

This month's books are as varied as Valentine's cards

It's that multicolored candy-heart season again, when the words are almost always more appealing than the taste.

"Pope Joan" warmed the hearts of the 1st Runner Ups. The Bookies gave red and yellow roses to local but nationally known Louise Erdrich. Cupid hit the Pizza and Pages readers for a book by former teacher and up-and-coming author Jordan Sonnenblick. For an Annie Dillard title with the Reading Women, there were full boxes of chocolate, some with a couple pieces gone, and no chocolate at all. The 4B Club felt love and hate about a book that was published in the author's native Australia as an adult book but as Young Adult Fiction (even with over 550 pages!) in the U.S.

If Valentine's Day gets as bitterly cold as it was a week ago, will Cupid's arrow—or a book about the Valentine martyrs (yes, more than one)—shatter? Now, where is that groundhog?...

Here is the rating system the groups use:

★★★★ = Excellent; highly recommended.

★★★ = Recommended; rather good.

★★ = Not bad, but not first on reading list.

★ = Don't waste time.

(none) = Didn't read due to offensive or disagreeable material.

1st Runner Ups

Read: "Pope Joan" by Donna Woolfolk Cross; 1996 (hardcover); Crown; 844 pp.

Historical Fiction: Joan is born in A.D. 814 to a cruel English canon and his Saxon wife but learns to read and write from one of her brothers. A Greek scholar furthers her education, while her mother sings her the songs of pagan gods. The scholar arranges for Joan to attend a palace school where she meets red-haired knight Gerold, who becomes her lover. After Norsemen attack the village, Joan assumes the identity of her brother killed in the attack. She makes her way to Fulda and becomes the learned scholar and healer Brother John Anglicus, and "he" eventually makes "his" way to Rome.

★★★★ Katie: This is a really good book. It's interesting to think about what it would have



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pope.

★★★★ Meta: If you like reading about a woman achieving what society told her she could and should not, you'll enjoy reading this book.

★★★★ Ardith: A great historical fiction!

★★★★ It was complicated, cerebrally entertaining, and fast paced.

★★★★ Jeni: Exceptional historical fiction!

★★★★ Joleen: Pick it up and read it. Say wow. THIS IS A GOOD BOOK!

Next selection: "Shattered Dreams: My Life as a Polygamist's Wife" by Irene Spencer.

Bookies

Read: "The Painted Drum" by Louise Erdrich; 2005 (hardcover); HarperCollins; 288 pp.

Novel: This is the story of Faye, a quarter Ojibwe, and how her life, including the relationships with her mother and her lover, is affected by the discovery of a mystical drum. She travels with it to the North Dakota reservation where it was made and discovers stories of five generations for whom the drum has connections to both tragedy and healing.

★★★★ Mebbie: The drum in the story unraveled a spiritual message that never would have been disclosed. Beautifully written.

★★★★ Lynne: The reality of the pain and sorrow was overpowering, as it often is in Erdrich's books.

★★★★+ Amelia: I found this book interesting but also a challenge keeping the three related stories straight.

★★★★ Anne: Erdrich is again at her beat as her Native American culture comes through. The spiritual connections were a little much but believable in the context of the story.

★★★★+ Jan: It was good to read an Erdrich book again after a several-year lapse. Although her works always receive excellent reviews, she is not a favorite of mine. For me, the Native American elements are too domi-

nant and overwhelm the story at times. I need to remind myself to read for cultural appreciation, as well as for the story.

March selection: "From Rage to Reason: My Life in Two Americas" by Janet Langhart Cohen.

Pizza and Pages

Read: "Drums, Girls, and Dangerous Pie" by Jordan Sonnenblick; 2005 (hardcover); Scholastic; 288 pp.

Young Adult Fiction: When his younger brother is diagnosed with leukemia, 13-year-old Steven tries to deal with his complicated emotions, his school life, and his desire to support his family.

