



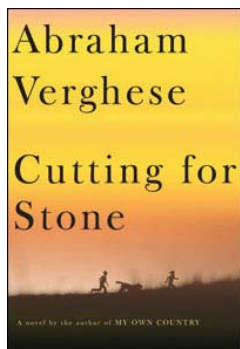
Best Books For A Book Club? Lynn Neary's '09 Picks

by Lynn Neary

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There are different kinds of book clubs. Some focus on nonfiction; others love novels. Some are very serious, considering it bad form not to finish the assigned book. Others are more laissez faire. I know one woman who reads about 50 pages of every book. If she likes it, she finishes it; if she doesn't, she uses the meeting to find out whether everyone else thinks she should continue.

From my experience, it's not necessary for the whole group to like the book at hand. Some of the best conversations occur when people don't agree. So on this list, I've tried to include a couple of books that will spark debate. I've also included a couple that I love. Most are pretty quick reads. Two are short-story collections, which means, in a pinch, you can read a few stories and still join in the discussion. One more thing: All of them are fiction, because it's my list and I love fiction. So have a glass of wine, maybe a bite to eat, and let the conversation begin.



Cutting for Stone

Cutting for Stone, by Abraham Verghese, hardcover, 560 pages, Knopf, list price: \$26.95

This big, old-fashioned novel is at once a family saga that crosses continents and cultures and a love story with tragic consequences. [As the novel begins](#), an Indian nun named Sister Mary Joseph Praise (just the name won my heart) gives birth to conjoined twins in a small mission hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She dies in childbirth, and the father, a brilliant surgeon, disappears almost as soon as they are born. The boys, Marion and Shiva, are physically separated shortly after birth but remain unusually close throughout their childhood. Raised by a childless couple who also practice medicine at the hospital, the twins grow up to be doctors as well.

This book is very much about what it means to be a doctor and what it takes to be a good one. Verghese, a practicing physician, spares no details in revealing the inner workings of the world of medicine. His descriptions of often complex medical procedures are both harrowing and fascinating ([hear a reading in which one of the twins assists with a vasectomy](#)). *Cutting for Stone* is a sprawling story that takes readers from India to Africa to America as the twins are separated by political turmoil and jealousy. Their reunion with each other and with the father who abandoned them is a testament to both the power and limitations of modern medicine and to the enduring love that binds families together.

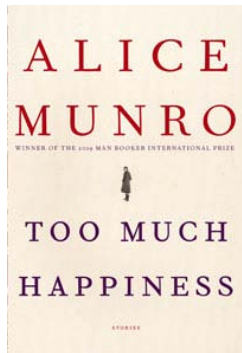


The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?

The Interrogative Mood: A Novel? by Padgett Powell, hardcover, 176 pages, Ecco, list price: \$21.99

This is a book like no other. If everyone in your book club loves it, I'd be very surprised. It's composed entirely of questions, which, on the face of it, seems sort of ridiculous. And on one level it is — wildly ridiculous and laugh-out-loud funny. At first, you just go along for the ride, amused by the sheer number and range of the questions and by the odd juxtapositions the author imposes in the asking of them. Open the book at any page, and I dare you not to be intrigued.

But a strange thing happens as you get further into it. What seems like a light, breezy read can suddenly turn serious, even profound, as the questions begin to provoke memories of the past and fears of the future. Just as you are about to get lost in your own thoughts, the narrator (interrogator?), a guy's guy if ever there was one, barges back in with yet another silly, sometimes even rude question. So what does it all add up to? Is it, as its subtitle asks, really a novel? Great question, I think, for a book club to ponder. (Don't you want to see how Powell pulls off this writing-exclusively-in-questions thing? [Would an excerpt from the book be helpful here?](#))



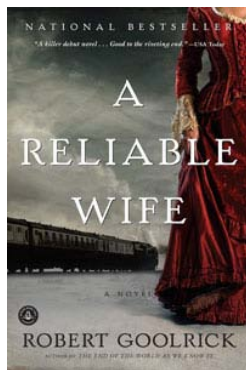
Too Much Happiness

Too Much Happiness, by Alice Munro, hardcover, 320 pages, Knopf, list price: \$25.95

Alice Munro's latest book of short stories is peopled with flawed human beings in compromising, even desperate situations. In some stories, her characters' responses to their circumstances seem to embody the very idea of "the banality of evil." Children commit murder as if it were a game; a young woman docilely complies with the perverted wishes of an old man. In all of the stories, people who seem to be living ordinary lives do unexpected, sometimes disturbing things.

These stories are like accidents we can't look away from, mirrors to our own souls that make us wonder, "What would I do if that happened to me?" I love the fact that

Munro manages to be so provocative in such a quiet way. The moral dilemma sneaks up on you, then slaps you in the face and leaves you wondering, "How did she do that?" And, oh, she gives you so much to talk about. (Read from [Munro's title story](#), about a Russian mathematician in love with the cousin of her late husband.)



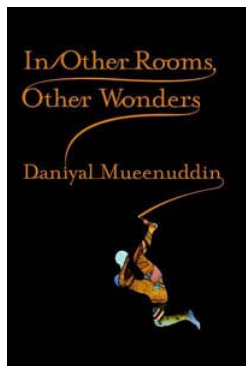
A Reliable Wife

A Reliable Wife, by Robert Goolrick, hardcover, 291 pages, Algonquin Books, list price: \$23.95

Don't let that title fool you. No one, especially the wife, is reliable in this novel. This is a tale of murder, madness and passion. And that's what makes it a fun read. As the story begins, a lonely, wealthy man with dark secrets in his past awaits the arrival of a mail-order bride who will share his mansion in the middle of nowhere. The bride is a beauty with a past of her own and a sinister plan for the future.

From there, the plot takes so many unexpected turns, it's impossible to really know whether the characters are good or evil, heroes or villains until the very end. This book has a hint of romance novel about it, and at times the writing is a bit

overwrought. But it's a page turner, and people are likely to either love it or hate it. (Read about Ralph Truitt [waiting for his mail-order bride](#) on a train platform, in front of a large — and impatient — crowd.)



In Other Rooms, Other Wonders

In Other Rooms, Other Wonders, by Daniyal Mueenuddin, hardcover, 256 pages, W.W. Norton & Co., list price: \$23.95

This book was a finalist for the National Book Awards and is starting to turn up in many "Best of the Year" lists, for good reason. It's a mesmerizing read about a way of life that is now almost extinct. Set mostly in rural Punjab and the city of Lahore, these interwoven stories, which take place over several decades, explore the lives of both rich and poor under Pakistan's rigid, almost feudal class structure. All of the characters are related to, or dependent on, a wealthy landowner who is only vaguely aware of what happens to them as they live out their lives in the "other rooms" on his land and in his homes. Every room has its secret story, every character a vibrant, sometimes tragic life.

Mueenuddin is half American, half Pakistani and has spent his life between the two countries. Now he manages his family's farm in the Punjab, and his life there has given him a unique insight into this world that few westerners have experienced firsthand. Whether he's writing about the lowliest servant girl or a privileged beauty, an ambitious politician or clever electrician, one senses that these are people Mueenuddin understands and cares for. (Read — or listen to [Mueenuddin read — the complete opening story](#) of the book, about the crafty and determined electrician Nawabdin.)