

Agus, David B. *The Book of Animal Secrets: Nature's Lessons for a Long and Happy Life*. New York: Simon, 2023.

At first I felt this book to be a bit contrived, but as I got deeper into it, I realized that the author has a seriousness of intent and purpose. From domesticated canines to “wild” animals, he intends for us to see that we have much to learn about living from our animal friends. A few things he hammers home again and again:

1) Companionship can include animals. 2) Like pigeons, pay attention to patterns; don't take the same route to and from work each day. 3) Keep your cardiovascular system fit. Don't smoke. Sleep in a flat position. Maintain dental hygiene. 4) Eat a diverse diet, “but stay as close to nature as possible.” Like chimps, learn to take some risks; don't be afraid of trial-and-error learning. 5) Teamwork, like ants employ, is always a healthy way to live. These are just a few lessons learned from our wild friends.

Alvarez, Julia. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. New York: Plume, 1992 (1991).

A lovely and memorable book. In a formal sense, Alvarez tells this story in reverse chronological order: Part I portrays 1989-1972; Part II, 1970-1960; and Part III, 1960-1956. In reality, however, she may feel free to flit from this event to that so that all time periods seem of the same era. What the form accomplishes may be that the author begins her saga with when this disenfranchised family from the Dominican Republic must flee to the US, a turbulent period for her country and her family. Then we slowly work our way back in time, to *end* with the García family's halcyon days just prior to the purge: a big house with servants, aunts, uncles and cousins living next door. A life they must sacrifice when they move north, where others make fun of their accents (until they expunge them from their lips, to survive). The day the Dominican police come searching for their father who has stealthily hidden in a secret compartment behind the wall of the master bathroom. Some chapters are told from the third-person, but many are shared by way of first-person through the eyes one of the four titular sisters. Each has her own voice, her own personality. The novel ends with a quiet story in which one sister invades the coal shed where she finds a mother cat and her kittens. The girl steals one of the kittens and names it Schwartz, perhaps after FAO Schwartz toy store in New York, from which the García father has brought his daughters various trinkets to play with. The cat becomes a metaphor, a nightmare the woman continues to have in adulthood: **“There are still times I wake up at three o'clock in the morning and peer into the darkness. At that hour and in that loneliness, I hear her, a black furred thing lurking in the corners of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art” (290)**. Wow, what a shouted whisper of an ending!

Balzac, Honoré. *Country Doctor, The*. Translated by Ellen Marriage with an introduction by Marcel Girard. London: Dent, 1968 (1961).

Episodic tales of a country French doctor who holds many of the same political ideas that the author does. Enjoyable to a point.

Barnes, Julian. *The Sense of an Ending*. New York: Knopf, 2011.

Quite a tour de force for Barnes to squeeze a lifetime into 163 pages! Makes one wonder why most novels couldn't do with a bit of streamlining (though not possible with many narratives, to be sure).

The first third or so of this novel about Tony Webster is set in his youth: his three mates and a prominent girlfriend who dumps him eventually for one of those friends, Adrian. Then Adrian commits suicide. Barnes writes a brilliant transitional scene which moves readers to his life as an adult:

“By now I'd left home, and started work as a trainee in arts administration. Then I met Margaret; we married, and three years later Susie was born. We bought a small house with a large mortgage; I commuted up to London every day. My traineeship turned into a long career. Life went by . . . [A]fter a dozen years Margaret took up with a fellow who ran a restaurant. I didn't much like him—or his food, for that matter—but then I wouldn't, would I? Custody of Susie was shared. Happily, she didn't seem too affected by the breakup; and, as I now realize, I never applied to her my theory of damage” (59).

This transition continues for another page and a half until readers begin Part Two: Tony is now sixty. Tony is bequeathed the late Adrian's diaries by Adrian's mother, but his wife, Veronica, will not release them to Tony. Why? That's what the rest of the novel is about. Happy reading! I know it was for me. Not a disappointment either.

Brecht, Bertolt. *Galileo: A Play*. Translated by Charles Laughton and edited, with an introduction, by Eric Bentley. New York: Grove, 1966 (1940, 1952).

This play about the famous astronomer remains vibrant. Although noted for many discoveries, here Galileo is persecuted for asserting that the sun, not the earth, is the center of our world. To remain alive, he acquiesces to the demands. His world reminds me of ours: all the flatlanders who do not believe the earth is warming. They'll be the very ones crying in their beer when their beach houses are swallowed up by the sea. Not that long from now.

Bronwell, Nancy Brooker. *Lubbock: A Pictorial History*. Virginia Beach: Donning, 1980.

Great photographs, particularly those from the early 20th century. The accompanying text leaves a lot to be desired.

Burnett, Carol. *This Time Together: Laughter and Reflection*. New York: Three Rivers, 2010.

As always, I feel as if CB is speaking directly to me in this memoir that jumps from her college days at UCLA to her third marriage to Brian Miller. And from the time in between she writes of the laughs and laughter she shares with viewers of her TV show, celebrities she knows (and, at times, doesn't know), to the ultimatum she issues one of her co-stars who's insulting her guests, to just about everything. While some of the stories echo accounts in her other books (and an anecdote that Julie Andrews also shares in *her* memoir, about pranking a famous man by the two of them faking an amorous kiss as he gets off a hotel elevator), each story reads fresh, reads like you've never heard it before. Burnett studied journalism in college, and I believe her talents of creating concise yet entertaining writing is always a strength of hers. I only have two more CB books to read and I will have covered them all—still wanting more. Carol Burnett seems to be a rare, rare human being who gives, gives, and gives, and never seems to tire of it—yea, she seems to thrive on it. Maybe why she's lived to be ninety at this writing.

Chee, Alexander. *The Queen of the Night*. Boston: Houghton, 2016.

If there is any performance greater than a tour de force, I don't know what it would be called, but this novel would surely fall under such a category. I've not been this stupefied by a contemporary novel for a long time. And so much to say about it!

This novel begins briefly in America, and it ends softly there. Lilliet (although she deftly goes by many names, as needed) is orphaned in her teens and flees the Midwest for New York City. There she (of course) is taken advantage of by men and for a short time earns money selling herself. But she manages to secure a job with a circus (in part by lying about her abilities) sailing for Europe. Her aim: to connect with her late mother's relatives in Lucerne, Switzerland. In Paris, however, she makes an adequate living but then because of her singular voice becomes a singer: And again a prostitute. Then a lady in waiting. Then she is trained as an opera singer by an expert. She is wooed by a prince, a famous tenor, a young composer. She backtracks at times, vacating the world of opera, because her voice (determined by experts to be a *falcon*, a darker-toned soprano) is fragile. Throughout, one wonders how she remains disease- and pregnancy-free, a thought that crosses her own mind:

I somehow had been spared both marriage and children thus far, mostly as a condition of my class, but not entirely. I had been spared worse, as well—the clap, tuberculosis, smallpox, wasting—until now, I had given it little thought. Your health, when you have it, is invisible to you. I only thought of myself as lucky and that this was my only luck. But was I lucky? Or did I have a spiteful womb?" (336).

This self-reflection occurs more than halfway through the book, and Lilliet proceeds to remain marriage- and child-free (by her own desires, in spite of being in love with the composer). It is a comfortable and fortunate condition for her, and it is the author's way of setting her up to experience an extraordinary freedom for a

woman living in the middle of 19th-century France.

And it must be said that Lilliet is a true performer, not a poseur of some kind:

I studied *Carmen* as if I were in school again. I started a new notebook, like the one I kept for each of the roles in my repertoire. I always began learning my music by copying out the lyrics by hand, and I marked the music above them. My mornings before rehearsal were spent with a pencil and the blank pages of a journal that came with me to the rehearsal, where I made notes, writing down thoughts the director and the conductor gave as well. I translated the libretto in order to understand, as much as possible, what I sang and what, if anything, might come of it” (478).

Whew! And yet, Lilliet knows, as a woman, what her lot in life is:

In this world, some time long ago, far past anyone’s remembering, women as a kind had done something so terrible, so awful, so fantastically cruel that they and their daughters and their daughters’ daughters were forever beyond forgiveness until the end of time” (538).

This thought ties to her very last act in the novel, one I shall not divulge, for it is key to understanding Lilliet and her plight, her ultimate place on earth, as she returns to the US and once again joins the circus (her operatic voice is ruined), Barnum’s circus. She has arrived back where she began what seems like a lifetime ago.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage, 1991 (1984).

I can see why this book has remained a perennial favorite among people of all ages. Cisneros writes a novel comprised of forty-four short vignettes (110 pages total), in which the narrator, a girl named Esperanza, reveals what her life is like on Chicago’s Mango Street (and before that the same city’s streets of Loomis, Keeler, and Paulina). Esperanza’s thinking is typically childlike, flitting from one relative to another, one friend to another, neighborhood mysteries that confound her, if for a short time. All forty-four chapters add up to an impressionistic delight of her Mexican heritage blended with the street-savvy people of a large Midwestern city. And Cisneros accomplishes this with the most delicately lyrical prose ever:

“And no one could yell at you if they saw you out in the dark leaning against a car, leaning against somebody without someone thinking you are bad, without somebody saying it is wrong, without the whole world waiting for you to make a mistake when all you wanted, all you wanted, Sally, was to love and to love and to love and to love, and no one could call that crazy” (83).

Collins, Wilkie. *The Woman in White*. Introduction and Notes by Camille Cauti. New York: Barnes, 2005 (1861).

A gem of the nineteenth century, this Victorian novel is intricately plotted down to the last page. (Consult the Internet for the summary.) I'm glad I read it, and it is yet another I can mark off my Jane Smiley list of top one hundred novels (see her *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel*). But I must say that even for someone who has much time on my hands, I couldn't appreciate Collins's glacial pace in developing complexity. I think we denizens of the 20th and 21st centuries have been corrupted in our ability to stay with something twice as long as many contemporary novels (clocks in at 635 pages). I shall keep trying, though. I shall keep trying.

Conroy, Pat. *The Great Santini: A Novel*. New York: Dial, 2013 (2004, 1976).

So many men of America (of the world) have experienced abusive relationships with their fathers—in one fashion or another. This novel artfully explores one that may be representative. Bull Meecham, WWII veteran, is a crack jet fighter pilot in the 1960s South, often posted far away from home for months on end (and where is home? when the family must move once every year or two). Ben, his son, hates his father: hates him for treating his children like soldiers, hates him for striking him, hates him for verbal abuse. The wife serves as intermediary between the children and Bull, but she can only do so much; all four children suffer in some way. One wonders how the tension, which is high, can grow as you turn the pages, but build it does. Ben, a fine high school basketball player, is challenged during a game one night, to quit taking abuse from an opposing player. If Ben doesn't do as he is told by his father (loudly from the grandstand), Ben will suffer—regardless of the coach's wishes. Seems Ben suffers anyway. When Ben decks the opposing player, breaking his nose and injuring him mightily, Ben is ejected from the game, perhaps never to play again. Pleases his father but neither his coach nor his community. No spoiler here: suffice it to say something tragic happens to the family, and Conroy most beautifully portrays how a son can both hate and love his father and suffer both emotions simultaneously. A tour de force.

Dedman, Bill and Paul Clark Newell, Junior. *Empty Mansions: The Mysterious Life of Huguette Clark and the Spending of a Great American Fortune*. New York: Ballantine, 2013.c

W. A. Grant builds a mining empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, leaving his heirs quite wealthy. The youngest daughter by his second wife, Huguette Clark, makes good use of her inheritance in any number of ways. She schools herself about the things she loves: Japanese art, painting, and more. Though she commits some errors, such as marrying and then having the union annulled in a very short time, she is a prudent woman. She may be plagued, however, with one of the maladies of inherited wealth, which is a certain guilt at receiving so much for having done so little to “earn” it. As a result she seems quite generous with those she loves and trusts, almost to a fault. All someone must do is drop a hint about being short of money for some project or an upcoming bill, and she grabs her checkbook.

