

# SIR Branch 17 Book Club Selections

## October 2022

**Never Surrender** by Michael Dobbs (Panza)

From Michael Dobbs, author of the book that inspired the smash hit Netflix series *House of Cards*, *Never Surrender* finds newly elected Prime Minister Winston Churchill in a personal confrontation with Adolf Hitler.

“The battle begins on Friday, May 10, 1940, when Hitler launches a devastating attack that within days will overrun France, Holland and Belgium and bring Britain to its knees at Dunkirk. *Never Surrender* examines Churchill's courage and defiance and his ability to lead a nation during three of the most crucial weeks in its history. Without the physical forces necessary to stave off German attack, Churchill uses the force of words to stand in Hitler's way, to show that no accords will be made.”

## November 2022

**2034 : A Novel of the Next World War** by : Elliot Ackerman with Admiral James Stavridis (Wheeler)

From two former military officers and award-winning authors, a chillingly authentic geopolitical thriller that imagines a naval clash between the US and China in the South China Sea in 2034 - and the path from there to a nightmarish global conflagration. On March 12, 2034, US Navy Commodore Sarah Hunt is on the bridge of her flagship, the guided missile destroyer USS John Paul Jones, conducting a routine freedom of navigation patrol in the South China Sea when her ship detects an unflagged trawler in clear distress, smoke billowing from its bridge. On that same day, US Marine aviator Major Chris "Wedge" Mitchell is flying an F35E Lightning over the Strait of Hormuz, testing a new stealth technology as he flirts with Iranian airspace. By the end of that day, Wedge will be an Iranian prisoner, and Sarah Hunt's destroyer will lie at the bottom of the sea, sunk by the Chinese Navy. Iran and China have clearly coordinated their moves, which involve the use of powerful new forms of cyber weaponry that render US ships and planes defenseless. In a single day, America's faith in its military's strategic preeminence is in tatters. A new, terrifying era is at hand. So begins a disturbingly plausible work of speculative fiction, coauthored by an award-winning novelist and decorated Marine veteran and the former commander of NATO, a legendary admiral who has spent much of his career strategically outmaneuvering America's most tenacious adversaries. Written with a powerful blend of geopolitical sophistication and human empathy, *2034* takes us inside the minds of a global cast of characters - Americans, Chinese, Iranians, Russians, Indians - as a series of arrogant miscalculations on all sides leads the world into an intensifying international storm. In the end, China and the United States will have paid a staggering cost, one that forever alters the global balance of power. Everything in *2034* is an imaginative extrapolation from present-day facts on the ground combined with the authors' years of working at the highest and most classified levels of national security. Sometimes it takes a brilliant work of fiction to illuminate the most dire of warnings: *2034* is all too close at hand, and this cautionary tale presents the readers a dark yet possible future that we must do all we can to avoid.

## January 2023

**Prussian Blue** by Philip Kerr (Brodie)

The French Riviera, 1956: Bernie's old and dangerous adversary Erich Mielke, deputy head of the East German Stasi, has turned up in Nice—and he's not on holiday. Mielke is calling in a debt and wants Bernie to travel to London to poison a female agent they've both had dealings with. But Bernie isn't keen on assassinating anyone. In an attempt to dodge his Stasi handler—former Kripo comrade Friedrich Korsch—Bernie bolts for the German border. Traveling by night and hiding by day, he has plenty of time to recall the last case he and Korsch worked together... Obersalzberg, Germany, 1939: A low-level bureaucrat has been found dead at Hitler's mountaintop retreat in Bavaria. Bernie and Korsch have one week to find the killer before the leader of the Third Reich arrives to celebrate his fiftieth birthday. Bernie knows it would mean disaster if Hitler discovers a shocking murder has been committed on the terrace of his own home. But Obersalzberg is also home to an elite Nazi community,

meaning an even bigger disaster for Bernie if his investigation takes aim at one of the party's higher-ups... 1939 and 1956: two different eras about to converge in an explosion Bernie Gunther will never forget.

