

NVHC Book Club 2020

SELECTIONS



January 4. *For Two Thousand Years* by Mihail Sebastian. Fiction. Translated from the Romanian by Philip O'Ceallaigh. With a foreword by Mark Mazower. Fiction. 228 pp. This classic 1934 novel delves into the mind of a Jewish student in Romania during the fraught years preceding World War II. Although he endures threats just to attend lectures, he feels disconnected from his Jewish peers and questions whether their activism will be worth it. From Bucharest to Paris, he strives to make peace with himself in an increasingly hostile world.

February 1. *The Unwanted: America, Auschwitz, and a Village Caught in Between* by Michael Dobbs. Illustrated. 343pp. Non-fiction. The author, a former Washington Post reporter, chose the village of Kippenheim to tell the stories of its inhabitants and their fate. Most hoped to find refuge in the United States. Dobbs weaves the tales of their fortunes with a carefully researched account of American attitudes and policies toward Europe's Jewish refugees.

March 7. *Jews in China: A History of Struggle* by Nicholas Ahang. Non-fiction. The author skillfully condenses centuries of historical information about four main groups of Jewish immigrants to China into this succinct, but comprehensive, chronicle. The Kaifeng Jews, who now look no different from their Chinese neighbours due to thousands of years of intermarriage and assimilation; the Baghdadi Jews, who came to Shanghai after the First Opium War and became fabulously wealthy through opium trade and real estate development; the Russian Jews, who left the Pale of Settlement for a better life in Harbin and prospered by supplying vast natural resources from Northeast China to Europe; and last but not least, the tens of thousands of German and Austrian Jews who escaped Nazi-occupied Europe and found refuge in Shanghai.

April 4. *The Emperor of Shoes* by Spencer Wise. Fiction. 328 pp. Alex Cohen is in China to learn the ropes of his father's shoe company. While there, he meets and falls for Ivy, a member of an activist group hoping to start a union among the workers. Alex wants to support her cause, as he knows that workers are being exploited at the factory. But his father is pressuring him to fall in line and step into his new management role. Then a government official asks Alex to bring him the names of the union organizers, and Alex finds himself at a crossroads

May 1. *Kafka's Last Trial: The Case of a Literary Legacy* by Benjamin Balint. Biog. 279 pp. Kafka's last instruction to his closest friend, Max Brod, was to destroy all his remaining papers upon his death. But Brod could not bring himself to burn the unpublished works of the man he considered a literary genius. Brod devoted his life to championing Kafka's writing, rescuing his legacy from obscurity and physical destruction.

June 6. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by Alfred Döblin. Translated by Michael Hofmann. Fiction. The inspiration for Rainer Werner Fassbinder's epic film, this novel is considered one of the most important works of the Weimar Republic and twentieth century literature. This novel of Berlin and the doomed Weimar Republic is one of the great books of the twentieth century, gruesome, farcical, and appalling, word drunk, pitchdark. In Michael Hofmann's extraordinary new translation, Alfred Döblin's masterpiece lives in English for the first time.

July 12 (one week late). *Madame Fourcade's Secret War: The Daring Young Woman Who Led France's Largest Spy Network Against Hitler* by Lynne Olson. Illustrated. 428 pp. Non-fiction. In 1941 a thirty-one-year-old Frenchwoman, a young mother born to privilege and known for her beauty and glamour, became the leader of a vast intelligence organization—the only woman to serve as a *chef de résistance* during the war. Strong-willed, independent, and a lifelong rebel against her country's conservative, patriarchal society, Marie-Madeleine Fourcade was temperamentally made for the job. Her group's name was Alliance, but the Gestapo dubbed it Noah's Ark because its agents used the names of animals as their aliases. No other French spy network lasted as long or supplied as much crucial intelligence—including providing American and British military commanders with a 55-foot-long map of the beaches and roads on which the Allies would land on D-Day—as Alliance.

August 1. *Kaddish: A Novel* by Nathan Englander. Fiction. 203 pp. There are reportedly no atheists in a foxhole, but do any exist beside the grave of a beloved, devout father? Jewish law requires the Kaddish prayer to be recited at three services daily, for the 11 months following a parent's death, in order to elevate the deceased's soul. That's a problem for Larry, a believer in neither prayer nor the soul. To appease his sister, Larry hatches an ingenious if cynical plan, hiring a stranger through a website called kaddish.com to recite the prayer and shepherd his father's soul safely to rest.

September 1. (one week late). *Spies of No Country: Secret Lives at the Birth of Israel* by Matti Friedman. Illustrated. 248 pp. Journalist and award-winning author Matti Friedman's tale of Israel's first spies reads like an espionage novel—but it's all true. The four agents at the center of this story were part of a ragtag unit known as the Arab Section, conceived during World War II by British spies and Jewish militia leaders in Palestine. Intended to gather intelligence and carry out sabotage operations, the unit consisted of Jews who were native to the Arab world and could thus easily assume Arab identities.

October 3. *The Ruined House* by Ruby Namdar, translated by Hillel Halkin. Fiction. 514 pp. Andrew P. Cohen, a professor of comparative culture at New York University, is at the zenith of his life. Adored by his classes and published in prestigious literary magazines, he is about to receive a coveted promotion—the crowning achievement of an enviable career. He is on excellent terms with Linda, his ex-wife, and his two grown children admire and adore him. His girlfriend, Ann Lee, a former student half his age, offers lively companionship. A man of elevated taste, education, and culture, he is a model of urbanity and success. But the manicured surface of his world begins to crack when he is visited by a series of strange and inexplicable visions involving an ancient religious ritual that will upend his comfortable life.

September 7. *The Chosen Wars: How Judaism Became an American Religion* by Stephen R. Weisman. 265 pp. Non-Fiction. The struggles that produced a redefinition of Judaism illuminate the larger American experience and the efforts by all Americans to reconcile their faith with modern demands. The narrative begins with the arrival of the first Jews in New Amsterdam and plays out over the nineteenth century as a massive immigration takes place at the dawn of the twentieth century. *The Chosen Wars* tells the stories of the colorful rabbis and activists—including Isaac Mayer Wise, Mordecai Noah, David Einhorn, Rebecca Gratz, and Isaac Lesser—who defined American Judaism and whose disputes divided it into the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox branches that remain today. “Only rarely does an author succeed in writing a book that reframes how we perceive our own history.”

December 5. *Anti-Semitism Here and Now* by Deborah E. Lipstadt. Non-fiction. 249 pp. Over the last decade there has been a noticeable uptick in antisemitic rhetoric and incidents by left-wing groups targeting Jewish students and Jewish organizations on American college campuses. And the reemergence of the white nationalist movement in America, complete with Nazi slogans and imagery, has been reminiscent of the horrific fascist displays of the 1930s. Through Europe, Jews have been attacked by terrorists, and some have been murdered. In a series of letters to an imagined college student and imagined colleague, both of whom are perplexed by this resurgence, acclaimed historian Deborah Lipstadt gives us her own superbly reasoned, brilliantly argued, and certain to be controversial responses to these troubling questions.

The Book Club meets on the first Saturday of the month at 9:00 a.m. in the NVHC Library. For more information, please contact Marjina Kaplan, marjina2@yahoo.com.