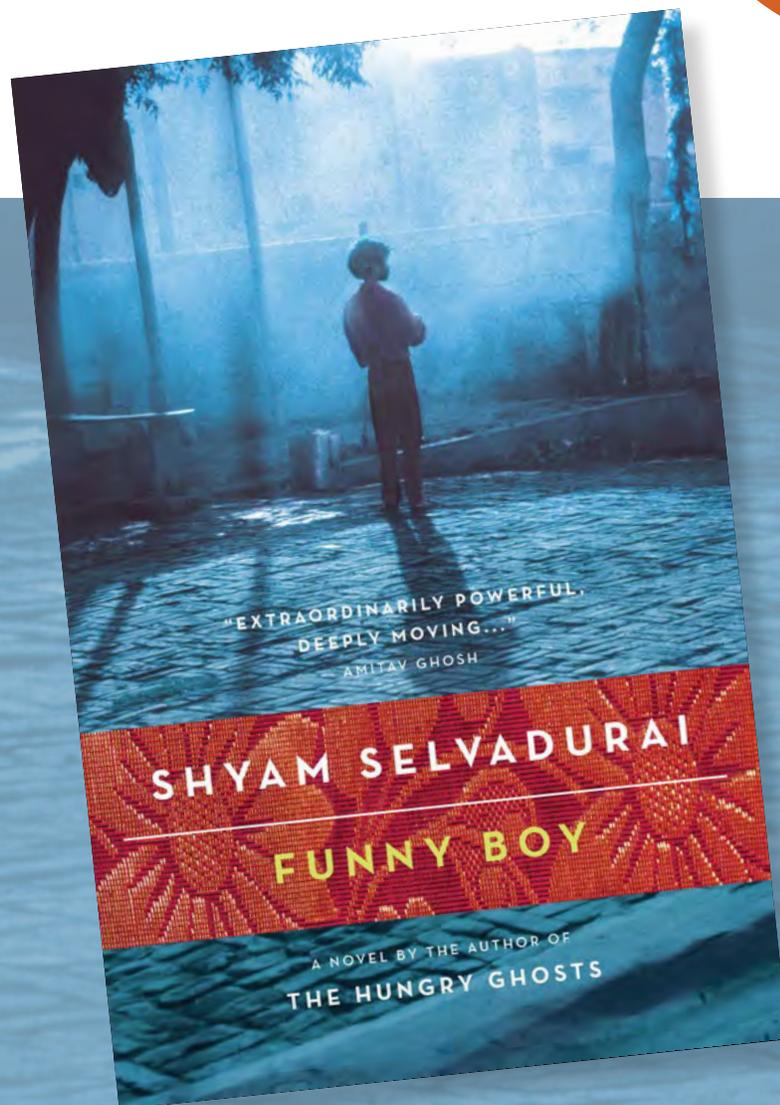


# JULY / AUGUST 2017 DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL



BOOK CLUB  
DISCUSSION  
GUIDE



**FUNNY BOY**  
BY SHYAM SELVADURAI  
RECOMMENDED BY CHRISTOPHER DIRADDO



Elena Milashina, journalist  
Moscow-based newspaper  
Novaya Gazeta

## TAKE ACTION!

Call on Russian authorities to protect journalists and other human rights defenders

—See page 10

The Amnesty International Book Club is pleased to announce our July/August title *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai. This title has been recommended by guest reader Christopher DiRaddo, with whom you will explore the novel and read beyond the book to learn more about LGBTI issues that Amnesty works hard to bring to light.

In this guide, you will find DiRaddo's reflection on the book, as well as discussion questions, an Amnesty Background section, and an action you can take to call on Chechnya to stop abducting, killing, and torturing men believed to be gay.

Set in the mannered, lush world of upper middle class Tamils in Sri Lanka, *Funny Boy*, though not autobiographical, draws on Selvadurai's experience of being gay in Sri Lanka and growing up during the escalating violence between the Buddhist Sinhala majority and Hindu Tamil minority in the 1970's and early 1980's.

