

AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL



BOOK CLUB

DISCUSSION  
GUIDE

READ ABOUT  
PRISONERS  
IN SOLITARY  
CONFINEMENT  
PAGES 6-10

EMMA DONOGHUE  
AUTHOR OF SLAMMERKIN

ROOM

A NOVEL



"Potent, darkly beautiful, and revelatory."  
— Michael Cunningham

SEPTEMBER/  
OCTOBER 2016

ROOM  
BY EMMA  
DONOGHUE

RECOMMENDED BY GUEST READER  
COREY REDEKOP

## Innocence and horror

To young Jack, Room is a place of imagination and safety. It is where he and Ma have been forever, and all his friends, Bed, Snake, Car and more live. Room, and all within the cork tiled walls, is real. Everything else is just television.

But for Jack's mother, who is only ever known as 'Ma', Room is a claustrophobic prison in which she has been kept for over seven years – two of them in isolation, with the only exception being her captor who assaults her repeatedly.

We think you'll find *Room* both a delight and a challenge. Emma Donoghue's clever narration has won the hearts of readers worldwide as a bestselling novel. Jack's wonder and playfulness dilutes the confinement, and yet Donoghue does not shy away from realities of a life entrapped. Through her story of a mother and son, we are given a glimpse into the torturous conditions of life in solitary confinement, and the destruction it can wreck upon those within a tiny cell.

This month, explore the novel *Room* with guest author Corey Redekop, and read beyond the book to learn more about the impact of solitary confinement, and why it is considered a form of torture. Furthermore, you will find an action on page 10 of our Amnesty International Book Club discussion guide to help support Mohammad Ali Taheri, who is a prisoner of conscience in Iran and has remained in solitary confinement for over five years.

We think you will really enjoy *Room*.  
Happy reading!

—The Book Club Team



### You can also see the 2015 film, *Room*

*Room* is a 2015 Canadian-Irish independent drama film directed by Lenny Abrahamson and written by Emma Donoghue, based on her novel of the same name. The film stars Brie Larson, Jacob Tremblay, Joan Allen, Sean Bridgers, and William H. Macy.

*Room* received wide acclaim from critics. Larson received the Academy Award for Best Actress, the BAFTA Award, Golden Globe Award, and the Screen Actors Guild Award. *Room* also received three other Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture and Best Director.

### 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.

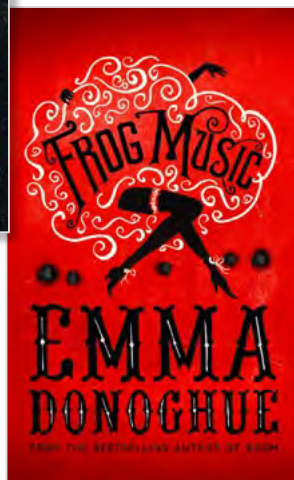
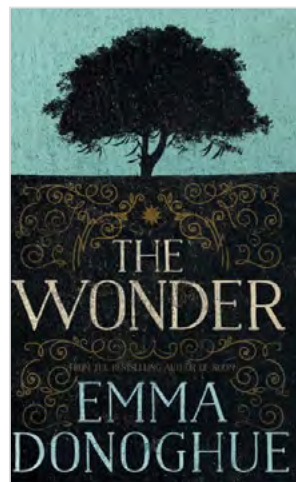


About this month's  
featured author,  
**Emma Donoghue**



Emma Donoghue is an Irish emigrant twice over: she spent eight years in Cambridge, United Kingdom, doing a PhD in eighteenth-century literature before moving to London, Ontario, where she lives with her partner and their two children. She also migrates between genres, writing literary history, biography and stage and radio plays, as well as fairy tales and short stories. She is best known for her novels, which range from the historical to the contemporary. Her international bestseller *Room* was a New York Times Best Book of 2010 and a finalist for the Man Booker, Commonwealth and Orange prizes. *The Lottery's Plus One* is her first novel for young readers.

