

Jan's Reading List

observation about Maya Angelou from the New Yorker: [Anais] *Nin and Angelou are both theatrical writers—they use language, often with great aplomb, to describe and glorify a self that is fulfilled only when it is being observed.*

<u>Author:</u>	<u>Book:</u>	<u>Date:</u>
Dennis Lahane	<u>The Given Day</u>	July '09
Elizabeth Strout	<u>Amy and Isabelle</u>	July '09
Jayne Anne Phillips	<u>Lark and Termite</u>	July '09
Abraham Verghese	<u>Cutting for Stone</u>	June '09

Ever since he was our guest in Corpus Christi, I've been a big fan of Abraham Verghese, but I don't think this is his best work. It's a novel about conjoined twin boys who were born in Ethiopia. Their mother died in childbirth and their father, a famous surgeon, abandoned them. The story treats their growing up, their symbiotic relationship, the girl who winds up coming between them. It has lots to say about medical training, here and abroad. There are long medical passages, clearly authoritative and detailed, but my impression was that there were a few too many coincidences in the story arc. I thought the writing was overwrought, especially in the parts about Marion's love for Ganet. And finally, there were reminders throughout the narrative that English is not Abraham's first language. (Erroneous conjugation of sink-sank-sunk; spring-sprang-sprung, etc. I don't understand why the editors didn't catch this.)

Theresa Schwegel	<u>Person of Interest</u>	June '09
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This is a rough-hewn first novel—hard to follow—full of red herrings and odd twists. It's a police novel written by a woman who apparently is married to a policeman, so it has that cinema verité quality, very noir. I didn't like it, can't recommend it. I didn't care about any of the characters. It treats a highly dysfunctional family—an estranged husband and wife, rebellious teenage daughter—but the reader is not invested in their lives. I wouldn't have finished it, I imagine, if I hadn't been listening to it from Audible.

Isabel Gillies	<u>Happens Every Day</u>	June '09
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Reading this book was like helping a friend through a crisis. Gillies is not a writer—she's an actress—and the work has rough patches and odd syntax from time to time, but her voice is endearing and she is a highly sympathetic person. It's a memoir about the dissolution of her marriage when she had two small sons, and about her desperation to stop her husband from leaving. She isn't successful, but the reader pulls for her throughout the narrative. She is kind and fair, and she rejects anger and bitterness. There is a lesson in her story for so many people who are enduring rejection.

Kate Atkinson	<u>When Will There Be Good News?</u>	May '09
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I just love the way this British mystery-writer tells her stories, weaving together disparate lives, building annoying characters with plenty of flaws that the reader nonetheless comes to love, piling incident upon unrelated incident (in this case, train wrecks, lost identities, car accidents, unfortunate marriages) and then braiding events together in a way that seems inevitable but not predictable. She's a lovely writer. This is the third of her books that I have read, and it may be my favorite. The endings are all especially satisfying.

Kathleen Kent

The Heretic's Daughter

May '09

This book concerns the Salem Witch trials of the 17th Century. It was written by a woman in Dallas who is a descendent of the Carrion family, one of the families apparently most victimized by the trials. It's fictional, so it's not easy to know how much of the narrative is historically accurate, but the author seems to have captured the sense of early American prisons, superstition, mob thinking, fear, suspicion, and the odd class system that dominated the small towns of the region and time.

The book group had an unusually lively meeting around this book during which we learned an interesting thing: it's hard to predict what will engender a great discussion. None of us expected to have so much to say about this book, although we were engaged by it, and admired it. But our discussion was wide-ranging and focused, dealing with family dynamics, history, feminism, theology and the ultimate unifying thread of the narrative, which was, in Lydia's words: shifting loyalties. Kay had heard Kathleen Kent speak in Dallas a couple of weeks ago, and she reported that the author is articulate and highly persuasive on the subject of the Salem Witch Trials and life in pre-Revolutionary America. She also said that Kent is planning a second book, this time dealing with the husband, Thomas. Certainly she laid the groundwork for that narrative in this one. We all had questions about Thomas—his mysterious past, his emotional make-up, his motivation in various interactions in this book.

This passage seemed to all of us to encapsulate the meaning of Martha Carrier's life and death (see pp 175-176 for the complete conversation):

"I will speak reason to them. They must listen," she said. "Then these girls and their stories will crumble and fall like so many cards on a tilted table. . . If I do not do this thing, then it may go on and on. . . Would you have me run away? And then what am I? I am only a servant with a boot on my back. And what am I to my children or to you? Can you love me as you have when I abandon what I know to be true? I am not afraid, Thomas."

Steve Toltz

A Fraction of the Whole

April/May '09

I wasn't particularly drawn into this book. It concerns a very dysfunctional father-son relationship, and it could have benefited, in my view, from a strict editing. Toltz is Australian, and I chose the book because it was on the short list for the Booker last year. But its plot is rambling, characters' motivations are vague and incomprehensible, and no character is at all sympathetic. There is a wise-ass sensibility to it, though, that is amusing in places.

Amy Hempel

Reasons to Live

April 2009

Amy was our guest in Corpus Christi recently, so I wanted to read this collection of her short stories. They're extremely spare. Some of them are tight and her economy of language is just right. Others are left perhaps too bare-boned. I'm writing this six weeks or so after reading the collection, and I have to say that I remember only one or two of the stories, so they may not be fully developed enough to "stick" with the reader. Or maybe it's just this reader . . .

**Mary Ann Shaffer and
Annie Barrows**

The Guernsey Literary and
Potato Peel Pie Society

March 2009

My quibbles with this come from the same problem that I have with any epistolary novel. First, it was hard, especially in the beginning, to keep the characters straight. This is a built-in challenge with epistolary novels, because the writer can't use all the tools in the toolbox: no observation, no action, no physical description. And secondly, I thought all the letters have a sameness of tone and syntax and usage. But the book did illuminate a chapter of history about which I knew nothing—and brought to life a wonderful, resilient, strong people.

Curtis Sittenfeld

American Wife

March 2009

This is what I call a fictional autobiography. Written in first-person, it concerns the life of a Wisconsin-born former librarian named Alice Blackwell, an only child with liberal leanings. She marries the son of a wealthy political family who unexpectedly becomes president. Sittenfeld has written that she based the novel on the life of Laura Bush, whom she admires. She is apparently trying to reconcile for herself how such a woman can live, as she puts it in the novel, "a life in opposition to itself." Well-written and engaging, the book nevertheless seems to elicit questions of ethics and legality. Can the author write those things about a person when it's so clear she is writing about a living public person? I wondered. That the "character" was in love with the classmate who was killed in a car accident caused by herself; that she became pregnant by that classmate's brother; that she had an abortion? It's a sympathetic portrayal, but I wonder.

Richard Russo

Bridge of Sighs

Feb. 2009

Russo is a skilled writer, but I've always thought he could use a better editor. This novel, like Russo's breakout novel, Empire Falls, concerns a dying industrial small city in the northeast. The main character is loyal to the town and never leaves, while his best friend goes to Italy to become a painter. Leaving v. staying; change v. stasis; marriage v. solitude; commitment v. none: these are some of the themes in the book, as in that earlier novel. The author is also preoccupied with parent-child relationships, especially that of fathers and sons. It's a good read, the sort of imperfect novel that seems to unfurl in real time, a book one can sink into.

Stieg Larsson

The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo

Feb. 2009

I loved this book and its wounded misfit of a main character. It's a mystery, but its subtexts include the exploitation of women; the social safety net of care for abused/neglected children in Sweden; the relationship between two unlikely lovers; and the kindness of strangers. A page-turner of a book.

Irvin D. Yalom

When Nietzsche Wept

Feb. 2009

This novel by the esteemed professor of psychiatry at Stamford concerns a fictional juncture of the lives of Sigmund Freud, Frederic Nietzsche, and the Viennese physician Josef Breuer at the genesis of talk therapy. Its subtitle is "A Novel of Obsession," and that obsession became tiresome to me, and the writing pedantic, as the book lumbered toward its end.