With that kind of naivete, she winds up trusting a crook as her money manager. In the end he bilks her out of millions, or attempts to. After Huguette dies at the age of 104, nineteen mostly distant relatives go to court to contest Huguette's will, which leaves much of her money to those who have worked for her for years. But after it is all done, the judge awards most of her fortune to the nineteen relatives, many of whom never even meet the woman or haven't seen her or tried to see her since they were children.

The main thrust of the book, in any case, is that W. A. Grant and his daughter (later) have as many as five large mansions built, and she never, except as a child, ever lives in any of them. She spends most of her adult life in a 5,000-square-foot apartment on Fifth Avenue across from New York's Central Park. Instead of selling those mansions early on, however, she maintains each one of them, whether in Santa Barbara, California, or in the New York City area. Each one is fully staffed for many decades even though no one from the family, and Huguette in particular, ever abides in them. The strangest thing about her living situation is that at some point her health becomes so bad that she must go to the hospital. Once she is there, she rather likes the company and attention she receives every day, so instead of installing a nursing staff back in her Fifth Avenue apartment, she virtually moves into Doctors' Hospital. And there she spends much of her last twenty years of life, thus expanding the motif of empty mansions. In the end, she hasn't lived in any of them. Her story is perhaps a cautionary tale about the hazards of inheriting a large fortune. Is it really yours? And can you ever share enough of it to assuage your guilt that you might not deserve it?

Doeden, Matt. *More Than a Game: Race, Gender, and Politics in Sports*. Minneapolis: Millbrook, 2020.

On behalf of YA readers author Doeden tackles the topics listed in the title. He begins with the story of former NFL player Colin Kaepernick, who ruins his career by taking a knee to protest, in general, how black people are mistreated by police. It sets the tone for the entire book. Doeden is straightforward enough to cite proof that author Jack London is racist when he publicly exhorts white boxer Jeff Jeffries to beat black boxer Jack Johnson, calling the latter the Great White Hope (an affront I was unaware of). Speaking of one of the two black athletes to raise their arms in protest in the 1964 Olympics, Doeden quotes John Carlos: **"I felt my country was traveling at a snail's pace toward something that should be obvious to all people of good will"** (23). The author also tells the story of changes in sports regarding women and trans people. He shares information about the #MeToo movement, yet protects YA readers from salacious details of adult crimes committed against young women. The page and a half devoted to boxer Muhammad Ali is a complete and fair profile that readers can understand. The book is published before the Washington Redskins team finally drops the latter as its mascot and becomes the Commanders. How any sensible adult could ban this book is beyond me. The author bends over backward to be fair and present both "sides" neutrally.

The state of Texas has banned over 900 YA books from public school libraries, and this title is one that appears on the list. I purchased the book, and, having reviewed it above, believe the Lubbock City County Libraries should have it on their shelves. I plan to present this copy to the LCCL libraries in hopes that librarians will catalog it and make it available to readers. If they don't, I will question librarians as to why. In any case, I intend for the book to end up in a place where young people can access it (Little Free Libraries, for one). It is an endeavor I hope more and more adults will take up on behalf of our young readers, who can't protect themselves from the state government's misguided efforts to censor what all children read.

Doerr, Anthony. *All the Light We Cannot See*. New York: Scribner, 2017 (2014).

As evanescent as the title would suggest, this novel takes readers to a world that might as well be on the moon. WWII, between the border of France and Germany, the warring atmosphere creating that lunar landscape where perhaps only the strongest and most willful survive. The story delves into the lives of two young people, a German boy and a French girl. Both radio enthusiasts. Even when the Nazis ban radios, there are people who go to great lengths to hold onto theirs, at all costs, and these two, each in different ways, use radios to promote freedom, truth. I love the short chapters, 2½ to 4 pages in length, and how Doerr alternates the young man's life with the young woman's until their stories become one.

Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. Springfield MA: McLouglin, 1828 (1719).

Finally, I can say I read it!

Delbanco, Andrew. *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*. With a new afterword by the author. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014 (2012).

Little seems to have changed in higher education since this book was published eleven years ago. Harvard may now cease considering legacy admissions; that may be all. Oh, and the Supreme Court recently struck down the concept of Affirmative Action—causing most thoughtful admissions departments to reconsider their policies. The “college” experience (four thousand in number) really only covers a small percentage of those who receive a secondary education. The majority attend a combination of community colleges or large research universities where the faculty are too busy really to teach and/or mentor undergraduates. And, as Delbanco claims in his preface to this edition, **“College in America costs too much and students learn too little” (xi)**.

Delbanco spends a chapter each on the following topics: the purpose of college; its origins; how the college has evolved into the university; questions of who gets to go and who pays for it; new developments; and what is to be done about college and university deficiencies. Having visited hundreds of institutions, Delbanco, a professor of literature at Columbia University, outlines what may be wrong but also puts forth a few ideas that might ameliorate the situation. One idea is practiced by a Harvard professor who realized one hour is too long for a lecture—students were

memorizing facts instead of digesting material. Instead, he now lectures for shorter periods, alternated with ten-minute break-out sessions where students work together on assigned problems. Through electronic feedback the professor learns whether he's gotten the idea across. If significant numbers don't understand, he returns to the material to present it again until most students have gotten it (165).

Ultimately, Delbanco asserts, “. . . **faculty must care . . . teaching is its own reward**” (166).

Amen.

Egan, Jennifer. *The Best American Short Stories 2014*. Boston: Houghton, 2014.

Often when I read these “best of” anthologies, I usually am guided by way of the guest editor. Do I like his or her writing and so forth? And I'm often correct. The editors whose writing I like (or adore, as Egan's case), often select the most engrossing stories. Each narrative—whether written by someone noted like Charles Baxter, Ann Beattie, or Lauren Groff, or whether written by lesser knowns (to me anyway) such as Stephen O'Connor or Laura Van Den Berg—is a jewel. Beattie's story about a seventy-one-year-old woman dining out with a college friend when her ex-husband walks through the door is a jewel. Talk about escalation of events! Nicole Cullen's story about a woman “inheriting” a special needs child she never wanted (sired by her ex-husband with another woman, no less) is haunting, and is freighted with so much detail it could be a compressed novel. David Gates's story seems to be about doing the unspeakable (euthanasia), but could one actually get away with it (making it murder, perhaps)? Riveting. And all of the stories are in one way or another of this riveting quality, thanks again, to Jennifer Egan's light yet selective editorial touch. From her Foreword, Egan says: **“I don't think about short stories any differently than I do about novels or novellas or even memoirs. But the smaller scale of a story is important; the distillation must be even more extreme in order to succeed. It also must be purer; there is almost no room for mistakes”** (xiv). Amen to that, and one senses in all these stories there is not one mistake!

Egan, Jennifer. *The Invisible Circus*. New York: Random, 2007 (1995).

I love Jennifer Egan's writing! I've now read four of her seven books, and I can't wait to explore the remaining three. In this, her first novel, Egan creates a nonmystery mystery that keeps one turning the pages (and yet devouring each finely crafted word) until the explosive climax. I say *nonmystery* because the “mystery” is out in the open from the beginning. Younger sister Phoebe continues to mourn loss of a sister eight years her senior, Faith. Age eighteen, in 1978, Phoebe cancels her college acceptance at Cal Berkeley, digs into her savings, and heads for Europe—without notifying her mother (her father has died thirteen years earlier). With her she takes almost twenty postcards that her sister had sent from her own European trip back in 1970. Once she lands in London, Phoebe traces her sister's steps (and the steps of her companion, Wolf) in each location from which a card was sent. Not sure exactly what she's looking for, she continues on through Amsterdam, where she's duped out of a bit of money, dopers pretending to have known her

sister. In Munich, she's in the process of looking up one person but runs into the infamous Wolf, her sister's former boyfriend, now thirty, working as a German-English translator (where would the novel form be without the element of coincidence?). Phoebe informs him that she is headed to Italy to locate the site where Faith died. Wolf then, in a big-brotherly manner, insists on accompanying her. This puzzles his fiancée, but he is adamant. One might think that this will be a benign sort of trip in which Phoebe finds out nothing, but that would be to discredit the author. But no spoiler here. The climax, staged in Corniglia, an isolated seaside village, is not to be missed. A great first novel, quite on par with Egan's other novels.

Egan, Jennifer. *Manhattan Beach*. New York: Scribner, 2017.

From the Acknowledgements section of this novel, one may deduce that Egan took up to a decade to produce it. It is a historical novel of epic proportions set during WW II, with so much to research, right? A young woman who works at a dull job measuring manufactured parts to make sure their sizes are correct. This woman named Anna is bored; rides a bike during her forty-five-minute lunch rather than choke down a sandwich from home with the *marrieds*, women who belittle her ambitions. She establishes a rapport with her supervisor, however, and with his help, goes on to become a diver, the first woman in New York to don a 250-pound diving suit and repair the skins of warships. Egan's research makes her underwater scenes some of the most realistically invigorating I've ever read.

Meanwhile, Anna maintains a home life: a beautiful mother who is a former performer, a somewhat peripatetic father who deserts the family without explanation, and a sister disabled with an unnamed affliction (one might deduce the child is stricken with cerebral palsy), but that the disease is unidentified adds to its mystery, makes the child a wondrous, angel-faced enigma, whom Anna misses achingly when her sister dies. As the father has already disappeared from the scene, her mother moves to her childhood home in Minnesota, leaving Anna the family apartment to herself.

A third strand of the novel concerns itself with Anna's father who crosses paths with a man from the underbelly of New York. Yet these men both maintain at least a superficial appearance of respectability, until the dirty business of doing illegal acts finally destroys them both. To avoid spoilers, suffice it to say that each man winds up having a profound effect on Anna's life. A father who leaves to service the war effort with the merchant marines. And the other man, the mystery man little Anna meets in the very first scene of the novel, well, his role is profound, too.

The conclusion of the novel, rather than serving as the denouement (neatly tying up loose ends like an Agatha Christie mystery), acts more like a coda (featuring extensions or elaborations of earlier themes) you might note at the end of a musical composition. It serves more as the logical culmination to the crazed life a young woman lives in the 1940s, at the height of a war altering life worldwide. To me, *Manhattan Beach* should also be a Pulitzer Prize-winner, like Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (superbly noted for its nonlinear spectacularism). But what do I

know. I'm merely a faithful reader of Egan's work, madly in love with her intelligence, her perfect sentences, her mastery of structure, and most important, her incorruptible and universal understanding of the human condition. Brava!

Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The Marriage Plot*. New York: Farrar, 2011.

I loved the author's book, *Middlesex*, but this novel seems to lack movement. I saw little growth in the three main characters: Madeline, Mitchell, and Leonard. At the end, in this love triangle, Madeline is still no closer to deciding what she wants in life. Perhaps that is all right; she is just out of college, just like the other two. The young man who falls in love with her, Mitchell, is a fellow college student and her best friend since childhood, but when she rejects him to marry Leonard, another student, he takes a protracted world trip with his best male friend. And when Mitchell returns, he finds Madeleine in a mess because she has married Leonard (against Mitchell's advice) who is diagnosed bipolar, and he has freed Madeleine to divorce him after his major meltdown. Mitchell then lives with Madeleine and her family (they love him) while she recovers. The two even have sex, a meh experience for both of them. The marriage plot, alluding to the title, turns out to be a reference to an academic essay Madeleine has written, finally published by an obscure journal within the last pages of this novel. Leonard has gone to live in the Oregonian woods with a buddy. Hm. Even if "sad," it seems the novel could have a more satisfying end. Just me, I guess.

Fitzgerald, Daniel G. *Faded Dreams: More Ghost Towns of Kansas*. Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1994.

