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BOOK CLUB

**DISCUSSION
GUIDE**

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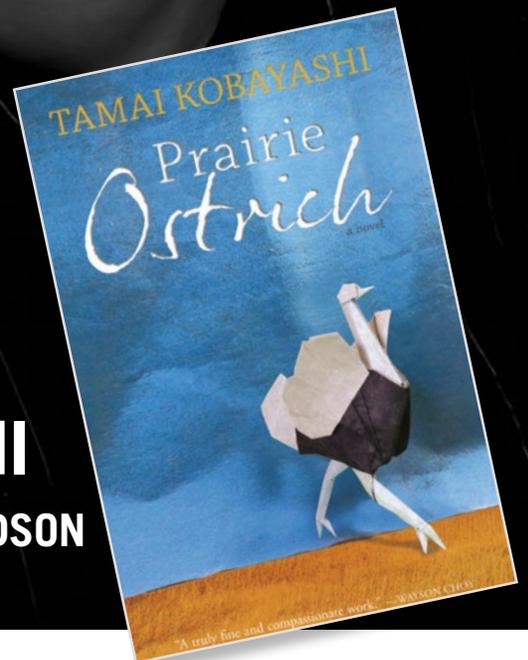


NOVEMBER 2016

PRAIRIE OSTRICH

BY TAMAI KOBAYASHI

RECOMMENDED BY GUEST READER **JAEL RICHARDSON**



WHAT MAKES A HERO?

Prairie Ostrich tells the story of eight-year-old Egg Murakami as she lives a day-to-day existence on an ostrich farm in Alberta. Since her brother's death, Egg's mother has curled up inside a bottle and her father has exiled himself to the barn. And yet Egg, despite her family's loss, continues to discover the world – the good and the bad. She wishes Anne Frank was her best friend, idolizes her older sister, runs from bullies, and wonders what it takes to be a hero.

But Egg also lives in a community named Bittercreek, where people passively watch one another in their suffering. Stagnation both in her home and neighbourhood compounds Egg's struggle with tragedy, bullying and growing up. Will Egg be able to break out of her own shell and take action when no one else dares? How can a young girl effect change when everyone is struggling?

The Amnesty International Book Club is pleased to announce that Jael Richardson has selected *Prairie Ostrich* as the November 2016 selection. Jael Richardson, Book Club Guest Reader, is the pioneering founder of Canada's Festival of Literary Diversity (FOLD), an event that celebrates the many different voices and cultures crafting Canadian Literature today. Her selection of *Prairie Ostrich* by Tamai Kobayashi, is an opportunity to not only examine what it is to feel like an outsider in one's community, but also bears witness to the dangers of passively allowing injustice.

This month, explore the novel *Prairie Ostrich* with guest reader Jael Richardson, and read beyond the book to learn more about the impact of inaction and action, and how even the simplest of actions can be heroic in consequence. You will

find our book club action on page 10 of our Amnesty International Book Club discussion guide, which is a call to join us this December 10th for Human Rights Day, and support our letter writing initiative, Write for Rights.

If you have any questions or comments, please email us at Bookclub@amnesty.ca.

Enjoy the read!

—The Book Club Team

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 or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.



About this month's featured author,

Tamai Kobayashi

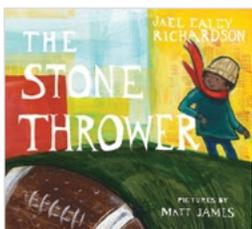
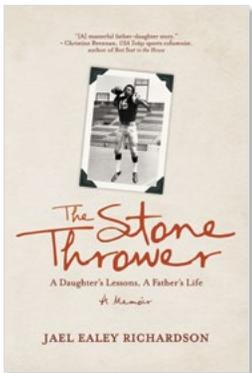
Born in Japan, raised in Canada, Tamai Kobayashi is a writer, song-writer, and videographer. She is the author of two story collections, *Exile and the Heart* and *Quixotic Erotic*, whose vivid, electric prose has garnered considerable critical acclaim. *Prairie Ostrich* is her first novel. It was included in CBC's list of 100 Young Adult Books That Make You Proud to be Canadian. The novel has also won the Writer's Trust Dayne Ogilvie Prize for LGBT Emerging Writers.

