

2010

Bowles, Paul - *The Sheltering Sky*

Borrowed book from D. I had seen the film with Malkovich twice over a twenty year period and decided I must read the text. I couldn't get over how fresh the language remains after sixty years—even the dialogue that uses a bit of jargon and slang. The nightmare of being plopped into an alien culture is a metaphor for all our alien feelings. Saved a number of citations for possible epigraphs for a short story collection of “travel stories.”

Carlson, Ron - *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*

I studied with RC in a weeklong workshop at Tomales Bay CA in 2006. This book gives me some strong reminders of what PH and RC had taught: remain with the physical, the concrete images of the story. From the concrete rises naturally the symbolic without fanfare, without fuss or contrivance.

Coetzee, J.M. - *Summertime*

Interesting concept and not easily cracked by this reader. Having five or six POVs is difficult to follow in spite of contrasting voices by characters. In this one everything did not fall into place easily. Falls into category of re-reading some time, more carefully at that.

Franzen, Jonathan - *Discomfort Zone—A Personal History*

Love his essays. So personal yet incisive and open, truthful. His fiction can tend to be overwrought, but his essays are always so clean and lean.

Haslett, Adam - *Union Atlantic*

A nice surprise. I only bought it because I had read Haslett's short story collection, *You Are Not a Stranger Here*, and I was surprised to read of a really sweet gay teen Nate and a “straight” man Doug, who tolerates him for the sexual release. Perhaps not as literary as Haslett's stories except perhaps for his portrayal of Charlotte. Her dogs “talk,” spout the most seemingly erudite kinds of information, but they turn out only (surprise) to be Charlotte in the process of losing her mind.

Read it twice. Both times the end seems rushed, if not pat, then just a little too neat. Doug, whom we've come to like, escapes his legal problems by leaving the country, returning to the Middle East instead of paying for his crimes. Of course, he feels (and perhaps we do, too) that he has not committed a crime in the muddled milieu of early twenty-first century finance. Hope Haslett does better next time. He's a better writer than this. [In spite of my thinking, I really have fond memories of reading this book, largely because H. admirably writes a novel with gay characters and gay behavior, but it is not a gay novel, is not the genre fiction of late 1980s and early 1990s.]

Huxley, Aldous - *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*

Because this title is referenced in Tom Ford's film, *A Single Man*, I was curious about it. Prose is surprisingly ordinary, yet ahead of its time (or timeless, rather). The theme is all about holding onto one's youth or extending the length of one's life—with strange murder and even stranger ending in which, ostensibly, we are privy to meeting a couple of characters who are 200+ years old! Creepy and frankly not worth three days of reading time [or am I still immature in my reading habits?]

Isherwood, Christopher - *A Single Man* (second reading)

Mallon, Thomas - *Fellow Travelers*

Waugh, Evelyn - *Brideshead Revisited*

I became interested in reading Waugh's *BR* (1944) when I saw a 2009 film by the same title. K and I also rented the 1981 mini-series (12 hours), and it became apparent that it was probably following the narrative line of the novel to a T. I then read the book. Waugh writes about England in the early 1920s with the 1940s providing a frame. Narrator Charles Ryder carries on wildly with Flyte family members: first a fellow traveler at Oxford, Sebastian, with whom he has a boyish but physical affair. It is one destined to fail as Sebastian becomes an alcoholic. Later Charles falls for and nearly marries Sebastian's sister Julia. Even as he may fall for the family and the estate, a huge castle and grounds, he cannot join them. No matter how smart, how clever, how practiced at all the social arts and graces, he cannot join them—not even as he becomes a successful artist. My favorite line: "These memories, which are my life—for we possess nothing certainly except the past—were always with me" (235).