Aravind Adiga

The White Tiger

Jan. 2009

Winner of the Man Booker award for literature, this epistolary novel treats the issue of class in India. Written as a long letter to the Prime Minister of China, who is coming to India to examine the phenomenon of entrepreneurship in that country, the protagonist traces his own history—brutal, cunning, sometimes murderous—from servant to (as he sees it) vastly successful entrepreneur. A fine book, and one that will stay with me. The book engendered a great discussion in my book group, one highlight of which was Kay's observation that the entire narrative leads toward this one keen psychological insight on page 160:

I put out my hand and wiped the vomit from his lips, and cooed soothing words to him. It squeezed my heart to see him suffer like this—but where my genuine concern for him ended and where my self-interest began, I could not tell: no servant can ever tell what the motives of his heart are. Do we loathe our masters behind a façade of love—or do we love them behind a façade of loathing?

We talked about the caste system in India, about the Indian psyche as demonstrated by the characters in the book, and we compared (from our vast experience) the character of the Chinese as contrasted with that of Indians. "Slumdog Millionaire" was referenced several times, because of the obvious similarities in station of Balram in the book and Jamal in the movie. We got out a

map and marveled the vastness of India, and we pointed out the places mentioned in the book. It was a delight to hear everyone's insights and perspectives.

Markus Zusak

The Book Thief

Dec. '08 – Jan. '09

Everyone in my book group seemed to enjoy this book, with its unusual (occasionally jarring) narrative voice and graphics. One device we especially appreciated was the series of "headlines" in the chapters, alerting the reader to what was coming. We were also struck by the compassionate yet matter-of-fact narrative voice of death. The author had a way of building empathy for various characters, such as Mama and the next-door neighbor, despite their very human failings. We also talked about the narrator's preoccupation with color and with the sky. And of course we all loved Leisel. Book Thief is unique, a genuine original.

Louis de Berniere

The Partisan's Daughter

Dec. 2008

In this book by the French writer de Berniere, a middle-aged man becomes enamored of a girl he picked up on the street. He returns to her again and again. He desires her but suppresses desire and listens avariciously as she recounts the story of her life. They part in the end, as is inevitable. Sad. Poignant. It reminded me a little of *Lolita*.

Geraldine Brooks

March

Nov. 2008

This historical novel concerning the father in *Little Women* is based on the author's father, Amos Bronson Alcott, father of Louisa May Alcott. The father in the book went to the Civil War as a chaplain, was wounded, and came back a broken man. The book won the Pulitzer a couple of years ago; it's one very skilled writer's take on the back-story of Amos Alcott, who himself was an educator and progressive who supported women's right to vote and insisted on admitting a black child to his School of Philosophy in Concord, Mass.

David Wroblewski

The Story of Edgar Sawtelle

Oct. 2008

This is a quiet book made quieter by the fact that the main character, Edgar Sawtelle, can't speak. He's mute for reasons nobody understands. He and his parents have a kennel where they train dogs. The story moves slowly, but the characters are well-drawn. For the person with an avid interest in dogs and dog-training, this book will be manna from heaven. The book is loosely modeled after the story of *Hamlet*—in a way similar to how A Thousand Acres is a modern retelling of King Lear.

Chaim Potok

My Name Is Asher Lev

Sept/Oct 2008

Published in the early 1960s, this book examines the anguish of an artist whose artistic gift separates him from his Orthodox Jewish family. The narrative takes the reader into an exotic, insular world, with a unique language and habits. Experts, including Cindy Rigby, who teaches the book at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and who, as a member of our book group, led our discussion. Such experts, consider this Potok's best work.

Tom Perrotta

The Abstinence Teacher

Sept. 2008

Perrotta's fifth novel features his trademark suburban setting and conversational prose, but the mood in this book is darker than that of Little Children. An agnostic health teacher mentions oral sex in her sex-education classroom instead of following the recommended abstinence-only curriculum. This brings fury from a local evangelical church. Subtext: the main character has an unexpected affair with a church member. I liked the book. The New York Times described Perrotta as a "truth-telling, unshowy chronicler of modern-day America."

- Tom Perrotta** Little Children Sept. 2008
This is my first book by this author. A couple of parents of small children meet at the playground and start an affair. The stay-at-home Dad is a sympathetic character, a law school graduate who can't (or hasn't) passed the Bar. The young mother is confused and undirected and doesn't really love her husband. It's well-trod ground, but the ending is graceful and untidy in a surprising way.
- Maggie O'Farrell** The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox August 2008
What an interesting book—about a woman who is too spirited and independent to be tolerated in 1950s Scotland. Esme Lennox is locked in an Edinburgh insane asylum by her family for being troublesome. Sixty years later, she is released into the care of a great-niece who never knew of her existence. The relationships that develop are so touching and revealing. A quirky but lovely book.
- Jonathon Miles** Dear American Airlines August 2008
Stranded at O'Hare on the way to (and therefore missing) his estranged daughter's wedding, the protagonist of this fine first novel begins a letter to the air carrier, demanding a refund. This is a long rant by a man who starts raving about all the things that are going wrong in his life, blaming American Airlines for every little imperfection in his life. Slightly funny, but wearing, like listening to somebody bitch for hours. The tone becomes more and more grating as the book goes along.
- Kate Atkinson** Behind the Scenes at the Museum August 2008
I think Atkinson is a fine writer, but I liked this book far less than the earlier one I read, called Case Histories. Both feature her apparent themes of sibling relationships, odd marriages, and an undercurrent of mystery in every family.
- Ruth Rendell** The Water Is Lovely August 2008
I originally ordered this book on the basis of a fine review in the New York Times. It's a mystery from the extremely prolific Ruth Rendell, whose dozens of titles are written under her own name as well as the pseudonym Barbara Vine. I found the book beautifully written, engaging, and sad.
- Tim O'Brien** July, July July 2008
Here's a book about a reunion for the class of 1969, and what has become of all the people in the class, and the relationships from then and now. You might say it's a more cynical, sadder version of "The Big Chill."
- Kate Christenton** The Great Man July 2008
This novel about a fictional artist concerns what happens after his death, as his wife, his sister, his long-time mistress, and his children all come to terms with his life and work—and the vacancy his dying has left.
- Kate Atkinson** Case Studies June 2008
I enjoyed this book, at least after I had worked my way through the sad, disparate murders at the beginning. I kept wondering how all these events were connected, but reading further I learned that all were investigated by the same sad-sack, loveable detective. I rarely read mysteries, but this book could get me hooked on the genre.
- Richard Price** Lush Life June 2008

This is such an interesting book, about a character who is flawed and very careless with the people who love her. She marries someone who loves her but whom she doesn't love. She is restless, goes driving around without direction, and eventually leaves him without a backward glance, or without telling him where she's going. Turns out she's pregnant, and she doesn't tell him that, either. Instead, she goes to a home for unwed mothers in a faraway state. She leaves her mother, too, and never tells her where she is. At the home, she marries a kind older man, although she is already married. She lies throughout the book, without remorse, and she is so cold to her husband and daughter. Eventually, she leaves them, too. The reader never understands why she is so completely detached.

Denis Johnson Tree of Smoke Feb/Mar 2008

A sprawling Viet Nam book whose confused narrative and bleak scenes mirror the war itself. It won the Pulitzer, maybe because it was so ambitious—with its woven narrative lines and varied characters. It was hard to follow, and even harder to care about the characters, but something about it kept me reading to the end. It's one of those books I admired, but didn't particularly enjoy.

Dave Eggers What Is the What? February 2008

This is the autobiography of one of the so-called Lost Boys of Sudan. The confusion of those little boys who walked, sometimes naked, across hundreds of miles to safety after their parents had been killed and their villages burned. . . .the confusion about what the war was about in the first place the confusion of trying to adjust to life in the United States. . . all add up to a brilliant book that posits once again the truth that war is hell—and demonstrates once again man's inhumanity to man.

Mary Gaitskill Veronica January 2008

An unlikely friendship between two fundamentally unsympathetic women, one young, one older and ill. I wondered what drew them together and what fueled the friendship. I find Gaitskill very hard to read, very dark, almost altogether detached as a writer.