About this month's guest reader,

Jael Richardson

Jael Richardson is the author of *The Stone Thrower: A Daughter's Lesson, a Father's Life*, a memoir based on her relationship with her father, CFL quarterback Chuck Ealey. The book received a CBC Bookie Award and earned Richardson an Acclaim Award and a My People Award as an Emerging Artist. *The Stone Thrower* was adapted into a children's book in 2016. Her essay "Conception" is part of Room's first Women of Colour edition, and excerpts from her first play, *my upside down black face*, are published in the anthology *T-Dot Griots: An Anthology of Toronto's Black Storytellers*. Richardson has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Guelph, and she lives in Brampton, Ontario where she serves as the Artistic Director for the Festival of Literary Diversity (The FOLD).

Follow Jael on Twitter @JaelRichardson and learn more about FOLD at www.thefoldcanada.org



Jael Richardson on *Prairie Ostrich*



Prairie Ostrich is one of those novels I wish I'd read earlier. It's the kind of novel I wish I had had in high school – the kind of book that sparks thoughts that are both simple and profound, that fire up big ideas. It's the kind of book that still has me thinking about who I am as a person and what my responsibility is as a citizen of the world and as a member of my community.

When I was in high school, the Canadian books I remember were stories set in the rural prairies and on vast landscapes blanketed in snow. They were stories that in my older years, I was determined to avoid. But it turns out I wasn't craving an escape from the geography of rural Canada in the Canadian literature I was reading. I wasn't longing to cut out voices from a large and important part of the country – a part of the country I visited for the first time rather recently. What I was craving in high school – what I still crave now – are stories that are not fixated on the immenseness of the land and the sound of the wind because the realities of lived experiences for outsiders on this land are far

more pressing. I was searching for stories like Tamai Kobayashi's *Prairie Ostrich*.

Prairie Ostrich is told from the perspective of Egg, a young, first generation Canadian who is balancing the hopes and dreams of Canadian life under the pressures and expectations of parents who, while living in Alberta, remain deeply influenced by their Japanese upbringing. In this way, *Prairie Ostrich* provides an important perspective on this country for the growing number of people who have come from other parts of the world and chosen Canada as their home.

How does being raised by immigrants and balancing another culture alongside Canadian life impact your sense of belonging, your sense of home? What does it mean to be Canadian as a first-generation Canadian, as an immigrant, as a person of colour?

But *Prairie Ostrich* also invites readers to think about social justice and human rights in ways that are particularly fitting for Amnesty International Book Club readers. The story and the characters invite us to consider the role of action versus inaction in the face of injustice, hardship, and difficulty.

Throughout the novel, Egg is faced with many opportunities to act or speak out, and sometimes she does. In her search for solutions for answers to her parents' sadness, she speaks up in a Sunday morning Bible class at church only to be rejected by her teacher, kicked out of class for daring to ask questions. The entire town of Bittercreek, in fact, seems rooted in inaction, which impacts Egg, her sister Kathy, and the entire Murakami family. Teachers see bullies pick on kids and do nothing. A teacher is abused by her husband and nothing happens. A man is chased out of town after being beaten, and no one is punished.

Prairie Ostrich reminds us that while action is active and decisive, inaction is not passive. It is also a choice, often with deep and harmful consequences that affect us as individuals as well as those around us. Inaction is a choice to allow ignorance, bitterness and suffering to sink deeper and take root in our lives, to poison us from the inside out.

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"To take action isn't necessarily to play the superhero," a friend said. "The idea of fixing the world is big and overwhelming, but the idea of standing up for what we personally believe is important is easier to digest. And that's where change starts."

