

Aciman, André. *Call Me by Your Name*. New York: Farrar, 2007.

This novel is a romance, both with a capital “r,” the kind that emphasizes subjectivity of the individual, and the small “r” kind, the Harlequin type that you must devour page by page, word by word, until you come to the final sentence of this desperate love affair between two young men.

I found the first half tediously slow. But then I thought, *Aciman must want us to be inside the head of the protagonist narrator, Elio*. These are the mind and heart of a seventeen-year-old boy who can't decide who he is whether it's with regard to sexual orientation or his prodigious musicianship (he transcribes manuscripts from one instrument to another and sells them). His mind belabors everything including the appearance of a young graduate student, Oliver, who comes to live in his family's Italian villa for the summer of 1983, a tradition Elio's father, a professor, has begun years before: *the summer intern*.

Both Elio and Oliver waste half the summer semi-rejecting one another, making love to girls, until finally Elio becomes more aggressive and discovers Oliver has wanted him since they first met. Their first kiss doesn't occur until page 81. But for a short, intense two weeks they become so close that they almost become one, wearing each other's clothing, Elio especially in love with a red swim suit of Oliver's. The very idea of calling each other by their own names—taking the name your parents have given you and calling your lover by that name—is a mental flip the reader must make to understand the depth of their intimacy:

**“Perhaps the physical and the metaphorical meanings are clumsy ways of understanding what happens when two beings need, not just to be close together, but to become so totally ductile that each becomes the other. To be who I am because of you. To be who he was because of me. To be in his mouth while he was in mine and no longer know whose it was, his cock or mine, that was in my mouth” (142-3).**

Aciman carries the development of this intimacy, which in the form of a deep friendship is to last forever, to the very last sentence of the book:

**“If you remember everything, I wanted to say, and if you are really like me, then before you leave tomorrow, or when you're just ready to shut the door of the taxi and have already said goodbye to everyone else and there's not a thing left to say in this life, then, just this once, turn to me, even in jest, or as an afterthought, which would have meant everything to me when we were together, and, as you did back then, look me in the face, hold my gaze, and call me by your name” (248).**

Through the specificity of this scenario, Aciman reveals a universal story of desire and love. We've all been there, and wow, should our lives turn out as swell as the lives of the two men characterized in this romance.

Alexie, Sherman. *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me: A Memoir*. New York: Little, Brown, 2017.

I once attended one of Mr. Alexie's readings in Iowa City; it was for his most recent publication, *The Toughest Indian in the World*. He's tall and lanky; at that time his hair was of medium length. Handsome. His performance was half stand-up act, for he is acerbically, wickedly funny and half dramatic reading in which he voiced all the parts. Not only the parts written on the lines, but you could hear the voices of his ancestors in the background, encouraging this talented young man to voice the Indian truth.

Once again in this painful but poignant memoir in which Alexie explores the relationship with his mother, he does not fail to delight, does not fail to sear our consciousness with the wrongs of our white ancestors. Just as his skin color condemns him, an innocent man, anyone with white skin must share the blame of our ancestors who ravaged the land and its native peoples as if it were all one prehistoric wellspring of riches. The book composed of 160 short chapters is NOT linear in structure; I do not think that being sequential is a particularly *Indian* way to tell a story. The author begins in 1972 when his family moves into a HUD home on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington, when the author is six years old. Some chapters are as short as a four-line poem. Other chapters are poems several pages in length (including one about his mother as quilter), each one a work of art in itself, enhancing a lyricism spread throughout the entirety of the book.

By beginning with an intimate description of the HUD house, Alexie gives us a double-edged view. On the one hand, the house represents a major step up for the family from the cramped quarters where they've lived before. The HUD house is not huge, but it does have a toilet, a bathroom, and that means a great deal to the family. These cramped quarters are an important metaphor for the Spokane Indian, whose entire tribe has been smothered, crammed into a piece of earth that represents a fraction of what it once owned. Alexie is always shoving against these boundaries of what white people expect of Indians, knowing their place. One must wonder how this nation would have developed if the white man had approached the Indians with respect and conceded to their wishes. If the white man had purchased land instead of stealing it, what then? If the white man had formed a government *with* native Americans instead of one that killed them off, what would we have today? Would any of us be here?

Anderson, Carol. *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.