### **February 2023**

#### **The Plot Against America by Philip Roth (Panza)**

FDR loses the 1940 election, and the new President is Charles Lindbergh, a “folksy” antisemite. Roth describes the impact of Lindbergh’s policies on one Jewish family in Newark, New Jersey, their neighbors, friends, and some prominent people as well as on the rest of the Nation. There are more summaries than you can shake a stick at on Google and Amazon. The book won the Society of American Historians 2005 Prize for the outstanding historical novel.

### **March 2023**

#### **Pompeii by Robert Harris (Brodie)**

All along the Mediterranean coast, the Roman empire’s richest citizens are relaxing in their luxurious villas, enjoying the last days of summer. The world’s largest navy lies peacefully at anchor in Misenum. The tourists are spending their money in the seaside resorts of Baiae, Herculaneum, and Pompeii.

But the carefree lifestyle and gorgeous weather belie an impending cataclysm, and only one man is worried. The young engineer Marcus Attilius Primus has just taken charge of the Aqua Augusta, the enormous aqueduct that brings fresh water to a quarter of a million people in nine towns around the Bay of Naples. His predecessor has disappeared. Springs are failing for the first time in generations. And now there is a crisis on the Augusta’s sixty-mile main line—somewhere to the north of Pompeii, on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius.

Attilius—decent, practical, and incorruptible—promises Pliny, the famous scholar who commands the navy, that he can repair the aqueduct before the reservoir runs dry. His plan is to travel to Pompeii and put together an expedition, then head out to the place where he believes the fault lies. But Pompeii proves to be a corrupt and violent town, and Attilius soon discovers that there are powerful forces at work—both natural and man-made—threatening to destroy him.

Why read it: Well written and researched, a glimpse into part of an ancient empire, you might want to visit Pompeii someday.

### **April 2023**

#### **T. Rex and the Crater of Doom by Walter Alvarez (Richards)**

Sixty-five million years ago, a comet or asteroid larger than Mount Everest slammed into the Earth, inducing an explosion equivalent to the detonation of a hundred million hydrogen bombs. Vaporized detritus blasted through the atmosphere upon impact, falling back to Earth around the globe. Disastrous environmental consequences ensued: a giant tsunami, continent-scale wildfires, darkness, and cold, followed by sweltering greenhouse heat. When conditions returned to normal, half the plant and animal genera on Earth had perished.

This horrific chain of events is now widely accepted as the solution to a great scientific mystery: what caused the extinction of the dinosaurs? Walter Alvarez, one of the Berkeley scientists who discovered evidence of the impact, tells the story behind the development of the initially controversial theory. It is a saga of high adventure in remote locations, of arduous data collection and intellectual struggle, of long periods of frustration ended by sudden breakthroughs, of friendships made and lost, and of the exhilaration of discovery that forever altered our understanding of Earth's geological history.

## May 2023

### **American Dirt** by Jeanine Cummins (McMane)

Lydia lives in Acapulco. She has a son, Luca, the love of her life, and a wonderful husband who is a journalist. And while cracks are beginning to show in Acapulco because of the cartels, Lydia's life is, by and large, fairly comfortable. But after her husband's tell-all profile of the newest drug lord is published, none of their lives will ever be the same.

Forced to flee, Lydia and Luca find themselves joining the countless people trying to reach the United States. Lydia soon sees that everyone is running from something. But what exactly are they running to?

## June 2023

### **Too Big for a Single Mind** by Tobias Hürter (Panza)

The epic story of how, amid two world wars, history's greatest physicists redefined the universe and the reality we live in

There may never be another era of science like the first half of the twentieth century, when a peerless cast of physicists—Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Max Planck, Wolfgang Pauli, Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrödinger, and others—came together to uncover the quantum world, a concept so outrageous and shocking, so contrary to traditional physics, that its own founders rebelled against it until the equations held up and fundamentally changed our understanding of reality. In propulsive, page-turning chapters, Tobias Hürter takes us back to a uniquely harrowing and momentous time, when war and revolution upended the lives of these renegade scientists, who were forced to crisscross Europe as they worked together to topple classical physics.

