

[February to May. I only read magazines (*New Yorker*, *GQ*) and English and film journals. Couldn't seem to concentrate on the serious stuff.]

Cameron, Peter - *Andorra*

Very disappointing. Reads like a first draft or like juvenilia that the publisher decided to publish though it's not up to snuff. Dialogue in many places is flat, "padding," neither of which moves the plot or develops character. POV is dishonest [or is this a form of the unreliable narrator?]. The reader feels cheated when he doesn't find out until the end that Fox literally killed his wife and child when he's told us earlier that she had killed the child and committed suicide. First person POV would be hard if he had told the truth, but still he also could have developed some sympathy, some sense of intrigue. None of the characters is really developed past the cardboard stage. [Many critics I located don't agree, so perhaps, again, it is I who failed to grasp Cameron's gifts.]

Fielding, Henry - *Tom Jones*

Interesting that his writing takes so much space to say so little [by today's standards]. Amazing the universalities that still exist, still baffle us as a civilization: unwed mothers, children born out of wedlock, class warfare.

Guterson, David - *Snow Falling on Cedars*

Very slow beginning, but the novel works. Even though the subject matter is emotional, Guterson is able to keep his distance.

Hamilton, Jane - *The Book of Ruth*

Her first novel. Think *A Map of the World* may be her best, so far. I have a feeling the editor made her shorten this book and tell instead of show the last third or so. However, it may just fit with her characterization.

Hamilton, Jane - *A Map of the World*

Again, a great read! *AMOTW* is a metaphor for the main character's "plan" for life—a crude map she'd drawn as a child with carefully prescribed colors, etc. When as an adult she is accused of child molestation, and, when a friend's child under her care drowns, and she goes to jail, her map of the world is no longer valid. It is a train wreck from page one, but you hang around to watch.

Hamilton, Jane - *The Short History of a Prince*

A good read. Plenty of allusions, literary and musical, but to what end? Fairly good portrayal of teaching though I think the character was too "good" for a first year teacher even at 38. Can a woman write about a gay male character? Yes, of course,

and admirably. I thought for a while it was going to be an *Object of My Affection* kind of plot, but Hamilton, thankfully, stayed away from that. Would like to read her earlier books. She really gets inside her characters.

Kafka, Franz - *The Metamorphosis*

Comparable to an artist who takes the little sores of his life and objectifies them, transforming them into art. The third person narrative is close to Georg, the unappreciated, unloved, overworked man who becomes a “dung beetle” out of self-preservation. Even so, the existence kills him. But wouldn't his prior existence have killed him, as well?

Irving, John - *A Widow for a Year*

I'm a fan . . . but I believe Irving hits the wall on this one. The novel seems “over” at the point where Ruth marries the Dutchman. Long, long denouement—tying up loose ends in a way that seems unnecessary.

Leavitt, David - *Arkansas*

Three fine novellas—more like what he is capable of (unlike *The Page Turner*). Quite good.

Leavitt, David - *The Page Turner*

After reading *While England Sleeps*, this novel reads like a first draft. Stiff. Contrived. May be the POV. He uses the third person. It seems that no character really owns the story.

Lee, Harper - *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Never read it before. I can see what the fuss is all about. Like a croissant, thin layers stacked into a whole lot that is delicious—characters who are full and rich. Plotting that is deft. Lee lays it all out in the first three or four pages. Theme is in the last paragraph: “Most people are [nice], Scout, when you finally see them” (284).

Long, David - *The Falling Boy*

Excellent writing. Young couple in early 1970s and how they part and return to one another.

McCann, Colum - *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*

Fine stories.

McCauley, Stephen - *The Object of My Affection*

Third reading. Enjoyed it again. Light, undemanding reading from a writer who is

capable of writing with more depth.

*Men on Men 6* - David Bergman, editor

Morrison, Toni - *Paradise*

She sets up a complex structure like *Beloved*, but it is not indecipherable. Each chapter is about a different woman in the “convent,” a house in Oklahoma for lost women. “They shoot the white girl first,” (3) is the first sentence of the book! Like *Beloved*, I must re-read before discussing or teaching the novel.

Nabokov, Vladimir - *Lolita*

Loved. Absolutely loved. Author again proves that anything, absolutely anything is fodder for a novel. All that is needed is the correct or appropriate treatment. Perspective, the “ladies and gents of the jury” POV, helps to fling aside much judgment on the part of the reader. Also, the fidelity Humbert has for his nymphet. Yet he never lets himself off the hook. He knows it’s wrong to let a child corrupt him (as he tells it), but he does allow it to happen. Encourages it. Plans it.

Laughed the hardest when Humbert approaches Lolita for one of the last times. The POV is between her legs, and she says: “Pulease leave me alone, will you . . . for Christ’s sake leave me alone” (192-3). Sent me into hysterics for five minutes only because . . . I’ve been there . . . and not as Humbert. Laughed until I cried.

Picano, Felice - *Like People in History*

Perhaps the gay *Gone With the Wind*: a rotten dubious honor. The first part was all right. Unrealistic? Cardboard characters? Woodstock? Finished it only because I felt like I should, not because it was any good.

Smiley, Jane - *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Liddie Newton*

Set in the Kansas Territory prior to the Civil War, prior to statehood [obviously]. Young woman’s husband is killed. She takes on the appearance of a man to hunt down his murderer. Tries to help a slave escape. Gets caught. Okay. [Sounds much more interesting than I gave it credit for at the time.]

Suskind, Patrick - *Perfume*

Translated from the German. Always have problems with translations.

Vidal, Gore - *The City and the Pillar* (1948)

Finally got a copy at Borders. Better than I thought it would be. Timeless in some respects. Plotting is smooth, nearly seamless. Characters move from scene to scene, locale to locale easily—almost too easily, as a young (albeit skilled) writer might do. Its main importance is the ease with which he writes about a taboo subject. The

novel probably set back his career many years, and yet he insisted. Admirable.

White, Edmund - *The Farewell Symphony*

The allusion in the title is the best thing this novel has going for it.

“I kept thinking of Haydn’s *The Farewell Symphony*. In the last movement more and more of the musicians get up to leave the stage, blowing out their candles as they go. In the end just one violinist is still playing.” Could have been the last sentence of the novel. The book ends there for me if not sooner. I get so disgusted with book editors [if indeed this is an editorial problem]. The novel has such a luxurious pace for half to two thirds of the way; the author weaves back and forth between past and present flawlessly. Then at one point, he begins to condense, condense, condense. Decades of relationships pass by in a few pages. Brice, the lover of the narrator’s, is least developed of all. Perhaps intentionally. He does produce the overwhelming sense of loss he and remaining friends suffer at the loss of an entire community, all the while knowing that he himself is sero-positive. Disappointing. Prose at the beginning is so luxurious, as if the author has all the time in the world [like central character of Anthony Burgess’s *Earthly Powers*]; so rushed at the end . . . as if he doesn’t . . . have all the time . . . . Perhaps that was White’s intent all along.

White, Michael C. - *A Brother’s Blood*

Excellent mystery but again, one that goes far beyond whodunit status. Flashbacks to WWII era in Maine, where 400,000 German POWs are held and work in logging camps. Characterization is excellent. An echoing of “brother’s blood” in present, as well as past. A German comes to Maine in 1990s to find out what happened to his brother in 1945. An older woman’s brother comes home to “dry out.” He dies on the ice. She wants to find out what really caused his death (a murder and discovers it is linked to the WWII brother’s death, as well, also a murder).