Unspoken indeed. Professor Anderson takes readers through the long yet decisive history of White Rage. It is a history that has lain directly beneath the noses of all Americans but one that has been covered up, ignored, or outright distorted, as well. Anderson revives for readers the five primary events in US history which incite and keep alive White Rage.

First, following the Civil War, former Confederates refuse actually to take

Reconstruction seriously, and the North ignores the South's refusal. Two, as a direct result of this action, freed African-Americans migrate north, only to find they are no more welcome there than they have been in the South. In places, rejection is even more hostile, more vitriolic. Three, White Rage is incited with the *Brown vs. Topeka* decision to integrate American schools, and at least two decades are spent in fighting or rolling back provisions of this decision—making most school districts as segregated as they ever were. Four, the author delineates how Ronald Reagan's white-rage leadership reverses, insidiously, the Civil Rights gains of the 1960s and 1970s. And last, Anderson reiterates what contemporary readers have witnessed for themselves, how the election of an African-American president, Barack Obama, once again incites White Rage, a backlash that results in the questionable election of Donald Trump.

Anderson's book reinforces the recent writings of other black authors, Ta-Nehisi Coates, for one. She doesn't mention reparations, but my thinking is that our country will never be at rest, can never truly hold its head up among nations until it has, in more than a symbolic manner, attempted to make reparations to the descendants of slavery. It won't be difficult to determine who qualifies. The government will be able to use the same visible trait it used to discriminate, and that is the color of one's skin. Anyone with African-American lineage should qualify for funding for free education, help with daily living expenses until one is independent. Not only that, but the trillions of dollars that were accrued by this nation during slavery off the backs of black men and women, should be multiplied to, in some manner, make it up to our dark-skinned brethren. Their ancestors were captured on their native soil, mauled, maligned—treated more harshly than work animals—and the surviving generations of victims of White Rage deserve recompense. The one percent will have to pay their fair share to ensure that this happens, along with the rest of us, but it must be done. And it must be done with an amount of good will and love. The fires of White Rage must be quelled forever. Only then can we heal.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. With a new introduction by the author. New York: Anchor, 2017.

I suppose I always felt this book, originally published in 1986, was a woman's book—chick lit—but after viewing the MGM/Hulu production of Atwood's novel, I believe I was wrong. A dystopian world in which women are nothing more than baby makers and terribly devalued if they cannot deliver is not a world any of us want to live in. Such a world is also one in which *all* human beings are devalued, consigned to rigid gender and social roles. Atwood herself may articulate the novel's greatest value in her new introduction:

**“But there's a literary form I haven't mentioned yet: the literature of witness. Offred records her story as best she can; then she hides it, trusting that it may be discovered later, by someone who is free to understand it and share it. This is an act of hope: every recorded story implies a future reader. Robinson Crusoe keeps a journal. So did Samuel Pepys, in which he chronicled the Great Fire of London. So did many who lived during the Black Death, although their accounts often stop**

abruptly. So did Roméo Dallaire, who chronicled both the Rwandan genocide and the world's indifference to it. So did Anne Frank, hidden in her secret annex" (xviii).

Atwood concludes her remarks with the following statement:

**"In the wake of the recent American election, fears and anxieties proliferate. Basic civil liberties are seen as endangered, along with many of the rights for women won over the past decades and indeed the past centuries. In this divisive climate, in which hate for many groups seems on the rise and scorn for democratic institutions is being expressed by extremists of all stripes, it is a certainty that someone, somewhere—many, I would guess—are writing down what is happening as they themselves are experiencing it. Or they will remember, and record later, if they can.**

**Will their message be suppressed and hidden? Will they be found, centuries later, in an old house, behind a wall?**

**Let us hope it doesn't come to that. I trust it will not" (xix).**

Indeed. A novel in which almost half of the chapters are entitled "Night"—and are alternated with ones like "Jezebel's" and "Salvaging"—readers should be duly warned that we, too, could descend into a world of moral darkness, that we should take heed from this literature of witness.

Clements, Brian, Alexandra Teague, and Dean Rader, eds., with an introduction by Colum McCann. *Bullets into Bells: Poets & Citizens Respond to Gun Violence*. Boston: Beacon, 2017.

There would nothing wrong with presenting a book-length collection of anti-gun poetry by itself, but *Bullets into Bells* increases its power by pairing each poem with a response written by a person who has been deeply affected by such violence. Note the eloquence of these lines from "Heal the Cracks in the Bell of the World," by poet, Martín Espada.