Arjie Chelvaratnam, at the age of 7, prefers dressing up in a sari and playing bride-bride with his girl cousins to cricket. When he is discovered by the adults engaging in this innocent fun, he is forced out of the world of the girls. A lonely outsider, he attaches himself to various sympathetic adults, whose own trajectories and dilemmas reveal to Arjie the difficulties of following one's desires. As the novel progresses, the civil violence and tensions mount bringing devastating consequences to Arjie's family and their sheltered world.

It is a coming-of-age novel set during a time of intense social and political strife in Sri Lanka. Through Arjie's lens, we experience the life of a young boy growing up, discovering love and his own sexuality.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would love to hear from you with any questions, suggestions or comments you may have. Just send us an email at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

We think you will really enjoy *Funny Boy*. Happy reading!

### About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit [www.amnesty.ca](http://www.amnesty.ca) or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.



About this month's featured author,

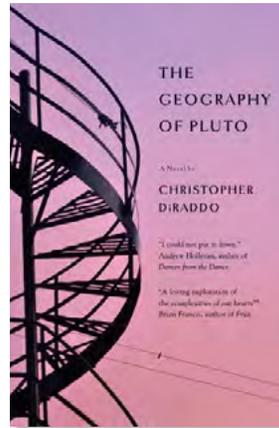
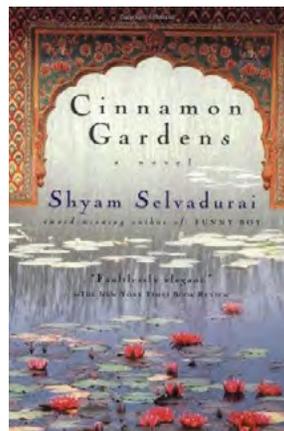
**Shyam**

**Selvadurai**

Shyam Selvadurai was born in 1965 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He came to Canada with his family at the age of nineteen. He has studied creative writing and theatre, and has a B.F.A. from York University.

*Funny Boy*, his first novel, was published to immediate acclaim in 1994, was a national bestseller, and won the W. H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award and, in the U.S., The Lambda Literary Award, and was named a Notable Book by the American Library Association. *Cinnamon Gardens*, his second novel, was shortlisted for the Trillium Award. It has been published in the U.S., the U.K., India, and numerous countries in Europe.

Shyam Selvadurai lives in Toronto.



About this month's guest reader,

**Christopher**

**DiRaddo**

Christopher DiRaddo is the author of *The Geography of Pluto* (Cormorant Books, 2014) and four short stories that have been published in anthologies by Arsenal Pulp Press, including the Lambda Literary Award-winning *First Person Queer*. He is also the founder and host of The Violet Hour, a bi-monthly queer reading series that takes place in the off-hours of a strip club in Montreal's gay village. Christopher got his start in community activism in 1998, running communications for Montreal's Divers/Cité LGBTQ Pride Celebrations. He also co-hosted the weekly community radio show *Queer Corps* on CKUT FM from 1997 to 2003. In 2016, Christopher joined the programming committee at Blue Metropolis to help curate, produce and host a series of events featuring LGBTQ writers at the annual literary festival.





## Christopher DiRaddo's reflection on *Funny Boy*

*This book came out in 1994. Coincidentally, so did I. So, I guess this novel is as old as I am – at least in gay years.*

*Discovering queer literature was formative to my development as a proud gay man, and Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* was one of the first LGBTQ books I read. I can't remember how I came across it, but it was probably at L'Androgyne, Montreal's gay, lesbian and feminist bookstore. Long closed now (like most gay bookstores in the world), L'Androgyne was the first place I found community, where I met and read about others who shared my worldview, and where I learned about what kind of stories I wanted to tell. *Boy*, do I miss it.*

*Even though Arjie Chelvaratnam and I have different origins, I saw myself in him. At the beginning of the novel, Arjie is seven years old and already knows what he wants. He'd rather play "bride-bride" with the girls, engaging in the "free play of fantasy," rather than joining the boys on the pitch for a game of cricket. It's a situation I knew well: the preference to use my imagination with girls, rather than test my (lacking) physical prowess with boys.*