Claire Messud The Emperor's Children December 2007

This book is so well-written. I love Messud's skill with language. This story reminded me of On Beauty, in that it involved academic types and an inappropriate relationship between an older man and a younger woman. It involves several twenty-somethings trying to find their way in Manhattan after 9-11.

Diane Setterfield The Thirteenth Tale December 2007

When I first started reading this book—a sort of gothic mystery about a biographer writing the story of a famous author—I was pulled right in because the narrator was an avid—not to say maniacal—reader. But as the story progressed, it struck me as overwrought. At the center of the narrative are two sets of separated twins. One is the biographer and the other is the subject of the biography. There are fires and mists and strange characters and twists in plot and it all adds up to, well, a romance novel without the heaving thighs.

Ethan Canin Carry Me Across the Water Nov. 2007

Alice McDermott After This Nov. 2007
Forgettable.

Amy Bloom Away Nov. 2007

A young woman who survived a Russian pogrom in which her family was butchered is the protagonist of Bloom's novel. Its first half is a vivid immigrant tale,

capturing the everyday struggle of living on the Lower East Side. Then the woman sets out for Siberia by way of Alaska to pursue the rumor that her small daughter is still alive. Writing in the Book Review, Louisa Thomas praised Bloom's "brilliantly sketched characters" and the "elegant and surprising moves" of her plot.

Glen David Gold Carter Beats the Devil Oct. 2007

I liked this long novel with its innocent central character and the dastardly Mysterioso and the circus—the stage—the picture of Victorian superstition and life in the late 19th Century. But it was 'way too long with too many red herrings, too many pointless twists in plot, too many characters for my taste. I wouldn't recommend it, though the majority of my book group really liked it.

Marisha Pessl Special Topics in Calamity Physics Sept. 2007

This book will tickle you pink. It has scads of literary allusions, and it's funny and smart. A first novel by a young woman, recalling her peripatetic growing up years with her father.

Zadie Smith On Beauty Aug/Sept. 2007

Smart and full of complex ideas. (I liked it better than White Teeth.) In an author's note at the end of On Beauty, Zadie Smith writes: "My largest structural debt should be obvious to any E.M. Forster fan; suffice it to say he gave me a classy old frame, which I covered with new material as best I could." If it is true that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Forster, perched on a cloud somewhere, should be all puffed up with pride. His disciple has taken Howards End, that marvelous tale of class difference, and upped the ante by adding race, politics, and gender. The end result is a story for the 21st century, told with a perfect ear for everything: gangsta street talk; academic posturing, both British and American; down-home black Floridian straight talk; and sassy, profane kids, both black and white.

Brad Watson The Heaven of Mercury August 2007

This is a quirky, off-beat Southern Gothic novel. Critics compared him to Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, but I think he's his own writer.

Cormac McCarthy The Road August 2007

I figured out with All the Pretty Horses that I can't really read Cormac McCarthy. His lack of conventional punctuation and paragraph breaks, his stripped-down voice, and the unremitting bleakness of his vision have put me off the page. But I CAN listen to him as I did with this title, and he is wonderful on the sentence level, despite his eccentricities. But that darkness underlies everything, and requires overcoming on the part of the reader.

Khalid Hossein A Thousand Splendid Suns July 2007

An evocative and disturbing look behind the veil of an oppressive (and polygamous) Iraqi marriage. One can't help admiring Hossein's skills, and the woman reader will thank her lucky stars she doesn't live in that world. Engaging, character-driven, and providing a detailed picture of a foreign world, this one is almost as good as his earlier book, The Kite Runner. Or maybe it is as good, but without the element of surprise one felt at discovering a new writer in that earlier book.

Sara Gruen Water for Elephants July 2007

Everyone seems to love this book set in a traveling circus during the years after the Great Depression. In the narrative present, the main character is 93 years old, and he is remembering his youth with the circus. Of course there are relationships and complexities in that earlier

insular, tightly-knit world, events of which take place against the backdrop of the circus, before circus animals, and within the inevitable hierarchy of such a world. It's a lovely book. This flashback-and-forth is the same narrative device used in The Madonnas of Leningrad. It's very effective in both books.

Geraldine Brooks Year of Wonders June 2007
An interesting historical novel about the Black Plague of the 1600s. It's based on a small English village that self-quarantined when the plague hit. It treats issues of isolation, superstition, compassion. A slim volume, it pulls you in.

Ward Just The Weather in Berlin May 2007
I don't know what appealed to me about this book, but it was a grey and dismal read about an unhappy couple spending a year doing academic research in Berlin. A little Ingmar Bergman-esque, and not my favorite read of the year.

Debra Dean The Madonnas of Leningrad Apr. 2007
A lovely novel about the Siege of Leningrad during WWII and the docents and maids and charwomen who protected the art in the Hermitage Museum, living in the museum during those long winter months. The main character, Marina, is an old woman now, and she has dementia. Her thoughts move back and forth in time, but mainly remain in the 900 days of siege, when she lived in the museum with the art. Those around her in the present are confused about what she's talking about as she moves into the past, but Dean does a good job of making the timeframe clear to the reader. I liked the book, especially after having visited the Hermitage a couple of years ago.

Stephen Harrigan Challenger Park Mar. 2007

Phillip Roth American Pastoral Feb. 2007

Ann Patchett Truth and Beauty Jan./Feb. 2006
My book group read this, and we all liked the book. However, we didn't much like Lucy, and we didn't believe Ann. Also, while reading the book led us to understand the dynamic between Lucy and Ann fairly clearly, we didn't close the book any better acquainted with either woman herself. And finally we disagreed that this friendship is emblematic of friendships between women. There was too little reciprocity in it. (And for me, the fact that the book was grammatically sloppy diminished its appeal considerably.)

Stephen King Lisey's Story Dec. 2006
I was disappointed in this book. Just as I was beginning to believe King was a smart, fine writer, he puts out this drivel. It concerns a skittish writer who is killed for mysterious reasons. His wife is someone he depends on entirely, and she is then harassed by a sketchy figure who wants the dead writer's papers. The late writer had been abused as a child, and he had this term – bula bula or something – for terrifying things. It was just silly. Didn't add up to much. However, I've read that King is entirely dependent on his wife Tabitha, and this is said to be somewhat autobiographical. I'm thinking it must have followed King's having been hit by a car and almost killed.

Kirhan Desai The Inheritance of Loss Nov-Dec 2006
Brilliant.

Jennifer Haigh Mrs. Kimble Nov-Dec 2006

This novel got lots of good press, and it is well-written and interesting. It's three disparate stories of women, but what they all have in common is this one soulless man named Ken Kimble. They have all been married to him. Each story is told from the woman's point of view, and the reader's assessment of Kimble comes through their respective eyes. He's a liar and an opportunist, a cheater, completely selfish. He ruins lives. But the most striking thing about this book is the abrupt way it ends. I was enraged!

Anna Quindlen Rise and Shine Nov. 2006

I like the way she writes. Wonderful, believable, flawed characters with whom one identifies. This one concerned two sisters who were orphaned as children, and who grew up with a kind aunt and uncle. One is now a successful television personality, the other a social worker. The big sister's marriage blows up and the dynamic between the sisters is revealed as everyone adjusts to changes in their lives and marriages. Everyone does end up intact. I think of it as Laurie Colwin with a dark edge.

Nora Ephron I Feel Bad About My Neck Oct. 2006

At first, I thought this was shallow. I kept thinking Ephron's obsession with her appearance was vain and ungraceful. I sort of thought she was squandering her quite considerable talent. But I've continued to mull over what she wrote, and to be moved by it. I mean, the book is funny and honest.

Anne Tyler The Amateur Marriage Oct. 2006

This was a reread, the story of a post WWII marriage and how it disintegrated. The reader sympathizes with the wife and her unhappiness and the seeming serendipitous nature of the marriage and how it came about. Still, not Tyler's best.