Now the bells speak with their tongues of bronze.

Now the bells open their mouths of bronze to say:

*Listen to the bells a world away. Listen to the bell in the ruins of a city where children gathered copper shells like beach glass, and the copper boiled in the foundry, and the bell born in the foundry says: I was born of bullets, but now I sing of a world where bullets melt into bells. Listen to the bell in a city where cannons from the armies of the Great War sank into molten metal bubbling like a vat of chocolate, and the many mouths that once spoke the tongue of smoke form the one mouth of a bell that says: I was born of cannons, but now I sing of a world where cannons melt into bells (53-4).*

Or feel the biting irony of this response by Dan Gross to "The Gun Joke" by Jamaal May.

I've got another one:

A Republican hunter who loves guns and a Democrat city slicker who doesn't are sitting at the local watering hole somewhere in rural America. The bartender, with a warped sense of humor, brings up "gun control" and sits back to watch the sparks fly—and initially they do. Then, as the two get to talking, they realize they actually agree much more than they disagree, especially about expanding Brady background checks to keep guns out of the hands of people they both agree shouldn't have them, like criminals, domestic abusers, people who are dangerously mentally ill, and terrorists. Then a Congressperson walks into the bar, and the two citizens excitedly share their breakthrough, "Hey, Congressman, guess what! Turns out we've found a solution to gun violence that everyone agrees on and will save lives!" The Congressman responds, "Sorry guys, doesn't matter. The gun industry is paying my tab."

OK, so this one's not funny either. But you know what would at least be fun? Imagine if we could write a new ending where the Republican and the Democrat get outraged, decide to say #ENOUGH and to hold this Congressman accountable for placing the interests of the gun industry ahead of our safety. Then, in two years, that Congressman is out of a job and needs to buy his own drinks. That's the kind of real change that we all can make through our activism (116).

There are too many fine poems and too many strong responses to them to list here. Just buy the book and READ them for yourselves. Words alone may not solve this problem of gun violence but they can certainly articulate its many problems.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. New York: One World, 2017.

Of necessity this book is a sad one. It tells a truth, or many truths, really, that white people in our country must come to grips with—namely that our white ancestors committed crimes against black slaves and that, as descendants, we have failed and continue to fail to atone for their sins.

"If you see black identity as you see southern identity, or Irish identity, or Italian identity—not as a separate trunk, but as a branch of the American tree, with roots in the broader experience—then you understand that the particulars of black culture are inseparable from the particulars of the country" (54).

"I believed this because the reparations claim was so old, so transparently correct, so clearly the only solution, and yet it remained far outside the borders of American politics. To believe anything else was to believe that a robbery spanning generations could somehow be ameliorated while never acknowledging the scope of the crime and never making recompense" (159).

One point, among many, that Coates makes resoundingly is that the great wealth that has been with this country from the beginning was made off the backs of black slaves, free labor. If poor white families had had to harvest all that cotton themselves such wealth would never have been accumulated. And that's why some citizens of places like Mississippi are still embittered today: "In 1860 there were

**more millionaires per capita in the Mississippi Valley than anywhere else in the country” (183).** Those individuals may feel that their legacy was stolen from them, but they fail to think of the *legacy* stolen from black slaves: their lives and the lives of their descendants.

Whites could do with a healthy dose of walk-a-mile-in-my-shoes kind of empathy. Coates quotes one man: **“When they tore down the projects here, they left the high-rises and came to the neighborhood with that gang mentality. You don’t have nothing, so you going to take something, even if it’s not real. You don’t have no street, but in your mind it’s yours” (195).**

In Coates’s introduction he makes clear that the eight years he is talking about—Obama’s eight years in power—are shadowed or echoed by an earlier period in the late nineteenth century, when black citizens, as part of Reconstruction, ran the state of South Carolina. Eight years only because whites took that away from them. Each of the eight essays in this book is a championing statement that clarifies the history of African-Americans: “The Legacy of Malcolm X,” “The Case for Reparations,” and “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration.” “My President Was Black” concludes this book which must be required reading for all Americans.

Cooper, Anderson and Gloria Vanderbilt. *The Rainbow Comes and Goes: A Mother and Son on Life, Love, and Loss*. New York: HarperCollins, 2016.