*Arjie is at the heart of the six connected stories in *Funny Boy*. His are the eyes through which we see everything. Children are much smarter than we give*

*them credit for. They have an intuitive understanding of the world that is innocent and pure, and not weighed down by tradition, history or conflict. Arjie is just coming into himself, trying to figure out the place he wants to hold in the world, while also witnessing what is happening to his country and those around him. A part of the Tamil minority living in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Arjie begins to learn what racism is as tensions slowly intensify between Tamils and Sinhalese. All around him, adults find themselves torn between their true nature as individuals and what society demands of them. And Arjie bears witness to the burden of their choices. Even those who deign to break from what is expected of them are left to grapple with the consequences, and then, by the end of the book, it's Arjie's turn to decide what he will do.*

*Funny Boy offers a powerful look at not only coming of age as a gay man in Sri Lanka among the 1983 riots, but also at the impact of family, tradition and country on the individual. It makes us ask the question, "Do we always have to obey?"*

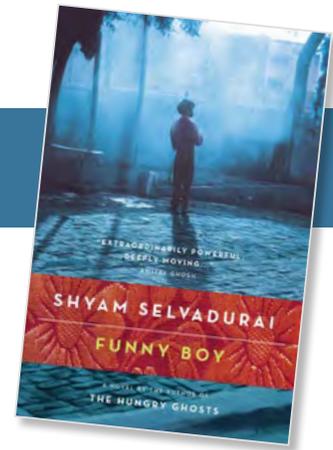
*Arjie may indeed be an outsider and a "funny boy," but he is not someone to be pitied or underestimated. In fact, it's his outlook on life and his bravery that we come to admire.*

—Christopher DiRaddo

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON *FUNNY BOY*

## Discussion questions from guest reader Christopher DiRaddo

1. This book was published in 1994. So much has changed in that time. What, in terms of the book's content, has not?
2. There is much tension in the book, as we lead up to the 1983 civil war between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. How did the author build that tension? How did it affect you while reading the book?
3. So many of the characters have to let go of the things they want. What is stopping them from being the persons they want to be?
4. Radha Auntie says at some point, "Ultimately, you have to live in the real world. And without your family you are nothing." How important is family to Arjie? Would you be able to turn your back on your own family if it meant denying who you are?
5. When faced with the prospect to leave Colombo, Arjie's father says, "I'll never emigrate. I've seen the way our people live in foreign countries." Has this book made you think differently about the immigrant experience?
6. Why do you think the author decided to present this book as six separate stories? Was it successful?
7. If Black Tie asked you to read the poem in front of the school, what would you have done?
8. Near the end of the book, Arjie says that "I was no longer a part of my family in the same way. I now inhabited a world they didn't understand and into which they could not follow me." What did he mean by that?
9. The ending of the book is quite striking. What is Arjie leaving behind? Is it a happy ending?



## Discussion questions from the Amnesty International Book Club

1. How does Arjie's understanding of justice develop throughout the book? How do the experiences of other characters, specifically Radha, Jagan, and Daryl influence that?
2. When and how does Arjie understand his identity as the sexual as well as the ethnic "other"? Is this parallel between sexuality and ethnicity visible in any other characters in the novel?
3. Is there a connection between Radha's and Amma's secrets and Arjie's? Can Arjie truly understand the familial ridicule Radha Auntie and Amma will experience if their secrets are revealed? Do they share their secrets with him because he may understand their desire to commit an act that directly contradicts the norm?
4. How does Arjie come to terms with his love for Shehan and his understanding of his sexual identity? How do his feelings transform into understanding and acceptance?
5. How do Arjie's experiences at the new school change him socially, specifically in relation to figures of authority?
6. Why does Arjie's father choose to ignore politics and morality concerning his hotel?
7. How does Arjie's disappointment with the action of people in his life influence his reactions throughout the book, specifically in the epilogue?