This book no doubt creates a rich resource for those searching for specific information regarding ghost towns located in one of the 105 Kansas counties. I, myself, found Fitzgerald's first book (*Ghost Towns of Kansas, Volume I*) helpful when I became curious about the former town of Runnymede, where, in 1924, my maternal grandfather established a grocery store—only to fail a year later because the automobile allowed people to travel to other towns for their needs. However, by reading about these over one hundred ghost towns, one begins to sense a mosaic of the state's checkered history, as well. How, for example, some nineteenth-century Kansans were pro-slavery and others were freestaters, in favor of abolition, that people murdered others with regard to the issue. One state historian establishes that from its inception Kansas garnered over 6,000 town "start-ups," and that if they all had flourished (theoretically) one could not now drive twelve miles in any direction without encountering another town.

Of course, reality has turned out being very different. Vast acreages of agricultural land and prairies have swallowed up those former towns—leaving only crumbling foundations or memorial plaques found on what is now private property. Any number of events or trends contributed to the failure of these ghost towns. Even grand entrepreneurial efforts failed. Important infrastructure (roads, rivers, and railways) did not materialize. Political decisions made in Topeka or county seats (some of those heartily fought over) ruined yet other towns. Catastrophic weather events played a part in some cases. Some towns just lacked proper leadership from

the beginning. Thus, Fitzgerald paints a fascinating history of primarily nineteenth-century Kansas (although many towns do not emit their last gasp until the 1930s), in which mostly white people from the east and European locations do battle with indigenous people to usurp or purchase lands that are questionably for sale in the first place. And the author does so without favor to either side. Just the facts. In any event, and regardless of motive, the people portrayed here do represent a certain heroic and pioneer spirit attempting literally to create something out of nothing. The text includes fascinating vintage photos, as well.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson. With Letters to Fitzgerald from Gertrude Stein, Edith Wharton, T. S. Eliot, Thomas Wolfe, and John Dos Passos. And essays and Poems by Paul Rosenfeld, Glenway Wescott, John Dos Passos, John Peal Bishop and Edmund Wilson. New York: New Directions, 1956 (1931).

There is much to admire about this collection of essays and varied materials, some written by Fitzgerald and some penned by other contemporaneous literati. The title is derived from the author's essay by the same name, in which he rather portrays his demise as a writer. It is a bit self-flagellating, if not a bit inaccurate. The weakest part of this tome may be "The Notebooks," in which, by category (Anecdotes, Descriptions of Humanity, Karacters, to name a few), Fitzgerald displays journal entry after journal entry. I've seen this done to great effect by the likes of David Sedaris in his journals (which have been carefully edited) and John Cheever's, as well. But here, this section contains around 150 pages of material that should probably have remained private. Some entries are so fragmented as to be nonsensical (except to the author); others seem overwritten and therefore of little value to the reader. In a strange aside, I must say a number of these entries seem to speak to Fitzgerald's preoccupation/fascination with "homosexuals":

"I really loved him, but of course it wore out like a love affair. The fairies have spoiled all that"(99). "Fairies?" Really?

"Fairy who fell for a wax dummy" (155).

"He had once been a pederast and he had perfected a trick of writing about all his affairs as if his boy friends had been girls, thus achieving feminine types of a certain spurious originality" (166). Is "he" Fitzgerald himself?

"When I like men I want to be like them—I want to lose the outer qualities that give me my individuality and be like them. I don't want the man; I want to absorb into myself all the qualities that make him attractive and leave him out. I cling to my own innards. When I like women I want to own them, to dominate them, to have them admire me" (169). Honestly sounds as if the man has an identity problem.

"Fairy can only stand young girls on stage, where they're speaking other people's lines" (201).

"Fairies: Nature's attempt to get rid of soft boys by sterilizing them" (205).

“The two young men could only groan and play sentimental music on the phonograph, but presently they departed; the fire leaped up, day went out behind the window and Forrest had rum in his tea” (214).

“to Gerald and Sara Murphy

Honey—that goes for Sara too...” (282). A nice, jocular greeting in a letter. Ha ha.

As I said, a strange preoccupation this man seems to have with gay men. He can't decide whether he admires them or deplors them, and could he possibly be one himself?

In all, however, I wish I had read this collection while I was teaching *The Great Gatsby* and a few of Fitzgerald's short stories to high school AP students years ago. Doing so might have informed my pedagogy in a superior manner.

Fox, Paula. *Desperate Characters*. With an introduction by Jonathan Franzen. New York: Norton, 1999 (1970).

This story is indeed one of desperation. Set in the late 1960s amid a crumbling New York City (Brooklyn), the middle-aged characters are desperate in different respects. Sophie, married to Otto, an attorney, feeds a feral cat that bites her. Otto's longtime law partner, Charlie, leaves their firm, but he also becomes involved with Sophie unbeknownst to husband Otto. Sophie postpones having her bite checked to see if she might be the victim of rabies. After she and Otto finally trap the cat to have it examined, she and Otto travel to their country place to find that it has been ransacked and vandalized. Perhaps only a bottle of booze has been stolen, but many items, including books, are completely unusable due to the destruction. They consult with the man whom they pay to care for their property in the off season, not getting much satisfaction when he claims he and his son just checked it a few days before. Much about this book is unsettling. People with a comfortable life are no longer comfortable with each other or their lives, yet they are loath to abandon them or do anything to change them. The cat bite seems to stand in for the unseen sore that is festering beneath the surface of their marriage. Unless I've missed something, we never learn the result of Sophie's test, whether she'll have to undergo the twelve rabies shots given to the stomach, one per day for nearly two weeks. Much in the way that we never learn what happens to these desperate people. The way the author must want it. The way many of our lives end up, with more questions posed than answered.

Francis, Mark, and Margery King, eds. *The Warhol Look: Glamor, Style, Fashion*. Pittsburgh: Little, 1997.

If one were to think that Andy Warhol was only a works-on-paper kind of artist, one would be terribly wrong; he delved into literary or journalistic art with publication of his *Interview*. And this tome threaded with essays by the likes of Hilton Als and others, is mostly a photographic record of Warhol's lifelong concern with fashion, style, and glamor—perhaps another art form. He felt he was

ugly, especially after his face was marred by a physical attack, so anything to beautify his world, his life, was important work for him—and this book makes a good case for such an idea.

Gabor, Thomas, and Fred Guttenberg. With a foreword by Steve Kerr. *American Carnage: Shattering the Myths That Fuel Gun Violence*. Coral Gables: Mango, 2023.

This succinct book is a must-read for every person in America. Gabor, a professor in criminology and sociology, and Guttenberg, father of downed Parkland Shooting victim, Jaime, have teamed up to appeal to our better senses about gun violence and gun safety.

First, the authors set the historical record straight. For much of our 247-year history, this country has regulated guns. It has only been during the last two or three decades that organizational leadership (not necessarily their members) of the National Rifle Association (NRA) have sold Americans a phony bill of goods. Instead of concentrating on the formation of state militias only, certain NRA members have glommed onto the Second Amendment to push their gun-toting agenda.

Second, the NRA has failed to take the historical context into consideration (what so-called originalists claim to love to do when speaking of the Constitution), that the amendment was designed to help communities protect themselves collectively, not to promote individual gun ownership.

Third, the authors tackle, by way of eleven chapters, thirty-seven myths that the NRA et. al. have dreamed up through the years. Just a few of them. **Myth 3: *America Has and All-Encompassing Gun Culture***. Nope. Only three in ten Americans personally own a gun. **Myth 6: *The Only Consequences of Gun Violence Are Murders***. Nope. “**Sadly, some victims experience life-altering injuries that have a profound impact on the quality of life. For example, when a person is shot and paralyzed in his twenties, his quality of life will be diminished significantly . . . [w]hen all the above financial costs are taken into account, it has been estimated that the annual cost of gun violence in the US is over \$280 billion” (51).** **Myth 16: *The Training Required of Concealed Weapons Permit Holders Prepares Them for Effective Defensive Gun Use***. Nope, once again. The authors prove that the carrying of guns can lead to escalation of disputes. Gabor, in an earlier book finds “**that ongoing or spontaneous disputes were the most common motives underlying mass shootings” (91).** Moreover, “**since May 2007, concealed carry permit holders have killed more than two thousand people and committed thirty-seven mass shootings, as well as many other crimes” (91).**

Authors Gabor and Guttenberg conclude their book with suggestions for what Americans can do, for we all know it will take an upswelling of such citizenry to join the rest of what the civilized world has already accomplished, and that is to reduce and limit the amount of gun violence. From requiring gun owners to secure guns in their homes to leveraging the corporate world to cease doing business with the gun

industry to voting, the eighty to ninety percent of citizens who want change can achieve it.

Garmus, Bonnie. *Lessons in Chemistry*. New York: Doubleday, 2022.

This novel may be one of the best that's come out in the last ten years. It deserves all the accolades it has received thus far. I could see this as director Greta Gerwig's next film project—another quirky woman's story.

Garmus sets the novel in the 1950s, but the protagonist, Elizabeth Zott, brings to the surface all the sexism and misogyny that professional women face during that era. Zott falls in love with a fellow scientist, Calvin Evans, while they work side-by-side in the same commercial laboratory. With no intention of ever marrying or having children, she finds herself pregnant—just as her beloved lover (with whom she cohabitates) suddenly dies. Though she has only a master's degree, her research is superior to the man in charge of her work and who steals it and claims it as his own.

Zott suffers a great deal: a single, unwed mother at this time period is all but spat upon by everyone in her community. Two saving features of her life: a nosy neighbor, Harriet, who volunteers to be Elizabeth's babysitter and sometimes cook and housekeeper. Zott is also in tune with her dog that she names Six-Thirty. She proceeds to "teach" him nearly a thousand words. Readers get to see what the dog is thinking, as he helps Elizabeth navigate life.

So many wonderful features to this novel, it would be a shame to spoil them all by listing them here. Suffice it to say that Garmus has created a complex novel, yet one that reads simply. She does such an excellent job of guiding readers through the complexity by way of reminders of events that have occurred in the past—without seeming repetitious. Quite a gift. Get the book. Read it. Laugh out loud as I did. Cry during the denouement, as all the pieces, like an Agatha Christie novel, come clattering into place. You won't be sorry.

Gorman, Amanda. *Call Us What We Carry: Poems*. New York: Viking, 2021.

This collection of poetry may be the most innovative one I've ever read—quite fitting for one of our youngest and most distinguished poets. Gorman uses a wide variety of poetic forms. Concrete poetry portrays Melville's whale, and a poem about the Covid Pandemic is a black mask with white print. She devises a series of free forms fitting the subject matter. Yet others are truly novel, for example, in "The Soldiers (or Plummer)," in which her lines representing a young soldier's diary appear as dated diary pages. The poet seems to be telling the broad sweep of African-American history by searching out every appropriate form and by sweeping out every ignored corner of said history. One reading, as with most fine poetry, will not be enough. And I look forward to Gorman's next collection.

Greer, Andrew Sean. *Less Is Lost*. New York: Little, 2022.

My only criticism of Greer's first novel in this series, *Less*, was that readers had to play a guessing game as to whom the narrator was. I felt there were some problems with that mechanism (see my complete profile: <https://www.richardjespers.com/blog/less-is-definitely-more>). Why not just write the narrative in third person? I asked at the time. Less's lover, Freddy Pelu, could not possibly know some of the things Less had experienced. At least, that is what I reasoned.

In this novel, Freddy Pelu is an openly open gay narrator, Less's partner (the one he finally winds up with in the first novel). And yet, his similar narration of this novel sets up different but similarly disturbing questions: 1) Since the two men are once again separated, we don't see them together. Less is on an extended book tour, attempting to scare up extra money, Freddy off somewhere else. 2) Again, Freddy seems to be narrating Less's story about the death of Less's previous lover. Is he actually there to witness all of Less's torments? 3) Why even have a partner if Less is not even going to engage with him, the least of which would be coitus?

Still, as a summer beach read, Greer's mixture of apt literary allusions and familiarity with pop culture, the novel is not disappointing. It kept me reading right to the very end when Less, after crisscrossing the USA—combining literary lectures with personal journey—finally meets up with Freddy (although it is only a good guess on the part of readers). If Greer squeaks out a sequel, I do hope that, even if Freddy narrates this one, too, that readers will experience the partners being *in the same room!*

Hamen, Susan E. *The Indian Removal Act and the Trail of Tears*. Lake Elmo MN: Focus Readers, 2019.

