

Published July 15th, 2015

Literary Luncheon at Orinda Books Allows Close Encounter with Author Ann Packer

By Lou Fancher

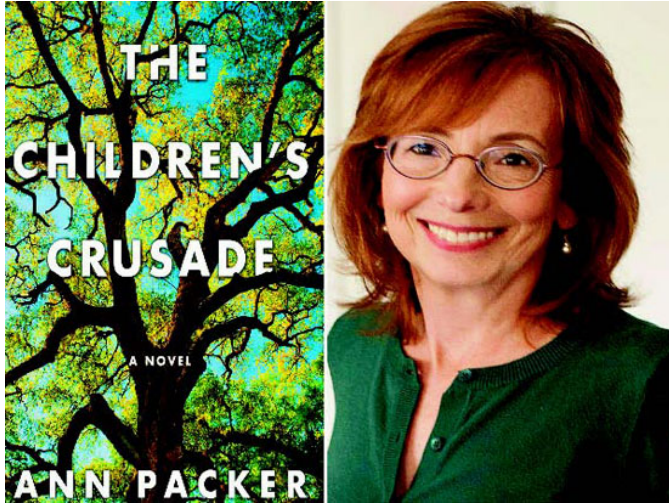


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from the family homestead. His wife, Penny, is an artist and an increasingly reluctant mother as her brood multiplies. The "R" threesome, named Robert, Rebecca and Ryan, like a consonant-locked trio, cloister themselves close to their unhappy childhood home as adults. Set in 1954 in what would become Silicon Valley, the family history unfolds multi-directionally through the turbulent '60s, '70s and up to the 21st century as they tell their differing stories.

And just as the Blair's follow their individual warp and wane, readers of the novel have starkly contrasting reactions to books like Packer's.

The fun of jawing over books is half the reason the salon-style luncheons are finding their way on to Orinda Book's calendar of events at increasing rates. June had "Cheese and Wine" with Laura Dave, author of "Eight Hundred Grapes;" a "Chef Charlie" cooking demonstration by Charles Vollmar of Epicurean Exchange, including a three-course light lunch with wine and a cookbook, "Mi Comida Latina" by Marcella Kreibel; and Packer's appearance.

"I'm a big reader and I saw a note about a book signing," Agnes Kirkhart said. "I have her books. I read the reviews and thought, 'Why not read a book I'm interested in and then get to know the author?'" A Concord resident making time during her lunch hour to travel to Orinda, Kirkhart said discovering the book's background increased her understanding of "Children's Crusade." "I know the characters more intimately because now, I know how they were 'born.'"

Diane Arney of Orinda said she and members of a tennis group she belongs to decided they were becoming "just too superficial" and formed a book club at the store 20 years ago. "It just grew and grew, until we had to divide it in two. There's lots of energy here."

And lots of different opinions, with readers pelting Packer with their frank reactions to the novel between trips to a buffet table laden with pasta salad and light deserts.

Packer fielded the input deftly, describing a process about which she said, "I don't plan as I write at all. I make it up as I go along, letting my imagination roam."

Packer said her mind, while working on the novel, was filled with thoughts as varied as sense memories of going barefoot in her childhood, an analytical approach to crafting characters that leaves her cool, almost cold in relationship to them. "My relationship with the characters is whether

In some ways, we all lead fictional lives. Imagine attending a reunion or similar gathering without hearing, "That's not what happened, I remember this ...," or "Gee, I don't remember that at all." Especially within families, memories blur and emphasis unravels differently in the parallel tracks of siblings, parents, and other family relatives.

Five decades in the Blair family, captured with chilling accuracy in the ever-precise lens of author Ann Packer's new novel, "The Children's Crusade," were the subtext for a literary luncheon at Orinda Books on June 25.

Packer's 448-page tale of Bill and Penny Blair and their four children sways between first- and third-person accounts of the family's past and present predicaments. Bill is a physician who dotes on his children, even James, the youngest, who rebels and eventually soars like a satellite away

or not they're reading right, not whether they're behaving right. It's different than a reader's relationship," she said, and a centralizing belief underlined throughout the book that "children deserve caring," and "people should be careful of children and pay attention to their needs."

Which connects conveniently to the other "half reason" the luncheons are popular: Orinda Books owner Maria Rhoden.

Operating in multiple roles—a harbormaster steering guests to small, circular tables; a commander posing piercing, insightful questions for authors that reveal her well-read background; a scullery maid scurrying to supply forks, water, biscotti for guests—Rhoden puts on a spirited performance of her own. Her energy is cheerful, generous and contagious—and seems to prompt lively language from others.

"I'm a huge reader. I devour books," said Orinda resident Cathy Cutler. "There's a wonderful staff here, always has been. They have a chance to expose their knowledge. It's a vibrant hub." Rhoden said opportunities to have best-selling authors like Packer come to the store are partially due to the good reputation established by longtime owner and founder Janet Boreta.

And Packer, told by a reader at the luncheon that she differed from the author and thought one of the characters was at fault for the fictional family's woes, said words that might serve as a template for resolving family reunion differences: "We differ. Good. It's your story now."

Upcoming Orinda Books events

Luncheon with Cassandra Dunn, author of "The Art of Adapting"
Tuesday, July 21 at noon

The Random Readers Book Club discussion of "The Boys in the Boat" by Daniel James Brown
Wednesday, July 22 at 2 p.m.

Cooking demonstration and lunch with Chef Charlie
Tuesday, July 28 at 11:30 a.m.

For more detailed information, visit orindabooks.com.

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[back](#)

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