Fellow Travelers by Mallon is set in Washington, D.C. in the early 1950s but 1991 provides a certain frame. A young (twenty-two) Tim Laughlin is seduced by a thirty year-old Hawkins Fuller (Hawk), a handsome state representative official. They conduct a short riotous affair—flying under the radar of a homophobic Washington. When Tim realizes he can never have Hawk, he joins the Army for two and a half years. Of course, he never gets over Hawk—and he is destined to come in contact with him again, even as Hawk Fuller is now married. Yet they pick up their affair where they left off—by co-opting the third floor of a condemned building (not an accidental symbol). For weeks or months they meet until Tim, in the throes of making love, says, I love you. Mallon deftly pivots the POV to Hawk, who, realizing what a relationship with Tim will mean for his career, says, "I love you, too." Hawk, to save his career, and to save Tim from himself, sabotages Tim's future in Washington by seeing that his security clearance is nixed. Hawk Fuller leaves it to a mutual female friend to tell Tim. Fuller tells her to make it hard on him. Tim, we discover in the epilogue, had lived his life in the Boston area doing largely altruistic work, also as a clerk in a bookstore. He is brought to Hawk's attention (now in his late 60s) by dying at fifty-nine of bone cancer (not AIDS as Hawk first assumes). Earlier in the novel, Tim had given Hawk a paperweight of clear glass with a sprig of a cherry blossom floating at its center. He still possesses this object at the end of the novel. "It had traveled with him for many years, from one country to another, throughout a world grown unexpectedly, and increasingly, free" (354). There may

be no novelistic sentence that expresses more regret. Hawk realizes he could have at least some of the time lived . . . free . . . and not had as he chosen.

Last, I re-read Isherwood's *A Single Man* (1964) because a film directed by Tom Ford had just been released. As after my first reading, years ago, I found it disappointing. After loving the breezy but intelligent *Berlin Stories*, I found *ASM*, written by a sixty-three year-old Isherwood, dull—and I'm not sure why I say that. Perhaps he s-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-s a day too far—186 wide-margined pages, probably 50,000 words or less. George's day is spent largely trying to forget his lover Jim who has recently died in a car accident. We would expect to know Jim a little, and that's exactly how much we learn of this man George loved—very little. The classroom and George's relationship to his college students seem dated. His relationship with the woman who lives near him is not really "close," though he seems to indicate it is. [The film makes much more of it with a luscious Julianne Moore making a play for George amid his grief.]

Fellow Travelers, of the three books, dares to be the most "honest" about the homosexual's life—but then it can afford to be because it was written most recently, thirty-eight years after *BR* and forty years after *ASM*. In another forty years perhaps there will be no such thing as a homosexual novel. It won't be needed.

Keegan, Claire *Antarctica* | *Walk the Blue Fields*

I first read her in the *New Yorker* and with gift money bought this collection of stories, as well as her *Walk the Blue Fields*. Love the story, "Antarctica." Keegan writes like I would like to write. Some of her stories at the end of *Antarctica* seem very average. All of the stories in *Fields* are strong—very Irish. Love how she delves into her heritage, her language, the DNA of her family!

O'Brien, Tim - *The Things They Carried*

The title story is the best although the writing continues to be topnotch and moving throughout. The soldiers continue to carry their burdens (as does the reader) to the very end. [Read the title story in AP training and have studied it many times. It may be the most powerful story written in English in the 20th century.]

Shaffer, Mary Ann and Annie Barrows - *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society: A Novel*

Composed entirely of letters—a largely successful epistolary novel—although I always believe a little bit is lost in doing so exclusively. Think of one's own letters and letters of one's correspondents, and how much is left out by necessity, even a so-called "newsy" letter.

London 1946. Guernsey is an island once occupied by Germany in WWII for its strategic location. The novel is interesting, yet not absorbing. Keeping all the personages straight without benefit of the usual tags of description supplied by an author keep me from learning them all, "seeing" what they looked like.

Udall, Brady - *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint*

Three-fourths of this novel is better than/as good as any “orphan” novel I’ve ever read (including *Owen Meany* and anything by Dickens), but Part IV is too hurried, and it presents information that could have been introduced earlier. The POV (Edgar) technically makes this practice “acceptable” (because he lost his memory), but it’s not pleasing to the reader . . . nor is it entirely honest.