## BACKGROUND



Pride Parade 2013, Auckland, New Zealand

# LGBTI rights are human rights

Around the world, the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people are violated daily. People are beaten, imprisoned, or killed by their own governments simply because of who they are. There are still more than 70 countries where consensual same-sex sexual activity is criminalized; punishment can include flogging, imprisonment, and in about a dozen jurisdictions, even the death penalty. LGBTI people, or those who are perceived as such, are also routinely the victims of harassment, discrimination, and violence. Many of those who speak up for LGBTI rights—

regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity—are themselves persecuted with impunity.

A person's sexual orientation or gender identity can lead to abuse in the form of discrimination, violence, imprisonment, torture, or even execution, and these abuses are all illegal under international human rights law. Amnesty International works to protect the rights of LGBTI individuals by shining a light on rights abuses, calling for policy change, and working to protect LGBTI human rights defenders.

# Equality under the law

Amnesty believes that all people, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, have the right to be equal under the law and the right to exercise their full range of human rights, without exception.

The right to marry and have a family is clearly articulated under international law, the basis of which is enshrined in Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Amnesty believes that the denial of equal recognition of same-sex relationships prevents many people from accessing a range of other rights, such as rights to housing and social security, and stigmatizes those relationships in ways that can fuel discrimination and other human rights abuses against people based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

For transgender and intersex people, the ability to acquire legal documents that accurately reflect their name and gender is a crucial human rights issue. Without them, transgender and intersex people are likely to be 'outed' every time they need medical care, go to the bank, use

government services, and other everyday activities that require identification to access, putting them at high risk of violence and discrimination. Changing name and gender on legal documents must be quick and affordable, and must not require surgery or any other kind of medical treatment.

Amnesty International calls on all governments to fulfill their human rights obligations by respecting, protecting and fulfilling the human rights of LGBTI people, as required by international human rights law and norms.

In addition, Amnesty asserts that all governments must continue to condemn all human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and give such violations the same consideration and concern as all other types of human rights violations based on other grounds. Governments should support global efforts to decriminalize homosexuality and work towards LGBTI equality.

Amnesty staff and volunteers march in Ottawa's 2015 Pride Parade



# A note from our Sri Lanka Country Coordinator, John Argue, about LGBTI rights in the country

Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy* is the best known example of a book dealing with the topic which is not discussed in public in Sri Lanka, that of sex in general, and in it, the particular challenge of dealing with a different sexual identity from the norm.

Amnesty International's most recent annual report refers to this kind of threat in the present context. In June 2016, the supporters of an extreme chauvinist group "waged a social media campaign of threats and intimidation against *Equal Ground*, an organization seeking human and political rights for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning (LGBTIQ) community of Sri Lanka."

Equal Ground is the only group that has succeeded in offering counselling and advice to people in the

country's LGBTIQ "community" simply because of the huge challenge of talking about something that is not discussed in polite society.

Its website is at <http://www.equal-ground.org/about> and its e-mail address is available for those who do seek assistance: [equalground@gmail.com](mailto:equalground@gmail.com)

Amnesty International's partner in promoting human rights around the world, Human Rights Watch, published a 63 page report in 2016, entitled "All Five Fingers Are Not the Same": Discrimination on Grounds of Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation in Sri Lanka".

The report argues that transgender people, and others who do not conform to social expectations about gender, face discrimination and abuse in Sri Lanka. It's available at: <http://bit.ly/2tGLXEd>

## Persecution of men believed to be gay in Chechnya

On April 1, 2017, the courageous journalists at Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta reported that over a hundred men suspected of being gay had been abducted, tortured, and some killed in a coordinated government campaign in the southern Russian republic of Chechnya. The story shone a light on these grave human rights abuses, and has drawn international attention, condemnation and action.

The men were reportedly tortured and otherwise ill-treated, and forced to disclose other LGBTI individuals known to them. Novaya Gazeta reportedly verified information about at least three men who had been killed by their captors, but its sources claim that there have been many more killings.

There are reports that some of the abducted men have since been returned to their families, possibly because their sexual orientation was not confirmed by their captors. However, they remain in grave danger because



To Russia, with Love: Man during protest holding rainbow/freedom flag

of the possibility of honour killings carried out by family members. Members of the Non-Governmental Organization Russian LGBTI network have confirmed this information, and have created a hotline offering help to those who may be looking for safety outside the region.