Earlier this year, I was referred to as an "activist" on the cover of a magazine for starting the Festival of Literary Diversity – a festival that celebrates stories like *Prairie Ostrich* and novelists like Tamai Kobayashi – stories and authors who, in the past, have been overlooked in the Canadian literary canon and community. It was the first time I had ever been described as an activist, and it made me think of the ways we take action and the ways we respond to what's wrong in our communities, in our country, and in the world. What is it that sparks action that's risky and bold, action that supersedes the obstacles we may face and the fears associated with those obstacles?

That's why young Egg Murakami is such a deeply compelling character for me. Her simple actions, her generosity, her silence, her curiosity, her moments of triumph and failure all remind me what it looks like to live in a world full of complex choices, to search for place and belonging and opportunities to be better people in an imperfect and broken world.

— Jael Richardson

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON *PRAIRIE OSTRICH*

Questions from Jael Richardson

1. The description for the novel reads, “The Murakami family is not happy.” What are the different ways that each of the family members cope with grief and how do those differences reflect their upbringing, their origins, their age, etc.?
2. So much of this story, and any story in fact, is about perspective. This story focuses on Egg’s life – her view of her family and Bittercreek, Alberta. What difference would it make if the story was told by her sister? Her mother? Her father? A combination? What would readers lose and gain?
3. Consider the symbolism of the name Egg as it relates to the entire novel. What role do names play in shaping character and identity in a country as diverse as Canada?
4. Egg is referred to in the description of the novel as a “quiet witness”. In what ways is Egg quiet and in what ways is that quietness incredibly loud and powerful? Consider instances in the novel where Egg is “loud” in word or action.
5. In telling stories to Egg, Kathy changes the endings so that they are “happy”. Is this a good thing to do? Why or why not? Does *Prairie Ostrich* have a happy ending?
6. Consider the impact of action versus inaction. When does Egg act in defense of someone or something and what is the result? How does the choice to speak out or stay quiet impact the sisters, the family, the school, the town?



Questions from Amnesty International

1. Did you enjoy the novel? What did you find most engaging and most challenging about *Prairie Ostrich*?
2. While the role models in Egg’s life are trapped in grief, she maintains a separate reality of fairytale and fantasy – from her love for super heroes to imagining Anne Frank as her best friend. As a child, who did you idolize and how did it impact your growth as an individual?
3. Egg asks an important question: “Do lives have a moral? Or is it just an accident on the railway trestle over the slow flowing river?” How would you answer this, and, what would be the moral of your own story?
4. “Ostriches don’t hide their head in the sand. That is a myth,” considers Egg. How does the ostrich lore add to the story, and in what ways does it impact Egg’s growth? Why do you think the author chose ostriches to convey these small lessons?
5. Egg wonders about love. “Evangeline loved Albert but she couldn’t save him. What’s the point of love if you can’t save anyone? What’s the point of anything?” How do you answer that question?
6. The town and Egg’s family seem literally paralyzed in either bitterness or grief. But by the end of the novel, Egg’s actions have created a change for the better both in small and large ways. Have you stood up for others, or yourself – and would you consider it to be heroic? If not, why not?

BACKGROUND



“A ball hurls towards Kuldeep and without a thought, Egg steps out and smacks it away. Amazed, she stares at her hand, feels the sting against her palm, savours it. She blinks. Character is destiny.

*Yes, she can change. She can be the strong one.” — **Prairie Ostrich***

Amnesty International is a large, worldwide organization. But it is essential to remember that we are a collective action made up of many individuals, supporters, local groups, experts, students, letter writers, petition signers and more. Each voice adds to the strength. Together we support human rights.

The moment Egg speaks out for another, she feels her own world change. She knows something within her has grown. Without even realizing it, she has chosen to take action against injustice. And in a sense, she has become an advocate.

What is advocacy?

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines advocacy as “the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal: the act or process of advocating something.”

