

## *BLL Book Reviews - September 2022*

Brewster Ladies Library  
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**Oona and the Shark (Katherine Tegen Books, 2022) Picture Book (4-8 year-olds)**

**by Kelly DiPucchio and illustrated Raissa Figueroa**

reviewed by: Nori Morganstein, Youth Services Librarian/Assistant Director

*Oona and the Shark* is about a mermaid who excels both at making friends and making inventions. She's friends with everyone, even the hermit crabs, who aren't the friendliest. All the creatures under the sea are impressed with her creations. She makes things like seahorse carousels and beach ball jugglers. The one animal who does not seem impressed though is Stanley, the shark.

The more Stanley rejects Oona's attempts to impress him, the harder she tries to win him over. She come up with bigger, louder, and better inventions. She even tries throwing a party. but, nothing works. Stanley just gets angry. Oona gets tired. Just when it seems like she's about to give up, she figures out what all her inventions and her party have in common: noise and distractions. He did seem to always be occupied with his seashell collection. Instead of her usual loud parties and inventions, Oona creates something she thinks Stanley would like, a machine that sorts sea glass by color. When she shows it to him, he loves it! They play together with it, quietly and have a lot of fun.

This book is full of positive messages. It teaches children about different types of play and personalities. Not everyone loves loud parties and social play. Some people are quieter and that's okay. The book is about embracing differences instead of giving up on them. Oona never gives up trying, and that's its own message too. Just because something is hard doesn't mean one should stop doing it.

The illustrations are bright and detailed. Looking at each page is like looking into an aquarium or watching a Pixar movie about the ocean. All of the fish and creatures are illustrated in a cute light, even the shark. You'll want to go to the beach after reading this and look for mermaids or maybe sea glass.



## **Why Save the Bankers?**

**by Thomas Piketty**

reviewed by Doug Wilcock

*Why Save the Bankers* is a compilation of forty-eight essays written by the French economist Thomas Piketty, famous as the author of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. The essays span the years 2008 – 2015 and focus on the global recession, problems with the European Union, and an unsettled world. Piketty is of course famous as the economist who pointed to the increasing concentration of wealth, especially inherited wealth, as the great source of economic inequality in both Europe and the U.S. In many of these essays he returns to that theme, especially in regard to the sclerotic economic growth in Europe. He decries, for example, the fact that after deducting depreciation from gross profits, almost all net profit is returned to shareholders as dividends with effectively no new capital investment. This, he asserts, is not a recipe for economic growth and an equitable distribution of the proceeds of growth.

Perhaps the most interesting essays are focused on Europe. While we, here in the U.S., were at least dimly aware of the issues surrounding the Euro and the debt problems facing Greece, Spain, and Italy, we might not have had the overview that Piketty brings to these problems. He decries the fact that while France, Germany, and the U.S. can finance their debt at very low interest rates, Spain, Italy and Greece face staggering debt service burdens because they pay interest on their debt of 5-6% (in comparison to 1-3%). He picks up on a German proposal, noting the irony that it comes from a very conservative source, that all debt in the Eurozone in excess of 60% of a country's GDP be mutualized so that this European debt can be financed at the low rates enjoyed by France and Germany. This leads him to the conclusion that a fiscal union is a necessary accompaniment to the monetary union that now exists, and that this union must be representative and transparent. Piketty abhors the Council of Heads of State that opaquely make decisions now, feeling that it is this opaqueness that has helped propel the backlash against the European Union. In making the case for a fiscal union and real representative democracy he feels that Europe must have a unified corporate profit tax, that the tax competition that currently exists is a zero-sum game and that the cheats in this game (Ireland and Luxembourg get top billing) have engaged in a beggar thy neighbor strategy. The result is that the economic powerhouse that Europe ought to be is viewed around the world as a dysfunctional basket case.

In reading these essays one is struck by how repetitive they can seem. Entire phrases appear numerous times in a number of essays. Also, by their nature of being just a few hundred words, the essays can't develop a sophisticated argument. Despite that, they collectively offer interesting ideas. Anyone interested in Europe and the direction of the European economy and politics would be well served by reading this book. Thomas Piketty may have disappeared from the headlines here in the United States but his ideas continue to animate political and economic discussions around the world.