Melissa Bank The Wonder Spot Oct. 2006

I was pondering this morning how this book seemed to be one that almost everyone in the book group read, and everyone enjoyed. However, we all promptly forgot it, even the most germane details. During our discussion we were reminding each other of facts. Only Randal had the good sense to wait to read the book until mere hours before the meeting, so she was fresh and thus able to remind the rest of us (most of whom, for some reason, read this one a good while ago) why we all enjoyed it. Banks is a facile writer who glides through the story. You keep reading, you don't lose interest, you revel in the writing. But there's something about the book that doesn't stick with you. We thought it might be the way the character moves from relationship to relationship, investing considerable psychic energy in each relationship and pulling the reader along as she goes—and then the relationship disappears and dissipates and never threads its way back into the narrative. Someone pointed out that life is like that: we have all kinds of significant encounters with people who leave and are never heard from again. Still, this book seemed sort of amoeba-like to me. I s'pose life is more formless than fiction. On the other hand, the family relationships remained and deepened throughout the story. I really liked those siblings—the exasperation and fondness and familiarity among the three of them.

Julia Glass The Whole World Over Sept. 2006

This book has the same general structure as Three Junes. It, too, is a triptych. It deals with a chef, and her trek to New Mexico to cook for the governor. It's fun to get Glass's take on New Mexico. I liked the book, though not as much as Three Junes.

Anne Tyler Digging to America Sept. 2006

I loved this book about families, fierce mother love, and how hard it is to feel a sense of belonging. This is one of her best.

Luis Alberto Urrea The Devil's Highway Aug. 2006

I absolutely couldn't read this book. It has to do with Mexican illegal immigration, and the subject is compelling, but the writing is dense and hard to read.

Cynthia Ozick Heir to the Glimmering World July 2006

Leif Enger Peace Like a River (reread) June 2006

See notes below.

Karen Olsson Waterloo May 2006

This is a novel about Texas politics. Karen Olsson is a political analyst and non-fiction writer, and she's more adept at that.

Stephen King On Writing April 2006

To my own surprise I was moved and inspired by this book, and I came away from it really wanting to revivify my own fiction-writing. It's a nuts-and-bolts book, and it demystifies the process. Also, King reiterates what we all know, and have always known, and yet a fact that we let slip away—which is that persistence is essential. Send stuff out, circulate it, get it read. I really appreciated this book, and appreciated him in a way I never had—having always dismissed him as a light-weight, genre writer. Although I did admire “The Shawshank Redemption” and “Stand By Me.” He’s smart, the real thing.

Russell Banks The Darling April 2006

Banks is an elegant writer, which I've known for a long time. This book concerns a 1960s radical who goes back to the Africa she left behind after years of marriage to a Liberian official. She had three sons, and when she's sixty, she goes back to see what has become of them. She has a double life, an assumed identity and a police record. My only quibble with the book is that I didn't believe the voice. It was too hard, too angry. I think I would have known the author was a man writing in a woman's voice even if I hadn't known Banks wrote the book.

Samrat Upadaya The Guru of Love April 2006

Set against a backdrop of prodemocracy unrest in contemporary Katmandu, The Guru of Love tells the story of a lowly tutor who ends up in a most irregular domestic ménage. Ramchandra lives in a shabby apartment house with his well-born wife and their children. He doesn't plan on becoming a cad, but when a beautiful young single mother named Malati becomes his student, he's drawn into a relationship with her. A powerful ambivalence marks his romance with the girl: "He had an urge to walk toward Tangal, knock on Malati's door, and tell her not to come to his house anymore, that he could no longer tutor her. Or perhaps crawl into bed next to her." When Ramchandra's wife Goma finds out about the affair, she has a unique solution--she asks Malati and her baby daughter to move into their apartment. Goma sleeps with the children and instructs the adulterous couple to share the master bedroom. She insists, "Why don't you two go inside the bedroom, and I'll bring you some food." This license sits uneasily upon Ramchandra, much as democratic liberation sits uneasily upon the old city of Katmandu. The Guru of Love is ultimately a sweet, sad look at an indestructible family. It also gives us, in Ramchandra's wife Goma, a surprising, cunning, and altogether charming heroine.

We agreed this was an interesting and exotic read, but of course it's impossible to consider the book apart from our Western sensibilities. The language was spare and economical and no character had any sort of interior monologue or obvious self-awareness. Both Malati and Goma remained inscrutable to Ramchandra throughout the book, though perhaps the most interesting character arc in the book was the evolution of Ramchandra's feelings toward Goma. We could only guess at characters' motivation and psychic states from their actions—which, as Randal pointed out, is all anyone has in trying to understand another person, anyway. I mentioned how the press of humanity was a thread throughout the narrative, making me feel

almost crowded as I read. We examined the effect of this lack of privacy on Ramchandra's affair with Malati. Most of us admired the book as a window on another culture, though we remained emotionally detached from the characters.

Elizabeth McCracken

Niagra Falls All Over Again

April 2006

William Trevor

A Bit on the Side

Mar 2006

Actually, I found this collection a little disappointing, and I'm a big Trevor fan. The stories seemed flat, the characters less sympathetic than usual, and the story arc was hard to follow on several of them. I still remember his story "The Piano Tuner's Wife" years after reading it, but these I forgot almost immediately. I think he was a bit off his game in this collection. Or maybe it was just because I was listening to them instead of reading them.

Andrea Levy

Small Island

Mar 2006

*The UK's Whitbread Award tends to honor the favorite much more than other British prizes. Thus 4/5 candidate Andrea Levy claimed the overall prize for **SMALL ISLAND**, making her the first person to win book the Orange and the Whitbread for the same book. **From Publishers Weekly Starred Review:** After winning the Orange Prize and the Whitbread Book of the Year Award, Levy's captivating fourth novel sweeps into a U.S. edition with much-deserved literary fanfare. Set mainly in the British Empire of 1948, this story of emigration, loss and love follows four characters—two Jamaicans and two Britons—as they struggle to find peace in postwar England.*

I was deeply moved by Small Island. The book is so nuanced and complex, with characters given to pride and blind elevation of self above others. The redemption in the book rescued me from the pain of considering such pervasive racism and class bias. It really is a brilliant book, written in an original voice, and with a coherent story arc that satisfies in the end. I can see why the book was nominated for virtually every major literary prize for which it was eligible—and won two of the biggest!

This passage illustrates the power of the narrative. The protagonist, Gilbert, is walking the streets of London, having been turned down for every job for which he applies, having been disrespected and spat upon (literally and figuratively) throughout these weeks he's been looking for work. Then he is approached by a middle-aged British woman, who hands him a sticky cough drop. Nothing more than that: "How long did I stare at that sweet in my hand? Fool that I am, I took a handkerchief from my pocket to wrap it. I had no intention of eating that precious candy. For it was a salvation to me—not for the sugar but for the act of kindness. The human tenderness with which it was given to me. I had become hungry for the good in people. Beholden to any tender heart. All we boys were in this thankless place. When we find it, we keep it. A simple gesture, a friendly word, a touch, a sticky sweet rescued me as sure as if that Englishwoman had pulled me from drowning in the sea."

Peter Carey

My Life As a Fake

Feb 2006

This is the story of a literary hoax that destroys the life of the perpetuator and raises the question of whether the monster he created actually came to life.

Joan London

Gilgamesh

Jan 2006

In this first novel, which takes place from the end of World War I to the 1950's, a young woman in the Australian outback meets a mysterious Armenian man, falls in love and becomes pregnant, and then embarks on a hellish, epic-scale journey to London and on to Armenia in search of him and herself. Last year our reviewer, Francine Prose, found the book "streamlined,

strong and remarkably lovely," and said "reading 'Gilgamesh' is like watching a magician who can do many things rapidly, expertly and all at once.

Gilgamesh made for a really good discussion. Suzanne brought a children's illustrated version of the original work, and that clarified a lot for most of us. Also, at the meeting I hadn't read the very end of the book. When I did, later that night, I found the ending very satisfying. The journey had a circular shape to me, and the whole story came together. Originally I was bothered by all those characters who wandered into and out of the narrative as the story went along, because I couldn't see what their role in the story was. But by the end it didn't matter so much. It struck me that we all have people who move into and out of our lives as we move through the years. Some we don't see again, but they still have their place in our stories.

