The Book Club Ballot: An Annotated List

On this list, you will find information about each of the books listed on our ballot. Entries are arranged in alphabetical order by the author's last name.

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott (1868, Fiction)

One of literature's most enduring classics, *Little Women* tells the story of the four March sisters as they weather the tumultuous Civil War years.

52 Loaves by William Alexander (2010, Nonfiction)

William Alexander is determined to bake the perfect loaf of bread. An original take on the six-thousand-year-old staple of life, *52 Loaves* explores the nature of obsession, the meditative quality of ritual, the futility of trying to re-create something perfect, our deep connection to the earth, and the mysterious instinct that makes all of us respond to the aroma of baking bread.

The Blind Assassin by Margaret Atwood (2000, Fiction)

In the aftermath of the Second World War and her sister's suicide, Iris witnesses an unlikely series of events that are interwoven with the sci-fi tale of a pair of anonymous lovers and the death of Iris' industrialist husband. A story that features a novel-within-a-novel about two unnamed lovers who meet in a dark room.

Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary With the Bard by Laura Bates (2013, Nonfiction)

Just as Larry Newton, one of the most notorious inmates at Indiana Federal Prison, was trying to break out of jail, Dr. Laura Bates was trying to break in. Now, a decade later, her Shakespeare in Shackles program has been lauded by academics and prison communities alike. In this profound illustration of the enduring lessons of Shakespeare through the ten-year relationship of Dr. Laura Bates and Newton, an amazing testament to the power of literature emerges. A starkly engaging tale, one that will be embraced by anyone who has ever been changed by a book.

City of Thieves by David Benioff (2008, Fiction)

A gripping adventure set in World War II-era Leningrad. A young deserter and a man arrested for looting are promised freedom if they can follow one order: to secure a dozen eggs for a powerful Soviet colonel to use in his daughter's wedding cake.

In a Sunburned Country by Bill Bryson (2000, Nonfiction)

The beloved author's comical account of his time spent traveling through Australia, a land that "harbors more things that can kill you in extremely nasty ways than anywhere else."

Kindred by Octavia E. Butler (2004, Fiction)

A book that combines science-fiction elements with a powerful literary narrative. Dana, a modern black woman, is celebrating her twenty-sixth birthday with her new husband when she is snatched abruptly from her home in California and transported to the antebellum South.

Life Itself by Roger Ebert (2011, Nonfiction)

The film critic best known for his "Chicago Sun-Times" reviews and his thirty years as co-host of "Siskel & Ebert at the Movies" describes his life and career, including his recovery from alcoholism and the complications from thyroid cancer treatment.

The Universe Versus Alex Woods by Gavin Extence (2014, Fiction)

The son of a fortune teller, who was struck by a meteorite when he was ten years old, befriends a grumpy old widower and proves his friendship by getting stopped at the border by customs with a large bag of marijuana and an urn full of ashes. *The Universe Versus Alex Woods* is a celebration of curious incidents, astronomy and astrology, the works of Kurt Vonnegut and the unexpected connections that form our world.

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down by Anne Fadiman (1998, Nonfiction)

A tragic tale of cultural differences chronicles the fight over the proper care of an epileptic Hmong child between a California medical center and her tradition-minded Laotian refugee family. Lia's doctors ascribed her seizures to the misfiring of her cerebral neurons; her parents call her illness *qaug dab peg* --the spirit catches you and you fall down -- and ascribe it to the wandering of her soul.

Sophie's World by Jostein Gaarder (1991, Fiction)

A page-turning novel that is also an exploration of the great philosophical concepts of Western thought, *Sophie's World* has fired the imagination of readers all over the world for more than twenty years.

Good Omens by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett (1990, Fiction)

A deliciously funny tale about good, evil, and the apocalypse -- created by two of the most imaginative writers of our time.

The Cellist of Sarajevo by Steven Galloway (2008, Fiction)

A musician in war-torn Sarajevo takes up his cello in memory of twenty-two people killed in a mortar attack. Inspired by a true story, *The Cellist of Sarajevo* poignantly explores how war can change one's definition of humanity, and how the rituals of daily life can themselves become a form of resistance.

Paris to the Moon by Adam Gopnik (1998, Nonfiction)

Revisiting a recurring American obsession with the French capital, the author takes a look at Paris and what it means to Americans as he describes his own relationship with the city.

