

## INTERNATIONAL HOUSE BOOK CLUB 2010

JANUARY 18

### **THE UNACCUSTOMED EARTH** by JUMPHA LAHIRI (INDIA)

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote, "Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn out soil. My children ... shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth." This quote, which was a revelation to me, so much so that I redid my work e-mail "inspiration quote" signature to put it it, is the inspiration of Jhumpa Lahiri's new collection of short stories called "Unaccustomed Earth".

This is the first book I have read of hers, and it simply does not disappoint. Eight stories are so intricately woven with their words and themes that each in itself is a beautiful work of art, and yet together, form the basis of a masterpiece. Former author of Interpreter of Maladies and The Namesake (movie tie-in edition), Lahiri's carrying on her success with this new bunch. The book starts with the story named after the book, a story about a Bengali woman named Ruma and her father who comes to visit her from Pennsylvania. Cultures and expectations collide as these two virtual strangers learn to exist with each other without the familiar glue of her mother, who passed away only months before. A garden, her mixed race son, and a secret love, permeate the layers of this opening story that literally leave you breathless by stories end. Similar themes are woven through the other seven stories, some which I liked more than others, but all of them written with such scope and craft.

Reading a story written by Lahiri is like sitting in a well ordered, immaculate living room, with a rich, fragrant onion sitting in front of you. As you delve into the story, you peel back the layers of the onion, and the exactitude and preciseness of her stories marvel, and the scent of the onion, not bitter or harsh, but rich and alluring, fill that perfect room, so much so that by the end, all of yours senses are heightened, and you may possibly have tears in your eyes.

It's as if Lahiri wrote her stories, and took a literary comb and brushed out all of the extra verbs, nouns, and adjectives (most which can clutter today's fiction), leaving only the essential words behind, creating an exquisite picture. People have compared Lahiri's writing to Hemingway. I sense more of Michael Cunningham, who also strives for leximic precision. Both Cunningham and Lahiri's writing is character centered, creates worlds of inner conflict, and flows like a beautiful river. 352 pages

FEBRUARY 15

**Rooftops of Tehran** by Mahbod Seraji (IRAN)

“This stunning literary debut paints a vivid portrait of growing up, discovering love, and awakening to the reality of life in a nation on the verge of revolution in the 1970s. *Rooftops of Tehran* opens in a middle-class neighborhood in Iran’s sprawling capital city. The rooftop of the narrator’s house – the tallest in their alley – is the perfect spot for sleeping on hot summer nights. It’s also the perfect location for stargazing, sneaking cigarettes, talking about American movies, and confiding, analyzing and agonizing through the typical trials of being a seventeen year-old boy, including being in love. This is the spot from which the narrator quietly watches his secret love, his beautiful next door neighbor Zari, promised since birth to his friend and mentor, nicknamed Doctor, a man adored and respected by the whole neighborhood. It is from this high perch that the narrator witnesses the SAVAK's brutal hunt and arrest of Doctor and realizes the oppressiveness of the regime under which he resides. And the rooftop is where the narrator and Zari ultimately find quiet refuge in each other after the shock of Doctor’s senseless fate ripples through their close-knit community and brings about terrible, unexpected repercussions.” 368 pages

MARCH 15

**Half of a Yellow Sun** by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (BIAFRA/NIGERIA)

2007 Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction

With her award-winning debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was heralded by the Washington Post Book World as "the 21st century daughter of Chinua Achebe." Now, in her masterly, haunting new novel, she recreates a seminal moment in modern African history: Biafra's impassioned struggle to establish an independent republic in Nigeria during the 1960s.

With the effortless grace of a natural storyteller, Adichie weaves together the lives of five characters caught up in the extraordinary tumult of the decade. Fifteen-year-old Ugwu is houseboy to Odenigbo, a university professor who sends him to school, and in whose living room Ugwu hears voices full of revolutionary zeal. Odenigbo's beautiful mistress, Olanna, a sociology teacher, is running away from her parents' world of wealth and excess; Kainene, her urbane twin, is taking over their father's business; and Kainene's English lover, Richard, forms a bridge between their two worlds. As we follow these intertwined lives through a military coup, the Biafran secession and the subsequent war, Adichie brilliantly evokes the promise, and intimately, the devastating disappointments that marked this time and place.

Epic, ambitious and triumphantly realized, *Half of a Yellow Sun*

is a more powerful, dramatic and intensely emotional picture of modern Africa than any we have had before. (560 pages)

APRIL 19

**Bliss** by O. Z. Livaneli (TURKEY)

Fifteen-year-old Meryem lives in a rural village in Eastern Anatolia, Turkey. Her simple, conventional way of life changes dramatically after she is raped and condemned to death for shaming the family. Asked to carry out the “honor killing” is her cousin, Cemal, a commando in the Turkish army. So begins a long, mystifying voyage for Meryem as her shell-shocked cousin ushers her to the shining metropolis of Istanbul where another troubled soul, the Harvard-educated professor Irfan, embarks on his own journey of transformation—one that catapults him into the heart of Meryem and Cemal’s conflict. The crossed-paths and interwoven destinies of these three characters makes for an affecting, by turns brutal and life-affirming portrayal of traditional and modern-day Turkey that no reader will soon forget. (276 pages)

