The Book Club Bible

Published by Michael O'Mara

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Introduction: A Book Club Member Speaks

I belong to a book group that meets monthly, and over the last three years I've discovered some astonishing writing, made some good friends and quaffed plenty of wine. I've also enjoyed some furious debates – we've discussed gender politics, parental responsibility, deviant sexuality and the future of society. I have read and loved books I would never have chosen myself and heard fresh perspectives on some of my favourite novels.

Yet there is always a moment of agony at every meeting. *What shall we read next?* There is always a sinking feeling when you realize that the moment of choice has come round again and you can't *name* a single book, let alone suggest one that you would be happy to inflict on your book club and then discuss in detail. Add in the caprices of your group and it's a minefield.

This, then, is why you need this book. No longer will you flounder when asked to recommend a title. No longer will you propose a book only to find that there's not much to say about it, or that it simply wasn't the rapturous read it promised. The 100 entries in this book – and the themed 'top tens' – will provide inspiration.

Each featured title is described by a non-spoiler synopsis, so you can consider whether or not to read it without having the ending ruined. Furthermore, there are suggested discussion points to stimulate debate and abolish that dreadful pause at the beginning of every meeting. For those of you dedicated enough to read two books a time, or for those who wish to continue a debate at the next session that draws on a different writer's perspective, complementary titles are recommended.

This guide was well received by my book group. I wish you the same enjoyment in discovering stories that may change your world.

ANA SAMPSON, London, 2007

Things Fall Apart

CHINUA ACHEBE

Published 1958 / Length 148 pages

Things Fall Apart follows the ambitions and struggles of Okonkwo, a prominent member of a pre-colonial Igbo village in what is now Nigeria, as he strives to maintain his high standing within his community in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Okonkwo has overcome a disadvantaged childhood to become a successful man, but he seems fated to lose the status he cherishes. His blind commitment to traditional values undermines his relationship with his family, particularly his son Nwoye. He is prepared to make great sacrifices in order to preserve his position in the village, yet Okonkwo's world is changing, as British colonial rule begins to encroach upon the Igbo way of life. Achebe portrays the colonial experience from an African perspective: the European culture promoted by the invading authorities represents a challenge to Okonkwo's identity, one he must overcome in order to survive. Written in the late 1950s against the backdrop of Nigeria's journey towards independence, the book raises questions about collective identity, morality and self-alienation, and constitutes the foundation of modern African literature in English.

WHAT THE CRITICS SAID

'Achebe is the conscience of African literature because he has consistently insisted on the power of storytellers to appeal to the morality and humanity of their readers and to give their life fuller meaning.' – SIMON GIKANDI, Professor of Literature, in his introductory essay to the Heinemann Classics in Context edition of the novel

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Okonkwo has been described as a classic tragic hero, but at

times his actions make it difficult for the reader to identify with him. Why do you think Achebe makes his protagonist so morally ambiguous?

- How do the characters of Ezinma, Nwoye and Ikemefuna reflect the strengths and limitations of Igbo society?
- Why do you think Achebe includes descriptions of the more troubling Igbo customs, such as the abandoning of twin babies? Isn't there a danger of alienating Western readers from the society he is depicting?
- *Things Fall Apart* repeatedly emphasizes the importance of oral storytelling in Igbo culture. How does the telling of stories affect the way in which Achebe's novel is narrated?

Background information

- Achebe is an internationally renowned Nigerian academic who drew on his own family's experience of colonization to write this, his first novel. The story of Okonkwo's family is continued in *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964).
- The title of the novel is taken from a line of W. B. Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming'.
- *Things Fall Apart* is the most widely read African novel and has been translated into fifty different languages, leading to Achebe being identified as the man who 'invented' modern African literature.

Suggested companion books

- *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o – detailing the effects of colonization on Kenyan identity during the 1952–60 Emergency.
- *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass (see page 86) – exploring cultural alienation and the individual.
- *Baudolino* by Umberto Eco – the importance of storytelling.

Half of a Yellow Sun

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

Published 2006 / Length 448 pages

Chilling violence erupted during the Nigeria–Biafra War, between 1967 and 1970, when the Igbo of eastern Nigeria sought to form an independent republic of Biafra; it is this important period of African history that is the focus of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie compellingly evokes the personal as well as the political, with three main characters at the heart of the story: Ugwu, a thirteen-year-old houseboy who spends his days scrubbing the floors and polishing the dishes of a university professor; the professor's beautiful lover Olanna, a young middle-class woman who has abandoned her privileged life in Lagos; and Richard, a shy Englishman who is bewitched by Olanna's twin sister. The novel depicts these characters' struggles as they are forced to test their ideals and loyalties under the shadow of the Nigerian troops' advance. As well as being an exploration of war and related issues such as moral responsibility and allegiance, this is at heart also a powerful love story.

WHAT THE CRITICS SAID

'Literary reflections on the Biafra war have a long and distinguished history, from the most famous poet to have died in the war, Christopher Okigbo, to Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and Flora Nwapa. Born in 1977, Adichie is part of a new generation revisiting the history that her parents survived. She brings to it a lucid intelligence and compassion, and a heartfelt plea for memory.' – *The Guardian*

DISCUSSION POINTS

- 'Perhaps he was not a true writer after all. He had read somewhere that, for the true writer, nothing was more

important than their art, not even love.' Discuss the role of love and art in the novel. What impact does war have on them?

