

2022 -2023 END OF YEAR REPORT—DIVERSITY BOOK GROUP

The Diversity Book Group has continued to thrive as it celebrates its third-plus year. We have continued meeting each month via Zoom, thanks to the support of Alexandria's Ellen Coolidge Burke Library. While we now have a membership roster of 20, we have a core group of some 14, most of whom attend almost every discussion. We have also continued to emphasize reading works by a diverse group whose voices are less familiar to us. Our emphasis remains to learn more about the great diversity and inter-connectedness of our humanness— specifically across race, culture, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, ability, age, and lifestyle.

In response to the group's recognition that we had not read widely from authors focused on disability, including mental illness, we selected several books to give us a better understanding of those who are differently able. Funny You Don't Look Autistic: A Comedian's Guide to Life on the Spectrum gave us a look into a Canadian man's particular challenges trying to live his life's dream of becoming a night club comic. The learning was punctuated by personal accounts of members of the group, one of whom is raising a son with autism. The take away was as the author put it, if you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism. We also read I'll Scream Later, a memoir by actress Marlee Matlin, who introduced us to one account of the life of a deaf offspring in a hearing family. We also read two novels in which the protagonists, women, struggled with mental illness—My Lovely Wife in the Psych Ward and Cherish Farrah. The latter was intensified by its racial component and was the first we had read of the genre, social horror.

As in years past, immigrant and refugee stories made up a portion of our selections. Refugee High: Coming of Age in America is a true story and one, like most that we have read, pulls at the heartstrings and can infuriate. We also read Girl in Translation, which like many of these novels, is based on real life and highlights not only differences in race and ethnicity but also the profound poverty that many who come to this country endure.

We have enjoyed getting out of our "culture" and exploring those of other countries. We read Too Much Lip that took us to a fictionalized rural indigenous community in Australia that revolves around a highly diverse group of characters, although most from the same family. Crying in H Mart, a memoir, while centering on a mother-daughter relationship, gave us some insight into the Korean-American community in this country. The Henna Artist took us to India to peek into the fictionalized life of a powerful woman trying to better herself and her family. The Good Women of China told the story of the brutalization of Chinese women, which was a real inside look at the cultural aspects of Chinese life both historical and contemporary.

Several books we read stand out for their themes related to the oppression of Black people in the United States. We read our first book of poetry as a group—Call Us What We Carry—by the amazing Presidential Inauguration Poet, Amanda Gorman. The genre was a new and challenging experience for many of us, but most were glad they had the opportunity to read it together and learn from each other. It was the first opportunity that the group had the chance to reflect together on their pandemic lock down experiences. We also learned much from our discussion of the 2010 award winning non-fiction work,

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, whose cancer was exploited for medical research without her's or her family's knowledge. As one discussant noted, the exploitation of Black and other people of color, particularly women, continues to this day, although it is more subtle due in part to legislation passed as a result of the injustice that the Lacks family suffered.

This year has been a rich one in term of the group's learning. We agree that we are all better for having read what we read, even if some of the content was difficult or the writing disappointing. Despite not meeting in person, we have reached a level of disclosure and respect in our discourse that is awe inspiring, even in the light of disagreement and the diversity our own group represents. As one member put it, a component of her happiness is community, and she is grateful to the Diversity Book Group for providing an important source of it. This "womanship" is something we all treasure as well as the opportunity to expand our knowledge and understanding of worlds outside our own.