Maile Meloy

Liars and Saints

Jan 2006

This is a good book; slim, tight, well-written. However, within a month I had completely forgotten the characters and the plot of the book, even though it would seem to have all the elements of gripping plot: journeys, incest, ill-fated love. Somehow the way the author piled it on made it unbelievable, like the story of the harrowing escape that first takes your breath away and eventually comes across as incredible.

Jeffrey Eugenides

Middlesex

Dec 2005

Eugenides also wrote The Virgin Suicides. Middlesex deals with a person who is born a girl, but who gradually comes to believe (s)he is a boy. Eugenides traces that genetic predisposition to hermaphroditism from its beginning on a distant Greek island, all the way through familial intermarriage, to the present. The book opens the question of gender identification up for discussion.

J.R. Moeringer

The Tender Bar

Nov-Dec 05

This is actually a memoir, by a journalist for the L.A. Times. Well-written, a guy's book. It's been getting a lot of press. It treats the question of how a boy manages without a father—and where he looks to find that father energy. This memoir holds that “everyone has a holy place, a refuge, where their heart is purer, their mind clearer, where they feel close to God or love or truth or whatever it is they happen to worship.” For young J.R., that place was a gin mill on Plandome Road where his Uncle Charlie was a bartender and a patron.. The Tender Bar's emotional climax comes after September 11, 2001, when almost fifty souls who lived and loved in Moehringer's home town of Manhasset were killed in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. One was a bartender we've met along the way. Another was one of the author's cousins. Moehringer drove from Denver, where he was based as a correspondent for the Times, to New York to mourn and comfort old friends. Moehringer's lovely evocation of an ordinary place filled with ordinary people gives dignity and meaning to those lost lives, and to his own.

Marina Lewycka

A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian

Nov 2005

A fun read. I bought it because it made the Whitbread short list in the UK. She's a 1st novelist.

Ron McLarty

The Memory of Running

Oct 2005

This book has never actually been published. It is available only as a recorded book. McLarty is a reader for Books-on-Tape and he wasn't able to get his book published. Then Stephen King heard it and presented the idea to BOT that they record it. It's the first recorded book that hasn't first been available in book form.

Siri Hustvedt

What I Loved

Oct 2005

Really intriguing, but erudite and a little meandering. I read this one while I was in Russia and had nightmares, but that coulda been because we kept going through locks and the

whole ship would shudder. Hustvedt is married to Paul Auster. Maybe a husband/wife reading? That would be a first.

I thought the book was brilliantly written even if emotionally draining to read. Was Mark evil, a sociopath, or just a desperately troubled young man? The descriptions of the artwork were intriguing. I kept wishing I could see one of Bill's exhibits. I thought the book was tightly woven at the outset, and unraveled later on in the narrative. There were many unresolved characters and sub-plots, but somehow (for me) that didn't diminish the power of the book. It was messy as life is messy. When asking the fundamental question—what is the book about?—I concluded that it is, at bottom, an examination of what (and whom) the narrator, this one solitary and well-intentioned man, loved during the course of his life.

Alice Sebold The Lovely Bones Aug 2005

After reading this book, I've had a hard time understanding what all the fuss is. Why did this book touch so many people? Is it the idea of heaven, that idea that our deceased loved ones are above somewhere, watching us?

Muriel Spark Memento Mori Aug 2005

Dealing with death, aging, the bonds of friendship, and centering around a small mystery, this book is a tour de force. The language is so confident and sure. And the prank caller, who repeats, "Remember you must die," seems prescient.

Sandra Scofield Occasions of Sin July/Aug

This book is a memoir of the same story Scofield covered in her novel Plain Seeing. I enjoyed this version as much as the novel. In both, Scofield mines her odd, disjointed childhood; her time in Catholic school; her awakening sexuality and the conflicts that emerge from it; and the death of her mother. Having met her, I was surprised at the frankness of the voice and also the vulnerability the book illuminates in its author.

Steve Martin Shopgirl July 2005

Francine Prose A Changed Man July 2005

About a young street thug

Wallace Stegner Crossing to Safety June/July

Louise Erdrich The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse
June 2005

Lorrie Moore Who Will Run the Frog Hospital? June 2005

David Schickler Sweet and Vicious May 2005

(On tape.) Truly one of the worst and most forgettable books I've ever read. I forgot it immediately, and had to search out this précis: Grace McGlone works at a car wash in Wisconsin. She tells herself that when the right man pulls into town, she plans to leave with him, and Henry Dante is the right man. Their passionate bond is immediate, yet they are in grave danger. Henry has stolen a magnificent set of diamonds and is on the run from his gangster boss. But Grace is "trying for heaven", so the priceless ice has to go. Making their way across America, Henry and Grace give the diamonds away, give their bodies to one another, and give themselves little chance to survive the retribution headed their way. Sexy and full of surprises, Sweet and Vicious is a spectacular tale of modern love that no listener will soon forget.

Diane Johnson Persian Nights May 2005

In general, we thought the main character was somewhat less than fully developed, that perhaps the author had in mind to write a novel contrasting the role of women in America during

the 1970s—when life was especially experimental and open—with that of women in an inscrutable and repressive society. That’s a great idea, and it provided fodder for some interesting discussion, but ultimately it didn’t add up (so the book group consensus went) to a fully realized character.

- Annie E Proulx** That Ol’ Ace In the Hole May 2005
A story set in the Panhandle involving a young man trying to find himself who experiences a change of heart. She didn’t get the Panhandle right, though, and in general I guess this book is the typical sophomore effort of a gifted writer. (Though there was another between The Shipping News and this one—also not up to her original promise.)
- Ian McEwan** Saturday April 2005
- Carl Hiaason** Skinny Dip April 2005
I’d been curious about this funny writer from Florida, so I read one of his popular books. This one involved a strong woman looking for love, and had a whiz-bang, fast-moving plot but not much depth.
- Margaret Atwood** The Blind Assassin April 2005
- Khaled Hosseini** The Kite Runner March 2005
Hosseini has written a page-turner about life in Afghanistan and the desire of his main character to learn to forgive himself for having failed his friend. The father in the book is authoritarian, the friend is good and full of grace, and the narrator is flawed but ultimately sympathetic. This book is hard to read because of several scenes of graphic violence.
- Marilyne Robinson** Gilead Feb. 2005
This book is about the religious vocation, about fathers and sons, and about the spiritual life of a deeply committed Christian. It’s generous and profound, and more than any book I’ve ever read—and that is a considerable number—I wish I could write something like this one. Set in the mid-1950s, it is written as a letter from a Congregationalist minister in Kansas to his seven-year-old son, written to the future man the son will become, in an attempt to let him know his father, who will be long dead by the time the letter is finally read. I linger over every page, and I just find myself recommending this book to everyone. This book is without peer. I was thinking last night about when I read Zorba the Greek, at age 26, on a train between Thessalonica, Greece, and Munich, and I had the sense that something had been restored to me through the reading, some life force. That’s how I feel reading this book. It is an inspiration and a comfort, a grace-filled examination of the Christian life.
- Chang Rae Lee** Aloft Jan. 2005
- John Grisham** The Jury Jan. 2005
- Gish Jen** Love Wife Jan. 2005
I couldn’t really grasp this book. The structure was so fragmentary. The author
- Tom Wolfe** I Am Charlotte Simmons Dec 2004
- David Liss** The Coffee Trader Dec 2004
Interesting book. Might be compared to Girl With a Pearl Earring. It’s a historical novel set in 18th century Holland and has to do with the earliest years of coffee trading and how it changed the world. Liss lives in San Antonio. He has been suggested on our Web site, I think.

Larry McMurtry Horseman, Pass By July 2004

This was a re-read, and it touches me as much as it did the first time I read it, probably twenty-five years ago. It is a story of loss of innocence, a story of the movement of history. The end of an era—cattle ranching as it was practiced from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s. It's poignant, touching. I admire this book.