But really, to understand a sense of advocacy, it is better to look away from dictionary definitions and instead consider stories. Often people do not even realize they are advocates. However, it’s important to reflect and realize the power each of us has to impact change. Whether it’s sharing your own story, or persevering

despite obstacles, giving support to others, or speaking out when needed ... there are countless ways to create positive change and, at the core, it can start as simply as reflection plus action.

How does Amnesty International advocate for human rights?

RESEARCH: Amnesty International sends around 130 research teams to visit roughly 70 countries every year. Our researchers listen to testimonies from people who have experienced and witnessed human rights violations, monitor legal proceedings, visit prisoners, and speak to civil society organizations, government officials, and others who are able to provide and verify information. We have on-going research and media monitoring of events unfolding around the world. And we receive information from human rights organizations, individuals, and others who are on the ground. We investigate to verify all the information we gather and receive.

EXPOSE THE TRUTH: Amnesty International shines a light on human rights by making our research findings public. We publish thousands of reports, press releases, and public statements and produce videos and other materials. We hold press conferences, do media interviews, and share the information in our publications, through our digital channels, and through our supporter networks. We present our research findings directly to government officials, and regional and international bodies including the United Nations where we have official observer status. We engage in public awareness and education work to make sure that no human rights violations are hidden in the dark.

TAKE ACTION: It is our supporters who make the biggest impact. They take all kinds of actions, from signing online and offline letters and petitions, holding public demonstrations, meeting with local MPs, getting local media attention to critical issues, and in so many other ways using their creativity, dedication and energy to keep the pressure on and get results.



Quiet witness: Anne Frank

“Everyone has inside of him a piece of good news. The good news is that you don’t know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is!”

—Anne Frank

Anne Frank didn’t just impact Egg’s life in *Prairie Ostrich*. Her diary has moved countless people. At age 13, Anne received the gift of a diary, and began to share with it all her secrets. When her family went into hiding from the Nazis, Anne herself became a silent witness to the war around her. Deep in the heart of Amsterdam, hidden high above the street in a secret annex of a narrow building, within her tiny room plastered with pictures of movie stars, Anne would peer from her window down onto the street below. She and her family could be taken at any moment and lived in fear. But she also daydreamed. She aspired to become a writer. She had her first kiss. She hoped the world could be made better. And, so importantly, she wrote down all her feelings.

“The world will keep on turning without me, and I can’t do anything to change events anyway.”

But even though Anne felt powerless, she nevertheless remained determined to bear witness and reworked her diary entries for publication after the war. She thought one day she might become a writer.

For over two years Anne, her family and their friends hid in that annex. Tragically on August 4th 1944 the group was betrayed to the Nazis, and taken away. Six months later Anne died in the Auschwitz concentration camp. Her diaries were abandoned in the annex, left stuffed inside a suitcase.

Her father, Otto Frank, was the only survivor from those hiding in the annex. It was also he who later honoured his daughter’s wishes and had the diary published.

Anne’s book has sold over 30 million copies and has been translated into 67 languages. To bear witness is important, even if it is quietly done. And even more important is to reflect on the world around us, as both fictional Egg in *Prairie Ostrich* and real-life Anne Frank, have done.

“It’s a wonder I haven’t abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart... I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more.”

—Anne Frank

“My name is **Tair Kaminer**, I am 19. A few months ago I ended a year of volunteering with the Israeli Boy and Girl Scouts in the town of Sderot, on the Gaza Strip border. In a few days, I will be going to jail.”

Conscientious objector

“An entire year I volunteered in Sderot, working with children living in a war zone, and it was there that I decided to refuse to serve in the Israeli military. My refusal comes from my will to make a contribution to the society of which I am a part and make this a better place to live, from my commitment to the struggle for peace and equality,” explains Tamir.

Since that initial call up, Tamir has been in prison six times. Israel’s practice is to sentence a conscientious objector to a short period of detention: usually twenty



or twenty-five days. Upon its end, the call up is renewed, and if refused, another period of detention is ordered by the military judge.