This handsome hardback produced with library binding and slick pages contains a wealth of information in its thirty-two pages. Hamen includes colorful illustrations that help to portray the fate of American Indian tribes in the 1700 and 1800s—the many many times that the government agrees to and then breaks treaties with native tribes who ancestors were present long before Europeans. It is a great primer for young readers and contains a brief bibliography for further reading.

The state of Texas has banned over 900 YA books from public school libraries, and this title is one that appears on the list. I purchased the book, and, having reviewed it above, believe the Lubbock City County Libraries should have it on their shelves. I plan to present this copy to the LCCL libraries in hopes that librarians will catalog it and make it available to readers. If they don't, I will question librarians as to why. In any case, I intend for the book to end up in a place where young people can access it (Little Free Libraries, for one). It is an endeavor I hope more and more adults will take up on behalf of our young readers, who can't protect themselves from the state government's misguided efforts to censor what all children read.

Harris, Duchess. With Tammy Gagne. *Race and the Media in Modern America*. Minneapolis: ABDO, 2021.

The author Harris highlights for Young Adult readers a number of ways in which modern American life continues to minimize or overlook or ridicule race in contemporary life. She divides the book into five sections: **1) Missing from the News 2) Biased storytelling 3) Racial Stereotypes 4) Lack of representation in Media and Entertainment, and 5) Branding in race.** In addition to fortifying her assertions with factual information—for instance, **the fact that 67% of people arrested on criminal charges are white compared to 26% Blacks, yet 37% of the news stories are about Blacks, not whites, whose stories make up only 28% of the news**—she also reveals areas in which conditions have improved. With regard to the Oscars, once light was shed on the lack of diversity there, the situation has been ameliorated somewhat, though Harris asserts there is always room for improvement. A very important point she makes is that 40% of our population is made up of non-white people. They should share more than a token percentage in every aspect of life.

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Kingsolver, Barbara. *Demon Copperhead: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins, 2022.

At first, I feel that the lad's name, Demon Copperhead, seems a bit contrived—perhaps trying too hard to BE David Copperfield—as Kingsolver is forthcoming about her boilerplate use of Dickens's beloved book. But as the pages fly by, his name takes on an earned significance. Eventually Demon Copperhead will become the name of his comic book character—artist Demon has a natural talent that a sensitive teacher nurtures along the way. Kingsolver's novel is about a twenty-first century orphan, one who loses his father before he is born and loses his mother as a child to her drug addictions. Not just any “drugs.” And it is not an easy life, as Demon proclaims.

“Addiction is not for the lazy. The life has no ends of hazards, deadly ambushes lying in wait, and that's just the drugs, not even discussing the people. If I was a fuckhead, I was one that knew how to apply himself . . . I'd only ever lived one way, by devoting myself completely” (426).

Kingsolver also beats the hell out of Purdue Pharmacy in this narrative, how the corporation invades Appalachia and actually targets poor people. Aching people who are injured in mines, aching athletes (like Demon)—anybody in pain. The afflicted line up at a pill mill in their local strip mall where a real doctor prescribes

real Oxycontin (for a price). Then the person may use it all or peddle it (or part of it) in the parking lot. Persons can score Fentanyl, too. The whole ball of druggy wax. Demon loses his live-in girlfriend to drugs. Demon himself gets hooked, as a star (for a short time) high school football player with a painful knee injury. Kingsolver concludes the saga with a proper Dickensian “happy ending,” at least happier than it might have been had he wound up dead, that is.

The novel is a rough read, emotionally. I seldom cry when reading aloud (to my partner in the evenings), but several times, Kingsolver crept up on me, and I found the simplicity of her language and her understanding of humanity uncanny. When Demon is fostered by the coach, Demon offers, to the housekeeper, to do his own laundry, his own cooking.

“She laughed and said not to be putting her out of her job. She said mine was just to be a little boy. Weird. I’d not had that job before” (224). This passage put me flat on the floor. Evocative for adults who’ve given up part or all of their childhood.

If you can withstand all the bad shit that happens to mostly loveable characters (experiencing a sad story vicariously is always easier than doing it for real), the book is quite a rewarding read.

Heim, Scott. *Mysterious Skin: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

Among the best novels I’ve ever read concerning adult male-to-young male molestation. Heim explores the issue inside out, from all angles. The adult, like a hawk (thus, the gay slang, *chickenhawk*), knows its target’s weaknesses and exploits them: the child’s loneliness, his lack of parental guidance, his need for what seems to be love (though it’s only the predator’s skewed view of *love*), the child’s own possible homosexuality one day. But another side of it is the fact that the child may perceive he *loves* this man, as well, in the case of the novel, a baseball coach. One of the coach’s victims is positive the man loves him, all the favors he bestows upon him, other gifts, the apparent affection, even the \$5 bill he tosses at his favored victims, already setting them up to become whores. From the beginning, the protagonist is sure he’s been abducted by aliens, and, in a sense he has. The experience of molestation must feel like an abduction—the child’s brain scrambling to make sense of this baffling situation—makes aliens from outer space seem a lot less threatening than dealing with aliens that seem to arise out of the very ground here on earth.

Hellman, Lillian. *Maybe: A Story*. Boston: Little, 1980.

Quite a story, indeed. In this brief (102 pages) autobiographical piece, Hellman tells the tale of a woman named Sarah Cameron. Does Lillian or does she not see Sarah in various locales? Does Sarah have a husband named Carter Cameron, and they, a son who remains unnamed? Yes, yes, and yes. But even so, Hellman shifts the story to New Orleans to portray two single aunts whom she admires and wishes to emulate for their independent natures. She shifts to New York. She shifts to Italy. But always, the story is about this elusive woman, Sarah. Hellman is gifted in

tying all these seemingly disparate loose ends together into a satisfying read that nevertheless leaves the author, and us, wondering, *Is Sarah Cameron real?*

Hellman, Lillian. *Scoundrel Time*. With an introduction by Garry Wills. Boston: Little, 1976.

Lillian Hellman can do no wrong. This brief but poignant memoir details Hellman's set-to with HUAC in the 1950s. Because of the committee's obsession with Communism at the time, Hellman and her partner, Dashiell Hammett, another prominent writer, are reduced to being paupers because they are unable to sell their wares to Hollywood or any other place after the "questioning" is all over. Hellman details all of this, once again, by way of a graceful wending back and forth from place to place (ah, including Rome) and time to time. Yet, when the book is done, there is only one clear message: Scoundrels (whether members HUAC or Watergate plumbers) will be scoundrels. Rings some bells with regard to our present situation, as well. Could Gen Z please purge us of men (and they are primarily men) like these scoundrels! Our country needs to quit repeating this paranoid pattern of always finding an "enemy" to focus on.

Highsmith, Patricia. *Edith's Diary*. New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1989 (1977).

An interesting *interior* novel. A middle-aged woman's life is plagued with any number of problems, least of which is that her husband divorces her. At the same time, she keeps a diary that reflects a much *happier* version of her life—so much so that by the end, her behavior seems bizarre (at least to her ex-husband and others who think she should see a shrink). As a reader I never see the deterioration, however. I believe she's merely frustrated with all that life has thrown at her.

Irving, John. *The Last Chairlift: A Novel*. New York: Simon, 2022.

I'm a big fan of most of Irving's early and mid-career books, including his nonfiction. I loved reading *Garp*, *Hotel New Hampshire*, and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. I had to begin the latter three times until it finally ensnared me and I couldn't put it down. Perusing *The Last Chairlift*, sadly, is not like that.

I read this book aloud to my partner evenings over a period of three months. I kept waiting for Irving's Dickensian afterburner to kick in at about page 100, that thrust that would propel us to the end. It did not engage, not for me anyway. Almost nine hundred pages seems too long for a contemporary novel, I believe. It might have been better served to come in at four or even five hundred pages. Why?

For one thing, there is too much of a certain kind of repetition. Normally, I like some recapitulation, little wrap-ups of or references to earlier events to remind readers what has come before. However, in this novel, Irving has an annoying habit of attaching endearing monikers like *the little snowshoer* to characters instead of using the character's name (and his practice seems clunky compared to the Russians who do this rather well). Of course, he alternates their usage with their real name at times, but by the time he does, one forgets who the little snowshoer is . . .

or was.

And did someone say ghosts? A few of the characters die along the way (the novel does cover quite a life span), but do they? They keep reappearing as *ghosts*, but Irving doesn't have much of a mechanism for readers to grab onto. We're just supposed to *know* it. Rather than being led to believe this is some kind of flashback, it is really encounters with ghosts we're having. I will accept responsibility for sloppy reading, but I'm not sure it's all my fault. Or are ghosts merely an easy, perhaps sloppy, representation of how the main character misses the people in his life who die?

Finally, Irving has a careerlong fascination with a number of images or motifs: bears or people in bear costumes, an almost homoerotic fascination with wrestling, and also, among others, a perhaps erotic fascination with trans people (and a son who accepts his trans mother, see *The World According to Garp*). This novel is populated with trans people, yet I never get the sense that Irving has a real feel or understanding of them. There is not enough information present on the page for readers to believe he knows what he's talking about: complex physical and psychological transformations, surgical or other medical procedures, the emotional angst that must come with such metamorphoses. And always, I wonder why he avoids other LGBTQIA+ iterations, mostly the G one (except for a lesbian couple who must be the last vestige of vaudeville, appearing nightly in *Two Dykes, One Who Talks*, har har har). Just saying.

It seems that Irving may have wished for this book to be his swan song, and he puts his entire heart and snippets of every motif from his entire oeuvre and mixes them all into a fine pea soup with not a little ham. I don't know about others, but as I finished this go-around with the latest Irving novel, I could only stomach so much of this rich pea soup. And only so much ham.

Johnson, Denis. *Angels: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002 (1977).

I wouldn't have thought of these words, but a blurb located on the back of the book describes the novel as being about *two born losers*. And I believe that is the case, unfortunately. A poor woman with two small children meets a divorced man, and they wind up in Phoenix. In the desert city, after mishaps with drugs, the woman finds herself in rehab, on the path toward a new life. The man and his two brothers, however, make a plan to rob a bank, believing their idea is brilliant. The heist, of course, goes awry, and the man winds up in prison killing someone. The account of his execution may be one of the most realistic and chilling scenes I've ever read in fiction. *Angels* makes a fine title on several levels of irony.

Johnson, George M. *All Boys Aren't Blue: A Memoir-Manifesto*. New York: Farrar, 2020.

All I can say is I wish this YA book had been around when I was a young adult in high school—back in the middle of the last century. Yet it is odd that this man, thirty-seven years my junior, goes through many of the traumas I do in my youth: trying to maintain two psyches, one private and one public; two lives, one inner and one outer. I most love the details of Johnson's college life, in which he joins a fraternity (of long-distinguished African-American lineage), half of whom are also gay, and the other half are OK with his orientation. He limns a very sensitive picture of his first time with another guy, one experience as a top and one as a bottom. The descriptions are real, even erotic, but not in themselves titillating. We also are privileged to read of his loving middle-class family life in New Jersey. This book should be available by way of multiple copies in every high school in America. Sadly, we live in a time when public libraries are being besieged by book burners, I mean, book banners, who serve to remove such tomes from our students' shelves. I plan to buy copies and make sure they're available in my city's libraries. Maybe we all can.

Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. New York: Viking, 1961 (1916).

These fifteen masterful stories leave me breathless, and I hope I don't sound surprised. Sometimes, when one (literally) dusts off a classic, one can be disappointed by a certain staleness. Not so with this collection. Seems as if you're walking the old streets of Dublin—taking in all its smells, its tastes, its music, its spicy people, but especially its speech—as if it were today. I was particularly taken with this characterization found in “A Painful Case”:

“He lived at a little distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances. He had an odd autobiographical habit which led him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate in the past tense. He never gave alms to beggars and walked firmly, carrying a stout hazel” (108). I believe it is often used in training AP teachers.

