

2000

Baxter, Charles - *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction*

Quirky, but some essays are better than others, both those about writing and those of literary analysis. Had some great insights about *Gatsby* and *Glass Menagerie* [texts that I taught at the time].

*Beowulf*

First time I've ever read [or taught it]. I now see why American culture values professional athletes so much. We still must have dragons to slay.

Bockren, Victor - *With William Burroughs—A Report from the Bunker*

Enjoyed most of Burroughs's nuggets about writing:

"Read and reread Conrad constantly—a gift of transmutation, like Genet."

"Sinclair Lewis said if you have just written something you think is absolutely great and you can't wait to publish it or show it to someone, throw it away."

"Somerset Maugham said that the greatest asset that any writer can have is longevity." "Involvement with his own image can be fatal to a writer." "Creativity comes from a series of shocks in which you are forced to look at yourself."

Chaucer, Geoffrey - *The Canterbury Tales*

Read most of them to teach.

Conason, Joe and Gene Lyons - *The Hunting of the President: The Ten-Year Campaign to Destroy Bill and Hillary Clinton*

Excellent if not distasteful book about the truth of 1989-1999: 1) The media who reported selectively about the Clintons 2) Excellent prose, not just another hurry-to-press poly-sci page-turner 3) Great documentation, much of it provided by the enemies themselves: the Tripp tapes, Starr's transcripts, etc. Makes Watergate look like a bungled attempt of naughty children. Republicans will never change. They are Machiavellian to the core, and they will do anything to win. Anything.

Donne, John - *John Donne's Poetry*

Enjoyed revisiting those poems I'd studied in graduate school and reading others for the first time in order to teach my juniors.

Doty, Mark - *Atlantis*

Poetry collection. "Almost Blue" is about Chet Baker. "Difference" is in 1994 *Best*

*American Poetry.*

Doty, Mark - *Firebird: A Memoir*

Doty is a fabulous writer. His training and practice as a poet mean that he creates beautiful, powerful prose. The Firebird is a controlling metaphor for much of the book. A product of his own creative powers, the Firebird is an image his mother eschews when she sees him dancing to the music of Stravinsky's Firebird Suite, hissing, "Son, you're a boy" (101). Out of the specific the universal is born.

Doty, Mark - *Heaven's Coast*

A memoir concerning the death of his lover, Wally Roberts, from complications due to AIDS. Unbelievably controlled prose, but unbridled emotion. I've never cried so freely while reading a book. Yet Doty is funny, as well. "And I was cooking for three, and teaching, and taking care of a man who'd just collapsed in my house; learning to cook like June Cleaver didn't exactly seem an option" (196-7).

A passage that moved me deeply: "Christmas Eve, I give him packages which I open for him, since the bows and paper represent more labor than he could manage: music videos by the Nashville singers he thinks particularly sexy, fleece-lined slippers decorated with images of bacon and eggs, and a book about breeds of dogs. He says he wishes he had something for me to open, but I don't want anything except to have him here. There's nothing more he could give me than his life, right now, his being with me" (253).

Faludi, Susan - *Stiffed: Betrayal of the American Man*

Faludi's research comes down to the fact that my generation (straight and gay) feel betrayed by fathers who didn't mentor us or show us how to be men. We have been "feminized" by a culture that values/devalues men's looks as much as it has women's looks in the past. Interesting sections: 1) The Citadel (homophobic yet homoerotic at the same time). 2) Aero-space industry and its betrayal of men. [I felt safer with my job as a mere English teacher; I would never be rich, but as long as I remained a "good" teacher (and all that meant, all of which wasn't pleasant), I could work as long . . . as I could work.] But men who trained to explore space have been put out of work—and even when they do "work," NASA does most of it for them. Astronauts have precious little control over the flight of their spacecraft. [And now with the end of the Shuttle Program, another chapter ends.]

Gardner, John - *Grendel*

Read twice before teaching it to my juniors. Didn't much warm to it though it is quite well written and clever. [Gee, how magnanimous of me.]