“Livaneli is an essential force in Turkey’s musical, cultural, and political scene.”  
--Orhan Pamuk, Nobel Prize Winner and author of *Snow*

“With lush scenes of Turkish life and nuanced depictions of the [characters’] inner lives. . . a convergence of lost, likable souls.”  
--*Entertainment Weekly*

**O. Z. Livaneli**, one of Turkey’s most prominent authors, is also an accomplished composer, and previously served as an elected member of the Turkish Parliament

MAY 17

**Shanghai Girls** by Lisa See – published May, 2009 – Shanghai (CHINA)

In 1937, Shanghai is the Paris of Asia, a city of great wealth and glamour, the home of millionaires and beggars, gangsters and gamblers, patriots and revolutionaries, artists and warlords. Thanks to their father’s prosperous rickshaw business, twenty-one-year-old Pearl Chin and her younger sister, May, are having the time of their lives. Though both sisters wave off authority and tradition, they couldn’t be more different: Both are beautiful, modern, and carefree . . . until the day their father tells them that he has gambled away their wealth and that in order to repay his debts he must sell the girls as wives to suitors who have traveled from California to find Chinese brides.

As Japanese bombs fall on their beloved city, Pearl and May set out on the journey, one that will take them through the Chinese countryside, in and out of the clutch of brutal soldiers, and to the shores of America. In Los Angeles they try to find love with the strangers they have married, brushing against the seduction of Hollywood, and striving to embrace American life as they fight discrimination, Communist witch hunts, and Chinatown’s old ways and rules. (Paperback due out February 2010)

JUNE 21

**Out** by Natsuo Kirino (JAPAN)

“Nothing in Japanese literature prepares us for the stark, tension-filled, plot-driven realism of Natsuo Kirino’s award-winning literary mystery Out. This mesmerizing novel tells the story of a brutal murder in the staid Tokyo suburbs, as a young mother who works the night shift making boxed lunches strangles her abusive husband and then seeks the help of her coworkers to dispose of the body and cover up her crime. The coolly intelligent Masako emerges as the plot’s ringleader, but quickly discovers that this killing is merely the beginning, as it leads to a terrifying foray into the violent underbelly of Japanese society. At once a masterpiece of literary suspense and pitch-black comedy of gender warfare, Out is also a moving evocation of the pressures and prejudices that drive women to extreme deeds, and the friendships that bolster them in the aftermath” 416 pages

JULY/AUGUST – NO MEETING

SEPTEMBER 20

**Small Island** by Andrea Levy (JAMAICA/LONDON)

2004 Whitbread Book of the Year

2004 Orange Prize for Fiction

2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize

Hortense Joseph arrives in London from Jamaica in 1948 with her life in her suitcase, her heart broken, her resolve intact. Her husband, Gilbert Joseph, returns from the war expecting to be received as a hero, but finds his status as a black man in Britain to be second class. His white landlady, Queenie, raised as a farmer's daughter, befriends Gilbert, and later Hortense, with innocence and courage, until the unexpected arrival of her husband, Bernard, who returns from combat with issues of his own to resolve.

Told in these 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 that most American of experiences: the immigrant's life. (438 pages)

OCTOBER 18

**The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara** by David Kertzer (ITALY)

(Finalist- National Book Award, 1998). A historical thriller. “Nightfall, June 1858. A knock sounds at the door of the Jewish merchant Momolo Mortara. Two officers of the Inquisition burst inside and seize Mortara’s six-year-old son, Edgardo. As the boy is wrenched from his father’s arms, his mother collapses. The reason for his abduction: the boy had been secretly ‘baptized’ by a family servant. According to papal law, the child is therefore a Catholic who can be taken from his family and delivered to a special monastery where his conversion will be completed. With this terrifying scene, prize-winning historian David I. Kertzer begins the true story of how one boy’s kidnapping became a pivotal event in the collapse of the Vatican as a secular power. The book evokes the rhythms of daily life in a Jewish ghetto, explores such personages as Napoleon III, the revolutionary campaigns of Mazzini and Garibaldi and the emerging of Italy as a modern state. Moving and informative...” 368 pages

NOVEMBER 15

**Strength in What Remains** by Tracy Kidder (BURUNDI [Central Africa])

In this new book, Kidder gives us the superb story of a hero for our time. *Strength in What Remains* is a wonderfully written, inspiring account of one man’s remarkable American journey and of the ordinary people who helped him. A brilliant testament to the power of will and of second chances.

Deo arrives in America from Burundi in search of a new life. Having survived a civil war and genocide, plagued by horrific dreams, he lands at JFK airport with two hundred dollars, no English, and no contacts. He ekes out a precarious existence delivering groceries, living in Central Park, and learning English by reading dictionaries in bookstores. Then Deo begins to meet the strangers who will change his life, pointing him eventually in the direction of Columbia University, medical school, and a life devoted to healing. Kidder breaks new ground in telling this unforgettable story as he travels with Deo back over a turbulent life in search of meaning and forgiveness.

An extraordinary writer, Tracy Kidder once again shows us what it means to be fully human by telling a story about the heroism inherent in ordinary people, a story about a life based on hope. (Paperback due out May 2010)

DECEMBER – NO MEETING