84, Charing Cross Road by Helene Hanff (1970, Nonfiction)

It all began with a letter inquiring about second-hand books, written by Helene Hanff in New York, and posted to a bookshop at 84, Charing Cross Road in London. As Helene's sarcastic and witty letters are responded to by the stodgy and proper Frank Doel, a relationship blossoms into a warm and charming long-distance friendship lasting many years.

Out On a Limb: What Black Bears Taught Me About Intelligence and Intuition by Ben Kilham (2013, Nonfiction)

For decades, Ben Kilham has studied wild black bears in a vast tract of Northern New Hampshire woodlands. Witnessing this world has led to some remarkable discoveries. Kilham's dyslexia once barred him from getting an advanced academic degree, securing funding for his research,

and publishing his observations in the scientific literature. After being shunned by the traditional scientific community, though, Kilham's unique findings now interest bear researchers worldwide. His techniques even aid scientists working with pandas in China and bears in Russia. Moreover, the observation skills that fueled Kilham's exceptional work turned out to be born of his dyslexia. His ability to think in pictures and decipher systems makes him a unique interpreter of the bear's world. Out on a Limb delivers Kilham's fascinating glimpse at the inner world of bears, and also makes a passionate case for science, and education in general, to open its doors to different ways of learning and researching—doors that could lead to far broader realms of discovery.

Small Island by Andrea Levy (2004, Fiction)

In 1948, Hortense Joseph arrives in London from Jamaica with her life in her suitcase. Her husband returns from the war expecting to be received as a hero, but finds himself, as a black man in Britain, as a second class citizen. Told in four voices, *Small Island* is a courageous novel of tender emotion and sparkling wit, of crossings taken and passages lost, of shattering compassion and of reckless optimism in the face of insurmountable barriers---in short, an encapsulation of the immigrant's life.

Crossing the Borders of Time by Leslie Maitland (2011, Nonfiction)

An award-winning former New York Times investigative reporter recounts his Jewish mother and grandparents' harrowing escape from Germany, his mother's 50-year separation from a Catholic Frenchman she passionately loved and the author's efforts years later to reunite them.

The Borrower by Rebecca Makkai (2011, Fiction)

Placed in an impossible situation when her favorite patron, a book-loving 10-year old, runs away from overbearing parents who force him to attend anti-gay classes with a celebrity pastor, children's librarian Lucy Hull flees with the boy only to discover that they are being pursued by an anonymous adversary.

The Greater Journey by David McCullough (2011, Nonfiction)

McCullough mixes famous and obscure names and delivers capsule biographies of everyone to produce a colorful parade of educated, Victorian-era American travelers and their life-changing experiences in Paris.

Dear Life by Alice Munro (2012, Fiction)

The Nobel Prize winning author's latest collection of short stories. Suffused with Munro's unparalleled gift for storytelling, these stories about departures, beginnings, accidents, dangers, and homecomings paint a vivid and lasting portrait of how strange, dangerous, and extraordinary the ordinary life can be.

What I Talk About When I Talk About Running by Haruki Murakami (2008, Nonfiction)

The Japanese writer recalls his four-month preparation for the 2005 New York City marathon, interweaving his reflections on the meaning of running in his life, his thoughts on the writing process and his career, and his experiences as an author and as an athlete.

The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup by Susan Orlean (2001, Nonfiction)

In a collection of essays from The New Yorker, the acclaimed author of The Orchid Thief offers a series of intriguing profiles of some of the colorful people she has encountered, from the first

female Spanish matador to the African king who drives a New York City cab to Silly Billy, a popular entertainer on the children's birthday-party circuit

<u>The Cat's Table</u> by Michael Ondaatje (2012, Fiction)

In the 1950s, an eleven-year-old boy boards a ship bound for England. As the ship crosses the Indian Ocean, the boy and his friends tumble from one adventure to another, and together they spy on a shackled prisoner, whose crime and fate will haunt them forever. A spellbinding story about the magical and often forbidden discoveries of childhood.

<u>The Moviegoer</u> by Walker Percy (1961, Fiction)

Binx Bolling is a young New Orleans stockbroker who surveys the world with the detached gaze of a Bourbon Street dandy, even as he yearns for a spiritual redemption. He occupies himself by dallying with his secretaries and going to movies, which provide him with the "treasurable moments" absent from his real life. But one fateful Mardi Gras, Binx embarks on a hare-brained quest that outrages his family, endangers his fragile cousin and sends him reeling through the chaos of New Orleans' French Quarter. Wry and wrenching, rich in irony and romance, *The Moviegoer* is a genuine American classic.