Find her online at [emmadonoghue.com](http://emmadonoghue.com), on Facebook under Emma Donoghue, and on Twitter @EDonoghueWriter.



About this month's  
guest reader,  
**Corey Redekop**

Corey Redekop's debut novel, *Shelf Monkey*, won Best Popular Fiction Novel at the 2008 Independent Book Publishers Awards and was declared a "Top 40 Novel of the Decade" by CBC Canada Reads. His follow-up novel, *Husk*, was shortlisted for the 2013 ReLit Award and chosen as one of the top books of the year by editors of Amazon.ca. It was later released in a French translation (as *Mister Funk*) and as an audiobook. His short stories have appeared in anthologies such as *The Exile Book of New Canadian Noir*, *Licence Expired: The Unauthorized James Bond*, *Superhero Universe: Tesseract Nineteen*, and *Those Who Make Us: Creature, Myth, and Monster Stories*. Corey abides in Fredericton, New Brunswick, where he is working on his third novel. He can be found online at [www.coreyredekop.ca](http://www.coreyredekop.ca) and on Twitter at @coreyredekop.



## Corey Redekop on *Room*



*Room*, from any angle, shouldn't work as well as it does. Its narrative is laden with monstrous themes of sexual assault, kidnapping, forcible confinement, psychological torture, and others. It's told from a point of view of Jack, a precocious and uncomprehending child. Half of its length is located within a suffocating nightmare. By almost any metric, Emma Donoghue's tale should be a well-nigh excruciating descent into a hellscape of voyeuristic despair, the stuff of lurid melodrama and mawkish Lifetime made-for-television movies.

Suffice to say, I approached my initial reading of it with a fair amount of dread, and I don't mean to offer a backhanded compliment when I say I was utterly relieved I didn't want to slash my wrists immediately after the last page. *Room* is a harrowing journey, oh yes, and terrifying, and claustrophobic, and soul-wrenching. This is as it should be. *Room* is also (let me find my other list) brave, funny, intelligent, rational, and triumphant.

Donoghue – inspired by (amongst many other incidents, sadly) the imprisonment of Elisabeth Fritzl by her father between 1984 and 2008 – begins *Room* on Jack's fifth birthday. Jack, we quickly come to realize, is the offspring of his mother ("Ma") and Old Nick, the man who abducted Ma seven years previously.

Jack has never known any world but the four walls of the shed he and Ma are confined within. Ma has devoted her life to nurturing, educating, and entertaining Jack, for her own sanity as well as his. Consequently, Jack's understanding of the world is severely stunted; other than visits from Old Nick — during which Jack

remains in a wardrobe, innocently counting the squeaks of the bedsprings — there is nothing else to his world but what is contained within *Room*. There is himself, there is Ma, there is Bed, Bath, Blanket, Television, and Plant.

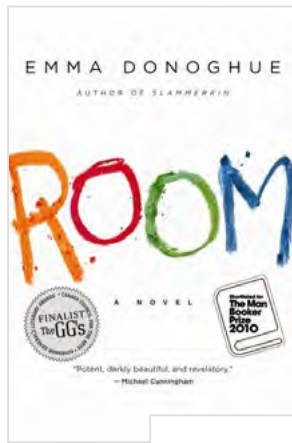
Much of the genius in Donoghue's work lies in her presentation of this horror as mundane, as a day-to-day existence that Jack has no trouble with because he is unaware of any alternative. Conditioned as he is to constant confinement, Jack understandably greets Ma's revelation of a universe beyond the walls with skepticism, confusion, and terror. His eventual exposure to the outside world becomes a bewildering sensory and emotional overload, yet Jack greets this potential chaos with the same innate sense of self his mother helped instill in him to survive the unimaginable.

Donoghue is saying  
we each can choose not  
to be defined by others.  
We can be stronger than  
our tormentors. We can be  
better than our detractors.  
We can survive, and thrive.

