

2007

Atkinson, Kate - *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (Smiley's #93)

Title turns out to be more metaphoric than real. This family's life is the "museum." Wonderfully realized. A great demonstration of how long spans of time can be compressed into short spaces of writing. She alternates between her own generation and those of her mother and grandmother (called "footnotes" i-xi). Skillfully plotted. Author lays the groundwork for revealing late in the novel that the narrator has believed (and that her mother has blamed her) for many years (yet repressed till now) that she pushed her twin sister into water and drowned her. She did not, in fact. Another sister had goaded the twin out onto the ice. Wow. Powerful, yet this event never overpowers the novel.

Best American Short Stories 2006 (Ann Patchett, ed.)

Boulevard - Volume 22, No. 2&3

My story, "My Long Playing Records" is featured along with Stephen Dixon's, Chris Offutt's—all great stories.

Bouldrey, Brian - *The Genius of Desire*

Glad I finally read it. While it is well-written and "literary" in merit, some things troubled me about it. It's probably just me, but I believe this family is TOO BIG. The "aunts" and "uncles" all ran together in my mind. Language is somewhat clunky at times, a shade purple at others.

Byrne, Rhonda - *The Secret*

Manipulative at best. Putting false hopes in people's minds. Positive thinking is necessary in life. But living life requires other factors, like intelligence. The section on good health is the shortest! The one on getting rich is the longest.

Carlson, Ron - *At the Jim Bridger*

Fabulous stories. I want to write this well—all the time! In the title story, a man saves another man's life by warming that man's naked body with his own naked body. Very powerful on many fronts.

Coetzee, J.M. - *Elizabeth Costello*

Love him, as usual. The narrative strand seems to get lost toward the end, but knowing his fastidiousness, it must be there. I shall re-read.

Dahl, Lesley - *The Problem with Paradise*

A YA novel by friend, Lesley. I'd forgotten what a fun read a book can be—no

heavy themes or symbolism (okay, symbolettes: turtles, island, cellphones [none], boats). The action moves so smoothly from one incident to the next. Reader wants to know how this young woman is going to cope. And I love the information about sea life (preserving it), sailing, and tropical storms. All contribute to the novel's own complexity. Love how the character grows naturally through situations to respect and like her stepmother, her father, her brother—to step outside herself to consider “liking” someone other than her current boyfriend. You feel she will function differently when she returns to California.

Didion, Joan - *Where I was From*

Didn't enjoy it as much as *Magical Thinking*, but still very fine. Very thoughtful and critical look at her home state (four generations)—good and bad.

Didion, Joan - *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Sometimes a book comes along just when you need to read it. Even though she's writing about the death of her husband, many of her statements apply to the death of any loved one: my father, for example. I, too, thought “magically”: I “saw” him, or felt his ghostly presence at my feet one night in bed (Freud calls it a psychosis), reliving what I did and what I thought I could have done differently to keep him alive. Sobering but uplifting in its power.

Ford, Ford Maddox - *The Good Soldier* (Smiley's #51)

The structure is odd. First person POV reveals some information, yet withholds other and then circles back to deliver more and more information. Blunt in places, more coy in others. The narrator says “I don't know” dozens of times. But he does know. It is an interesting effect, but I'm not sure I'd want to duplicate or imitate it—an author would need the same or similar purpose.

Ford's prose is so very English—conversational—but not in the same manner that Lawrence's is English. [Funny that I would select this book, written about the same time as *Lady Chatterly*. In fact, I'd thought FMF was American. Silly me.]

The ending (last twenty pages) is lackluster, a strange denouement. The “I don't know” POV (unreliable narrator) seems highly contrived by this point, though the narrator's “natural recall” stands as a fine defense. Upon second reading, the novel would probably seem more sophisticated, but I may never know.

Hunter, Tab - *Confidential*

Dishy tidbits. He and Tony Perkins were lovers at one time. Tab had sex with Rudolph N., the ballet dancer. But sad tale of a boy with strange mother. No father to speak of. Superficial, particularly the second half when an editor must have told Hunter (and his co-writer) to hurry it along. Contradictory in places. Winds up “poor” because he spends a lot of money. Yet someone must invest well for him because in later life he is comfortable and supports his mother (and her mother for a while): houses, cars, etc.

Jacobson, Sid and Ernie Colon - *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*

TTU/English Dept. public book discussion for September 2007. Okay, but still don't get graphic books although outlining events of the four jets simultaneously is interesting.

Lahiri, Jhumpa - *Namesake, The*

First contemporary novel in a long time to hold my attention. Captivating characters. Interesting story about Indian parents who move to America and name their firstborn Gogol. Economy of words, yet so articulate. Resonates with all of literature, not just with Gogol. She closes many gaps: cultural, generational, educational.

Lawrence, D.H. - *Lady Chatterly's Lover* (Smiley's #61)

In a novel things (how precise) . . . elements are echoed, repeated. Michaelis must seem to the reader, at first, that he is Lady Chatterly's lover. However, he is only practice for the lover to come, an easing into her "loverliness." Initially, he is in himself satisfying, but then not. Lady Chatterly realizes he will not bring her even sexual satisfaction, let alone love.

