



12 Clean Picks for Your Book Club

If you like to have a lively discussion at book club, you need a book that can spark it. Here are some that fit the bill and are clean (rated mild on our ratings scale, or a very low moderate rating).

The Correspondent, by Virginia Evans. This novel tells the story, entirely through letters, of the blossoming social sphere of a seventy-something woman. Sybil has been writing letters her entire life and considers her correspondence an important part of who she is. She's lived a full life, as a wife, mother, and successful lawyer, but now she's become a bit isolated. A few letters from someone in her past cause her to re-examine a very difficult part of her life, leading to some changes now. A slow-paced book, but it opens up like a flower blooming at the end. Rated mild.

The Garden, by Nick Newman. Two elderly sisters have lived for decades inside a walled-off garden, never leaving the confines of the garden. Each day they simply work to survive, regularly consulting an old almanac their mother left for them. One day they find a boy hiding in their home, and it upends their lives. As each day brings more disquiet and disruption, the sisters have to face memories and some hard truths. And they will have to decide not just how to deal with the boy, but how they will move forward. It's a good book to spark discussion and think about human nature. Rated moderate, for one use of strong language.

The Lion Women of Tehran, by Marjan Kamali. This novel focuses on two girls who bond in a very sweet friendship. It also teaches readers about Iran in the years under the Shah before Ayatollah Khomeini took over. For me, putting together what I knew from history with the information in this book fleshed out the picture for me and, as good fiction does, made it more real. Rated mild.

Remarkably Bright Creatures, by Shelby Van Pelt. An octopus narrates this completely delightful book about an older woman who works at an aquarium and a young man who comes to visit the town where it's located. If you like grumpy/cynical characters, you will adore the octopus. This is a fun, captivating book about family. Rated moderate, for two uses of strong language.

The Story of Beautiful Girl, by Rachel Simon. In this novel a Deaf black man and a developmentally disabled woman fall in love in an institution. They escape for a short time and the woman gives birth to a girl, whom she places with an older woman to hide. The book follows their lives for 40 years as they deal with the hands they've been given. It's a sweet story and the sometimes-difficult topics are handled delicately. Rated mild.





Calling Invisible Women, by Jeanne Ray. A wife and mother of two grown children one day turns invisible. She realizes she can't see herself. That's disturbing enough, but what becomes the real issue is that pretty much no one else seems to notice. She continues to go about her regular business of being a wife and mom, and her loved ones just can't tell she's missing a face above the clothes. It's fun and relatable for women of a certain age. Rated moderate (it's almost entirely clean, but for some reason, one use of strong language is in there).

Mrs. England, by Stacey Halls. This novel follows a newly graduated Norland Nurse (nanny) in the early 1900s who leaves London to work for a family with four children in isolated Yorkshire. She comes to love the children but is confused and concerned about various situations in the home. It's a novel of suspense that explores the power imbalance between women and men at that time. Rated mild.

Never Let Me Go, by Kazuo Ishiguro. A caregiver who grew up in a special school looks back at her friendships there and the signs that pointed to the sinister future that awaited the young people. It's dystopian but explores the topics of friendship and humanity. It gives the reader plenty to think about and to talk about in a book group. Rated mild.

The Confidence Men, by Margalit Fox. Two British officers escaped from a prison camp in the middle of the desert in Turkey near the end of World War I by crafting an elaborate con involving a homemade Ouija board. It sounds like a crazy story, and it certainly is. But as the old saying goes, "Truth is stranger than fiction." There's a lot to learn and unpack in this nonfiction book. Rated mild.

The Lost Tribe of Coney Island, by Claire Prentice. Most of us likely know of shows that exhibited human beings who were considered "freaks." But it's likely few have heard about the Filipino tribes who were exhibited at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904 or Coney Island in 1905. Thanks to "American imperialism" and the "popular taste for sensationalism," several groups of Filipinos from the northern part of the country were brought to the United States and encouraged to set up versions of their native villages at various expos and parks. This nonfiction book is a fascinating true story. Rated mild.

Violeta, by Isabel Allende. This longtime best-selling author said this story was inspired by her mother, who died in 2018 at age 98: "My mother was an extraordinary woman who did not have an extraordinary life. When I started writing Violeta, I was imagining what my mother could have been." Rated moderate.

The Downstairs Girl, by Stacey Lee. This young adult story was a Reese Witherspoon book club pick. It follows a young Chinese woman living in Atlanta after the Civil War. Her options for pretty much everything in life are limited, but she dreams big and ends up making the most of the cards she's been dealt. It's rated mild.