In its essence, *Room* is a story of survival, as Jack and Ma are pushed to their limits and beyond. I usually detest phrases such as "triumph of the human spirit," but I'm hard-pressed to arrive at another description that captures what *Room* so brilliantly presents. We have within each of us the capacity to identify ourselves beyond our individual

tragedies, Donoghue is saying: we each can choose not to be defined by others. We can be stronger than our tormentors. We can be better than our detractors. We can survive, and thrive.

—Corey Redekop



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON *ROOM*

## Questions from Corey Redekop

1. Why is *Room* narrated by Jack rather than Ma? Would Ma have made for a better narrator? How would the story have differed?
2. Was Ma's choice in how to raise Jack "correct"? Would another method have been more effective?
3. Jack and Ma's escape should be a happy occasion, yet the world beyond Room is, in many ways, a prison of its own. In what ways does the outside world mirror that of Room?
4. *Room* deals with despicable acts, yet readers flocked to it. Why do stories of confinement hold such a fascination to readers, of both fiction and non-fiction?
5. After the escape, Ma finds herself unwillingly placed into another role, that of the "media-ready" traumatized victim. Was this a fair representation of the media's reaction to stories such as this? What does it say about us that we categorize people in such a fashion?
6. Jack's understanding of the world is severely stunted. After reading *Room*, did you look at the world differently?
7. *Room* ends on an uncertain yet hopeful moment. Was this, in your opinion, realistic? Why or why not? How else could the story have ended?
8. What do you think happens to Jack and Ma after the story closes? Should we even want to know? What does our wanting to know say about us?

## Questions from Amnesty International

1. Did you enjoy the novel? What did you find most engaging and most challenging about this book?
2. Solitary confinement is used throughout the world (see our discussion section), including within Canada. Why is it acceptable punishment within prisons, but considered a form of torment within the novel? Do prisoners in solitary confinement deserve the same compassion that Ma and Jack's story attracts? Why or why not?
3. Jack is changed after his mother explains that Room is a prison, and she was once free. Can realizing the suffering of others change who we are, and how we see our own world?
4. The television interview that Ma gives is a disaster. If you were the reporter, what would you ask her?
5. With difficult news coming to us every day in the media from around the world, Jack's grandmother's book club conversation is easily relatable: "Such horrors, in the news every day, sometimes I feel like staying in bed with the drapes closed."

How do you push back against the horrors and bad news of the day? Where do you find your hopes and ambitions to continue onwards?

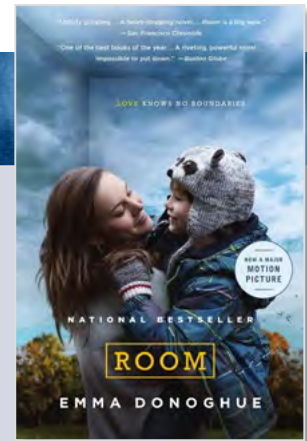
## BACKGROUND

*Ma's voice is getting loud again. "I wish people would stop treating us like we're the only ones who ever lived through something terrible. I've been finding stuff on the Internet you wouldn't believe."*

*"Other cases like yours?"*

*"Yeah, but not just—I mean, of course when I woke up in that shed, I thought nobody'd ever had it as bad as me. But the thing is, slavery's not a new invention."*

*And solitary confinement—did you know, in America we've got more than twenty-five thousand prisoners in isolation cells? Some of them for more than twenty years." (p.236)*



## WHAT IS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT?

Juan E. Méndez, The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, defines solitary confinement as the “physical and social isolation of individuals who are confined to their cells for 22-24 hours a day.” The revised UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) defines solitary confinement as ‘confinement of prisoners for 22 hours or more a day without meaningful human contact’. And Amnesty International uses the terms “solitary confinement” and “isolation” to refer to prisoners who are confined to cells for 22-24 hours a day with minimal contact with other human beings, including guards and prison staff.

Solitary confinement is not the same as incommunicado detention. A prisoner held in solitary confinement in a cell may still have access to lawyers, family and independent medical care, etc.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture has called for all countries to ban solitary confinement except in very exceptional circumstances and for as short a time as possible, with an absolute prohibition in the case of juveniles and people with mental disabilities.