“Ivy Day in the Committee Room” reads more like a one-act play, mostly dialogue, placing the reader smack in the midst of that early twentieth-century Dublin. And the final story, “The Dead,” has earned, I would say, its properly elevated place in the literary canon. The first part of the story views a family celebrating the winter holidays on a cold but invigorating snowy evening. Much jollity abounds, yet when the protagonist rides home with his wife in a cab (horse-drawn), he is struck by lust for this spouse, yet she herself is cool, aloof. In revealing to her husband a story about a young man she once had loved (and who died), this husband also is struck by how our lives are ruled by *the dead*.

Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian: A Novel*. Translated from the Korean by Deborah Smith. London: Hogarth, 2007.

In Part One, also titled *The Vegetarian*, a citizen of Seoul narrates in first person this story concerning his wife's apparently sudden decision to become a vegetarian. "I had a dream," is all she can say, concerning her choice. He finds her in the middle of the night emptying the fridge and freezer of every piece of meat they own—thus making *her* decision also her husband's. If he eats meat at all, it is when he is out of the house, usually during lunch. The woman's *vegetarianism* turns toward the unhealthy, as she does not replace the protein of meat with plant-based protein but merely snacks on pieces of vegetation here and there. Her extended family becomes unhappy with her conversion, and members do all they can to dissuade her, to no avail.

In Part Two, the point of view shifting to third person, titled *Mongolian Mark*, the woman's brother-in-law, a visual artist, becomes obsessed with the woman, her now slender (and slowly shrinking) body becoming the subject of his work with video. At one point he paints flowers on her skin and films her as a work of art—particularly obsessed with a so-called *Mongolian mark*, a type of birthmark, located just above her ass crack. He extends his work to include a fellow male artist, whom he paints, as well, but his friends refuses to engage in sex with the woman—the brother-in-law's next creation. Finally, the brother-in-law himself paints his body and the two engage in coitus in an evocatively sensual scene.

In *Flaming Trees*, Part Three, the point of view shifts to the woman's sister, wife of the artist. The vegetarian now believes she is so vegetative herself, that she has turned herself into a tree (she stands on her head much of the time). Her family (husband has left the scene) commit her to a mental institution, and there the novel takes an even darker turn—as this woman comes to terms with the violence she experienced as a child. A brief but engrossing read.

Krouse, Erika. *Tell Me Everything: The Story of a Private Investigation*. New York: Flatiron, 2022.

Krouse, a fine novelist and short story writer (I became acquainted with her work in *The New Yorker*), turns to nonfiction in this book. She lives in Colorado where she secures a job as a private investigator for an attorney who is attempting to litigate against the town's *university* (you don't have to comb your memory for long to realize she's talking about the University of Colorado). In her developing career—she informs her boss during her interview that she is *not* a PI—she learns to interview victims of sexual violence at the hands of the university's potential recruits, contemporary football players, and coaching staff (at least by way of their complicity). It is a case that continues for six years until it is "resolved" (you'll have to read the book to see what that means).

Throughout this narrative, Krouse weaves in her own story of sexual abuse. Seems as a child, the man living with her mother, known to readers as X, begins abusing her at age four and continues for a number of years. This abuse colors all her

relationships, of course, with both men and women. At a certain age, she refuses to be in the same room with X, a stance her mother does not approve. In fact, at one point, her mother “disowns” her for a fairly flimsy excuse concerning Krouse’s wedding details. Oh, and into the narrative is also woven her relationship with a sensitive guy, who turns out to be the man she marries. Krouse must learn to live without her biological family (her brother being the only one who deigns to speak to her, usually on the down low), and so she forms a new one with her husband and a number of other close friends.

The case? The university sustains huge losses because of the scandal, and many people at the top are let go, very gingerly, because the university doesn’t need any more litigation or loss of income. For example, the head football coach is fired, but the university must pay out his contract for several million. Erika Krouse continues to work for the attorney, but the cases seem like light-lifting compared to the sexual assault case. She enjoys having acquired the skills she has learned: research, interviewing, counseling (insomuch as she can) to win over informants and witnesses. A very fine book about a horrible subject, one our society has yet to deal with in a uniform fashion. Women and girls deserve NOT to be assaulted in any manner by any male. Period.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Unaccustomed Earth*. New York: Knopf, 2008.

These are eight long stories that are reminiscent of Alice Munro’s long stories in that Lahiri seems to tell an entire lifetime in one. She neither leaves much out, nor does she include too much. Each word, each sentence, fits into each paragraph, each section, to make a complete and satisfying story. Her characters have depth, sometimes taking readers in surprising directions—in the same way that actual human beings can surprise us in our own lives. I tried to read each story in one sitting because quitting before it is done is like leaving a banquet after one or two courses. I admire her work for its craft and its deeply conveyed emotions.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Whereabouts*. Written in Italian and translated by the author. New York: Vintage, 2021.

This one-hundred-fifty-seven-page novel is divided into forty-six titled chapters, all in the form of prepositional phrases indicating, as the title suggests, place. *Whereabouts. On the Sidewalk. On the Balcony. In the Sun. At the Villa. Even Upon Waking.* Waking is a place, after all. Only Lahiri could create so much life with so little. The first-person narrative is told by a female Italian professor of literature living, we assume, not in Rome but a smaller, less satisfying city. She shares, in bits like chocolates from fluted paper containers, her life. After an unsatisfactory relationship with a man (told in flashback), she prefers living alone, prefers being childless, prefers to visit her ailing mother once a week. She wavers only a little between her preferred solitude and connecting with others: her neighbors, her university pupils, favored merchants. It is a hard-won battle, but she seems to win it with dignity and poise. An immensely satisfying read.

Lehman, Elizabeth J. *Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture*. Lawrence: U Press of Kansas, 2011.

Lehman centers her book around five topics: 1) how cinema treats women in the early 1960s; 2) how young women navigate leaving home in the late 1960s; 3) single women in the early 1970s sitcoms; 4) working women in 1970s action series; and last, single women dealing with sexual aggression in 1970s film. All throughout, Lehman draws from 1960s and 1970s films and television shows to explore these topics of popular culture. For example, she draws on character Mary Richards of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to demonstrate how, with careful tinkering by writers and directors, Mary walks a fine line between keeping her sex life on the down low and yet confronting her boss about why she is paid less than the man who has preceded her as producer of the news. But though the author's analysis may seem like a *TV Guide* description at times, she uses television and film to demonstrate how US women transition from the world of their mothers and grandmothers to the mid-century world of marked change for the lives of women. In the latter part, she utilizes a book/film like *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* to explore how women seeking an active sex life messes with the heads of young men raised like their fathers, how such men can turn violent because they're no longer *in charge* of such a negotiation. An interesting read for younger people to see how far (or not) American culture has advanced during the early twenty-first century.

Loe, Nancy E. *Hearst Castle: An Interpretive History of W. R. Hearst's San Simeon Estate*. Aramark. Santa Barbara: Companion Press, 1994.

I first visited Hearst Castle, San Simeon, California, in 1978. The tour was conducted more like an informal swirl through a friend's home. The lighting was poor, and items seemed casually thrown together. The second time I visited the *park*, in 1997, it had been acquired by the state of California and a visit to the new museum was divided into separate tours. My partner and I were so fascinated that we took all four, two in the morning and two in the afternoon. We became so well acquainted with the docent that we later had drinks . . . that is not true . . . I wish. He was a handsome blond man. Anyway, by that time, the entire property had been curated and updated so that it looked more as it would have in its heyday, the 1920s and 1930s.

Loe's book, which I bought on that latter trip, has remained on my shelf until now, but it is no less interesting. The content is as much about the original owner, William Randolph Hearst, newspaper magnate, and his architect partner, the renowned Julia Morgan, as it is about the property itself. In fact, the book seems more about Morgan, an early feminist and a rare woman architect at that time. Hearst may have liked her in part because she was able to create almost every feature he wanted, even if it meant destroying a newly built basement wall to widen his bowling alley to three lanes from two—a whimsy that he scarcely utilized in his lifetime. But he also respected Morgan's opinion and taste, because she was usually correct in her judgment. I still find the idea fascinating that a mere mortal could make his every wish come true (except that wish to live forever). What it must do to one's psyche to get one's way ninety-nine percent of the time.

To some eyes, the castle is a mishmash (or is it now mashup?) of every major historical architectural period and every major culture in the world. To others it represents the hubris of the ultrawealthy. To me it sings of the creativity of two people rich with ideas and nearly unlimited resources. Late in life, Hearst would be forced to sell off certain assets in order to take care of his \$126 million dollar debt. Now that's living! And yet he would still hold onto his Casa Grande, as he so fondly called it, for a bit longer. Nice work if you can get it!

Loe, Nancy E. *Hearst Castle: The Official Pictorial Guide*. Aramark. Santa Barbara: Companion Press, 1991.

This book, the first of Loe's books, I should have read *first*. Much of its text and many of its photos are duplicated in the latter book. I frankly don't see why both of them were published; *Interpretive History* is so much more complete.

McBride, James. *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store*. New York: Riverhead, 2023.

This novel has a well-earned spot on Goodreads.com "Historical Fiction" shortlist for 2023. Early in the twentieth century, in Pottstown, PA, a certain intersectionality occurs between the African-Americans, Jewish-Americans, and the whites of the town, and, as one can imagine, it isn't always pretty. The Jewish and the Blacks do all right—they're both outliers confined to the town's Chicken Hill—but interactions with white citizens are to be guarded, mostly because of past transgressions against the minorities. The titular grocery store is the center of Chicken Hill activity for a long time, until the beautiful but lame woman owner dies. Her husband continues to run it, but it is not the same. There are a number of villains, but the main one, a doctor, gets his in the end. And one of the town's victims, a boy who loses his hearing in a childhood accident, is rescued from an insane asylum and smuggled to South Carolina to live out his life there. McBride has a magnificent story to tell, and he removes himself from it so that just the story remains. All in all, a very satisfying read.

McCabe, Patrick. *Breakfast on Pluto*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.

Saw the movie, loved it, and had to read the book. Only, not so thrilled. The key to appreciating the novel may be in understanding its title. McCabe first references it by way of a *song* the character sings: **"Go anywhere without leaving your chair/and let your thoughts run free/Living within all the dreams you can spin/We'll visit the stars and journey to Mars/Finding our breakfast on Pluto!"** (29). He returns to it later: **"All I can say is, if you weren't whistling Dixie backwards on the far side of Pluto by the time they were finished with you, dearies, then you were made of strong stuff and no mistake—which, sorry to say, Miss Pussy wasn't"** (143-4). And finally: **"I climbed in beside her and hugged her and hugged her and hugged her and sang: 'Up on the moon/We'll all be there soon/Watching the earth down below? We'll visit the stars/And journey to Mars/Finding our breakfast on Pluto' and then crying 'Charlie! I'm so happy!'"** (190). I think Miss Pussy, a transvestite prostitute, is so not enamored of her life at times that she must instigate these

faraway trips by which she escapes her earthly pain, both psychic and physical. Critics raved, but I shall have to read it a second times, perhaps, to reap its rewards.

McQuiston, Casey. *Red, White & Royal Blue*. New York: St. Martin's, 2019

In many ways, this is a commercial romance novel, but for once, it is about two young men, not a heterosexual couple. And not two ordinary men, but one is His Royal Highness, Prince Henry of the UK, and the other is Alex, the First Son of the United States (FSOTUS)—who is elected the first female president. In a way, the two men have known each other, at least by sight, since they were children. The inciting incident, as how-to-write-novels will tell, you occurs when Alex attends the royal wedding of Henry's brother in the UK. During a tussle, the two fall into the £75,000 wedding cake. To make amends, Alex flies back to the UK for photo ops to demonstrate to the public how the two really are fine friends after all. While visiting a primary school where Prince Henry (BTW he's gorgeous, like a young Prince William) volunteers, Alex is impressed with the prince's sincere largesse, but when firecrackers are mistaken for gunfire, the two are shoved into a dark, cramped, custodial closet (so symbolic), where once again they argue. Sometime later, New Year's maybe, Henry sails the Atlantic (by air) to appear at Alex's party held at the White House. At one point, Henry feels left out and ventures onto the snow-covered lawn, and Alex eventually joins him, where Henry plants a big one on Alex's mouth: the real inciting incident, perhaps. Alex, also a handsome physical specimen combining the best of his mother's Anglo and his father's Mexican heritage, is stunned but suddenly realizes he may be bisexual.