Goldberg, Myla - *Bee Season*

Another autographed copy from the Iowa Summer Writing Festival: reading at the

Prairie Lights Book Store. Fine young writer, yet novel seems to bog down in places almost as if author really had three novels going and couldn't decide which one she wanted to write. It either needs to be a longer novel (I would love to know more about Miriam, the mother) or focus on the "Bee" child, Eliza. The ending, while logical . . . I'm not sure. Perhaps it was fine. [Turned out to be a best seller!]

Hersch, E.D. - *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*

Liked the "list" in the appendix best.

Hotchner, A.E. - *King of the Hill*

Loved it. Has so much more content than the film although Soderberg probably puts together the best events/images into the film and threads them into a subtly insistent plot. The book is a memoir and as such is not plot driven. Interesting diction; though the prose is third person retrospective, he uses a twelve year-old's diction: "Me and Lester did such and such." It seems to work, taking the reader back to 1933.

Ivins, Molly - *Shrub*

Title comes from "arbusto," Bush's oil company, the translation of which is really "shrub," not "bush." I just wish everyone in America could read this book and that the media would quit courting him.

Leebron, Fred - *Six Figures*

Another Iowa Summer Writing Festival teacher. Signed copy. Good solid writing, but something is lacking. Just not quite up there with the best, but what do I know. I'm not published at all. I see what he's going for, a subtle exploration of the family, the couple. But so many things are too subtle or unclear. Even at the end at which point his sarcastic explosion tells us he "didn't do it" (hit his wife with a hammer), the details are lacking. I know it's not a whodunit but the reader wants to know who dun it. [Maybe that's my problem, a latent commercial reader who is quite comfortable with having loose ends tied up neatly.]

Leebron, Fred and Andrew Levy - *Creating Fiction: A Writer's Companion*

Probably the best book on writing fiction that I've read thus far.

McEwan, Ian - *Enduring Love*

Not sure what E. saw in this that drew such a rave review. Beginning is riveting; the characters are finely drawn, the prose deft; the historical-psychological basis is fascinating; but the end seems to crumble, almost as if McEwan relied too much on "what really happened." The subplot of whether the man who plummeted to the earth was having an affair is a bit facile, I think.

*Men on Men 2000*, edited by David Bergman

Some excellent stories/some rather mediocre, including one written by one of the most renowned writers listed in the table of contents. Just didn't have the verve, structure, or importance of his previous work. I can see why my story [shortlisted] was not ultimately accepted by Bergman. It wouldn't have fit with these. I kept trying to relate it to the other stories, and it just didn't.

Moore, Lorrie - *Birds of America*

A great collection of stories. Birds are a loose motif throughout most of the stories, a metaphor perhaps for all the human American birds and variations.

Munro, Alice - *Selected Stories*

Fabulous. Impeccable. [See annotations.]

*Penguin Book of Gay Short Stories* (ed. by David Leavitt and Mark Mitchell)

Enjoyed many of the stories—a much more varied look at gay characters in terms of timeframe, age, sex of narrator, and setting than some anthologies. So many of the GLBT journals now are “young” (just as I am old). The young lack a certain elegance in their prose . . . some of them, anyway.

Proulx, Annie - *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*

Exquisite stories. Rich. Shows and tells just enough. Reader must be astute and care as much about the characters as she does. “You don't get it that you can't have a fence with only one post.”

“. . . the wind scything up a nice Wyoming howler.”

Stuckey-French, Elizabeth - *The First Paper Girl in Red Oak, Iowa: Stories*

Signed copy! ESF was the instructor of the short story class I took at the Iowa Summer Writing Festival. Subtle, well-crafted stories. Liked her newest stories the best: “Electric Wizard” and “The Visible Man.” [She gave such good advice on my ms.]

Vonnegut, Kurt - *Slaughter House Five*

Excellent, of course. Disjointed. Innovative. Straightforward. Emotionless at times.

Whitaker, Rick - *Assuming the Position*

A memoir of hustler. Touching, plain speaking prose. Whitaker makes one thing very clear. Hustling is bad for the human spirit, yet he overcomes its addictions to survive (and flourish, I hope).

Wolff, Tobias - *This Boy's Life: A Memoir*

Wonderful. Same rich textures of detail as appear in his fiction. Yet his prose is simple, not overblown, almost as an adolescent boy might tell his story. Master.