

There Is This Book



Cindy Swanson Finch

“People” have been the center of Cindy Swanson Finch’s life forever. And “people” does not mean “others.” Cindy does not think in terms of “self” and “others,” but instead thinks of all as “one.”

Before Cindy graduated from Washington High School, Brainerd (Class of 1967), she was working among us, her way of life through adulthood. Cleaning resort cabins, “car hopping” (that does not mean jumping over SUVs), serving, office reception, office cleaning, years as a teaching assistant at Brainerd State Hospital, day care for 13 children and then 25 years at Brainerd Regional Human Services, including the psychiatric and mentally handicapped units and a state group home. “Retirement” meant more of the same for several more years, in a local group home and in a psychiatric care facility.

It is not surprising that Cindy is a lover of all animals, but especially cats, three of whom (“cats are people, too”) live with her now, even though at one time she helped raise Irish Setters. Her “outside” pets are the chipmunks which surround her home, even though she knows that they are destructive (“I don’t care, they’re so cute”), and who seem to know that they have a friend inside.

And in her era of pre – Title IX, otherwise known as “no girls athletics,” Cindy was a dedicated swimmer, a frequent blue ribbon winner competing in races at Brainerd’s Lum Park, imagining herself to be Brainerd’s Esther Williams (look it up).

Although she was a Girl Scout leader, the world now knows her secret favorite read, the one she would take with her into quarantine: Not *The Horse Whisperer*, not Nora Roberts, none of the mysteries she loves, William Kent Krueger, Agatha Christie, John Sandford and the like, and not the Bible, all of whom and which she loves.

Cindy would bring the unknown *Boy's Life*, by Robert McCammon. And sneak in a canvas to paint on ("multi-media painting" is her thing), her pen and paper, to write, and some music (Willie Nelson repetitively singing "You Were Always on My Mind," which makes her cry every time – bring Kleenex, Cindy) to dance slowly to through the weeks.

Not surprisingly, Cindy reads, reads and reads. When she is done (some she keeps and reads again and again), all of her books go to the Friends of the Brainerd Public Library for inexpensive sales to others, with proceeds from sales supporting the Brainerd Public Library). The public library is not just there for this Walt Whitman-esque woman, but instead America's public libraries, and Brainerd's in particular, are a very important part of the life of this woman who is always in the middle of life itself.

Q. What is the last great book you read?

I have read so many books that I have considered to be "great," but I will only name one here: *The Horse Whisperer*, by Nicholas Evans. Not only is it "great," but it is "incredible." Everything in a book that I want in a book is here. The characters brought me to tears and laughter, made me thoughtful and at times angry. And they made me love them.

There is a solid plot and a great story of heartbreak, love, pain and betrayal. Faith and joy and healing. I felt so many different emotions as I read, read in two days and will pick up again and likely go through it all again.

Endings are off limits here, but I will say I sobbed my heart out. And figure that will happen each time I re – read *The Horse Whisperer*. In fact, it's making me cry just to think about it. And that's a "great" book.

Q. What is your favorite book no one has heard of?

You've never heard of this one, but it is one of those all-time favorites of mine. Robert McCammon is known for his horror stories, but *Boy's Life* is not that. The short version is a young boy sees his father try to rescue a man whose car had plummeted into a lake. When dad dives in, he finds the man dead and handcuffed to the steering wheel.

This is, in part, a story about small town America, a place full of fantasy and magic and mystery, but the most frightening thing of all that the little boy learns about is the human form of evil. And we get a ghost story (little boy's dog is dying, little boy holds dog close as his dog longingly looks out the window and sees a ghost dog and – well, choices need to be made).

Boy's Life is a mystery filled with so much love, magic, kindness, sadness, happiness, adventure, horror, evil and goodness: Give yourself plenty of time to read it, and hold on.

Q. Do you consider any books to be “guilty pleasures” and if so, or if not, then why or why not?

I'm not sure I have any book that I feel “guilty” about, but if I do, then they would have been written by authors like Nora Roberts, or they would be what I call “beach reads.” They all are romances (I admit, I like a good romance and a good giggle along the way) and they go something like this:

Boy meets girl, girl doesn't like boy, all of a sudden she does like boy, then boy likes girl and in a couple of months they are madly in love. Occasionally, danger is stirred into the pot, that is, “plot,” and he saves her. Silly things, but good and fun little reads. No murder. No mysteries, except those of the heart, of course.

Q. What is your favorite book to recommend to others, and why?

So many I like to recommend, but one of my favorites is *I Know This Much Is True*, by Wally Lamb. A man tries to save his schizophrenic twin brother and in doing so, helps the twin to escape the institution he is in. It is a sad, and true, description of the life of a schizophrenic human: Mental illness affects all of us at some time, for example family members, friends, places we work and co-workers, even if not in a facility caring for the afflicted. I also believe that “mental” illness also is a “physical” illness, in part because it relates to our brains, obviously an important body part. The pain of “mental” illness sometimes affects our physical behaviors, too. And of course there can be very “physical” expressions of “mental” illness, like suicide. I like to recommend the book for several reasons, but certainly because it will help any reader understand the misery of “mental” illness and be better ready to address it when it enters, in some way, our lives.

Q. Do you consider any books that are considered to be “great books” to be overrated, and if so, then why?

No question: *Gone With the Wind*.

Other than Melanie, I did not like any of the characters. I considered Melanie to be the heroine, since she was the only character who possessed empathy, compassion, forgiveness and bravery.

