

# SUA Zoom Book Club

As a member of SUA and a lecturer in US History who teaches a course on US immigration history, I was excited when Lynn Zalokar asked me if I would be interested in leading an online book group for SUA members (and potential members) in order to enhance our knowledge of Slovenes in the U.S. What I realized when I teach history is that sometimes the easiest way to interact with the past is through personal stories. That led to the framework for the SUA Book Club. The first book we chose was *Women of the Copper Country* by Mary Doria Russell. The historical novel recounts the story of Annie Klobuchar Clemenc in Calumet, Michigan, who helped organize a miners' strike in 1913. The miners and their families were immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe and toiled in dangerous conditions for long hours with little pay. Sometimes called the "American Joan of Arc," Annie helps organize a strike and leads the miners and their families to believe they can agitate to make their lives better.

For the book club, we ask participants to read the book in advance and then discuss it during our Zoom meeting. The first book club meeting was better than I could have imagined. We had a wide variety of Slovene-Americans who participated, many of whom had personal connections to mining in the US and to Calumet, Michigan, in particular. To hear the family stories of so many who participated was really enriching for the entire group. Reflecting on it later, I was so happy that we were all able to share our personal histories with the rest of the group and keep the memories of our immigrant ancestors alive.

Since the first meeting of our book club was so successful, Lynn and I decided to continue to meet on a quarterly basis. We have chosen a variety of books and are always open to suggestions for new ideas.

The second book was *Necropolis* by Boris Pahor. Boris died at the age of 108, not long after we read the book. He was from the Slovenian minority in Trieste, Italy. He writes about the discrimination he and other Slovenes faced, especially under the fascist regime of Mussolini, and the time he spent

in a Nazi concentration camp in France during World War II. Although the book was originally published in 1967, it wasn't translated into English until 1995 (and then again in 2010). Pahor's stream-of-consciousness remembrance slips back and forth between his original imprisonment by the Nazis and then his visit decades later to the camp which has become a sort of tourist site. The book is short but written almost in a poetic style that lends itself to deep discussions. During our Zoom meeting, we had a great conversation about the role of memory about the past and how our impressions change over time as well as appreciating how much he went through personally and as a member of an oppressed minority.

Our third book was *Accordion Crimes* by Annie Proulx, a novel that explores the US immigrant experience through an accordion that is passed down from various groups, including Mexicans, Poles, Quebecois, and African Americans. Accordions are quite important to Slovenian music, so we also sent out a video by Alex Meixner on the music and culture of the accordion (available on YouTube). The book allowed us to discuss our families and their immigrant past, as well as what we have in common with other immigrant groups who often encounter the same obstacles and tribulations, through the lens of music.

The final book of the first season was *Forbidden Bread* by Erica Johnson Debeljak, an American who meets and falls in love with a Slovenian poet, Aleš Debeljak, and immigrates to Slovenia. The book is a relatively light-hearted look at her relationship and the obstacles she faces trying to learn a new language and culture in Slovenia during the 1990s. It was an interesting take since the members of our group are Slovenian immigrants or have family who immigrated to the US (or other countries) from Slovenia while Erica struggles with her move in the other direction.

To begin the second season, we chose *Girl at War* by Sara Novic. Although the novel is about a girl in Croatia (not Slovenia) during the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s who then moves to the US, it allowed our

group to discuss the more recent events that have affected Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. A fascinating thing about the history of the region is the seemingly constant border changes in the area and the number of languages, religions, and ethnic groups living in close proximity. When my family immigrated to the US in the early 20th century, their papers originally said they were from Austria since Slovenia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It then became the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, then the six republics of Yugoslavia which have now splintered into their own countries. *Girl at War* addresses the lasting effects of war and upheaval on those who experience it and the difficulty they face in processing issues from the past.

Our next meeting on January 24 will feature the novel *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* by Richard Flanagan. It explores the story of a Slovenian family who immigrates to Australia in the 1950s and the daughter's difficulties dealing with the past as an adult. It will be interesting to see if participants notice any differences between immigration to the U.S. and Australia. Having these conversations perfectly illustrates the power of fiction to remind us of the pride we have in being Slovenian and the common threads we share.

Anyone interested in the SUA book club can email [suabookclub@gmail.com](mailto:suabookclub@gmail.com) to get on the list.



By Stephanie Petkovsek, Branch 93  
[spetkovsek@gmail.com](mailto:spetkovsek@gmail.com)