans to live out the rest of his life reading books and avoiding his nagging ex-wife, three grown daughters and sister — who buzz in and out of his life with an energy and purposefulness that stands in contrast to Liam's rudderless existence. As the story begins, Liam is shaken out of his dormant state by an intruder who enters his new apartment through an unlocked patio door and knocks him unconscious. Liam, who has no memory of the blow, becomes obsessed with reconstructing those missing hours and sets off on a series of improbable adventures that reawaken him to his past.

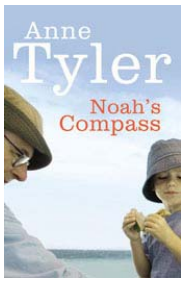
This is a book more about character than plot. The story itself is no page-turner; a burglary, a romance, a betrayal and a plot twist all feel more flat than the characters who experience them. But the actors, who aside from Liam are almost all women, spring to life as a bundle of exquisite details. People like Eunice, Liam's love interest, were, he observes, "subject to speckles and flushes; their purses resembled wastepaper baskets; they stepped on their own skirts." Liam's youngest daughter, Kitty: "her fingers long and flexible, ending in nail bitten nubbins — lemur fingers." His pushy sister, Julia, insists on bringing beef stew to a convalescing Liam even though he hasn't eaten meat in three decades. I know these women and they form a dysfunctional family that makes for an engaging read. Liam himself is more of a cipher who threatens to break through into a fully conscious adult, only to frustratingly retreat back inside himself.

*From the net*

Anne Tyler is a popular fiction author with that bit extra: a master of character. I enjoy all her books ( starting with *The Accidental Tourist*) but not recommended if you're looking for plot.

*Comment by Claudia*

**Rating 4**




## A Mirror Garden by Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and Zara Houshmand — Leonore

In Persia in 1924, when a child still had to worry about hostile camels in the bazaar and a nanny might spin stories at her pillow until her eyes fell shut, the extraordinary and irresistible Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian was born. From the enchanted basement storeroom where she played as a girl to the penthouse high above New York City where she would someday live, this is the delightful and inspiring story of her life as an artist, a wife and mother, a collector, and an Iranian. Born an adventurer and a tomboy, Monir describes a childhood spent getting into scrapes and dreaming up improbable destinies. We see the mischievous girl become a spirited young woman defiant of tradition: traveling to America during World War II; training as an artist; escaping a disastrous marriage; and learning to support herself and her baby before Abolbashar Farmanfarmaian, an Iranian of royal descent, whisks her back to Tehran for her second wedding. Home again and happily married, Monir discovers the neglected folk arts of far-flung regions and explores her own creative impulse, in which traditional Iranian forms reveal surprisingly modern possibilities. She throws marvelous parties, plays Twister with the Shah, and delights in road trips in the decades before the rise of radical fundamentalism forces her to leave everything behind and begin a new life in New York. An enchanting love story, a compelling portrait of the creative spirit, and a celebration of the warmth and grace of Iranian culture, A Mirror Garden is also a genuine fairy tale whose exuberant heroine has never needed rescuing--for by embracing experience, she has always charmed her own life.

From the Internet

I read this book after viewing this author's mosaic on exhibition at present at GOMA Asia Pacific Exhibition at QAG in Brisbane. Not a bad read but a long one. She has met and worked with many New York artists - Andy Warhol was one. Being an artist Farmanfarmaian's writing is full of descriptions of colour and her discovery of the stained glass windows in Qasvin and other glass artifacts in Isfahan and other places have influenced her work which has evolved finally into the making of the mirror mosaics

*Comment by Leonore*

**Rating 2.5**