Ian McEwan Atonement July 2004

The book group's insights into Atonement really brought me to a new level of understanding, both theological and (I think) in terms of the author's intent for the book. That notion of shared culpability, and Briony's being the only one who understood her part in the larger sin, must be at the center of the author's vision. For that reason, the ending is not so much trickery as a sort of transcendence of fact. As the narrator mused, what difference did it make whether the two lovers came to a sad and untimely end—or lived happily ever after? Briony's surpassing and life-long desire to change things, if only she could have, provides the pulse of the narrative. Her sorrow, her deep regret meant that she lived the remainder of her life in a kind of private, wretched apology not ameliorated by the fact that she had been only a confused child when the incident took place.

Perhaps readers are to come away from the book reflecting on our own lives, and on the nature of atonement. Can atonement take place without reconciliation? Is propitiation a necessary component of atonement? Can one ever be forgiven, outside God's forgiveness? And most importantly, how does one understand and internalize God's forgiveness. . . . I am left with these questions.

Jonathon Kellerman Therapy July 2004

This book had too many characters and the descriptions and prose were standard and unimaginative—straight out of the "How-to-write" book. Every character was described by height, hair color, and clothes worn. Bad guys were totally bad, totally w/o nuance. They sweated and skulked and whined. Good guys were uninteresting and predictable. This book showed me the difference between literary and genre books—again.

Azar Nafisi Reading Lolita in Tehran June 2004

In our book group discussion, we all found ourselves intrigued by the idea of Reading Lolita in Tehran, but there was a general consensus that the book could have used (1.) tighter editing, and (2.) more narrative cohesion. The fragmentary, diary-like structure of the book made keeping the characters straight hard for several of us. Also, the effect of so many shards of time—all the lives of the class members, all the allusions to the literature—made for a sort of mosaic, we thought, the effect of which was to give us a more or less coherent picture at the end, but also to keep us from identifying closely with any of the characters. It's an interesting book. To me, perhaps the strongest passage is that beginning scene, where the women are all arriving at the narrator's house, and they begin to take off their chadors and veils, and as they do, their personalities emerge like butterflies from a cocoon. Probably Nafisi even used that imagery. . . . In any case, we were reminded of the sheer privilege of being able to meet with whom we please, when we please, to discuss whatever we wish.

Anne Tyler The Amateur Marriage June 2004

Darker than most of her novels, this one explores a bad marriage between two good people, and what happens when it ends.

Robertson Davies The Manticore May 2004

This is about a man who goes to Zurich for Jungian analysis in the sixties, when the school of thinking was new. Brilliantly written, odd, and utterly compelling. At the end, the reader feels as though she has been through analysis herself.

- Richard Russo** Straight Man April 2004
A howler, especially the opening section. Russo maintains a droll, sad-sack voice throughout, and the narrative is truly funny. The back-biting and competition in academic settings is so pervasive. This gets at that dynamic in a funny way.
- Elinor Lipman** The Ladies Man April 2004
Another wonderful Lipman book. Our book group read this after I emailed Elinor and asked her which of her titles we should read. It's about a man who can't commit, and who walks out on a woman. Now they are middle-aged and he comes back to see if he can learn what made him leave.
- Diane Johnson** L'Affaire March 2004
I'm just awed at her ability to tie many concerns, many characters, many plotlines together. I like this better than any of her other books that I've read—w/ the exception of Health and Happiness. Her spunky, earnest, striving female characters—their sexual exploits—the messes they get themselves into. This book concerned the estate of an elderly Englishman who was killed in an avalanche in France, and his progeny from three women, and the respective inheritance laws of France and England. Also, she always examines the American character with a combination of affection and impatience. I assume she's an expatriate.
- T.C. Boyle** Drop City March 2004
A whimsical look at communal life in California during the 60s and 70s. Funny and bizarre, as I remember East Is East was. Boyle is literary voice itself—original and surprising. But in the end the novel doesn't add up to much. One doesn't know or identify with any of the characters, really, and it seems like yesterday's high—forgotten, perceived through a haze.
- Daniel Phillip Mason** The Piano Tuner Feb. 2004
A piano tuner from London is hired to go into deepest Burma to tune the piano of an army doctor. Setting is the late 19th century. A fine, worthwhile first novel, but with a COMPLETELY unsatisfying and in fact infuriating ending. Everything ends w/o resolution of any kind. There was a central question: was the doctor doing good or was he a criminal? The reader never finds out. It made me livid as a reader!
- Franz Kafka** “The Judgment” Feb. 2004
A short story w/o any conventional narrative elements, dense, hard to follow and ultimately baffling. How has it survived in the canon?
- Donna Tartt** Secret History Feb/Mar 2004
This is Tartt's earlier novel, written to great critical acclaim when she was in her twenties. It's about a murder that takes place on a college campus, and the consequences of that murder on the lives of the victim's friends. Her second novel, The Little Friend, was recently published and I wanted to read the first one before attempting the second, which is for children. My thoughts:
- William Maxwell** So Long, See You Tomorrow Feb. 2004
A beautiful, deeply affecting novel. Maxwell lost his own mother in the influenza epidemic of 1918, and that marked him with a grief that lasted throughout his life. In his novels he returns again and again to the idea of a child's loss, and his vulnerability in the face of that loss. Maxwell's characters are easily traced to people from his hometown of Lincoln, Illinois. The book group talked about the relationships in the novel—the look at men's friendships, at the father-son relationship, at the two marriages at the center of the novel. We noted how the hard things in the story—the murder, the affair—take place offstage, so that the reader is left to ponder

the consequences of those actions. Someone suggested the novel was similar to The Optimist's Daughter in its artful use of compression. (I'm going to follow up by reading Maxwell's The Chateau, which is one of the few of his novels that deviates from those preoccupations with loss, memory, and childhood.)

Maxwell repeated the idea that some things, once done, cannot be undone. The novel also points to the idea of the suddenness with which things can change. These two notions were braided throughout the narrative. A person is going along, thinking his/her life is one way, and then something happens and everything is changed. I think the title refers to those days when the narrator and Cletus were playing together, and thinking they would play together again the next day. The narrator bids Cletus goodbye, until tomorrow, and then the murder happens and Cletus is gone, irrevocably. In the same way, the narrator's mother had been suddenly gone after her death. And in those economical, visual passages Maxwell draws of the child after his mother's death, the child is so disoriented; he can't believe this has happened to his family. "So long, see you tomorrow," then, becomes a promise that can't always be kept. It becomes an expression of naïve hope for continuity against the inevitability of loss.

Flannery O'Connor "The River" Jan. 2004

A short story drenched in her themes of sin, salvation, Baptism, and peopled with her good country people. A young boy is taken from his drunk parents by a baby-sitter who takes him to the river to be baptized by an itinerant preacher.

Andre Dubus III The House of Sand and Fog Jan. 2004

A fine, intense book with some major flaws, first of which is its basic premise that two people can be so confused about who owns a house. The law on which the plot hangs was explained to us by Laurie Tice and—at least in Texas—the whole conflict could have been resolved in a hearing. The owner would pay taxes due plus a fee and the house would be returned to him/her. The other problem I had with the book was the relationship between Kathy Nicolo and Lester Burden. It seemed implausible to me, itself known only dimly, as through fog, a love constructed on a foundation of sand.

Laura Weisberger The Devil Wears Prada Jan. 2004

A long whine about the fashion industry, entertaining and revealing, though, and it moves right along. It's about a year in the life of a recent college grad who gets a job as assistant to the woman CEO of Runway, a fashion magazine. It moves apace, but by the time it's over (I'm listening on tape) it will feel like a year has passed. Supposedly based on the life of a real person in the world of NY fashion.

Tracy Chevalier The Virgin Blue Dec. 2003

Less compelling than The Girl With a Pearl Earring, while treating similar themes: art, its composition, its affect on the artist and those around him. This book addresses the issue of religion and the exclusion of women from religious discourse.

Wendell Berry Jayber Crow Nov. 2003

The group loved this, but to me the sentences were too dense and the language and lives folded in on themselves. I didn't finish. I love his poetry, though.