Lawrence, through Connie, really lambastes industrial England. As John Edwards speaks of two political Americas, Lawrence describes, laments the two Englands, how the industrial is blotting out the agricultural, and this is set in the mid-1920s! Fitzgerald's observation of America during the same period has a certain prescience of what is to come. More and more pollution. This pollution is perhaps a metaphor for a different kind of pollution.

Lawrence's lovemaking scenes are ever so erotic. Lovely. So what I would strive for. It is life itself. To write without even an allusion to sex is a kind of dishonesty. Everyone thinks about it, does it or doesn't but wants to, ignores though one can't really ignore yearnings that manifest themselves physically.

When Lawrence moves the novel to Venice, the narrative pace slows. The drama that has been building is truncated. Why would he do this?

The novel, except for some fine "descriptions," leaves the realm of the physical world. It all becomes a matter of certain machinations: getting the characters from here to there to finish off the novel. What if Connie had stayed and fought? It seems possible. Lawrence has limned Chatterly as such a strong rebellious woman. Why could she not—Hester Prynne style—have stayed and fought?

Lustig, Arnost - *Lovely Green Eyes* (Smiley's #97)

Seems unclear who the narrator is—a man who eventually marries "Skinny," a young girl who is turned into a prostitute by the Germans in WWII. Or rather, she accepts this lot to save herself (the rest of her family have been killed). Engrossing

at times.

As Smiley says, it is a difficult book to read. And as always—as with any translation—something is lost. Some energy. Some meaning. Some intent. Some emotion. All are lost.

McEwan, Ian - *Atonement* (Smiley's #100)

Beautiful. Disagree with Smiley [*Thirteen Ways*], however. I didn't "need" to know how Lola felt. It wasn't Lola's story; it was Briony's. Yes, McEwan does take risks in his writing. I admire that. And I've tried to emulate, taking risks, but risks have to be "worth" it. Must have some substance.

Mitford, Nancy - *Love in a Cold Climate* (Smiley's #74)

Again not as thrilled with the book as Smiley. The writer didn't involve me until about halfway through. Cedric is the stereotypic homosexual of the period (mid 1920s), without many individual characteristics to set him apart from the others, gay or straight.

Murdoch, Iris - *The Sea, The Sea* (Smiley's #82)

“. . . no novel can transcend its conception” (525), says Smiley in *Thirteen Ways*.

She actually does not like this novel as much. And I agree with her critique almost word for word. The lesson for the novelist? Aim high and make sure you hit your mark.

O. Henry Prize Stories 2007

Pessl, Marisha - *Special Topics in Calamity Physics: A Novel*

Excellent debut for a young writer, yet infuriating at times. The structure is a combination of narrator Blue's and her father's knowledge. Pessl uses narratives of other characters (particularly father) and Blue to extend way beyond usual scope of first person POV. This tool is helpful to a young narrator like Blue, who is bright but naïve, inexperienced. Pessl insists on using the word "snuck" for the past participle "sneaked." Does she use it because the narrator is sixteen (the new grammar) or do the author/editor NOT know it isn't part of the proper conjugation? The novel is part satire (of the intellectual/scholastic world), part murder mystery, and part *Legally Blonde*. All the parts fall (clickety-clack) into place by the end. Found myself reading quickly as if it were only a whodunit. Slowed down to try and savor author's work. Book is also part "autobiography" of the narrator. Each character is fleshed out. It is the discovery by a naïve young woman as to how the world works including a father who is quite a phony, yet by the end, especially after days and days of reflection, I felt cheated.

Spark, Muriel - *Loitering with Intent* (Smiley's #84)

Clever and amazing. Not as ga ga about it as Smiley, who evidently has read her entire oeuvre (including *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, a novel I love). I was, however, sucked in and involved, but in a whodunit-I've-got-to-read-as-fast-as-I-can-to-find-out sort of way. Always feel empty at the end of that kind of read—like having eaten an entire bag of potato chips, both stuffed and empty at the same time.

Tyler, Anne - *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (Smiley's #85)

Lovely book. Deft handling of multiple POVs. This was the main reason I selected it to read, to see an author handle it well. Tyler's handling is not obvious, has not jarring shifts. The characters are well delineated. The novel is borne of its characters, i.e., create the plot. Plot does not make a "place" for these characters. They come onto the page full-blown.

"Oh, this was what happened when you broke off all ties with your family! It wasn't right; with your family, if with no one else, you have to keep on trying" (174-5).

Wescott, Glenway - *The Pilgrim Hawk*

Short but piercing novel set entirely in one afternoon in 1940. A woman "owns" a hawk as a pet, and it sets up obvious symbolism (control, freedom), but a more subtle symbol for her marriage. Wescott is contemporary of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and just as good, yet he is never as heralded.

West, Rebecca - *The Fountain Overflows* (Smiley's #73)

Born in 1892, author is same age as my late grandmother. Though seemingly tedious (only by the reader's lack of tolerance for the thorough nature of 19th c. prose) the novel is a wonderful portrayal of musicians.

Winchester, Simon - *The Professor and the Madman*

Story of man who helped to write the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Read it for TTU/English Dept. public book discussion.