The right to refuse military service for reasons of conscience is inherent in the notion of freedom of thought, conscience and religion as laid down in a number of international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

“There were those who worried about my personal future in a state in which military service holds so much importance. They suggested I serve regardless of my opinions, or at least not refuse publically. But through all the difficulties and worries, I chose to refuse publically. This state, this country, this society, are too important to me to agree to be silent. I was not raised to care only for myself, my life until now has been about giving and social responsibility.”

Remembering Naser al-Raas

Naser al-Raas was a young Canadian detained in Bahrain in March 2011 during a visit to family members. Over the following year, he spent two periods in jail, was tortured and was sentenced in October 2011 to five years in prison for participating in peaceful protests.



“The first time in prison was 31 days that changed my life,” he said. “I was tortured, beaten and kicked. They finally released me because of my health. The second time in prison, I was not tortured—I believe it was because Amnesty members were supporting me. It was because of Amnesty members that I was released.”

Soon after his release, Naser married his fiancée Zainab. He returned to Canada on May 1 with a yearning for justice. In Canada he worked for the rights of countless others while studying for a degree in human rights, and having a son with Zainab.

His experience of being tortured and beaten had severely impacted his health, leading to many hospital visits and treatments. Nevertheless, Naser pushed through this busy schedule while moving around in a motorized wheelchair and requiring a constant link to oxygen to ease his breathing.

Alex Neve, Amnesty International Canada’s Secretary General, has reflected upon Naser’s impact.

“Whenever I was in touch with a request that he come to an Amnesty International event, an invitation to speak at a rally or just to let him know about something

“Whenever I was in touch... to let him know about something happening in the Ottawa human rights community, his response was always, ‘you do not need to ask, just tell me where it is. I’ll always come.’ And he did. He always came.” —**Alex Neve**

happening in the Ottawa human rights community, his response was always, ‘you do not need to ask, just tell me where it is. I’ll always come.’ And he did. He always came.

“That included what is almost certainly the coldest, snowiest demonstration I’ve ever attended. We were trudging through heavy snowfall from Parliament Hill to the Saudi Embassy. I had my head down and collar turned up; and heard my name. And there was Naser, pushing through drifting snow on his wheelchair. My heart soared and the blizzard suddenly seemed more gentle and the urgency of why we’re out, all the more compelling.”

While Naser sadly passed away on September 20th, 2016 due to the health trauma and weakened heart from his time of imprisonment – his impact has uplifted the lives of many.

“His legacy will be immense, and will live on through determined activism across Canada and around the world.”

TAKE ACTION ON DECEMBER 10TH

Sometimes taking action is as simple as writing a letter. A few words, combined with millions of others writing their few words, has incredible impact.

Every year around December 10, International Human Rights Day, Amnesty supporters send letters on behalf of people they've never met. Our messages help convince government officials to release people imprisoned for expressing their opinion, stop the use of torture, and end other human rights abuses.

Letter writing has always been at the heart of Amnesty International's work, and over 55 years of activism shows us that words have power. Last year we sent over 3.7 million messages from 200 countries – and changed lives!

WRITE FOR RIGHTS

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL



JOIN US THIS YEAR AND WRITE FOR RIGHTS!

- Sign up at www.writeathon.ca!
- Explore the website to learn about the people we're supporting this year, access videos, letter-writing tips, and more.
- Invite friends and family to join you! Many people enjoy organizing parties and events for Write for Rights. We encourage you to register your event for ideas and case updates – registration is on the www.writeathon.ca website.



WRITE FOR RIGHTS #WRITE4RIGHTS ON DECEMBER 10

WRITE FOR RIGHTS ACTION COUNTS: **18879** Worldwide

WRITE A LETTER. CHANGE A LIFE.

What is Write for Rights?

Released April 2016

JOIN US HUMAN RIGHTS DAY, DECEMBER 10, 2016!