The epistolary nature of this book (if emails can be considered letters) makes it interesting at times. TV journalist Anderson Cooper exchanges emails with his mother, both of them attempting to make sense of their lives as mother and son. At times, the exercise feels belabored as if Cooper is indeed a writer interviewing another celebrity. Yet there are enough genuine moments to provide readers with the feeling they’re witnessing something real. His mother, Gloria Vanderbilt, makes a startling statement:

**“Although I have never told you or any one else, I did this [to work under her birth name] because I believed that if I succeeded in writing, or acting, or painting, it would expiate in some mysterious and secret way the public vilification of my mother and free her to love me as I longed to be loved” (101).**

One issue that deeply affects both of their lives is the death of Anderson’s father, Wyatt Cooper. Gloria is totally dumbfounded. Anderson’s brother, Carter, will commit suicide. And Anderson himself declares his life would have been so different if his father had lived:

**“I certainly longed for that sense of safety as a teenager. It would have been nice to have a male figure in those years. It always surprised me that none of the men you were friends with made an effort to reach out to Carter or me after Daddy’s death. I kept secretly hoping someone would come forward as a mentor or a friend, occasionally taking me out for a slice of pizza or to a movie” (204).**

Cooper turns inward after his father’s death, obtains a fake press pass, and begins

his adventurous and often dangerous career in journalism overseas. He admits that if his father had lived, he might not have burned such a trail. Lucky for us that he did.

Corn, David and Michael Isikoff. *Russian Roulette: The Inside Story of Putin's War on America and the Election of Donald Trump*. New York: Hachette, 2018.

A hot read, mostly because these two journalists have taken the patchwork of daily news that we all read every day and transformed all that information into a seamless narrative that is easy to understand. And important, easy to appreciate. If Americans aren't concerned about the Russia investigation, they aren't very concerned about the survival of their country.

Nuggets:

**"Putin had once called the collapse of the Soviet Union the 'greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.' He was a Russian nationalist to his core. He wanted to extend Russian power, restoring its spheres of influence. He was an autocrat in the long tradition of Russian strongmen and had little interest in joining the club of Western liberal democracies—or winning its approval" (31).**

**"But the feedback the U.S. official received was mostly about what the secret source had to say about Ukraine. That was the crisis of the moment. The secret sources' warnings about Russia's information warfare plans in the United States and Europe garnered little attention. 'Anybody who had any doubt about Putin's intentions,' the U.S. official later said, 'just wasn't reading what we reported'" (54).**

**"It appeared that the DNC had been hit twice by separate teams of Russian cyber bandits. And the Russian hackers, CrowdStrike could tell, had been exfiltrating—that is, stealing—a host of DNC material, including emails and databases. Among the pilfered materials was the DNC's entire opposition research file on Donald Trump.**

**It was a complete compromise. There was no telling what the Russians had. Or what they would do with it" (76).**

**"And Trump Jr. touted Russian as a key source for profits. 'Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets . . . certainly with our project in SoHo and anywhere in New York,' he explained. 'We see a lot of money pouring in from Russia'" (89).**

**"According to Source C, a senior Russian financial official, the Trump operation was part of Putin's overall plan to sow disunity within the United States and the trans-Atlantic alliance. This source reported having heard Putin express his desire to return to the nineteenth-century style of 'Great Power' politics in which nations would pursue their own interests rather than an ideals-based international order" (147).**

Field, Sally. *In Pieces: A Memoir*. New York: Grand Central, 2018.

Many celebrity memoirs or autobiographies seem to read as if the *author* has recorded his or her story and transcribed it word for word—with little benefit of revision or constructive editing. Not so with Sally Field. The arc of her narrative advances from one point of tension to the next until the climax splatters on the page like a scene from one of her films. In making herself vulnerable to all the revealed truths of her life, she encourages readers to acknowledge their own truths, and because of this honesty readers are willing to forgive her her foibles. Even if Field does not possess a degree from an accredited institution (a lifetime regret on her part), she creates prose that stands up to that of any fine writer. Moreover, she does a superb job of connecting the emotional DNA from great-grandmother to grandmother to mother to Sally. She quotes from Jung as her touchstone:

**“Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on their environment and especially on their children than the un-lived life of the parent” (29).**

That both her mother and stepfather are failed actors (in the sense that they cannot sustain lifelong careers) contributes to how they relate to Sally as the child. The public may be tempted to believe that because one is offered a TV series at age eighteen said actor has it made for the rest of her life. Not so. Field makes plain how actors for many years may live from hand to mouth—without health insurance, without home ownership, sometimes without food for themselves or families. Not only do Sally’s parents experience these pitfalls, but so does she. As the star of *Gidget*, she is suddenly supporting her parents and siblings, because both her parents are at low points their own careers. And the path never gets easier. One might be paid quite well for one film but then the next project is not in sight, and an actor must stretch that income until something does come along. Moreover, Field has her own children and spouse to support, at times repeating the pattern of living she has grown up with.