Amnesty believes no prisoner should be confined long-term in conditions of isolation and reduced sensory stimulation, and that conditions of detention should conform to the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and other international human rights standards. Solitary confinement should be completely prohibited for imprisoned children.

## WHAT IS THE IMPACT?

“[Solitary confinement] can amount to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment when used as a punishment, during pre-trial detention, indefinitely or for a prolonged period, for persons with mental disabilities or juveniles.” —**Juan E. Méndez**

- Isolated prisoners in Canada have extremely limited interaction with others, mainly occurring through food slots in their doors with correctional officers, nurses, or psychologists.
- For over 20 years, the Office of the Correctional Investigator has repeatedly reported that solitary confinement is greatly overused. So much so that almost half of all prisoners in the Canadian Penal system have experienced solitary confinement.
- Those in solitary confinement are twice as likely to self-harm and attempt suicide.

—*Annual Report 2014-2015, Conditions of Confinement*, Office of the Correctional Investigator  
<http://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/priorities-priorites/confinement-eng.aspx>



# ENTOMBED

22-24 HOURS A DAY  
IN A CELL 12'3" X 7'5" FEET  
FOR AN AVERAGE OF 8.2 YEARS

## Steven's story

When the thick solid metal door shut behind him, Steven was faced with his worst nightmare. He knew he would be forced to spend the following four years locked in a room only large enough to take two steps to either side. He would spend his every minute surrounded by nothing but three walls, a thin mattress, a concrete block for a table and a small sink.

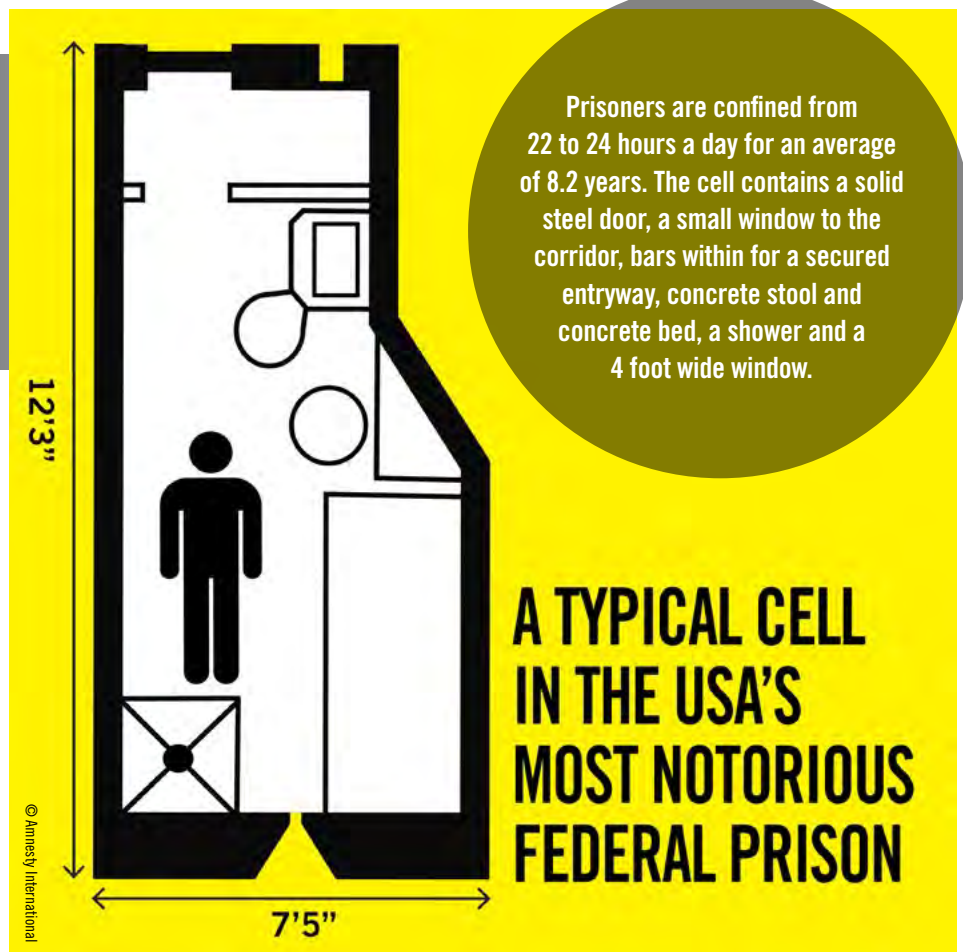
He knew the only human interaction he would have in the next 48 months would be a few words with his guards, who were not allowed to make conversation with him.