★★★★ Morgan: It was a very sad book at times, but other times it is funny! It's a great book. I enjoyed it a lot.

★★★★ DJ: This is a wonderful book, but be sure to keep a box of tissues handy. I think it gives a realistic view of what could happen to a family when a child becomes terribly ill.

Next selection: "The Goose Girl" by Shannon Hale.

Reading Women

Read: "An American Childhood" by Annie Dillard; 1987 (hardcover); HarperCollins; 255 pp.

Memoir: This is a thoughtful and almost meditative account of growing up in upper class Pittsburgh in the '50s. Dillard, the 1974 Pulitzer Prize-winning essayist for "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek", searches for meaning in her rich experiences from kindergarten through high school.

★★★★ Jan: I felt like Annie Dillard and I were soulmates until she soared beyond me in an intellectual curiosity as a teenager! I loved her introspection and admired her amazing attention to detail, not just as a writer but in all of her pursuits.

★★★★ Dolly: It's not chronological, so it was confusing. I just couldn't relate to the character, even though she is my age, and I also grew up in "the city."

★★★★ Alice: I love this glimpse into a girl's life experience that is so different from my own. She paints a vivid picture of life in the 1950s Pittsburgh.

H20: Annie Dillard is gifted at observation and finding the words to elaborate on them. She brings Pittsburgh, time, and a place to life; but there wasn't any real tension, just exposition.

★★★★ Ramona: Wonderful descriptions. A good book to pick up and read a bit. Each chapter stands alone.

Next selection: "The City of Falling Angels" by John Berendt.

The 4B Club

Read: "The Book Thief" by Markus Zusak; 2006 (hardcover); Knopf Books for Young Readers; \$60 pp.

Young Adult Novel/Grade 9 and up: When 9-year-old Liesel Meminger's brother dies, Death, the narrator, gets hooked on her when he sees her steal a gravedigger's instruction manual. When Liesel moves in with a foster family—lovable Hans and crotchety Rosa—Hans teaches her to read using the manual. Liesel then steals more books. These stories help the girl find some sort of solace while fear, destruction, and despair settle in around her.

★★★★ Ramsey: I quit after 70 pages. I found this book to be too confusing. Even by page 70, I didn't know what the book was about. I'm not going to finish this one.

★★★★ Diane: It took awhile to get involved with the story. After getting used to the style of writing, I wanted to find out what happened to Liesel and the people involved in her life.

★★★★ Ginger: The creative efforts and stylistics were brilliant but distracted from the unity of the whole.

★★★★+ Jane: I didn't finish this book. It didn't hold my interest because I didn't much like the style it was written in. The story line was good.

★★★★ Shari: This is

one of the best books I've read lately. I really liked the writing style, the imagery, and the metaphors—very creative use of words but not too wordy. The story of this poor German family during World War II is simple, but this author makes it enlivening and interesting because of his storytelling ability. Liesel is a most resilient, memorable heroine who makes this story so worthwhile.

[no rating] Deb: I can't rate it, yet, because I haven't finished it. So far I've read 150 pages, and it hasn't moved me to go on. So I may finish it yet or not.

★★★★+ Lisa: The first few pages bugged me—I didn't want to continue! But the style combined with the story then got me. I appreciated Zusak's unique and very original imagery. Death as narrator was also creative, but for a story that centers on the Holocaust, it's quite apt.

★★★★ Carn: I didn't find this story depressing despite the misery that it depicted. The

vivid imagery in the author's writing was amazing, as was the realistic telling of the bravery of common people during Nazi Germany. The power of words to destroy as well as to lift up was a fascinating theme throughout the book.

★★★★ Skylar: This is a touching story about how books can feed the soul and provide an escape. Liesel is the main character who escapes the horrifying events of World War II by stealing and reading books, a practice that keeps her sane and feeds her newfound love of words and stories. This book covers the intensity of the hate and intolerance of Nazi Germany, as well as the quest for power and domination.

Next selection: "Everyman" by Philip Roth.

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