

WOMEN & READING TODAY

***The Camel Bookmobile* by M. Hamilton. (2007).
New York: HarperCollins.**

Seeking excitement and fulfillment, Irish-American Fiona (Fi) Sweeney leaves New York to run a camel bookmobile in Kenya. Well-intentioned and naive, Fi believes that by bringing books to remote communities, she will make a difference in the world. Much of the story is set in the semi-nomadic community of Mididima, where not everyone believes in the power of literature and modernization. Fi is caught in the local struggle between globalizing Western influences and the threat they bring to long-established values, oral traditions, and the role of elders in the community. While some support the library and the knowledge it brings, there are many who see it as a danger. Poignantly written and populated by vibrant characters, Hamilton's work brings to light conflicting perspectives on literacy and the consequences of imposed Western ideas of education. The novel is a cautionary tale for well-intentioned librarians who lack cultural sensitivity and an understanding of indigenous values. (UTL call no: 813.6 H321C Inforum Stacks)

***The Jane Austen Book Club* by K. J. Fowler.
(2004). New York: Putnam.**

The "all-Jane-Austen-all-the-time-book-club," comprised of five women and one man, meets once a month to discuss a chosen Jane Austen novel. Funny and cleverly written, this novel is divided into six chapters, each dedicated to one of the book club members and one of Jane Austen's books. While the characters' lives do not always mimic those of Austen's protagonists, parallels are drawn and used to illuminate the unique personalities of the book club members, contemporary social conventions, and complicated relationships. This is an intricate, multilayered novel. While familiarity with Austen's classics enhances the reading experience, it is not essential for enjoying the book. Included at the end are synopses of each of the six Austen books, as well as "questions for discussion" contributed by every club member. Not only is it a book about a book club, it is also an ideal choice for a book club! This novel was adapted to film in 2007. (UTL call no: PS3556 .O844 J36 2004X Robarts Stacks)

***Summer Reading: A Novel* by H. Wolitze.
(2007). New York: Ballantine Books.**

Set in the present day Hamptons, the story revolves around three characters whose lives intersect at the Page Turners summer book club that meets twice a month. Lissy Snyder is a young socialite with dyslexia who hosts the meetings in an attempt to secure her place in Hamptons society; Angela Graves, an eccentric retired English professor, leads the group; and Michelle Cutty is Lissy's summer maid. Narrated in the first person, the story switches its focus from woman to woman. As the protagonists read *Madame Bovary* and Angela's other recommended books, each struggles with her own personal issues: restlessness, affairs, regret, insecurity, social standing, and step-children. They are encouraged, and at times choose to be led, by the acts of the heroines in the novels they read. This is a quick read, and while the characters are somewhat sketchy, the book lends insight into the reasons for reading groups and offers a glimpse of a book club formed for social advancement rather than as escape, support, or self-education. (UTL call no: PS3573 .O563 S86 2007X Robarts Stacks)

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READER'S ADVISORY GUIDE:

INF 2155H
THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN
THE COMMUNITY:
DEVELOPING A CRITICAL
PRACTICE



HAVE YOU EVER ASKED YOURSELF:
WHO WERE THE USERS OF THE
PUBLIC LIBRARY THROUGHOUT ITS
HISTORY? CAN YOU PICTURE THEM?
WHERE DID THEY LIVE? HOW DID
THEY LOVE? WHAT WERE THEIR
DAILY CONCERNS? WHAT DID THEY
ASPIRE TO?

READ SOME SUGGESTED TITLES
AND FIND OUT!

FEMALE READERS ARE IN THE FOCUS

WOMEN & READING: 19TH & 20TH CENTURY

***The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* by M. Schaffer & A. Barrows. (2008). New York: Dial Press.**

The year is 1946. London author Juliet Ashton, looking for ideas for a new book, finds an inspiration in a letter from Dawsey Adams, a Guernsey pig farmer. A lively correspondence with Dawsey and the other members of the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society ensues. At the time, the Channel Island of Guernsey is still reeling from the effects of the Nazi occupation during the Second World War. Cut off from the world for the duration of the war, the island inhabitants turn to each other and to books and reading. Originally established as a ruse to explain to Nazi soldiers why residents were wandering the streets after curfew, the literary society became a lifeline for the island people. Through the cast of colourful characters, riveting subject matter, and humour, this epistolary novel lends insight into the powerful influence of reading – on individuals and communities as a whole. (UTL call no: PS3619 .H3365 G84 2008 University College [Laidlaw] Stacks)