## **The Summer Before the War,**

**by Helen Simonson, 2016. 473 pp**

reviewed by JoAnn Phillips

With its themes of love, loss, yearning, class self-consciousness, and the nearing drumbeats of war, this novel is written with a painterly eye for vivid detail. The writing sometimes feels lushly old-fashioned, but it nonetheless offers an unmistakable indictment of the glorification of war, and the impulse to judge whom one should love. Simonson unflinchingly rebukes the patriarchal society that viewed women of the day with calculated condescension. The setting is 1914, but the human values Simonson explores with insight and precision are relevant today. Parallels between 1914 and 2022 abound. Sink into a cozy chair and be transported to Rye, in England, just before WWI begins in earnest, and let Simonson's compelling cast of colorful characters inhabit your imagination.

**Leonardo Da Vinci**  
**by Walter Isaacson**  
reviewed by Jim Mills

If any figure in history has earned the title, Renaissance Man, that man would have to be *Leonardo Da Vinci*. With great skill Walter Isaacson has presented this remarkably gifted man's life, lived 500 years ago, in great detail in this 2017 biography. Da Vinci, in his time, was a renown painter, scientist, engineer, inventor and visionary.

Da Vinci's life did not have a promising start with his birth in 1452. Leonardo was an illegitimate child. He was not offered the educational opportunities that his father made available to his siblings. In a way this slow start to Leonardo's life may have been an advantage. Not being exposed to conventional knowledge from traditional schooling made Da Vinci more open to new revolutionary ideas. He was also fortunate to be born at the start of the printing press era, making book learning more readily available as book prices dropped sharply. Starting his career as an artist, he very early on showed his extraordinary versatility and genius.

In the era of powerful city states, artists and other talented individuals needed the support of wealthy sponsors. Leonardo throughout his career had support from the Medicis in Florence, the Sforzas in Milan, the papacy in Rome, Cesare Borgia's army in Northern Italy and eventually with King Francis the 1st in France. In addition to his artistic talents Da Vinci was in demand as an architect and a military engineer. Throughout his life Leonardo continually gave expression to his endless curiosity. Much of this inventive exploration would not become common knowledge until Da Vinci's numerous notes were discovered and examined long after his death. Being left handed, Da Vinci wrote from right to left further concealing his creative ideas.

For many years, Da Vinci for many years dissected human and animal bodies. He was able to discover much about the human anatomy and his knowledge in this area was far in advance of any of his contemporary. Since his work was little known at the time, it took several centuries for other medical explorers to rediscover what Da Vinci had learned around 1500. His endless curiosity drove Leonardo to investigate many areas of knowledge such as aeronautics, geometry, trigonometry, architecture, and military technology.

Da Vinci's shortcoming was his shifting interest in so many fields. Most areas he did not pursue with enough fervor to produce a usable result. This included some of his monumental paintings that were left uncompleted including *The Adoration of the Magi* and *The Battle of Anghiari*. His completed paintings such as the *Mona Lisa* and the *Last Supper* insured Leonardo's reputation as a master of his arts. He had worked on the *Mona Lisa* for a decade or so and it was still in his possession when he died in 1519. The period in which Da Vinci lived was one in which one person could become a pioneer in so many fields. Centuries later knowledge had become so compartmentalized and competition so severe that never again could so much be achieved in so many fields by a single person. Leonardo Da Vinci comes down to us through the centuries as a uniquely brilliant and creative individual. This trait has been brilliantly revealed by Walter Isaacson in this biography which is generously filled with beautiful color illustrations.

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**The BLL Book Reviews**

**Also appear on the Brewster Ladies Library Web Site**

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**Thanks to JoAnn Phillips for her skill in editing these reviews.**

## The Great Passion

by James Runcie

reviewed by Doug Wilcock

*The Great Passion*, a relatively short novel, is the story of J.S. Bach's family life and the creation of the St. Matthew Passion, as told through the eyes of a young person, Stefan Silberman. After Silberman's mother dies, and his father decides he can't take care of Stefan, Silberman has come to the church school where Bach serves as Cantor after his mother dies and his father decides that he can't take care of Stefan. Picked on because of his red hair- his nickname is Carrot- Stefan is "adopted" by Bach's family to protect him from bullying by the other students. Stefan is tormented particularly by a student named David Stolle who, along with his parents, plays a major role in the novel.

When talking early on with Bach's wife, Anna Magdalena (Lena), about the death of his mother, Lena tells Stefan that "we cannot be defined by our grief, otherwise it's the only thing anyone will say about us." This gets Stefan to thinking that our lives are often quickly and superficially summed up, that we lazily and carelessly describe other people, using physical description, profession, and character, in general only three or four attributes to regularly define a person. "When I was young the only thing people said about me were that I had red hair, a dead mother and that my father made organs. That was all anyone thought they ever needed to know. I have always found it strange how so few facts define a life."