Phone calls were banned – the mere fact of picking up a receiver to speak to a relative was considered too dangerous. Hugging another person was also out of the question – any visits from relatives would have to be conducted through a glass screen by phone. But nobody came to visit.

*"I immediately felt despair, confusion. I felt threatened,"* said Steven, who now lives with his wife and seven-year-old son in California.

Steven, who was 25 years old at the time, had been placed in an isolation cell in the Pelican Bay State Prison in California as punishment for having a fight with another inmate and spitting on a prison guard.

And even though isolation was not new to him – he had previously spent four years in solitary confinement in a juvenile facility after he was convicted of carjacking – the



Prisoners are confined from 22 to 24 hours a day for an average of 8.2 years. The cell contains a solid steel door, a small window to the corridor, bars within for a secured entryway, concrete stool and concrete bed, a shower and a 4 foot wide window.

**A TYPICAL CELL  
IN THE USA'S  
MOST NOTORIOUS  
FEDERAL PRISON**

thought of more time there was almost too difficult to bear.

*"When I was put in an isolation cell again, I felt I had some survival skills other people around me didn't have and I knew when I was getting out but it was still terrifying. But many people didn't make it through, they killed themselves or went crazy,"* he said.

One area of wide concern for UN human rights experts and bodies is Canada's extensive use of solitary confinement. The physical and psychological impact of solitary confinement is frequently irreversible and is often so severe that the UN's leading expert on torture, the Special Rapporteur on torture, has called for it to be prohibited against certain groups of individuals and for its use to be restricted and limited more generally. Canada's practice is not even close to the Special Rapporteur's standards.

Read more of Steven's story at <http://www.amnesty.ca/blog/entombed-life-in-the-usa's-cruel-isolation-chambers>.

# Meet Ashley Smith

As discussed in the 2016 Human Rights Agenda for Canada, Ashley Smith's story went public when a video was released during the Coroner's Inquest into the circumstances leading to her death. Ashley was 19 years old when she died at the Grand Valley Institution for Women in October of 2007. Over the previous eight months, she had been transferred across four provinces and eight different prisons.

Not only had she had electric shock devices and pepper spray used against her during that time, she had spent excessive amounts of time in solitary confinement, was put upon suicide watch, and was essentially left to her own devices when exhibiting the behaviours that led her to take her own life.

The Coroner's inquest in the Ashley Smith case in Ontario called for its use to be restricted. That recommendation was rejected by the federal government at the time.

## CANADA'S USE OF SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

Amnesty International welcomes the mandate given to the Minister of Justice to implement the "recommendations from the inquest into the death of Ashley Smith regarding the restriction of the use of solitary confinement." Action to curtail the widespread use of solitary confinement in Canada would address a serious national human rights concern and would demonstrate that the Canadian government is prepared to take action to implement international human rights obligations.







## Albert Woodfox: Why letters matter

Albert Woodfox spent 40 years in solitary confinement, locked up alone in a tiny cell with little natural light for 23 hours a day. He was convicted in 1973 for the murder of a prison guard the year before, while he was serving time for robbery. But Albert says he is an innocent man.

*"After four decades of isolation, Albert Woodfox's release is long overdue and undeniably just."* Jasmine Heiss, Senior Campaigner at Amnesty International USA's Individuals and Risk Campaign.