All I've describe so far, of course, is plot, but McQuiston adeptly creates well-rounded characters whom you care for. She creates a future in which the US not only *reelects* the first woman president but also one in which people of all ethnic groups hold important positions in government, both in the US and in the UK. And . . . the state of Texas finally turns blue, handing the president the final thirty-eight electoral votes that send her over the finish line. It is a future many of us have held dear in our hearts for decades, and McQuiston makes it happen realistically (but with a bit of whimsy, of course). For that alone, I am most grateful. She also writes several of the most romantic yet erotic sex scenes I've ever read—ones that, however, do not detract from the importance of the novel. Kudos to the author, and may we hope for a sequel, in which Prince Henry and FSOTUS marry and have (or adopt) children? A bonus chapter from Henry's POV may suggest that. We'll have to wait and see!

Merla, Patrick, Ed. *Boys Like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.

Within this book's 366 pages, twenty-nine gay male authors, born between 1935 and 1970, reveal their coming-out stories. All of these are solicited by the editor, who, I believe, must ask each contributor to reference (if obliquely) his place and date of birth, the year he comes out, and its circumstances. As a result, many of the stories do seem similar, bear a certain patina. And yet all the pieces are for one reason or another wildly different. Some concern themselves with only sexual

aspects of being sequestered in that closet, the life one is vacating; others are more abstract, more about vacating a much larger enclosure, perhaps a closet of lies and deceit taken on as a chrysalis of protection against a homophobic society. Ultimately, however, each story is one of transformation. Before coming out: *I wasn't*. After: *I am*. Below I've cited some nuggets of wisdom that struck me as being profound for one reason or another.

In "Cinnamon Skin," Edmund White proclaims: **"People are wrong to imagine teenage boys want to shoot their loads; what they want is a union of souls which will only incidentally result in a tangling of arms, thighs, loins. Teenagers do not fetishize big cocks, hairy chests, powerful biceps, or blond hair and thick necks; their desire is too general to respond to anything less than eternal love and their love is vague and powerful enough to ennoble any body at all"** (29).

When a men's magazine asks Allan Gurganus to submit some of his fiction, the editor rejects it because its protagonist a gay sailor. *You want to rub our noses in it?* Gurganus wants to say, **"I bet if I were Toni Morrison and you phoned to ask me for a story, and I sent you one about my fellow black people, you sure wouldn't use the term "rubbing their noses in it," I betcha"** (55). So true, in my experience, anyway.

Andrew Holleran says, **"Denial is always astonishing in retrospect, that one was able to compartmentalize oneself, to proceed with one part while putting another on ice. As long as I was only writing poems to Livingston in my notebook at Fort Benning . . . I was part of the mainstream"** (93).

Charles Silverstein: **"Most people don't understand the difference between guilt and shame. The distinction is central in the lives of gay men, particularly those over thirty. I often masturbated in my adolescent years and felt guilty about it. Guilt means one has done something wrong, which could have been avoided. It's a matter of will; I could have chosen not to jerk off. In reality, it made no difference whether I masturbated or not. The toxin was within me. What I *was* [my italics], not what I did, resulted in my deep sense of humiliation. My homosexuality was the shame built into me, and embarrassment over my condition created self-hate. It made no difference that I bedded women. I knew the truth. That's what shame is about, and I learned it well"** (117).

Christopher Bram: **"Compared to fiction, real life has more characters and incident than necessary. My coming out was a prolonged narrative with a surprising continuity of people. I suspect I write novels instead of short stories because my past is full of such long, tangled strands"** (133).

Douglas Sadowick: **"Just because a person does not recall a rotten feeling does not mean it is nowhere to be found. A wound from early childhood that remains ignored will find ways to manifest in the present"** (223).

"Gay psychologists suggest that a gay man's relationship to his father material to a special case, different from heterosexual men, hypothesizing that a guy born gay

falls in love with the first man (rather than woman) he meets on the scene. (The theory here is that the libido, with its inner godly programming teases the ego complex out from the Self through the first great romance.) The literal father, if he is a kind man, will deflect the nuclear projection of libido, which is devastating enough; if he's an asshole, he will repudiate the gay boy. All this takes place unconsciously, of course, yet it is often the filter through which the light of gay love shines, giving 'love/hate' new meaning" (226).

Well worth the time to read, if you're still trying to understand your own coming out. However, I suspect, and hope, that coming out is no longer necessary for most LGBTQIA+ individuals because remaining sequestered is no longer required. Younger parents seem more enlightened, spot their gay sons or daughters early and empower them with understanding and encouragement. Gay marriage. Trans people emerging from their respective closets. All this is to say, closets may once again take on their traditional meaning, the putting out of sight of things we want unseen—clothes, shoes, junk—not human beings. Not gay people.

Miller, William H., Jr. *The Fabulous Interiors of the Great Ocean Liners in Historic Photographs*. With the assistance of the Museum of the city of New York. New York: Dover, 1985.

These gorgeous black-and-white photographs (I could fall into some of them and stow myself away in a lifeboat), along with an informed and lively text, portray the evolution of the cruise ship interiors from the ornate detail of the 1920s and 1930s to the pared-down spare designs of the 1960s through the 1980s. A great resource for anyone interested in this era.

Miller, William H., Jr. *The Great Luxury Liners 1927-1954: A Photographic Record*. New York: Dover, 1981.

A fun book that's been on my shelf, unread, since 1986. It's not just full of fantastic black-and-white photographs that do great service to the ships and their luxurious interiors, but Miller provides quite a bit of history, too, covering the 1920s, the Depression years, World War II, and the post-war years. I myself, born in 1948, was too young ever to travel this way (although I have *cruised* since the mid-1990s), so the book is quite a window for those attempting to see what it was like to travel by sea between continents during that era. Something to be said about traveling in real time. No jet lag!

Mitgang, Herbert. *Words Still Count with Me: A Chronicle of Literary Conversations*. New York: Norton, 1995.

A book I've long neglected. A sort of Renaissance man writing over several genres, Mitgang interviews (insisting they are conversations) sixty-five authors from around the world over a period of twenty years (mid-1970s–mid-1990s)—only ten of whom are women. Nonetheless, it is a treasure trove of writerly information from the likes of Carl Sandburg, Rebecca West, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, Stephen Spender, and Toni Morrison. Mitgang develops the book's title from his time with E. B.

White: **“Sipping his Boodles martini, Andy White replied, ‘TV has taken a big bite out of the written word. But words still count with me’” (72).** And they obviously count with Mitgang, as he nails down little jewels like this one from Norman Mailer: **“The trick is to go beyond one’s reach,” (73)** in attempting a new work. Or note this from Doris Lessing: **“I get cross with those who identify me—me, personally—with my characters. I finally discovered the right response. I say that I am totally and absolutely *all* of the characters in my books. It’s a useful device even though the reaction I get is often instant indignation” (221).** Mitgang tops off the book with seven essays, my favorite of which is entitled “West Egg: Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby*,” in which he searches out the exact stomping grounds on Long Island where Fitzgerald sets his infamous novel—only to ascertain that **“The Parker-Swope-‘Gatsby’ house, he recalled, had burned down at the beginning of World War II” (278).** Ahhh, literary history can surely disappoint, but not this tome—filled with nuggets of writing that seem to remain relevant even ten years after Mitgang’s demise at ninety-three.

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Knopf, 2002 (1973).

Sula is about the titular black character and her best friend, Nel. Sula truly marches to her own drummer: abandoning her small Ohio town of Medallion (the Bottoms, ironically located atop a ridge, above the valley where white people live) to become educated; returning to the Bottoms to ravage most of the husbands there (never getting pregnant), including Nel’s husband, Jude (who then leaves town). It is her friend Nel that unfurls the last chapters, following Sula’s death. As she visits Sula in the cemetery, she comes to this conclusion: **“All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.’ And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. ‘We was girls together,’ she said as though explaining something. ‘O Lord, Sula,’ she cried, ‘girl, girl, girlgirlgirl’” (174).**

Morrison is a master of storytelling, revealing a lifetime in just 174 pages—utilizing the compression of a poet, the expansiveness of a novelist. Beautiful.

Moshfegh, Ottessa. *McGlue*. New York: Penguin, 2019 (2014).

A rough little book, this. And one that encapsulates a man’s short life within the span of 145 pages. But is it set in the 19th century? It would seem so: no cars, no televisions, no phones. Only horse and cart, books, bars, and whores for entertainment. Is it about sailors? Would seem to be: McGlue, a young man, is at sea much of the time, *at sea* with regard to his life, accused of the murder of his best mate, Johnson. Yet he can’t recall; a certain blow to his head in a brawl keeps his memories at bay, even while he awaits in prison—without drink, which he misses terribly. Does the book have a homophobic tinge to it, or is it merely a representation of a sailor’s life in the 19th century—a time in which McGlue refers to the cabin boy as a fag or fagger? Is this slim tome *Moby Dick* (sans the whale) compressed into a story Melville couldn’t tell or couldn’t have gotten published in his time?

Yet I’m also mystified by McGlue’s use of language. At first, it seems readers have

been transported into 19th-century Massachusetts, but the author can't decide whether McGlue is an uneducated galoot or a literary scholar. At one point, he proclaims, “. . . **just anything but not to have to be here, sitting, *lying* down with myself like this**” (64). Oh, one thinks, his scant schooling has remained intact. He has conjugated correctly the verb for reclining. Fine, but McGlue is not consistent. A few pages later he says, “**I just *lay* down, cold as it is, until Dwelly disappears**” (71). As a commoner, has he backslid into conflating the verb “lie” with its cousin “lay”? Perhaps, you say, the author is portraying McGlue's unpolished education: his battered brain retrieving the correct verb only some of the time. Okay. But what about this example? At one point, McGlue remembers to employ the subjunctive mood, signaling the hypothetical nature of a situation: “**If he *were* here I'd throw an arm around him, pat his head and thank him**” (107). Most uneducated would just say, *If he was here*. Several sentences down, McGlue says, “**Before me was a gentlemen . . .**” (107). Why does he use the plural instead of “gentleman?” Is it an antiquated linguistic quirk I'm unaware of, or is he once again attempting to be blue collar when his earlier instinct is to be more erudite?

Some may wonder why I would belabor this issue, but I continue to be puzzled. Are McGlue's inconsistencies genuinely his, or do they belong to the author? Does she have an adequate grasp of her characterization of him, of the language? If she's unsure about McGlue's usage, then what does it say, on the whole, about her story? Which, by the way, is terribly engrossing, a mini-dip into what an 1800s “sea shanty” might have been. Because whatever else the novella may be, it seems to delve into the love and affection two men have for one another at a time in which matie Johnson has no proper way for him to express his carnal desires for McGlue. And the conflict ends in death . . . for both. I think.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pnin*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1957.

Somewhere early on in *Pnin*, the pronoun “I” pops up and continues, like a turtle, to raise its head here and there, until the very end, when the first-person narrator reveals himself and his relationship to the character Pnin. It almost seems like the novel is written from the third-person POV, and one must wonder what the author's intent is.

I chose to read this book as one from of a list of “campus novels” written in the last one hundred years. Pnin's relationship to academia is seen through the eyes of a middle-aged Russian immigrant teaching (mostly) Russian literature, and the book is very episodic and circular. One ends the novel wondering, in some sense, what the significance of his narrative is. Academia? Its social milieu? The contact with students? Might need to read it again to find out . . . if I feel like it.