Jhumpa Lahiri The Namesake Nov. 2003

The story of an Indian couple, who married in an arranged marriage, then came to the U.S. so the husband can teach at M.I.T. The wife is from a village in India. It's about her adjustment to this new world. They have two children. The story moves into the point of view of the son, who is smart, and fully integrated into the life of modern America, and it elucidates the

book had an absolutely adorable child at the center, and it was also a book about sexual awakening.

Carol Shields

Unless

May 2003

This was an interesting book, the kind one admires more than enjoys. The chapter titles were all conjunctions, transitions—all connectors. This device added to the fragmentary nature of the narrative. “Unless is the worry word of the English language. It flies like a moth around the ear, you hardly hear it, and yet everything depends on its breathy presence. Unless—that’s the little subjunctive mineral you carry along in your pocket crease. It’s always there, or else not there. . . Unless you’re lucky, unless you’re healthy, fertile, unless you’re loved and fed, unless you’re clear about your sexual direction, unless you’re offered what others are offered, you go down in the darkness, down to despair. Unless provides you with a trapdoor, a tunnel into the light, the reverse side of not enough. Unless keeps you from drowning in the presiding arrangements. . . Unless is a miracle of language and perception. . . it makes us anxious, makes us cunning, Cunning like the wolves that crop up in the most thrilling fairy tales. But it gives us hope.” (pp. 224 - 225)

“On days when I don’t know which foot to put in front of the other, I can type my way toward becoming a conscious being.” (p. 109)

And about that unrelenting interior monologue, Shields writes: “Our sunny daughter teased us with curious notions. Voices talking in her head, she said. All the time. But we understood that once that this meant nothing, only that she had become conscious of the lifelong dialogue that goes on in a person’s head, the longest conversation any of us has. Oh hello, it’s me again. And again. The most interesting conversation we’ll ever know, and the most circular and repetitive and insane. Please, not that woman again! Doesn’t she ever shut up? (This is why I read novels: so I can escape my own unrelenting monologue.)

And her resounding section on housework, and what it means to women. Are women enslaved by their possessions?

Geoff Leavenworth

Isle of Misfortune

April 2003

Oh,

well, what to say. This is based on Geoff’s own experience of being stalked by a stranger in Galveston—a crazy person, assumedly, who randomly targeted Geoff’s whole family. Geoff wrote a fictional (but not very) account of those events that caused his family to abandon Galveston and move to Austin. Interesting, and I do like Geoff and Simone very much. The book was published by TCU press.

Alison Pearson

I Don’t Know How She Does It

April 2003

It was interesting to select this book for the reading group, which is made up of women with a feminist bent. I was surprised by their reactions. People who’re very much un-Texan thought it was hilarious and found all kinds of feminist issues in it, and took the book much more seriously than I did. Also about the voice of the novel: Sarah Bird managed to bring it off. At the beginning the voice seemed so stagey and fake, so broad-brushed and cartoon-like, that I thought it would drive me crazy before the book was over. However, about a fourth of the way through the book I began to get used to it and by the end the voice had won me over. Then I went back and re-read the beginning and it didn’t seem so stagey after all. Weird, eh?

Anna Quindlen

Blessings

March 2003

(on tape)

I loved this book about the voluntary family, the connections among disparate people bound by love of a child. The story concerns a baby left on the doorstep of an elderly rich woman’s house. The child is found by the old woman’s caretaker, a seeming loser of a kid who

rises to great love and cares for the child tenderly. Soon the old woman discovers the child and comes to love her, too. It's a story of loss and redemption, of unlikely alliances.

Graham Greene The End of the Affair March 2003

Jennifer Egan Look At Me Feb/Mar 03

I decided not to finish this book. For one thing I had a galley copy, and there were errors throughout. Also, the narrative was fragmentary and hard to follow. Various characters whose stories were elusive and whose motivations were vague.

Sue Monk Kidd The Secret Life of Bees Feb. 03
(on tape)

I think it was because of the reader that this book, highly recommended by a number of people I respect, sounded like one long whine.

Ann Packer The Dive from Clausen's Pier Feb. 03

I found myself disappointed that Carrie stayed in Wisconsin and didn't return to New York, and I wondered why she made that decision, finally. I felt it all went back to that remark by Mrs. Mayer, "Mr. Mayer and I don't feel you're a reliable person." Maybe that comment made her question her own worth and morality as a person. Plus there was that deep theme of abandonment and fear of abandonment running through the book. Carrie didn't want to be a person who would run out, the way her father had run out.

However, at the end of the book, when she has that conversation with her mother about how it felt to be left (and that "quietness in the face of having been left")--and her mother said she had thought her husband was going to explode just before he left . . . I wondered about that. Was Carrie going eventually to get to the point of "exploding"? After all, she acknowledged that she loved and desired Kilroy. And she acknowledged that she and Mike probably wouldn't have gotten married anyway. So what was the point of sacrificing her own happiness, in the end? Are happiness and morality mutually exclusive? All these questions about the leaver and the left. . . .

Jane Hamilton Disobedience January 2003

I liked this book but thought it went on and on, in a way. The thing is, it's about a young teenage boy who discovers—through reading her e-mail—that his mother is having an affair. I think Hamilton was trying to capture the power a parent has on a child's emerging sexuality—for good and for ill.

Nick Hornby How to Be Good Dec 2002

This book requires thought, even though it's an easy read. Hornby writes with a gleeful, wickedly funny voice about very serious matters: what motivates a person to do the right thing? What does it mean to be good? Can a person be good without being stuffy?

Rohinton Mistry A Fine Balance Oct/Nov 02
(on tape)

What Mistry does with language is mystifying. Syntax is formal and poetic. Is this Indian? I have thought about this book for weeks, the grace and dignity of the poverty-stricken tailors, the futility of their attempts at beating the class system in India. Even the term "untouchable." What does that say about a society, that some of its members should be untouchable and unable to rise above that status? But is it really so different here?

Richard Russo Empire Falls Sept/Oct 2002

- Diane Johnson** Health and Happiness December 1999
Loved this book about the behind-the-scenes life of a hospital. A real page-turner. Johnson's a wonderful writer.
- Arandati Roy** The God of Small Things * December 1999
I just have not been able to get into this book. It drags, is stagey, and doesn't move me. I can't care about the characters. Yet so many have loved it
- Haynes, Melinda** Mother of Pearl November 1999
At first I thought this was a brilliant novel, but after a while the coincidences seemed staged and the narrative overwritten. I liked some of the ideas in the book, though, like the pure woman, and the treatment of black/white race issues. Everybody needs a mother
- Wally Lamb** She's Come Undone September 1999
I read this because Anne Martin recommended it and because Lamb wrote it while a student at Vermont, I'd heard. It's interesting and well-written, but I ran out of patience with the main character because she was so shattered and unable to get hold of her life. And her reason for that eluded me.
- Wolfe, Tom** A Man in Full* Aug.– Sept. '99
This book is a sort of guilty pleasure. So well-written, so technically skillful. Chapter 22, for example, opens gorgeously, pulling reader back to Conrad's p.o.v. The form of the book is a sort of braiding of various stories; one doesn't know at first how the lives are going to intersect, only that they will. Chapter 21 is a conversation between Martha and Peepgas; that's the whole chapter, and it's gripping!
- Barbara Kingsolver** The Poisonwood Bible July – Aug. '99
See my critical essay for an analysis of why I thought this book didn't work. It was very ambitious, and there are some gripping themes in it, but the characters, because they were all written in a first-person narrative, tended to become one-dimensional. This is necessary, of course, because otherwise the reader has trouble distinguishing one I-voice from another.
- McDermott, Alice** Charming Billy* July 1999
- Eudora Welty** The Optimist's Daughter June 1999
I'm reading this at Tom Jenk's behest, hoping to understand something about compression. Welty is so brilliant. I like to think of the scene where the wife and the daughter come into the dying man's room, and how much the reader can know of the women's respective characters simply by noticing the way they're dressed and the way they enter the room. (See my critical essay.)
- Allan Gurganus** Plays Well With Others* May 1999
Too gay. Too much.
- Stephen Dobyns** Church of Dead Girls* April 1999
- Charles Frasier** Cold Mountain fall 1998
The ending disappointed so many people. After all he'd been through . . .
- Jane Hamilton** A Map of the World 1995

Diane Johnson

Le Divorce
Health and Happiness

1999

Also:

Snow Falling On Cedars, David Guterson

The Deep End of the Ocean, Jacqueline Mitchard

Saint Maybe,

Breathing Lessons

Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant

The Accidental Tourist

(plus all her early titles)

Anne Tyler

Mating, Norman Rush

Wellville, T. Coraghessan Boyle

East Is East, T. Coraghessan Boyle

Several books by Josephine Humphries (research titles)

Also, several books by James Wilcox (ditto)

What I remember from childhood:

Grimm's Fairy Tales

Checking it out again and again from the library. Vague memory of walking home from WCTU with it tucked under my arm. If I could figure out what the appeal was, I might understand something of myself as a child.