On Human Rights Day 2015, Amnesty members, Book Club members, and human rights activists were invited to Write for Rights on behalf of prisoner Albert Woodfox. Albert Woodfox was placed in solitary confinement in Louisiana State Penitentiary, known to many as 'Angola'. He endured 23 hours a day, for over forty years, alone in a small cell even though no physical evidence linked him to the crime the state said he committed.

Prior to the settlement that released him, Woodfox's conviction had been overturned three times. On June 8, 2015, U.S. Federal Judge James Brady granted Woodfox unconditional release and barred the state from retrying him. However, Judge Brady's ruling was overturned on appeal.

But he would not be forgotten in that cell. Hundreds of thousands of letters were written on December 10th 2015 during Amnesty's Write for Rights event, many of them calling attention to Woodfox's situation. That following year in 2016, Woodfox was finally released.

Actions can make a difference, and writing letters helps to create change. For Albert Woodfox, it meant freedom after far too long in cruel conditions.

Read more on our Amnesty.ca blog post: **Albert Woodfox finally released**

# TAKE ACTION

## Mohammad Ali Taheri: five years in solitary confinement in Tehran's Evin prison.

Mohammad Ali Taheri is known around the world for his spiritual teachings and promotion of healing through alternative medicine. In 2006 he opened a cultural and educational institute, called Erfan-e Halgheh, in Tehran to develop and disseminate his spiritual beliefs. The offices of the institute were shut down in August 2010.

Mohammad was sentenced to death in July 2015 for his spiritual teachings. The death sentence was quashed in December 2015 but the authorities continue to conduct investigations that could potentially support the charge.

He has spent over five years in solitary confinement in Tehran's Evin prison.

Mohammad Ali Taheri has been on more than 12 hunger strikes in protest of the five years he has been held in solitary confinement and conditions of detention. His health is fragile.

**Mohammad Ali Taheri is a prisoner of conscience, held solely for the peaceful exercise of his rights to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression.**



**Call on Iranian authorities to release him now**

Sign the e-petition at <http://bit.ly/FreeMohammadAliTaheri>

Visit  
**amnesty.ca**  
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Sign up online or by emailing  
**[urgentaction@amnesty.ca](mailto:urgentaction@amnesty.ca)**

## Sources and further reading

- *2016 Human Rights Agenda*, published by Amnesty International
- Visit Solitary Watch [www.solitarywatch.com](http://www.solitarywatch.com)
- *Annual Report 2014-2015, Conditions of Confinement*, Office of the Correctional Investigator <http://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/priorities-priorites/confinement-eng.aspx>
- *Entombed: Life in the USA's cruel isolation chambers* <http://bit.ly/2aVKMvq>

## Tell others about the book club!

Share the Amnesty International Book Club online



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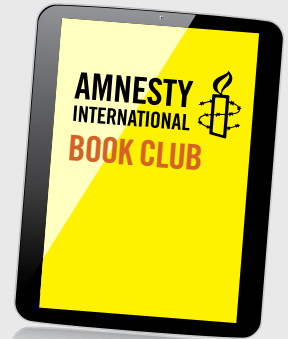
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- And join our discussion group on **Goodreads.com**



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## COMING UP IN NOVEMBER 2016

### *Prairie Ostrich* by Tamai Kobayashi

Recommended by guest reader Jael Richardson

In 1974 Bittercreek, Alberta, eight-year-old Egg Murakami lives a day-to-day existence on the family ostrich farm. Since her brother's death, Egg's mother has curled up inside a bottle and her father has exiled himself to the barn. Egg and big sister Kathy find solace in each other, Kathy reading books to Egg, reinventing them so that the stories end happily—and so that the world does not seem so awful. And Kathy, in love with her best friend, has her own problems.

Kobayashi introduces a fresh perspective to Canadian literature, blending physical, cultural, ancestral, and sexual isolation into an account of one girl's attempt to find her place against schoolyard battles and the mysteries of the adult world.

### The discussion guide will be sent out mid November

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