Stefan finds that "the sorrows that befall us all were a necessary symmetry," with ideas and emotions, patterns and events known only through their opposite. "We cannot understand light without darkness, joy without pain, peace without war, love without hatred, beauty without ugliness or youth without age. We only know the best by experiencing the worst. We understand life because of death."

After the death of one of Bach's children, author Runcie (author also of the Grantchester series seen on PBS) ruminates on prayer. "Sitting at someone's bedside in times of sorrow was an act of prayer. Acknowledging that there are times when we are powerless was an act of prayer." He goes further, speaking through Stefan that "the life of the faithful involved making everything we did an act of prayer." And he concludes about death, speaking through Anna Magdalena who says that "the greater the love the more intensely we fear the terror of its loss."

About two-thirds of the way through the book, Runcie begins the buildup to the writing of the St. Matthew Passion with the death of Sophia Stolle, mother of Stefan's bully. A quick, awkward exchange between Stefan and David, the bully, forms David's apology to Stefan, while David's father Paul acknowledges Stefan's vocal ability. In his own way, each expresses their gratitude that Stefan sang at Sophia's funeral.

To sing the Passion, Bach decides that he needs Paul Stolle, as well as David whom he has already enlisted. Bach, called Sebastian throughout the book, Lena, and Stefan visit Stolle, hoping to convince him to sing. Ultimately, the conversation turns to Stefan. "Why are you here?" asks Stolle. "I sang for your wife. Perhaps you could sing for us too." "What do you know of these things?" "I lost my mother, just as your son has. And now I sing because I can and people have asked me and I have to do it. ... It fills my days with something other than grief." Bach steps in to suggest that for Stolle singing will be his lament. "You cannot hold onto your suffering. Share it. Let others know that they are not alone."

Once the drama of how roles will be filled is cleared, there is the hard work of preparation, all overseen by the demanding presence of J.S. Bach. On Good Friday 1727, in St. Thomas's church in Leipzig, the Passion is sung. There is a thrill among the musicians as the performance began, with the doubts, uncertainty, illnesses, and absences cast aside. "The excitement of performance with its necessary and unstoppable momentum was exhilarating." As performers, the musicians and singers were no longer individuals. "Our identities, hopes, and fears had been subsumed into something greater than ourselves." Isn't that a necessary condition for a great piece of music?

We can thank James Runcie for using Stefan Silbermann to tell us what it would have been like to be a musician studying, singing, or playing under Bach. Runcie makes Bach believable and the story of the creation of the St. Matthew Passion dramatic. He gives us plenty to consider, writing in a couple hundred pages that life can be shaped by death and how we respond to it. Stepping aside from the hurly burly of eighteenth-century life, we find that the core of *The Great Passion* forms a meditative book.

## **Empire of the Scalpel: The History of Surgery**

**by Ira Rutkow**

reviewed by Jim Mills

Prior to the last 150 years surgery was infrequently performed. The experience was one of agonizing pain and often led to death. In the mid to late 19th century this sorry history would dramatically change. In 1846 at Harvard the first operation was conducted using an anesthetic, but the ever-present threat of fatal infection would continue for a few more decades. In Great Britain, Joseph Lister, using Pasteur's discovery of infectious microbes, developed a set of operating procedures using an antiseptic (carbolic acid) that drastically reduced lives lost during surgery. Lister had a difficult time convincing other surgeons to adopt these new protocols. In 1881 the President of the United States, James Garfield, was shot by an assassin. Garfield survived his gunshot wounds for several months but died from infections introduced by his physician who had resisted using antiseptic techniques. Medical innovations historically have been resisted by an older generation of physicians fixed in their ways.

Over the last century the surgical technology and procedures have steadily improved increasing survivability, decreasing patient discomfort, and expanding the range of curable medical conditions. Early 20th century innovations such as X-Rays, electrical lighting, surgical procedures to reduce blood loss and shock, and the first antibiotics further improved surgical outcomes. In the second half of the century techniques were developed that allowed organ transplants including eventually heart and lung. The 21st century expanded the use of less invasive surgical techniques such as laparoscopic technology reducing the impact of surgery on the patient and drastically reducing recovery times. Each of these surgical advances has increased the use of surgery in solving medical problems.