Chechnya is a semi-autonomous republic within the Russian Federation.

The Russian Federation passed a law in 2013 banning "propaganda of homosexuality among minors," a law restricting human rights and which has fuelled homophobia.

Reactions from officials in Chechnya to these allegations of rights abuses have varied from denial, to dismissing it as joke, to thinly veiled threats. In the wake of international outcry, Russian officials opened an investigation into the allegations; sustained pressure is needed to ensure that officials follow-through with a prompt, thorough and impartial investigation.

# Death threats against Russian journalist: Elena Milashina



© Jan van Eck / Amnesty International

Elena Milashina, journalist Moscow-based newspaper Novaya Gazeta

Elena Milashina, a Russian journalist covering Chechnya at the independent Novaya Gazeta newspaper, received death threats for her reporting on allegations of human rights abuses against men believed to be gay in Chechnya. Chechnya has been ruled since 2007 by Ramzan Kadyrov, a man with a less than stellar human rights record. Under his rule, human rights defenders have been targeted, intimidated, harassed, and worse.

Through her research and reports she has drawn international attention to the Russian government's crackdown on civil society, as well as gross human rights abuses continuing in the Northern Caucasus. In cooperation with international and domestic human rights Non-Governmental Organizations, Elena documents cases of enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, extrajudicial executions, torture, and persecution of relatives of alleged insurgents in Chechnya and other republics in the Northern Caucasus.

Novaya Gazeta journalists covering Chechnya were killed in 2006 and 2009. Many other human rights defenders have experienced violence and repression, and it's not abated over time. In late 2014, after the office of a human rights group in Chechnya was burned down, Amnesty called for an end to the crackdown on freedom of expression in the region.

As you can imagine, in a climate where independent

voices are so stifled, Novaya Gazeta's report in April was bold, and one of the only ways to defend human rights in a context where space for civil society activism is almost non-existent. In response to their report, their journalists have been publicly threatened by influential people in Chechnya. On April 3, 15,000 people attended a rally outside the central mosque in Grozny, the capital city of Chechnya, where clerics and other high profile people condemned the journalists.

Elena and other journalists at Novaya Gazeta are facing serious threats from influential people in Chechnya – so much so that Elena has been forced to flee. Join Amnesty in defending the rights of Elena and the other Novaya Gazeta journalists. They are human rights defenders. They publish stories highlighting human rights abuses and now we need to make sure that their rights aren't violated.

Our advocacy is making a difference. International attention on Chechnya helped to make sure that Russia opened an investigation into the allegations of human rights violations of men believed to be gay in Chechnya. International pressure appears to have nearly halted the targeting and abductions. We can't give up now! Amnesty is working hard to end these grave human rights abuses, and you can help by taking the actions on the next page.

## TAKE ACTION NOW

Call on Russian authorities to investigate threats against Novaya Gazeta journalists and take steps to protect journalists and other human rights defenders.

**Sign the petition at:  
<http://bit.ly/2ue45IG>**



An Amnesty International supporter signing a petition.

## Or write a letter calling on authorities to investigate the abductions and killings of gay men in Chechnya

Please send a letter, fax, and/or email in Russian or English without delay. (Postage is \$2.50.)

\* Urge them to carry out prompt, effective and thorough investigations into the reports of abductions and killings of men believed to be gay in Chechnya and to ensure that anyone found guilty or complicit in such crimes will be brought to justice in accordance with the laws of the Russian Federation.

\* Call on them to take all necessary steps to ensure safety of any individual who may be at risk in Chechnya because of their sexual orientation and to condemn in the strongest terms possible any discriminatory comments made by officials.

\* Remind the Russian and Chechen authorities that they have an international human rights obligation to prohibit discrimination and to investigate and prosecute hate crimes, the most invidious form of discrimination.