These tumultuous decades would also be the culmination and closing chapter of a more serendipitous—and more human—kind of research. Today, physics has principally become a practical discipline conducted at large-scale facilities. Great breakthroughs are now rarely made in the mind, or among colleagues sparring during walks on the beach, at Christmas parties, in university cafeterias, or late-into-the-night debates at conferences. *Too Big for a Single Mind* takes us back to this golden age of physics, when the creation of quantum theory demanded the combined efforts of friends and rivals, lovers and loners, straight-edged intellectuals and freethinking dreamers. In this stirring, grand narrative, brought to life by the letters, notes, research papers, diaries, and memoirs they wrote, we witness the birth of an idea that not only revolutionized physics and our world, but that stands as a testament to the boundless potential of genius in collaboration.

## July 2023

### **Origin Stories** by David Christian (Brodie)

Most historians study the smallest slivers of time, emphasizing specific dates, individuals, and documents. But what would it look like to study the whole of history, from the big bang through the present day -- and even into the remote future? How would looking at the full span of time change the way we perceive the universe, the earth, and our very existence?

These were the questions David Christian set out to answer when he created the field of "Big History," the most exciting new approach to understanding where we have been, where we are, and where we are going. In *Origin Story*, Christian takes readers on a wild ride through the entire 13.8 billion years we've come to know as "history." By focusing on defining events (thresholds), major trends, and profound questions about our origins, Christian exposes the hidden threads that tie everything together -- from the creation of the planet to the advent of agriculture, nuclear war, and beyond.

With stunning insights into the origin of the universe, the beginning of life, the emergence of humans, and what the future might bring, *Origin Story* boldly reframes our place in the cosmos.

## August 2023

### **Travels with Epicurus: A Journey to a Greek Island in Search of a Fulfilled Life** by Daniel Klein (Richards)

After being advised by his dentist to get tooth implants, Daniel Klein decides to stick with his dentures and instead use the money to make a trip to the Greek island Hydra and discover the secrets of aging happily. Drawing on the inspiring lives of his Greek friends and philosophers ranging from Epicurus to Sartre, Klein uncovers the simple pleasures that are available late in life, as well as the refined pleasures that only a mature mind can fully appreciate.

A travel book, a witty and accessible meditation, and an optimistic guide to living well, *Travels with Epicurus* is a delightful jaunt to the Aegean and through the terrain of old age that only a free spirit like Klein could lead.

## September 2023

**Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI** by David Grann. 352 pages. Published in 2017. (McMane)

In the 1920s, the richest people per capita in the world were members of the Osage Nation in Oklahoma. After oil was discovered beneath their land, the Osage rode in chauffeured automobiles, built mansions, and sent their children to study in Europe.

Then, one by one, the Osage began to be killed off. The family of an Osage woman, Mollie Burkhart, became a prime target. One of her relatives was shot. Another was poisoned. And it was just the beginning, as more and more Osage were dying under mysterious circumstances, and many of those who dared to investigate the killings were themselves murdered.

As the death toll rose, the newly created FBI took up the case, and the young director, J. Edgar Hoover, turned to a former Texas Ranger named Tom White to try to unravel the mystery. White put together an undercover team, including a Native American agent who infiltrated the region, and together with the Osage began to expose one of the most chilling conspiracies in American history.

## October 2023

**French Exit** by Patrick deWitt. 256 pages. (Lundblad)

Frances Price – tart widow, possessive mother, and Upper East Side force of nature – is in dire straits, beset by scandal and impending bankruptcy. Her adult son Malcolm is no help, mired in a permanent state of arrested development. And then there's the Price's aging cat, Small Frank, who Frances believes houses the spirit of her late husband, an infamously immoral litigator and world-class cad whose gruesome tabloid death rendered Frances and Malcolm social outcasts.

