

## THE LIVES OF OTHERS: READING MEMOIR 5

**Coordinators:** Jay Fleishman, Maureen Hatch, Mary Padilla, Alissa Rivin and Miriam Lawrence (organizer)

In our fifth foray into the lives of others, we encounter five extraordinary women who, by quite different routes, find their way to live their best lives.

We start with Tara Westover. Raised in isolation on a mountain in Idaho in an abusive family headed by a psychotic religious fanatic, she found her way into college and ultimately earned a Ph.D. from Cambridge. Her next step was to write *Educated* in order to figure out what had happened to her.

In *The Spiral Staircase*, Karen Armstrong recounts her struggle to find meaning after 7 years in a convent. Life in the secular world brings unhappiness and self-doubt until she finds spiritual fulfillment through the study of, and writing about, comparative religion.

*Dinners with Ruth* is an account of two remarkable women, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and veteran journalist Nina Totenberg, both of whom paved the way for future generations by tearing down professional and legal barriers. It is also an intimate memoir of the power of friendship.

And finally, a love affair between a woman and a park. In *Saving Central Park*, Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, founder of the Central Park Conservancy, intertwines her personal story with that of Olmsted's masterpiece. A Texas transplant, she recounts her challenges as well as those of the park: its early history, brink of collapse, and triumphant renaissance.

**Jay Fleishman**, a retired NYC high school social studies teacher, has coordinated study groups on freedom of speech, contemporary US religion, and the American South. This is the second memoir he will lead in our continuing series.

**Mary Padilla** has coordinated study groups on topics ranging from consciousness to the creative process to genetics to evolution, but they are all basically about the same idea—how things actually work—and this one will be no exception.

**Maureen Hatch** retired from the National Cancer Institute where she led studies of the health effects from the Chernobyl accident. She is the author

of over 160 peer reviewed publications. She discovered the pleasure of reading in childhood sitting in her favorite tree.

**Alissa Rivin** recently retired from 20+ years of Special Projects in the NYC Comptroller's Office. An avid walker, she has explored most areas of Central Park. She looks forward to hearing about other members' explorations as well.

**Miriam Lawrence** has been organizing The Lives of Others: Reading Memoir series since its inception. This will be its fifth semester.

**Type of Study Group:** Mostly discussion

**Readings and other Materials/Online Services:**

Any edition of the following:

*Educated: A Memoir* by Tara Westover;

*The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness* by Karen Armstrong;

*Dinners with Ruth: A Memoir on the Power of Friendships* by Nina Totenberg;

*Saving Central Park: A History and a Memoir* by Elizabeth Barlow Rogers.

\*\*\*\*\* SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS \*\*\*\*\*

**WEEK 1**

**TOPIC:** *Educated* - education and identity

**READING:** Author's note, Prologue, Part 1: pp xi-152

**QUESTIONS:**

What do you think of the idea of learning as a medium for change?

It's said that autobiography tries to be objective and memoir does not, as it is based on memory. Can a memoir be true? Is all personal writing a "version" of oneself?

**WEEK 2**

**TOPIC:** *Educated* - power, independence, and vulnerability

**READING:** Part 2: pp 153-254

**QUESTIONS:**

Are you comfortable with the author's rationale for writing frankly about her family's dysfunction? Do you think that her attempt to combine the vividness of what happened with the insight of later reflection was successful? Can freedom from cultural models be helpful?

### **WEEK 3**

**TOPIC:** *Educated* - memory, uncertainty, and ambiguity

**READING:** Part 3: pp 253-329

**QUESTIONS:**

What do you think the book meant to the author? What did it mean to you? What did it inspire you to do next?

**WEEKS 4 TO 6:** *The Spiral Staircase*

**WEEKS 7 TO 9:** *Dinners with Ruth*

**WEEKS 10 TO 12:** *Saving Central Park*

