

2008

Achebe, Chinua - *Things Fall Apart*

I can see why this novel is on the International Baccalaureate reading list. Everyone should read this book to see what an untenable position African tribes have been in for far too long. Tribal people are somewhat childlike (not childish), naïve, and have been exploited by even the most educated of other cultures (particularly by people of the Church). At the same time, to survive in the larger world, Africans almost surely must give up—sacrifice—this ancient and simple way of life. If for no other reason than self-preservation, they must give it up.

Atkinson, Kate - *Case Histories*

Not as fine as *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. The tone is too flippant for subject matter. The POV seems too distant. Jumping back and forth among the three or four narratives seems to cheat all of them somehow although others have done it skillfully before her. Funny in places (haha). Sad (boohooohoo) in others, but more of a page turner than a literary book like Museum.

Best American Short Stories 2008 (Stephen King, ed.)

Ick. The stories were tinged with King's taste. Some stories seemed simplistic—shall I say it—like horror stories. Randy Devita's story, however, was excellent. Also liked Roy Kesey's, Aryn Kyle's, and Alice Munro's (as always).

Best of the Web 2008 (Steve Almond, guest ed.)

Most of the pieces are vibrant with youthful and/or iconoclastic voices. A poor copy editor marred what was otherwise a fine premiere edition.

[Funny story: my story “Basketball Is Not a Drug” was selected after having been published in *Blackbird*, and I considered it an honor to be represented in this inaugural edition of *Best of the Web*. The entire process moved along very quickly, and before I knew it, the copy had been released in July. I was never asked to read the “galley proof” (what’s that?) of my story. So I proudly sent the news to family, friends, and associates. I then read my copy and saw that someone had toyed heavily with my story. In composing it I intentionally and purposefully write the entire story in the second person, present tense, even while referring to the past. It is an artificial practice, but I had a method to my insanity, which was to give the reader the feeling that this madman who’s on a million prescriptions is living in a world that seems entirely in the now, past or not. But a sweet little copy editor had attempted (and gave up) to change some of the prose to past tense. My temperature rose three degrees in three seconds, and I fired off a letter outlining every error the copy editor had created. By the time Dan Wickett called me to soothe my hurt ego, I was over it. (Meditation has its properties, one of which is a forgiveness mantra.) However, I still refer readers to the original publication online at *Blackbird* [http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v6n1/fiction/jespers_r/basketball.htm]

Boyle, T.C. - *Tortilla Curtain*

Strange mixture of writing. Parts are so exquisitely written; the prose shines like diamonds. In other places author seems to make huge, cheap editorial leaps at which time the reader is supposed to jump with him without any preparation or transition (this could be *my* problem). The Mexicans' lives proceed concurrently with the gringos' lives, but there are too many coincidences. But then I realize that may be the author's plan—stories are interesting because several conflicting events happen at nearly the same time. The end is nicely literary and symbolic, but scarcely any of the rest of the novel seems to be. I liked it, but I didn't.

Carlson, Ron - *Five Skies*

Some people still write like short story writers while writing a novel. RC writes with Hemingway-like sparseness, moment-by-moment happenings. But his prose is almost too spare. At times the dialogue does not seem real—symbolic, perhaps. It sounds so stiff; characters use few contractions, for example, when in real life, we all use contractions out the wazoo. In spite of this distraction, it is a fine novel. Will read again.

Davis, Amanda - *Circling Down the Drain*

On the other hand . . . Davis writes about really tough subjects. You feel them. Why is it women writers get a rap for not being tough? Writing is imaginative yet quite real. [Davis died in a plane crash 2003.]

Dufresne, John - *Louisiana Power and Light*

Very good, but again a male author writes evocatively emotional scenes but without the apparent emotion. I didn't feel much as I read the novel because apparently the central character didn't either.

Eggers, Dave - *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*

Finally got around to reading it. A bit of irony, but given the ego of the writer, not too ironic. I enjoyed most of it very much. Evocative.

Freudenberger, Nell - *Lucky Girls*

Comprised of five long stories, all set in Asia/India. Excellent. Great control of the language. Subtle. Reminds me of Pam Houston.

Gilchrist, Ellen - *Victory Over Japan*

I loved these stories, particularly the early ones. The later ones were difficult to follow (too many characters). A very courageous writer, getting inside a wide variety of characters.

Norse, Harold - *Memoir of a Bastard Angel*

A poet's memoir. Unlike Mark Doty, however, his prose is NOT engaging. Some of the anecdotes are gossipy and entertaining.

Ondaatje, Michael - *Divisadero*

As usual, a book with many layers. Title at first relates to Divisadero Street in San Francisco—"a private core of memory" (65).

Later, more complex: "I come from Divisadero Street. Divisadero, from the Spanish word for 'division,' the street that at one time was the dividing line between San Francisco and the fields of the Presidio. Or it might be derived from the word *divisar*, meaning 'to gaze at something from a distance.' (There is a 'height' nearby called El Divisadero.) Thus a point from which you can look far into the distance" (142-3).

Like *The English Patient*, however, the novel is not readily accessible, which is a quality I treasure. Leaves me more to discover the next time I read it. And I shall.

Paris Review

See what the fuss is all about. Three very fine pieces of fiction.

Smith, Thorne - *Topper*

Bought it after seeing the old film. Writing is really weak compared with contemporary writing. Fluff(y), but once in a while, I like to read fluff(y).

Taylor, Benjamin - *The Book of Getting Even*

Bequeathed my copy to J while we were in Mass. Not as good as the *New Yorker* book critic indicated.