Putting penury and pariahdom behind them, the family decides to cut their losses and head for the exit. One ocean voyage later, the curious trio land in their beloved Paris, the City of Light serving as a backdrop not for love or romance, but self-destruction and economical ruin – to riotous effect. A number of singular characters serve to round out the cast: a bashful private investigator, an aimless psychic proposing a seance, and a doctor who makes house calls with his wine merchant in tow, to name a few.

Brimming with pathos, *French Exit* is a one-of-a-kind 'tragedy of manners,' a send-up of high society, as well as a moving mother/son caper which only Patrick deWitt could conceive and execute.

## November 2023

### **Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation** by Joseph J. Ellis. 304 pages. (Richards)

In this landmark work of history, the National Book Award—winning author of *American Sphinx* explores how a group of greatly gifted but deeply flawed individuals—Hamilton, Burr, Jefferson, Franklin, Washington, Adams, and Madison—confronted the overwhelming challenges before them to set the course for our nation.

The United States was more a fragile hope than a reality in 1790. During the decade that followed, the Founding Fathers—re-examined here as Founding Brothers—combined the ideals of the Declaration of Independence with the content of the Constitution to create the practical workings of our government. Through an analysis of six fascinating episodes—Hamilton and Burr’s deadly duel, Washington’s precedent-setting Farewell Address, Adams’ administration and political partnership with his wife, the debate about where to place the capital, Franklin’s attempt to force Congress to confront the issue of slavery and Madison’s attempts to block him, and Jefferson and Adams’ famous correspondence—*Founding Brothers* brings to life the vital issues and personalities from the most important decade in our nation’s history.

## January 2024

### **Differ We Must: How Lincoln Succeeded in a Divided America** by Steve Inskeep. 352 pages. (Wheeler/Culp)

A compelling and nuanced exploration of Abraham Lincoln’s political acumen, illuminating a great politician’s strategy in a country divided—and lessons for our own disorderly present.

In 1855, with the United States at odds over slavery, the lawyer Abraham Lincoln wrote a note to his best friend, the son of a Kentucky slaveowner. Lincoln rebuked his friend for failing to oppose slavery. But he added: “If for this you and I must differ, differ we must,” and said they would be friends forever. Throughout his life and political career, Lincoln often agreed to disagree. Democracy demanded it, since even an adversary had a vote. The man who went on to become America’s sixteenth president has assumed many roles in our historical consciousness, but most notable is that he was, unapologetically, a politician. And as Steve Inskeep argues, it was because he was willing to engage in politics—meeting with critics, sometimes working with them and other times outwitting them—that he was able to lead a social revolution.

In *Differ We Must*, Inskeep illuminates Lincoln’s life through sixteen encounters, some well-known, some obscure, but all imbued with new significance here. Each interaction was with a person who differed from Lincoln, and in each someone wanted something from the other. While Lincoln didn’t always change his critics’ beliefs—many went to war against him—he did learn how to make his beliefs actionable. He told jokes, relied on sarcasm, and often made fun of himself—but behind the banter was a distinguished storyteller who carefully chose what to say and what to withhold. He knew his limitations and, as history came to prove, he knew how to prioritize. Many of his greatest acts came about through his engagement with people who disagreed with him—meaning that in these meetings, Lincoln became the Lincoln we know.

## February 2024

### **The Last Neanderthal** by Clare Cameron. 288 pages. (Brodie)

Forty thousand years in the past, the last family of Neanderthals roams the earth. After a crushingly hard winter, their numbers are low, but Girl, the oldest daughter, is just coming of age and her family is determined to travel to the annual meeting place and find her a mate.

But the unforgiving landscape takes its toll, and Girl is left alone to care for Runt, a foundling of unknown origin. As Girl and Runt face the coming winter storms, Girl realizes she has one final chance to save her people, even if it means sacrificing part of herself.

In the modern day, archaeologist Rosamund Gale works well into her pregnancy, racing to excavate newly found Neanderthal artifacts before her baby comes. Linked across the ages by the shared experience of early motherhood, both stories examine the often-taboo corners of women's lives.

Haunting, suspenseful, and profoundly moving, *The Last Neanderthal* asks us to reconsider all we think we know about what it means to be human.