### Address your messages to

*Chairman of the Investigation Committee*

**Aleksandr Ivanovich Bastrykin**  
Investigation Committee of the Russian Federation  
Tekhnicheskii pereulok, dom 2  
105005 Moscow, Russian Federation  
Fax: 011 7 495 966 97 76  
Online (in Russian): [http://sledcom.ru/references/Organizaciya\\_priema\\_grazhdan#reception](http://sledcom.ru/references/Organizaciya_priema_grazhdan#reception)

Salutation: Dear Chairman

*Acting Head of the Investigation Committee for the Chechen Republic*

**Sergei Vasilievich Sokolov**  
Ul. Altaiskaya d.3, Grozny,  
364000 Chechen Republic, Russian Federation  
Fax: 011 7 8712 62 41 01  
Email: [ip-chechen@sledcom.ru](mailto:ip-chechen@sledcom.ru)  
Online: <http://chr.sledcom.ru/references>

Salutation: Dear Acting Head

### Please send copies to both

*Ambassador for the Russian Federation*

**His Excellency Alexander Darchiev**  
285 Charlotte Street  
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 8L5  
Fax: (613) 236-6342  
Email: [info@rusembassy.ca](mailto:info@rusembassy.ca)

*Human Rights Ombudsman of the Russian Federation*

**Tatiana Nikolaevna Moskalkova**  
ul. Miasnitskaia, 47  
107084, Moscow  
Russian Federation  
Fax: 011 7 495 607 7470 / 011 7 495 607 3977

(If you'd like to check if fax received: 011 7 495 607 1854)

## MORE ABOUT THIS ISSUE

**JOIN** We Defend, Amnesty's new global campaign to protect human rights defenders in Russia, Sri Lanka, and around the world: [www.amnesty.ca/wedefend](http://www.amnesty.ca/wedefend)

**READ** Amnesty International's Annual Report entry about Sri Lanka here: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2017/02/amnesty-international-annual-report-201617/> or contact our Sri Lanka and Maldives Coordinator John Argue to explore how you can get involved: [srilankamaldivescoordinator@amnesty.ca](mailto:srilankamaldivescoordinator@amnesty.ca)

**LEARN** more about Amnesty's work on LGBTI issues at: <http://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/issues/lgbti-rights> or contact our LGBTI Coordinators George Harvey and Alexander Xavier to explore how you can get involved at [lgbticoordinator@amnesty.ca](mailto:lgbticoordinator@amnesty.ca)

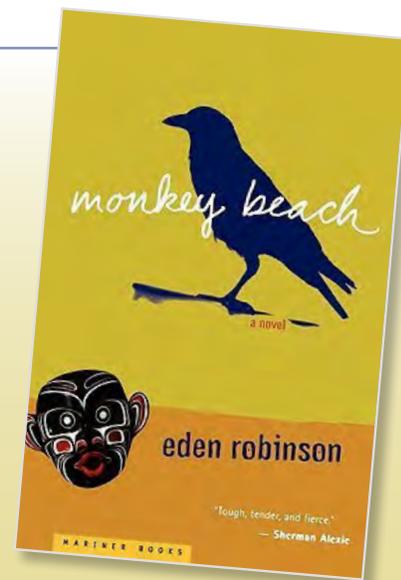
## Share the Amnesty International Book Club online

- Check us out on Facebook at **Amnesty International Book Club**, Twitter at **@AmnestyReads**, Instagram at **@AmnestyBookClub** and join our discussion group on **Goodreads.com**

## COMING UP IN SEPTEMBER 2017

### *Monkey Beach* by Eden Robinson

Recommended by guest reader  
**Katherena Vermette**



Five hundred miles north of Vancouver is Kitamaat, the homeland of the Haisla people. Growing up a tough, wild tomboy, swimming, fighting, and fishing in a remote village where the land slips into the green ocean on the edge of the world, Lisamarie has always been different.

Haunting, funny, and vividly poignant, *Monkey Beach* gives full scope to Robinson's startling ability to make bedfellows of comedy and the dark underside of life. Informed as much by its lush living wilderness as by the humanity of its colorful characters, *Monkey Beach* is a profoundly moving story about childhood and the pain of growing older—a multilayered tale of family grief and redemption.

**The discussion guide will be sent out September 2017.**

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).