Offill, Jenny. *Dept. of Speculation*. New York: Knopf, 2014.

A quirky but powerful little book (177 small pages) in which a woman explores her marriage, her career as writer and professor, and her motherhood. The author begins the novel writing in the first person from the protagonist's point of view. Her mind moves quickly, in short square paragraphs, from topic to topic, yet all are woven together as finely as the finest of spider webs—the reader's mind puts the story together. About halfway through, Offill shifts to third person, but it may only be the woman writing about herself and her husband as objectively as she is emotionally able—distancing herself from the pain of their failing marriage, the pain she feels that she is failing her daughter. She calls their weekly sessions with a therapist the Theater of Hurt Feelings, and at that point begins to hide money in various places in the house, inside books mostly—ostensibly fortifying her life against what is to come. What's to come is that the three of them move to a place in the country, where the husband can play the piano as loudly as he wishes, where they all can enjoy the snow, tromp through the woods, which are utterly at peace. The writerly persona embodied in this narrator quotes many other writers along the way (as writers of any ilk are wont to do). Here she sites poet Rainer Maria Rilke: **“Surely all art is the result of one's having been in danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end, to where no one can go any further” (171).** Enough said about this one artist and about what *she* has gone through?

Otsuka, Julie. *The Buddha in the Attic*. Detroit: Gale (Thorndike), 2012 (2011).

In this spare novel told by way of the first person plural, Otsuka reveals the collective story of Japanese women who are duped into coming to the United States to marry handsome men looking nothing like their photographs. Then readers learn of their collective story, as these women and their husbands (and offspring) toil virtually as slaves in a place called J-town on behalf of California agriculture. Otsuka even takes us to the point in history when Japanese-Americans are rounded up and are entrained to detention camps “over the mountains” into states like Nevada, Utah, and Idaho, to sit out World War II as prisoners of war. These people lose everything, and, except for decades later, when their descendants may receive a token amount of \$20,000 in reparations, these poor, hardworking people never receive recompense for the misery they were made to suffer because of certain Americans' racist and provincial attitudes. A tragic story made beautiful by way of the author's portrayal of this betrayed but noble race.

Price, Reynolds. *Ardent Spirits: Leaving Home, Coming Back*. New York: Scribner, 2009.

Seems there is always something interesting to be found in a writer's memoirs, and Price's is no exception. This, one of three volumes of his memoirs, is an account of his years of study abroad and his first years of teaching at Duke University. Yet, of course, it also includes much else along the way: the many close friendships and collegial relationships he acquires in academia; familial relationships, tangentially at least; his desire to be and early practices of becoming a novelist; his relationships with other writers and those associated with the publishing business (some natural sort of name-dropping allowed). And finally, he does address his homosexuality

(having been born in 1933, he abhors the term “gay” and justifies his disapproval). Both in the UK and US, such sexual actions are strictly illegal, so he lives primarily a lonely life, never establishing a long-term relationship, though he does come close while in England, falling in love with a European man just prior to returning to the States to teach. Their long distance love fizzles out, but they do remain friends. Price dies in 2011, just as gay marriage is being accepted as a norm. Pity. I would love to know what his thoughts about it might have been.

Reeves, Richard V. *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It*. Washington: Brookings, 2022.

Reeves’s thesis may be that while the liberation of women in the last fifty years has been a much-needed, even transformative, change in our society, men and boys have been left behind in their liberation or growth. He believes, for example, that boys should be *red-shirted*, in other words, begin school a year later. Many parents already do this when they see their sons are not ready. An added benefit is that when the boys reach their teen years, they’re in a class of young women whose maturity more closely matches their own. Reeves also includes in his research how black boys and men differ yet from white males and other ethnic groups in their experiences—thus expanding his work.

To solve the employment problem of boys and men he advocates more sophisticated tech programs to train boys (as well as girls) for tech jobs that are sorely needed, perhaps entire high schools, not just a single department. He suggests that we as a society make it acceptable for men to train for more **HEAL** professions (health, education, administration, and literacy), in the same way women and girls have increased their presence in **STEM** professions (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). In the manner that women have made headway in achieving fifty percent occupation of **STEM** jobs and professions that used to be closed to women, men and boys should be encouraged and supported financially to enter **HEAL** professions. He cites research that suggests many boys perform better when they are tutored by male teachers.

There are those who will see this book as overlooking women and girls, but Reeves insists that that is not so. An apparent feminist in thought and deed (a somewhat stay-at-home-dad), he believes that progress should continue for women and girls. It’s just that he believes men, because of societal changes occurring in the last half-century, should be allowed to grow in areas that they weren’t previously. And he offers an entire chapter on how these new roles for men may be accomplished. The task will take considerable resources, both financial and human, but if we don’t begin by considering the ideas put forth by our scholars, where else can we begin, and how do we expect to progress as a civilization?

Rodgers, Mary and Jesse Green. *Shy: The Alarming Outspoken Memoirs of Mary Rodgers*. New York: Farrar, 2022.

I've been a huge fan of comic Carol Burnett my entire life. I remember her belting out a song called "Shy," when she appeared in a TV version of the play, *Once Upon a Mattress*. By today's standards, it was a simple production and recorded on kinescope for us now to cherish by way of YouTube. The one highlight is Burnett as the princess singing "Shy" with some irony, her mouth open wide, her lungs full of air, no microphone needed. The thing I don't know or realize at the time is that the music is written by the author of this book, Mary Rodgers—the younger daughter of composer Richard Rodgers.

Mary Rodgers's book is co-written with Jesse Green, a lifelong friend. Rodgers at one point attempts to pen the book herself, yet always gets bogged down. But you're a storyteller, Jesse tells her, a talker! So Mary tells her stories to Jesse, and Jesse does more than write them down. He creates a great book, handing over each draft to Mary for approval, until they arrive at what is this tome.

The title may not be quite so ironic when applied to Mary. Although she in many ways is bold, she is always reigned in, first of all, by her parents. Her mother, probably jealous of her daughter's talent (this learned from Mary's many hours on analysts' sofas), belittles her and her work. Richard Rodgers, her famous father, is also begrudging with regard to how much time he spends with his daughter. Mary Rodgers (b. 1931) is an early feminist without the crusading. She must fight her way into every project she obtains until she reaches a certain point (probably when *Mattress* becomes a huge hit). Even after that, she doesn't always get the big projects. Her fame comes more or less from writing projects for children.

In fact, she must love children a great deal, giving birth to six of her own (three each by two different husbands), one dying quite young. Her legacy, as she tells it, may to be a better parent than composer. She tries, in vain sometimes, to be a better mother than her own mother was. Ultimately she realizes she may not be able to have it all, as more recent feminists realize. At least not without a lot of help, women can't have it all. (We're talking the hiring of tutors, governesses, child caregivers, not to mention lots of domestic help—something available only to the wealthy.) At any rate, this memoir is enjoyable to read on many levels. Not always the greatest prose (transcription of an oral work seems to miss out on the finishing touches that grammar and phrasing can give it), with perhaps far too many footnotes that could have been incorporated into the main text, this memoir is still a pleasant and entertaining read.

Roem, Ned. *The Paris Diary and The New York Diary 1951-1961*. With a preface by Robert Phelps and an introduction by Richard Howard. New York: Da Capo, 1998 (1966-67).

Having read four other books by Roem, I believe this one seems the most disruptive, disturbing, and self-oriented (and admittedly what journal isn't related to the self). But during the decade he is writing, Roem is roughly between twenty-

seven and thirty-seven. He's experienced professional success, but not enough. He's really just getting started on his long career, which will deliver him, short eleven months and change, to his 100th birthday. If one were reading these diaries contemporaneously, however, one might believe he wouldn't make it to forty. Rorem drinks heavily—blackout and hangover heavily—and he halts alcohol consumption of his own accord often, then begins again. He even mentions (seemingly) with serious intent the idea of suicide. Thankfully, he does not take such action, instead making the most of his life—delivering portfolios plump with fine scores. Read this book, knowing that in spite of his angst, he does live long enough to become one of the most revered American composers of the twentieth century.

Shilts, Randy. *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*. New York: St. Martin's, 1987.

I am indeed glad that I finally read this book. I tried to in 1987, but it has sat on my shelf, I think, because at the time it was just too painful. The news, what little legitimate news there was, seemed full of what Shilts calls AIDSpeak. What I failed to realize was that through his book I was reading history: the pokiness of the Reagan administration and the congress to take action: the controversy of closing gay bath houses (mostly on the coasts); the quarrel between US and French scientists over who discovered HIV first; what at the time were *only* hundreds of young gay men dying each week (later thousands); the religious right proclaiming we were getting our comeuppance instead of dispensing Christ-like kindness to treat our suffering. It's all here in this book, and I, without checking my facts, believe little has changed. He got it right, got it recorded, before he himself succumbed to the disease in 1994. A hero and a journalistic master.

Snyder, Rachel Louise. *Women We Buried, Women We Burned: A Memoir*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2023.

This book comes to me as sort of a literary triptych: 1) The author's abusive childhood 2) The author's pursuance and achieving of a higher education, and 3) The author's life as a result of the first two. Oh, where to begin?

A little girl loses her mother (having been raised in the Jewish faith), and her father (a questionable "Christian"), remarries rather soon. Little girl rebels against all: her parents, her schools, all teachings that have come before. And why not? She is subject to such great hypocritical abuse by her father: formal spankings that her father rationalizes by way of the scriptures, though adult Rachel later puts those readings into context:

"The actual verse is Proverbs 13:24: *He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes*. Interestingly, the more commonly cited 'spare the rod, spoil the child' isn't anywhere in the Bible. It comes from a mid-seventeenth century bawdy poem called 'Hudibras' by Samuel Butler" (71).

And all the spankings ever do (as with most children) is fuel her anger. Young Rachel repeatedly runs away from home. She does drugs. She begins to work at an early age because her father gives written permission (child labor being perhaps another form of abuse). The blended family of four children broadens to include two new siblings, babes Rachel adores, though her older siblings not so much. When the two parents can no longer “control” their older brood, they pack four suitcases and kick them out. Rachel is in her teens, and she drops out of high school (or actually the school drops her, expels her for her poor behavior and academic record).

Thus begins Rachel’s education: Sensing that she is innately intelligent. But learning that if she doesn’t finish her education, she will never have a life. This long-but-short education includes working as a booking agent for local Chicago bands (which she’s excellent at), attending Barbizon school of modeling (at the behest of her Jewish grandmother) but dropping out. Eventually, she is convinced by a friend to take the GED (General Education Development) exam, which, in spite of her academic weaknesses she passes with little effort: **“If everyone knew how easy the GED was, no one would ever finish high school” (161)**. Then she begins to attend community college, moves on to earn her undergraduate and graduate degrees related to literature and writing. Teaches, earns a living as a freelance journalist.

The third part of Rachel’s triptych consists of her adulthood. She begins by booking passage for the Semester at Sea [<https://www.semesteratsea.org>], which changes her life’s trajectory. For many years following her education, Snyder will travel the world as a journalist and writer. She will marry a British man and have a child overseas. She will return to the US, living in Washington DC, but will travel to Arizona to help care for her second mother, the second one also to die from cancer. The most poignant section of the memoir, the last third, will pull together with the first two, to finally bring to rest Rachel’s anger with her father and her stepmother, will finally make Rachel a whole person. If not a tour de force, the book is pretty damn close.

Somtochukwu, Ani Kayode. *And Then He Sang a Lullaby*. New York: Roxane Gay, 2023.

It would be a great understatement to say that the country of Nigeria is an unsafe place for the LGBTQIA+ community to live. In this debut novel, Somtochukwu takes readers through the lives and loves of two young men. For one, neither set of parents offers any support for their gay sons. One man establishes a close relationship with his sister, which helps. Still, these two college men are on their own. On their own when one is beaten up by his very roommates. On his own in almost every context of his life. For those of us who complain about our LGBTQ+ lives in the US, we need only read this novel to realize we must be thankful for what we have and continue to fight against such bigotry here and abroad.