<u>The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals</u> by Michael Pollan (2006, Nonfiction)

What should we have for dinner? To one degree or another, this simple question assails any creature faced with a wide choice of things to eat. Today, the cornucopia of the modern American supermarket and fast-food outlet has thrown us back on a bewildering landscape where we have to worry about which of those tasty-looking morsels might kill us. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is bestselling author Michael Pollan's brilliant and eye-opening exploration of the little-known but vitally important dimensions of eating in America.

<u>The Lifeboat</u> by Charlotte Rogan (2012, Fiction)

Grace Winter, 22, is both a newlywed and a widow. She is also on trial for her life. The Lifeboat is a page-turning novel of hard choices and survival, narrated by a woman as unforgettable and complex as the events she describes.

<u>The Last of the Doughboys: The Forgotten Generation and their Forgotten World War</u> by Richard Rubin (2013, Nonfiction)

A decade-long odyssey to recover the story of a forgotten generation led Rubin across the United States and France, through archives, private collections, and battlefields, literature, propaganda, and even music. But at the center of it all were the last of the last, the men and women he met. They were the final survivors of the millions who made up the American Expeditionary Forces. Self-reliant, humble, and stoic, they kept their stories to themselves for a lifetime, and then shared them at the last possible moment, so that they, and the war they fought, might at last be remembered. A moving meditation on character, grace, aging, and memory.

<u>Tenth of December</u> by George Saunders (2013, Fiction)

Disturbingly dark and wickedly funny, George Saunders's book of short stories introduces a slew of unforgettable characters. A must-read collection from one of the most important and blazingly original writers of our time.

Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore by Robin Sloan (2013, Fiction)

After a layoff during the Great Recession sidelines his tech career, Clay Jannon takes a job at the titular bookstore in San Francisco, and soon realizes that the establishment is a facade for a strange secret.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith (1943, Fiction)

The beloved American classic about a young girl's coming-of-age at the turn of the century, Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is a poignant and moving tale filled with compassion and cruelty, laughter and heartache, all seen through the eyes of young, sensitive Francie Nolan during her bittersweet formative years in the slums of Williamsburg.

Maine by J. Courtney Sullivan (2011, Fiction)

By turns wickedly funny and achingly sad, *Maine* unveils the sibling rivalry, alcoholism, social climbing, and Catholic guilt at the center of one family, along with the abiding, often irrational love that keeps them coming back, every summer, to Maine and to each other.

Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day by Winifred Watson (1938, Fiction)

Miss Pettigrew, a governess approaching middle-age, is accustomed to a household of unruly English children. When her employment agency sends her to the wrong address, her life takes an unexpected turn. The alluring nightclub singer, Delysia LaFosse, becomes her new employer, and Miss Pettigrew encounters a kind of glamour that she had only seen before at the movies. Over the course of a single day, both women are changed forever in this delightful and lighthearted novel.

The Interestings by Meg Wolitzer (2013, Fiction)

Forging a powerful bond in the mid-1970s that lasts throughout subsequent decades, six individuals pursue respective challenges into their midlife years, including an aspiring actress who harbors jealousy toward friends who achieve successful creative careers.

The Third Son by Julie Wu (2013, Fiction)

In Saburo, Julie Wu has created an extraordinary character, a gentle soul forced to fight for everything he's ever wanted: food, an education, and his first love, Yoshiko. A sparkling, evocative debut, it will have readers cheering for this young boy with his head in the clouds who, against all odds, finds himself on the frontier of America's space program.

The Shadow of the Wind by Carlos Ruiz Zafon (2005, Fiction)

In Barcelona, 1945: A city slowly heals in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, and Daniel, an antiquarian book dealer's son, finds solace in a mysterious book entitled *The Shadow of the Wind*, by one Julián Carax. But when he sets out to find the author's other works, he makes a shocking discovery: someone has been systematically destroying every copy of every book Carax has written. In fact, Daniel may have the last of Carax's books in existence. Soon Daniel's seemingly innocent quest opens a door into one of Barcelona's darkest secrets--an epic story of murder, madness, and doomed love.