In *Empire of the Scalpel*, the surgeon Ira Rutkow, has provided a fascinating and eminently readable account of surgical history. He has included the biographies of many of the pioneers of surgical technique and their contributions to medical knowledge as well as changes in the organization and training of new surgeons. These improvements were hard won and were achieved only by the persistence and dedication of many determined individuals who had developed new concepts that ended up eventually benefiting us all.



**Re-enactment of the first public demonstration of general anesthesia by William T. G. Morton on October 16, 1846, in the Ether Dome at Massachusetts General Hospital.**

## **Pig Years**

**by Ellyn Gaydos**

reviewed by Jim Mills

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*Pig Years* is Ellyn Gaydos' account of her years working on small farms in upstate New York and Vermont. The author does not mince any words in telling of her story. The experience can be tough on marginally paid workers, some of whom move from site to site seeking employment.

The most dramatic and difficult to read segments have to do with the slaughtering of pigs and chickens. Many farms ship out their animals to slaughter houses to do the deed but Gaydos' farms performed the task in-house. Both the animals and workers are persistently attacked by various forms of vermin that proliferate in the farm environment. Most of the farm animals and many of the farm workers have some sort of chronic physical or medical problems and are continually pestered by parasites.

Working with vegetables can be less stressful but the problems encountered can be equally demanding. Controlling pests is a continuing chore and the operation and maintenance of farm machinery requires patience and ingenuity. This same machinery is an ever-threatening source of injury for farm workers. The medical support for these employees is frequently less than desired.

The physical environment on a farm is also challenging. Persistent mud, brutal winter weather, high winds, heavy rains and scorching sun can make life so difficult. When off-work, the employees find their pleasures wherever they can. Nearby in New York the New Lebanon Valley Speedway draws large crowds exhibiting the spectacle of crashing, racing vehicles providing action-packed entertainment for folks who have very little else for amusement. The shopping options are limited to Walmarts and Dollar Stores and dining options are also limited.

*Pig Years* provides a graphic description of the agricultural world that supports our way of life. A world that fortunately we don't directly have to experience. Reading books such as *Pig Years* provides a view of that world and a confirmation to those, like my son, who decide not to consume meat. Personally I have not become a vegetarian, but liking the variety of delicious options that vegetables provide, have been leaning in that direction. We all have choices to make.

## **Now and Forever: Somewhere a Band Is Playing. & Leviathan '99**

**by Ray Bradbury**

reviewed by Don Boink

Out in the middle of the Arizona desert is Summerton, a town not found on any map. One day, as a train passed through that didn't stop, a bag was tossed up on the station platform and a man jumped off the moving train. He was a newspaper reporter checking out a rumor. In the station, he found the Stationmaster, Elias Culpepper. Various hats on pegs indicated he was also a taxi driver, baggage master., ticket seller, night watchman and switchman. What will it be, a ticket on the next train? Or a taxi over to the Egyptian View Arms?

This the beginning of a strange tale about a lost town inhabited by nothing but writers of various types. At the Egyptian Arms the reporter encounters the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. She turns out to be Nefertiti. As the reporter explores the town, he finds a cemetery with headstones listing dates of birth but no death dates. It turns out that all these people are ageless. Talking with Culpepper, the reporter learns that once a month the Stationmaster takes a truck load of manuscripts to be mailed to publishers. Later checks and reject are returned. The news that he is withholding is the plan to run a highway right where the town now exists. Complications occur throughout the rest of the story. The story has a happy ending.

## **The Martian Chronicles**

**by Ray Bradbury**

reviewed by Don Boink

“Bradbury’s Mars is a place of hope, dreams and metaphor.” It is described as a place of crystal pillars and fossil seas. This imaginative story is populated by the remnants of a vanished civilization that existed thousands of years ago. When mankind’s ingenuity enabled him to devise space ships that were capable of eventually reaching distant planets, the allure of the fourth planet from the sun was irresistible. A succession of expeditions of increasing complexity were commissioned that resulted in not only reaching Mars, but in subduing it.

This book depicts the adventures of the first Earthmen to arrive at Mars and the reception they received, or didn’t receive. The second expedition to reach Mars had a small crew who sought out the Martians to get acquainted with them. The crew was struck by the similarity of the housing to that on Earth. The first contact they made, after knocking at the door of a house, didn’t seem surprised to see them. Instead the occupant was impatient, as if bothered, and directed them to see someone else. Their expectation had been a sort of warm welcome and congratulations.