PARTICIPATE IN WRITE FOR RIGHTS WITH 7 EASY STEPS!

STEP 1: Sign up online! Whether you're writing on your own, joining an event or hosting your own, let us know. We'll provide support and keep you updated.

STEP 2: Download the cases! Find who we're writing for here.

STEP 3: Get your materials! Download your materials here.

STEP 4: Build momentum! Spread the word about [@writeforrights](#) on social media.

STEP 5: Write your letters! Sit down with a pen and paper on your own or with others.

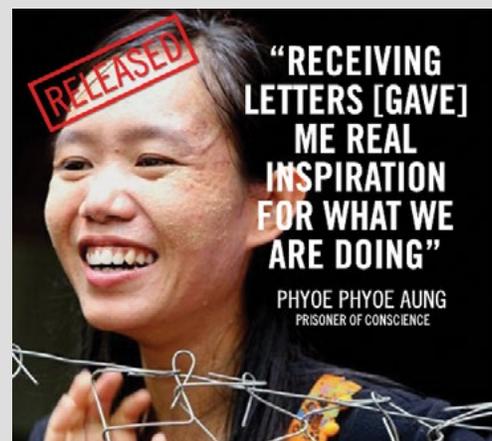
STEP 6: Report back! Add your letter count to the global total.

STEP 7: Celebrate your success! Your words are lighting change.

SIGN UP! **TAKE ACTION NOW**

Already 352 Individuals and groups are participating across Canada!

WARM UP WITH OUR ONLINE ACTIONS!
This year, we're standing with 11 individuals and communities facing human rights violations around the world. Warm up for December 10 by sending emails for these urgent cases!



FURTHER READING

- Learn more about the Festival of Literary Diversity: thefoldcanada.org
- Read more of Naser al-Raas's story on the www.Amnesty.ca Blog <http://bit.ly/2fcKrVK>
- Read Tamir Kaminer's full Conscientious Objector statement: <http://bit.ly/2eGwde7>
- Learn more about Anne Frank: annefrank.org
- Visit *Prairie Ostrich* author Tamai Kobayashi's website: tamaikobayashi.com

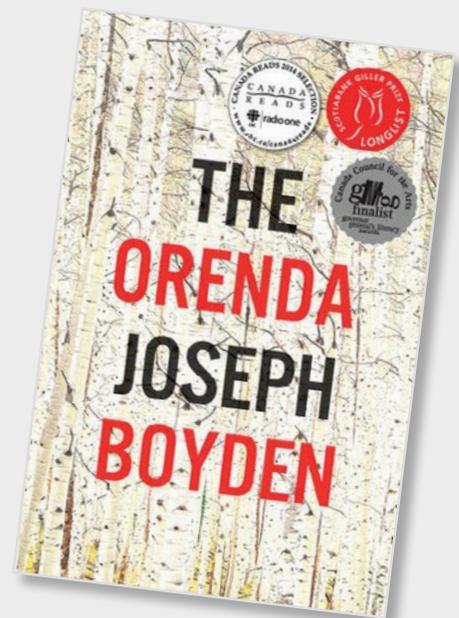
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AMNESTY
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BOOK CLUB
2016 READERS'
CHOICE



COMING UP IN DECEMBER 2016

The Orenda by Joseph Boyden

A visceral portrait of life at a crossroads, *The Orenda* opens with a brutal massacre and the kidnapping of the young Iroquois Snow Falls, a spirited girl with a special gift. Her captor, Bird, is an elder and one of the Huron Nation's great warriors and statesmen. It has been years since the murder of his family and yet they are never far from his mind. In Snow Falls, Bird recognizes the ghost of his lost daughter and sees the girl possesses powerful magic that will be useful to him on the troubled road ahead. Bird's people have battled the Iroquois for as long as he can remember, but both tribes now face a new, more dangerous threat from afar.

The discussion guide will be sent out mid December

In the meanwhile, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at bookclub@amnesty.ca.