MAYBE Scarlett, but only because after losing everything, she was a survivor. My granddaughter and I have discussed this book several times and we agree that Scarlett was a true narcissist, extremely self-absorbed and very unlikeable. It pleased us when Rhett left her:

Frankly Scarlett, we didn't give a damn, either.

The good thing with GWTW is that tomorrow is another day and there are hundreds upon hundreds of better books out there.

Q. What subjects do you wish more authors would write about?

In reading fiction, I like to have actual historical facts added into the story. Author Linda Fairstein writes about characters living in New York City and I love it when she injects the true history of places like Central Park, or the subways and the homeless who may be there, into the fiction she draws me in to. Actual events, actual people intermixed with fictional events and fictional people in a great story.

Q. What moves you most in a work of literature?

It's no surprise, from reading what I have said here, that there is a great deal that “moves me the most” in literature. But to summarize, I would say that what moves me the most is someone being able to recover from a devastating loss or experience. This also has to do with the courage to fight back and finally to win, in the end, and to find happiness.

Q. Which genres do you especially enjoy reading, and which do you avoid?

Since starting with Nancy Drew mysteries in grade school, then all of Agatha Christie's many mysteries (I love Miss Marple), mystery after mystery is my favorite

genre. To name some among the dozens: John Sandford, Linda Castillo, C. J. Box, William Kent Krueger, Sue Grafton, J. D. Robb, James Patterson, Linda Fairchild, Jonathan Kellerman, Jess Loury and Louise Penny. Every one of their books, and yes, on binges.

I mostly avoid fantasy novels, even though they have been recommended to me. So not *The Game of Thrones* and the *Dresden* novels, although I have thoroughly enjoyed the *Harry Potters*. And I avoid authors like Danielle Steele (and you would have to ask me what the difference is between Danielle Steele and Nora Roberts, if you don't know already. Here is a hint: A good romance novel has to have believable characters who make me actually care about their stories).

Q. What book might people be surprised to find on your bookshelves?

The Holy Bible. And *The Book of Tarot*. Surprised?

Q. Who is your favorite fictional hero or heroine, and who is your favorite antihero or villain?

Clearly, Joe Pickett, the hero in the C. J. Box series. Villains, maybe because there are so many, tend to be defeated and by their nature, as villains, they "depart." While heroes, especially in the many mystery series I so enjoy, come back time and again. That's what heroes in fiction do.

Q. Do you consider any books, which are not generally thought of as being among the great books, to be candidates for such a list, and why?

The books of Jo Jo Moyes (yes, there is such an author). Her books are filled with passion, love, sadness, real life situations, characters who suck you in and make you feel and think about them long after you put the book down. Her writing is addictive and the only wish I have for her work is that she had thrice the amount of them for me to read.

Q. What books are stacked by your favorite place to read, waiting for you?

J. D. Robb is waiting for me. Also, several Nicholas Sparkses. I just finished Louise Penny's newest novel and already am wishing for more. And Linda Castillo's newest one that was so incredibly exciting. And such a quick read.

Q. What book do you intend to read – and finish – next?

I want to start on Nicholas Sparks, but because I love Eve and Roarke and always am very excited to read about their new adventures, I will instead pick up a J. D. Robb (Eve and Roarke are his lead characters) book stacked over there.

Q. Just guessing, how many books are in your personal library?

About 50, but it is downsized from what it was, as I have given away several recently. And, I give most of the books I have read to the Friends of the Brainerd Public Library.

Q. If you could invite one author, living or deceased, to dine with you, then who and why?

Hands down, Agatha Christie, for dinner. Or if you will, then “Dame Agatha,” with whom I would love even to have tea. Agatha Christie lived such an interesting life, including meeting royalty and living through the war in England. She had a great sense of what made people tick. Her humor. Her use of “red herrings.” But hands down, Agatha Christie.

Q. Do you read one book at a time, or more, and whichever way you read, why do you do so “that way”?

Normally, one at a time. But, every once in a while, more than one at a time. But, and it drives my daughter crazy, I will start a series of books in the middle of the series. IF I like that book, THEN I will go back to the first book in the series and read them all in one shot. I’m not satisfied until I have consumed every single one.

And then, when I get to the end of the series, I’m upset because I have finished them all and have to wait until the author writes a new one. So I will find another book, usually one that is (yes) in the middle or at the end of a series, like it and start anew with that new series.

I have no clue as to why I do it that way.

Q. If you know there is a movie and there is a book, which do you “consume” first, and why?

Definitely, book first. It is very, very rare that the movie is better than the book, and that is especially if the book has a very intricate story line. The movie just can't do the book's story justice. A good example is the Harry Potter movies: Although they are good, except for the last one, they are nowhere near as good as the books.

Same with Stephen King's *The Stand* and *It*: Fantastic books, but the movies could not hold a candle to them.

An exception is *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I liked the book, but Jack Nicholson and the movie were absolutely riveting. I have yet to see the movie of *The Horse Whisperer*. Although I have heard that the movie is good, I can't imagine that it would be anywhere near as good or emotional as the book.

Q. What do you think about the skills and abilities of those who reach the level of authors who are published by established publishers?

It takes total dedication to be a published author. Tons of research, the ability to make an outline in the beginning, then have a fantastic imagination to pull it all together. Plus, a deep understanding of humanity, an amazing amount of patience and the ability to stay on task day after day after day.

Q. If you are about to be quarantined for two weeks, and can only bring one book with you, then which book will you bring, and why?

Only one, for TWO weeks? Oh my goodness! I would take *Boy's Life* with me and have to read it very slowly.

Cindy Swanson Finch
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