The next Martian they spoke with the visitors explained who they were and where they came from. He listened politely and then commented that there were several others who had come from other planets. He then gave the leader a key and directed them down a corridor to the next door. Following his directions they went to the next door and used the key to unlock it. Entering they found themselves in a large room filled with several people. When they announced where they were from there was a great hoorah and celebration such as they had expected. Talking with various celebrants they found that they were from several different locations. Discussing this with their crew they came to the conclusion that they were in an insane asylum. This situation was eventually corrected and they proceeded to expand their explorations.

Gradually the Martians were forced to give ground to the Earth invaders. One group of Martians took to the hills and mountains and evolved into a nonhuman form. They became simply globes of blue fire. This story is a marvelous discussion of the realities of life and its eternal existence.

Two priests pursued sought out the blue flame entities. One priest felt they had human instincts and were friendly. To test his theory he attempted to harm himself to see if they would protect him. Stepping off a high cliff a couple of hundred feet above his companion he was overjoyed to find that the blue flames surrounded him and gently eased him to a safe landing. He asked his companion if he could see the pistol he had brought. Firing the gun at his hand the bullet never reached his hand but was stopped by the blue globes in mid-air and simply fell to the ground. This was repeated three times with the same results. His companion priest was convinced now and joined in making an altar of smooth stones for the Martians. That effort was rejected by the Martians, as they said they had no need of it since they did not have any religion.

This book ends on an enigmatic note as a father takes his children to a Martian canal. One son says he wants to see a Martian as his Dad had promised. The father moves to the edge of the canal and peered down at the clear waters. Down below, reflected in the waters, the Martians peer back at them.

**Ray Bradbury**



## **I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes Within Us and a Grand View of Life**

**by Ed Yong**

reviewed by Jim Mills

This strangely titled book is, for this reviewer, a landmark discourse on a topic that is relatively new to medical science. Much of the thrust of medicine has been directed towards the destruction and control of pathological bacteria and viruses. The author points out that the vast majority of microbes have either a neutral or beneficial effect on humans and other living creatures. Each of us, animals, plants, fungi, etc, are surrounded and crammed by thousands of species of these tiny creatures (billions of individuals) collectively known as the micro-biome. Even bacteria are inhabited by viruses that affect their welfare. Our lives in so many different ways are controlled for better or worse by the particular mix that occupies us at any given moment. Much of the variability in individual health and in our reaction to medical treatment is a result of these fellow inhabitants. Medicine is just beginning to appreciate these interactions and the results of their studies promise major improvements in future health care. As the author points out we, each of us, contain multitudes.

A major impact that these creatures have on us is our ability to digest various foodstuffs. Termites could not extract nutrition from wood without the bacteria in their gut. Many creatures can eat foods that would be poisonous to them because of the microbes inside them that break down the poisons before they can harm the host. The widespread use of various antibiotics is compared by the author to carpet bombing. They can destroy harmful bugs but also those that are beneficial to us. Each of us enters this world free from these internal parasite/benefactors. Usually newborn babies pick up their first bacteria from their mothers vagina. Those born by Cesarean Section do not have this benefit. The same benefit can be said to accrue for breast fed babies. In the future we will have to take into account these interactions in determining just which lifestyle/treatments are truly beneficial in the long run. This consideration involves a revolutionary way of thinking about life.

It is possible that many illnesses in the future may be prevented or treated by the infusion of a mix of microbes especially tailored to each individual. Research in this area may lead to revolutionary treatment of what have in the past have been intractable health problems. The rise in various autoimmune diseases such as asthma may have a basis in the exposure or lack of exposure to microbes during a child's formative years. Hospitals are realizing that trying to create a germ-free environment may be detrimental to patient health by destroying beneficial microbes that actually keep pathological ones at bay. Scientists have been introducing bacteria into certain strains of mosquitoes that counteract and neutralize the Dengue Fever virus before the mosquito can pass on this deadly illness to humans. Early release of these treated mosquitoes into the wild in Australia have produced a sharp decline in this disease and show great promise for many third world countries that are decimated by Dengue.

With our companion multitudes, each of us is unique as a result of our past exposures and other factors such as our diets that promote or retard the growth of various bacteria in our gut. The old maxim, *we are what we eat*, has never been truer than today. I heartily recommend this informative book to any reader interested in this new and potentially revolutionary view of our lives and our health. The author is especially skilled in describing complex biological processes and explaining their impact on our world in a way that is comprehensible to the average reader.