

Miami Hamilton Downtown Book Club

TIME: Noon

January 30 – Dewey, The Small Town Library Cat Who Touched the World, Vicki Myron

One frigid Midwestern winter night in 1988, a ginger kitten was shoved into the after-hours book-return slot at the public library in Spencer, Iowa. And in this tender story, Myron, the library director, tells of the impact the cat, named Dewey, had on the library and its patrons, and on Myron herself. Through her developing relationship with the feline, Myron recounts the economic and social history of Spencer as well as her own success story—despite an alcoholic husband, living on welfare, and health problems ranging from the difficult birth of her daughter, Jodi, to breast cancer. After her divorce, Myron graduated college (the first in her family) and stumbled into a library job. She quickly rose to become director, realizing early on that this was a job I could love for the rest of my life. Dewey, meanwhile, brings disabled children out of their shells, invites businessmen to pet him with one hand while holding the Wall Street Journal with the other, eats rubber bands and becomes a media darling. The book is not only a tribute to a cat—anthropomorphized to a degree that can strain credulity (Dewey plays hide and seek with Myron, can read her thoughts, is mortified by his hair balls)—it's a love letter to libraries. (Sept.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc.

February 27 – Bangkok 8 by John Burdett - Everything in Bangkok 8 reverberates with a freshness of old ideas seen from a new perspective. Every time the murder mystery seems to fall in a familiar pattern, it veers off in an unexpected direction. Sonchai is such a delightful character and storyteller who takes your elbow and bends your ear as he leads you on a tour of his beloved city. Even his jaundiced view of Western life and his tendency to stereotype all things American is a turnabout of the way Americans see his own country, all sex and corruption. Sonchai sees all the warts of Thai society, but he understands why they happen and has made his peace with them. He's more comfortable with the devil he knows than the devil he doesn't.

John Burdett has perfectly captured a sense of place that is so ultimately foreign to most of us and made it seem familiar. Even his mixture of different ethnicities, Thai, Khmer, Karen, Lao, Chinese, Russian, Burmese, and Siberian, gives this novel a feeling of the larger world outside the U.S. that we consistently ignore. Sonchai Jitpleecheep is our travel guide, daring us to think differently and inviting us to enjoy his home. Feel free to lose yourself within Bangkok 8 and enjoy your visit abroad. It's time well-spent. Bangkok 8 is one of those novels you finish with a smile on your face and warmth in your heart for a story, and a place, that is well told and satisfying.

March 27 - Three Cups of Tea by Greg Mortenson – This is the astonishing, uplifting story of a real-life Indiana Jones and his humanitarian campaign to use education to combat terrorism in the Taliban's backyard.

Anyone who despairs of the individual's power to change lives has to read the story of Greg Mortenson, a homeless mountaineer who, following a 1993 climb of Pakistan's treacherous K2, was inspired by a chance encounter with impoverished mountain villagers and promised to build them a school. Over the next decade he built fifty-five schools especially for girls that offer a balanced education in one of the most isolated and dangerous regions on earth. As it chronicles Mortenson's quest, which has brought him into conflict with both enraged Islamists and uncomprehending Americans, "Three Cups of Tea" combines adventure with a celebration of the humanitarian spirit.

April 24 – The Beans of Egypt, Maine by Carolyn Chute- The Beans of Egypt, Maine is about a white-trash family in a tiny depressed town, as seen through the eyes of Erlene Granville, the respectable girl next door. Although intellectually Erlene understands her father's wish that she stay away from the Beans, they fascinate her. The attraction goes much deeper perhaps because of the family's devotion and passionate love for each other.

May 29 – Animal, Vegetable, Miracle by Barbara Kingsolver - When Kingsolver and her family move from suburban Arizona to rural Appalachia, they take on a new challenge: to spend a year on a locally produced diet, paying close attention to the provenance of all they consume. "Our highest shopping goal was to get our food from so close to home, we'd know the person who grew it. Often that turned out to be ourselves as we learned to produce what we needed, starting with dirt, seeds, and enough knowledge to muddle through. Or starting with baby animals, and enough sense to refrain from naming them."--From publisher description

June 26 – The Reader by Bernhard Schlink - The Reader (Der Vorleser) is an award-winning novel by German law professor and judge Bernhard Schlink. It was published in Germany in 1995 and in the United States (translated into English by Carol Brown Janeway) in 1997. It concerns itself with the difficulties of comprehending the Holocaust as experienced by the generations growing up afterward, and whether it can be understood through language alone, a question increasingly at the center of literature about the Holocaust in the late 20th and early 21st centuries as it begins to fade from living memory.

Schlink's book was well received not just in his native country, where it was a change from the detective novels he had been writing up till that point, winning several awards, but in the United States as well. It became the first German novel to top the New York Times bestseller list. It has been translated into 37 other languages, and been assigned in college-level courses on Holocaust literature.

July 24 – Book Swap and The Groucho Letters: Letters from and to Groucho Marx.

Bring a book to swap or bring a few and take a few (with the promise of returning the books the next time we meet!?!)

All Things Considered, October 20, 2008 · Why are we here? What is our purpose? Is there a God? How can we account for the presence of evil? These are just some of the questions not answered in The Groucho Letters: Letters from and to Groucho Marx — which is precisely why I keep a copy of it on the small table beside my bed.

A letter from Warner Brothers threatening legal action for the Marx Brothers' use of the name "Casablanca" in the title of their movie was met not with bluster, counter threats or even a request for discussion, but rather with a letter from Groucho discussing the history of the name "Warner" and the word "brothers." "Professionally," he writes, "we were brothers long before you... what about the Smith Brothers? The Brothers Karamazov? Dan Brothers, an outfielder with Detroit?" Subsequent letters from the WB lawyers were met with even more flippancy, and eventually they simply stopped writing and gave up the matter.

In 1963, responding to an admiring letter he received from T.S. Eliot, Groucho replied, "Dear Tom; If this isn't your first name, I'm in a hell of a fix." . . . and on it goes. This collection is irreverent and glib. But what fun! 😊

August - Closed