Sontag, Susan. *I, etcetera*. New York: Random, 1978 (1963).

A tough read, when some stories are written like her essays. Others, like "Dr. Jekyll," though you think you get what she's doing, riffing off an older story, find you knocking at her door: "Let me in, let me in. I want to understand."

Colm Tóibín. *The Magician: A Novel*. New York: Scribner, 2021.

There aren't enough superlatives that can be ascribed to this novel, the author of which has published twenty-four other books. This fictionalized story of literary giant, Thomas Mann, is both riveting and sobering. The young Mann writes poetry exalting his also young lovers, all male. But in his Germany he cannot get out of marrying. And in fact, he does marry a woman he loves, and they produce quite a family. The novel traces their lives as they unfold in pre-World War II Europe, and as their lives extend to America, where the Manns take up residence. The book as well traces the processes or problems he incurs in writing some of his important works, including *Death in Venice*. It seems that Tóibín utilizes only the most important details or facts, or otherwise, his five-hundred-page novel might be twice the journey. A joy to read if you care about world literature and its important authors.

Torres, Justin. *We the Animals*. Boston: Houghton, 2011.

A great, compact book, deserving of all the accolades it has received. I wonder, however, if it isn't about twenty-five to fifty pages short (weighs in at 128 pages). I do appreciate a narrative that cuts to the chase, that doesn't involve itself in extraneous material. The story is about three young brothers and their abusive (mostly by way of omission-of-care) parents. But at one point, the narrative jumps from the narrator being prepubescent to suddenly warring with his older brothers because he realizes he's gay, and they realize they're straight. Some transition might have been good. Instead of suddenly confessing to readers that he has been frequenting the men's room at the bus station for sexual contacts, he might ease readers into his realizations. You see it coming all along—he's the sensitive son, the one who writes, could be a pianist by way of his long slim fingers—but the hints seem wasted if they aren't brought to fruition a bit sooner. All in all, however, the book is engrossing. I was first drawn to Torres's writing by way of his *New Yorker* short story in 2011, "Reverting to a Wild State," and thought at the time, *I can't wait to read more from this guy*.

Ventura, Michael. *If I Was a Highway: Essays*. With a foreword by Dan Flores and photographs by Butch Hancock. Lubbock: Texas Tech UP, 2011.

This journalist originally from New York befriends the Southwest US, from Lubbock, Texas to Los Angeles; and, in turn, the Southwest seems to befriend him. In "A Life of Destinations," Ventura says: **"To be that man who only lives to live. That is my task from now on. It isn't about writing anymore, or finding a meaning, or changing the world, or getting and keeping love, though all of that is important; but it isn't about that stuff anymore. The task now is to be that man who only lives**

to live. For whom life, life, life, is enough” (15). What a great attitude!

As a Lubbockian (a term the author may have coined for no one I know uses it seriously), myself, I particularly liked Ventura’s essay, “Lubbockian Identity.” He begins this way: **“Let us consider Lubbock Texas. In 1973, January through September, I lived in Lubbock—not a resident; a drifter, taking my time passing through. The Lubbockians I got to know all were Texans, mostly born and raised in Lubbock. Ethnically, most were some mixture of Anglo-Saxon-Celt, often with Cherokee stirred in a few generations back. Many traced their American ancestry to well before the Civil War”** (35). But this delineation is only the beginning of Ventura’s portrayal of Lubbock—a place he likes more than he doesn’t. Will buy copies of this for friends who don’t live in Lubbock—just so they know I’m not entirely crazy for living here! [And I did.]

Westney, William. *The Perfect Wrong Note: Learning to Trust Your Musical Self*. New Jersey: Amadeus, 2003.

A wonderful book in which the author, one of the finest concert pianists in our time, creates new spaces for musicians. He teaches readers/pianists/musicians how to reshape their practices, to make them more *relaxing* and more valuable toward the end of performing. Westney also restructures an old tradition, now calling it the Un-Master class, a safe space where criticism is also laden with praise for what’s going well for the student performer; the experience applies a certain amount of encouragement for the future, as well. And finally, Westney ties music to much more philosophical issues, as well as addressing the injuries professional musicians suffer through their rigorous rehearsals. Simply put: one must rehearse in shorter stints, take a brief break every twenty minutes; be mindful of posture and body placement; take care of general health with diet, exercise, and sleep. A fine read for any level of musician. It has certainly helped me to maintain a satisfying relationship with the keyboard (organ) after abandoning a professional career (in the Church) decades ago. I wish his wisdom had been available to me at that time; I believe it would have made a difference.

Wharton, Edith. *The Writing of Fiction*. New York: Simon, 1997 (1924).

A compact book full of what must seem like esoteric advice to contemporary writers of fiction. Most all of her references derive primarily from nineteenth-century European literature: Balzac, Eliot, Goethe, Henry James, Trollope, and others. One must remember Wharton lived in Paris until her death at seventy-five, in 1937, so her reading reflects that fact. In the section entitled “Constructing a Novel,” she devotes a great deal of space to elements of “character” and “situation,” in constructing a novel. Interesting ideas, only some of which may still apply to writing today’s fiction.

White, Edmund. *Caracole*. New York: Vintage (Random), 1996 (1985).

Quite a departure for White, this novel explores lives of a heterosexual people, not gay men. Not quite a fan of fantasy, I found this novel difficult to navigate, but I cannot blame White for following his artistic inclinations. Maybe someday I'll reread the book and get it.

White, Edmund. *The Humble Lover*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2023.

Disclosure: The book I read is an *advance reading copy* (not for sale, as they say, but I must have bought it somewhere), and, as can be expected, it has a few typographical errors. Hopefully, the plot and characterization weaknesses have been shored up in the published version, as well.

Hard to tell whether this novel is a farce or a tragedy, or both. I've been waiting for a noted LGBTQIA+ author to write about the trials and tribulations of an elderly gay man, but I'm also not sure whether this is the one I wanted to read (the protagonist of Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* is only sixty). Aldwych West, on the other hand is eighty. He seduces (insofar as he can) a young male ballet dancer (twenty), convinces this August Dupond to live with him in his sprawling Central Park West apartment in New York. Then Aldwych's niece by marriage sets her sights on August, as well, and, add in some other unsavory characters, and you do get sort of a sex farce romp—until the end, which I shall not spoil. Read and see what you think. White's majesty with the language is ever-present, but there is something rather too facile about the story that evolves (or devolves) into a tragic conclusion that might have been avoided. Not to keep it *light*, so to speak, but to keep it consistent with the beginning and middle parts of the novel.

Wiesel, Elie. *Dawn*. Translated by Frances Frenaye. New York: Farrar, 2008 (1972).

The author continues his motif of “night” in this second book: **“Night is purer than day: it is more intense, more true” (145)**. “Dawn” in this novel is reflective of what is to happen: **“At dawn tomorrow at the same hour, the same minute, they will die—but not together, for there is an abyss between them. David ben Moshe's death is meaningful; John Dawson's is not. David is a hero, John a victim . . .” (159)**. This short novel is about the young man, who has survived WWII, to kill the Brit, John Dawson.

Wiesel, Elie. *Day*. Translated by Anne Borchardt. New York: Farrar, 2008 (1972).

In some sense, Wiesel explains that this book is a sequel to *Dawn*. What it is really about, though the term is never used, is PTSD of Jewish people who lived through the Holocaust in WWII Germany. Though readers may suspect it is so, it is not until the end that they discover for sure that the subject of the novel has tried to kill himself by stepping in front of a car: he doesn't decide to jump in front of the oncoming car, not until the last minute. His peripheral vision tells him it is a sure thing to put himself in its path. This is how great his pain. But . . . he does not

succeed. A short, riveting novel, about people who feel guilty for being allowed to live when others of their ilk were not so fortunate.

Williams, Donald Mace. *Wolfe*. Los Angeles: Rattle, 2009.

Enjoyed this pastiche of *Beowulf* set in West Texas. A lot of skill employed by this noted poet.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

Zinn tells the truth about American history in this tell-all book. He tells the truth about Christopher Columbus, that he was an Indian killer. Why should we still observe his birthday? At the other end of the continuum Zinn tells us the truth about Bill Clinton's presidency. He was not a progressive but a middle-of-the-roader who sided with the Republicans in many cases in order to stay in office. Nearly every page of this book realigns all the facts with the stories that we have been told. Very enlightening reading, especially for high school and college history classes.

Templates for Bibliographic Entries:**Basic:**

Last Name, First Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

Basic with Introduction or Other Component(s):

Last Name, First Name. With an introduction by First Name, Last Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

Basic with Introduction (or other component) and book is a later reprint:

Last Name, First Name. With an introduction by First Name, Last Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication. First published by Publ Co in year.

Basic with Two or More Authors:

Last Name, First Name, 2nd, First and Last Names. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

Translation from Foreign Language:

Last Name, First Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. Translated by Name of translator(s). City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

Translation from Foreign Language with Other Component:

Last Name, First Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. Translated by First Name, Last Name and with Other Component by First Name, Last Name. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

Running List of Books Read Aloud since 2020 (in order read)

	Date Finished
2020	
1. Eisen, Cliff and Dominic McHugh, eds. <i>The Letters of Cole Porter</i>	5/19/20
2. Langella, Frank. <i>Dropped Names: Famous Men and Women as I Knew...</i>	7/25/20
3. Shikibu, Murasaki. <i>Tale of the Genji</i>	7/27/20 - 11/05/20
2021	Date Finished
4. Proulx, Annie. <i>Barkskins: A Novel</i>	2/05/21
5. Kendi, Ibram X. and Keisha N. Blain, eds. <i>Four Hundred Souls</i>	3/24/21
6. Kawabata, Yasunari. <i>The Master of Go</i>	4/06/21
7. Flores, Dan. <i>The Horizontal Yellow</i>	5/04/21
8. Wright, Frank Lloyd. <i>An Autobiography</i>	7/07/21
9. Raven, Catherine. <i>Fox and I</i>	7/30/21
10. Marquez, Gabriel García. <i>One Hundred Years of Solitude</i>	8/31/21
11. García, Rodrigo. <i>A Farewell to Gabo and Mercedes</i>	9/9/21
12. Mantel, Hilary. <i>Wolf Hall</i>	11/05/21
13. Perry/Winfrey. <i>What Happened to You?</i>	12/23/21
2022	Date Finished
14. Cummins, Jeanine. <i>American Dirt</i>	2/01/22
15. Sedgwick, John. <i>From the River to the Sea</i>	2/24/22
16. McCarthy, Cormac. <i>Blood Meridian: Or The Evening Redness in the West</i>	3/30/22
17. Highsmith, Patricia. <i>Ripley's Game</i>	4/26/22
18. Doty, Mark. <i>What Is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life</i>	5/19/22
19. Tan, Amy. <i>The Opposite of Fate</i>	7/14/22
20. Snyder, George. <i>On Wings of Affection.</i>	7/28/22
21. Sedaris, David. <i>A Carnival of Snackery: Diaries (2003-2020)</i>	9/01/22
22. Patchett, Ann. <i>The Dutch House</i>	9/21/22
23. Wharton, Edith. <i>The Custom of the Country</i>	10/31/22
24. Cather, Willa. <i>The Professor's House</i>	11/11/22
25. Rodgers, Mary. <i>Shy</i>	12/31/22
2023	Date Finished
26. Irving, John. <i>The Last Chairlift</i>	4/07/23
27. Toibin, Colm. <i>The Magician</i>	6/04/23
28. Garmus, Bonnie. <i>Lessons in Chemistry</i>	8/02/23
29. Kingsolver, Barbara. <i>Demon Copperhead</i>	9/20/23
30. McQuiston, Casey. <i>Red, White and Royal Blue</i>	10/19/23
31. McBride, James. <i>The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store</i>	12/17/23