***The Hidden Hand: A Novel* by E. D. E. N. Southworth. (1920). New York: A.L. Burt.**

This story had first been published as a serial in 1859 and appeared two more times in serial format before being published as a book. Written by one of the most popular female writers of the time, the work was especially well-liked by young women. The fast-paced, action/adventure features Capitola Black, a young orphan living on the streets of New York, until she is finally taken in by Col. “Old Hurricane” Warfield as his ward. “Madcap” and daring, Cap refuses to settle for the life of southern belle, choosing instead to engage in wild adventures. This fascinating story has it all: dark, atmospheric weather, kidnapping attempts, secrets to uncover, and a notorious criminal to catch. *The Hidden Hand* should be particularly interesting to students intending to work in public libraries because it is an early example of escapist series fiction, which was heavily criticized by library professionals of the time but popular among women who used public libraries at the turn of the 20th century. (UTL call no: PS2892 .H5 19-- Downsview on request—also available online)

***The Ladies' Lending Library* by J. K. Keefer. (2007). Toronto: HarperCollins.**

In the summer of 1963, first-generation Ukrainian Canadians are vacationing at the Kalyna Beach cottage community in Ontario. While their husbands spend week after week working in Toronto and come home only on weekends, a few women, the novel's protagonists, pass the time cooking, cleaning, and minding children on the beach. In the bleak routine of their lives, the highlight is Friday afternoons when they meet to drink gin, talk about racy novels, and discuss the latest Hollywood gossip. This book focuses on relationships: women's families, immediate and extended. It brings out the tension between preserving traditional Ukrainian values and assimilating into Canadian society. Keefer's novel is character-driven with a slow moving storyline. While melancholic in tone, its merit is the nuanced portrayal of a group of women who use reading (or meetings under the pretext of reading?) to escape their tedious uneventful lives. (UTL call no: 813.54 K96L Inforum Stacks)

***Lark Rise to Candleford: A Trilogy* by F. Thompson. (1945). London: Oxford University Press.**

This trilogy *Lark Rise, Over to Candleford*, and *Candleford Green*, describes life in a quiet village in Oxfordshire during the 1880's. Told through the eyes of 13-year-old Laura, this semi-autobiographical tale recounts the author's experiences growing up in a similar village. The stories offer a detailed account of festivals and a vivid description of the daily lives of farmers, craftsmen, and tradesmen in the English countryside. Poignantly written in a clear straightforward style, the trilogy captures the pivotal point in Western history when the tight-knit rural society, revolving traditionally around the seasons, begins to change through agricultural mechanisation, means of communication, and industrialisation. This book is invaluable as a tool for understanding the people and the social forces at the close of the 19th century. The work has been adapted for stage and turned into a BBC TV series. (UTL call no: DA670 .O9 T52 1945 Robarts Stacks)

***Little Women* by L. M. Alcott. (2001). Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.**

Originally published in two parts, as *Little Women* in 1868 and *Good Wives* in 1869, the two were finally issued in one volume *Little Women* in 1880. This classic children's story, set in New England during the American Civil War, chronicles the lives of the recently impoverished March sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. They overcome hardships and cope with the usual tension among siblings; they love and make friends, while maintaining a positive outlook on life. The book was forward-thinking for its time because of its portrayal of strong, independent female characters. This is exemplified in the story of Jo's literary aspirations and her success as a writer. Despite the fact that it was written more than 150 years ago, *Little Women* is still relevant today. Although somewhat moralistic in tone, cautioning against the trappings of materialism, and promoting traditional family values, the book nonetheless offers a view of young women as intelligent, ambitious and independent thinkers. (UTL call no: PS 1017.L52 Robarts Stacks)

***Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time* by F. Fern. (1855). New York: Mason Brothers.**

Originally published in 1854, *Ruth Hall* was written by journalist Fanny Fern, which is a pen name for Sara Willis. The novel is a semi-autobiographical account of a woman achieving financial independence as a newspaper journalist. Ruth Hall, a happily married mother of three, loses her husband to typhoid fever and finds herself in dire financial circumstances. Inadequately supported by her father and father-in-law, Ruth turns to writing to support herself and her daughters. Fern was sharply criticised for her derisive portrayal of men in the book, reflective of men in her own life. Fern writes in a terse, journalistic style, offering satirical commentary on marriage, men, and the role of women in 19th century society. Depicting a strong, independent woman who succeeds in a male-dominated profession, it is an unconventional portrait of an accomplished woman of the time. (UTL available online)