Green Mansions

Sexual undertones. A girl alone in the forest, coming of age. Verdant, moist environment. Only the vaguest memories of this book. I read it when I was hitting puberty, I think.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. First Semester BIBLIOGRAPHY

Advisor: Sharon Sheehy Stark

Date: June 10, 2000

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Fowler, H. Ramsey and Jane E. Aaron. The Little-Brown Handbook, Fourth Edition.
Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1989.

Gurganus, Allan. Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All. New York: Ivy
Paperbacks, 1990.

Gurganus, Allan. Plays Well With Others. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1999.
 Hamilton, Jane. A Map of the World. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.
 Jin, Ha. Waiting. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.
 Kingsolver, Barbara. Poisonwood Bible. New York: Harper-Collins, 1999.
 Lamott, Anne. Crooked Little Heart. New York: Doubleday, 1997.
 Lott, Bret. Jewel. New York: Pocket Books, 1991.
 Morris, Mary McGarry. A Dangerous Woman. New York: Viking Press, 1991.
 Roy, Arundhati. The God of Small Things. New York: Harper-Collins, 1998.
 Scofield, Sandra. Plain Seeing. New York: Harper Edition, 1998.
 Troyka, Lynn Quitman. Handbook for Writers. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.
 Tyler, Anne. A Patchwork Planet. New York: Knopf, 1998.
 Welty, Eudora. The Optimist's Daughter. New York: Random House, 1969.
 Wolfe, Tom. A Man in Full. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1998.

II. Second Semester B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Advisor: Douglas Glover
 Date: December 15, 2000

Anderson, Sherwood. "The Other Woman," The Little Review, 1920.
 Barthleme, Donald. "A City of Churches," The New Yorker, 1973.
 Coelho, Paulo. The Alchemist. New York: HarperFlamingo, 1993.
 D'Ambrosio, Charles Jr. "The Point," The Best American Short Stories. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.
 Glover, Douglas. "Why I Decide to Kill Myself and Other Jokes," A Guide to Animal Behaviour. Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada: Goose Lane Editions, 1991.
 Glover, Douglas. "Fire Drill," A Guide to Animal Behaviour. Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada: Goose Lane Editions, 1991.
 Gordon, Fran. Paisley Girl. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.
 Mason, Bobbie Ann. "Shiloh," Shiloh and Other Stories. New York: Harper, 1982.
 Miller, Sue. While I Was Gone. New York: Ballantine, 1999.
 Munro, Alice. "Floating Bridge," The New Yorker. July 31, 2000.
 Munro, Alice. Lives of Girls and Women. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971.
 O'Hara, John. "Straight Pool," Points of View: An Anthology of Short Stories. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.
 Parker, Dorothy. "A Telephone Call," Points of View: An Anthology of Short Stories. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.
 Trevor, William. After Rain. New York: Viking Penguin, 1996.
 Verghese, Abraham. The Tennis Partner. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.

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III. Third Semester B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Advisor: Bret Lott
 Date: June 6, 2001

Baldwin, James. "Sonny's Blues," The Harper American Literature. New York: Harper & Row, 1987.
 Bloom, Amy. Love Invents Us. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.
 Humphreys, Josephine. Dreams of Sleep. New York: Penguin, 1984.

Johnson, Diane. Le Divorce. New York: Penguin Books, 1997.
 Lehane, Dennis. Mystic River. New York: William Morrow & Co., 2001.
 Lipman, Elinor. Isabel's Bed. New York: Pocket Books, 1995.
 Lipman, Elinor. The Inn at Lake Devine. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.
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 Lipman, Elinor. Then She Found Me. New York: Pocket Books, 1990.
 McKee, Robert. Story. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997.
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IV. Fourth Semester BIBLIOGRAPHY

Advisor: Francois Camoin

Date: December, 2001

- Amis, Martin. The Information. New York: Vintage, 1996.
(What odd use of language. This book is hard to follow, and Amis has a peculiar habit of intruding into a 3rd-person narrative with a first-person perspective. One has no idea whose that first-person voice is. Still, there was something oddly compelling about this eccentric, sour book. I finished it, anyway. I listened to it on tape.)
 - Chevalier, Tracy. Girl With a Pearl Earring. New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 2001.
(This was a completely enchanting book set in 1664, about the imagined life of a Vermeer model, said to be a maid of the Vermeer family. As one reviewer put it, "This is how it must have been." Loved the book.)
 - Dressler, Mylene. The Deadwood Beetle. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001.
(So dry and un sentimental, so like a beetle. She was wonderful with language, but the story had a glacial pace and the characters were not particularly sympathetic. Still, I liked the book. An odd little number.)
 - Grisham, John. The Painted House. New York: Doubleday, 2001.
(I listened to this one on tape. It's not a lawyer book, believe it or not, and it's really charming. About a poor cotton-farming family in Arkansas, trying to bring in the crop. There are floods, disputes between the "hill people" and migrant Mexican workers who are helping with the harvest...and a little boy trying to make sense of it all. Really nice.)
 - Oates, Joyce Carol. Middle Age, A Romance. Hopewell, New Jersey: Ecco Press, 2001.
This book has engaged me, but it reminds me of the problem with being as prolific as Oates is: the work desperately needs to be edited. It's sloppy. She is redundant and pedantic, moves into "telling, not showing," declines to move the narrative along. She even misuses words, such as substituting "revenge" for "avenge." She'll get on a word and use it repetitively ad nauseum. An example is "vulpine," which she uses like a club to beat a description to death. Sue Miller told me Oates refuses to be edited. Big mistake. She NEEDS it.
 - Bird, Sarah. The Yokota Officers' Club.
What a fun, engaging, well-written, fast-paced book about a military family and the relationship from the past that haunts and is tearing apart the parents' marriage. The relationships among the six siblings are so well-drawn and compelling; the isolation of a military life; the failure to make and keep relationships. This is a wonderful book. The only thing I didn't like—although I understand its necessity in the context—was the military argot, which I couldn't follow and often didn't understand.
- Carr, Caleb. The Angel of Darkness. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1997.

Fox, Paula. Desperate Characters. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970.

Grisham, John. The Painted House. New York: Doubleday, 2001.

Oates, Joyce Carol. Middle Age, A Romance. Hopewell, New Jersey: Ecco Press, 2001.

V. Recollected

VI. Books on Tape

June 1, 2004 Therapy
March 1, 2004 Straight Man
January 24, 2004 The Piano Tuner
January 24, 2004 . L'Affaire
January 24, 2004 The Amateur Marriage
November 14, 2003 The Devil Wears Prada
October 10, 2003 The Namesake
August 11, 2003 The Da Vinci Code
July 7, 2003 Embers
July 7, 2003 Getting Mother's Body
April 1, 2003 Child of My Heart
28-Jul-03 Black and Blue: A Novel
March 22, 2003 I Don't Know How She Does It
January 21, 2003 Blessings
January 21, 2003 The Secret Life of Bees
December 23, 2002 A Fine Balance
September 28, 2002 A Fine Balance
August 20, 2002 Enemy Women
April 30, 2002 Peace Like a River
February 28, 2002 The World Below
January 29, 2002 The Fourth Hand
November 9, 2001 The Angel of Darkness
October 19, 2001 Middle Age: A Romance
September 18, 2001 A Painted House

Caleb Carr