- The book takes its title from the emblem for Biafra, the breakaway state in eastern Nigeria that survived for only three years. What other significances do the images of sun, fire and light carry throughout?
- The novel begins in a time of peace before reaching war. How does this affect our response to the characters?
- Adichie uses the technique of a book within a book. What is the significance of this device?

Background information

- The novel won the 2007 Orange Prize for Fiction.
- In January 2004, Adichie was heralded by *The Washington Post Book World* as 'the twenty-first-century daughter of Chinua Achebe'.
- *Purple Hibiscus*, the author's first novel, won the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. It was also shortlisted for the 2004 Orange Prize and the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, and longlisted for the 2004 Booker Prize.

Suggested companion books

- *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (see page 10) – a classic account of a changing Nigeria.
- *Surviving in Biafra* by Alfred Obiora Uzokwe – a memoir of civil war seen through the eyes of a young boy.
- *The Icarus Girl* by Helen Oyeyemi – a novel set partly in Nigeria.
- The *Regeneration* trilogy by Pat Barker – exploring the effect of war on civilian life.

Brick Lane

MONICA ALI

Published 2003 / Length 492 pages

An enjoyable and inspiring read, *Brick Lane* contains a potpourri of archetypal modern characters caught in a morass of angst and alienation. Nazneen is an eighteen-year-old woman wrenched from her family and the relative security of her Bangladeshi village to be married off to a man old enough to be her father, and forced to live in London, a place she doesn't know. Chanu, her husband, a man who came to Britain expecting to get on if he worked and studied hard, has learned the hard way that Britain isn't quite the land of golden opportunity it appeared to be from Bangladesh. For years, Nazneen keeps house, looks after her husband, bears his children and dutifully maintains her horizons within her home and family. When reality finally dawns on Chanu, with it comes the realization that he cannot earn enough to support his family. Suddenly, Nazneen's world broadens, and with the purchase of a second-hand sewing machine and an introduction to Karim, a young second-generation British-Bangladeshi, her life changes for ever.

READER'S OPINION

'Ali lifts the lid on contemporary immigrant life in modern urban Britain. It's both surprising and heart-warming and gives a real sense of the fractured identities that so many immigrant people and especially their children are trying to forge into a coherent whole. Excellent.' – MIKE, 37

DISCUSSION POINTS

- How successful is Ali at conveying the alienation felt by her characters, both towards each other and within the society in which they find themselves?

- For what audience is this book primarily written? Do you think it helps to foster better understanding and respect between indigenous and immigrant people?
- How is hypocrisy handled in the book? In particular, what do you make of Mrs Islam?
- Does the backdrop of escalating racial tension add to or get in the way of the other narratives?
- Should Western attitudes towards women and women's rights be overlaid on to different cultures, as here? Should we even ask that question?

Background information

- In 2004, Ali won the British Book Awards Newcomer of the Year and *Brick Lane* won the WH Smith People's Choice Award for Debut Novel. The book was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize, *The Guardian* First Book Award and the British Book Awards Literary Fiction Award.
- In 2003, *Granta* magazine named Ali as one of its twenty Best of Young British Novelists.

Suggested companion books

- *Straightening Ali* by Amjeed Kabil – a young British-born Pakistani man is forced into an arranged marriage by his family, even though they know he is gay.
- *The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi – Karim, a young English-Asian man living with his English mother and Indian father in south London, tries to find his own identity.
- *Small Island* by Andrea Levy (see page 132) – a Jamaican couple are befriended by their white landlady in post-war Britain, when to be black was to be a second-class citizen.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

MAYA ANGELOU

Published 1969 / Length 281 pages

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is the first volume in Maya Angelou's acclaimed series of autobiographies. Born Marguerite Johnson, she and her beloved brother, Bailey, are sent to live with their strict Southern Baptist grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas. The children call her Momma and her rules and religion bring an order to their young lives that their parents did not. Running the local store, Momma is in an unusual position during the troubled times in 1930s America, and she is able to protect her grandchildren from the harsher aspects of life during the Depression. The realities of growing up in the Southern states are painfully and truthfully depicted, but it is when the children are sent north to escape the potentially brutal attitudes of the white folks on the other side of town that Maya's life is turned upside down. Angelou's poetic writing style gives real depth to her descriptions of her formative years. She allows the reader genuine emotional access to the difficult and personal experiences of her childhood and adolescence, with moving and lyrical prose that manages to avoid self-pity, in a narrative that finishes on a note of hope.

READER'S OPINION

'In her beautiful and honest account, Angelou confronts us with themes as huge and global as racial discrimination and as small and localized as a young girl's coming of age, each explored with equal poignancy and candour. An inspiring read.' – ANNA, 20

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Maya spends much of her childhood with her grandmother in Arkansas – how does her strict upbringing contribute to her behaviour as she grows up?

- Following Maya's treatment at the hands of her mother's boyfriend, the family takes drastic action. How do you think young Maya's guilt over their protection of her affects her developing personality?
- How does her month of homelessness change Maya's outlook when she returns to her mother's home?
- Maya was almost completely mute for five years, yet she went on to become an eloquent speaker, civil-rights activist, poet, actress, dancer, playwright and university professor. Do you think her years of silence helped or hindered her transformation into the woman she became?

Background information

- The book's title comes from Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem 'Sympathy'.

Suggested companion books

- *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (see page 212) – a woman finds the strength to overcome a horrendous childhood with the companionship of other women.
- *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (see page 142) – a Pulitzer Prize-winning depiction of life at the end of slavery, and the extremes of motherly love.
- *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – examines the restrictions of a strict religious upbringing in a country undergoing dramatic political change.