But the story of Field’s acting career is only one strand of her memoir. She shares the most intimate parts of her life which help to illuminate who she is as an actor. I am reminded of her titular role in *Norma Rae*, when she stomps up onto a table and unites laborers where she works, and it is not difficult to believe that Field gains her power from a very real scene transpiring with her stepfather, one of the most dramatic scenes from the book. Sally is fifteen, both her mother and stepfather, *Jocko*, are drunk, and he picks a fight with Sally, informing her she’s a smart-ass, that he knows her inside and out, and she denies that he knows anything about her:

**“The room turned red, bright blazing red. I rose from where I sat perched on the edge of my childhood, rose up through years of fear, fury, and longing, of confusion and love. I stepped onto the coffee table and there we were again, eye-to-eye, nose-to nose.**

**‘I hate you! YOU’RE the liar! Not ME! And you know NOTHING!’ From my mouth came a voice, but it didn’t belong to me, and from a faraway place I watched as this little person who looked like me stood up until she seemed to tower over this man.**



**‘You don’t know who I am!’ This guttural voice, filled with loathing, vomited forth as she peered into his eyes. But it *was* me. I was still there, somewhere. And while she stood, I held my breath—for a minute? An hour? And a stunning realization hit me: He was frightened of her. He was frightened of me” (90).**

Jocko throws Field repeatedly against a glass patio door, but even so she realizes she has *won*. **“Somehow, some part of me that wasn’t afraid, that didn’t care if I was loved, or if I lived or died, had beaten him. He knew it too” (91).**

Wow. That page and a half stuns me. I suddenly see, perhaps, (for who knows where it emanates from) the power Field draws from to *act*, to create the memorable characters that she has for decades—the place inside her where she must retreat again and again, mining emotional truth to create honest and vibrant characters. As I said, *Wow*. Field’s memoir continues at this pace until the very end, in which she reaches resolution about a very key event from her childhood, one through which the reader can view Sally Field as a whole, integrated person, one who has more than earned what one might call happiness.

Franklin, Ruth. *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*. New York: Liveright, 2016.

Roger Straus, Jackson’s first publisher, often called her **“a rather haunted woman” (2)**. She had plenty to haunt her life, especially a mother who fiercely dominated her daughter, even after she became a literary success.

**“Jackson’s awareness that her mother had never loved her unconditionally—if at all—would be a source of sadness well into adulthood. Aside from a single angry letter that she did not send, she never gave voice to her feelings of rejection. But she expressed them in other ways. All the heroines of her novels are essentially motherless—if not lacking a mother entirely, then victims of loveless mothering. Many of her books include acts of matricide, either unconscious or deliberate” (25).**

Jackson spends nearly the rest of her life fighting against her mother about how to raise her own children, how to cook and keep house, how to go about her career even though her mother had never had one of her own. At the same time that Shirley attempts to establish a literary career while being supportive of a husband in the related business of literary criticism and raising four children, she seems to love being with her children. She often packs them up into the car to go on day trips. She more or less lets them have free run of the house and town, while at the same time, scolds her children with the same invisible criticism that she learned from her mother.

Franklin goes into great detail about Jackson’s literary life, each novel, her famous story, “The Lottery.” She paints an honest picture of Jackson’s life, one that is so interesting, I didn’t want the book to end.

Ginna, Peter, ed. *What Editors Do: The Art, Craft, and Business of Book Editing*.

Chicago: U of Chicago, 2017.

Ginna has amassed a large number of essays by editors and agents, or those who used to be one or the other. He organizes their pieces around broad topics such as acquisition, editing process, and publication. But he also includes a section concerning memoir and one about careers in publishing. Writers have heard ad infinitum what editors want when they attend workshops, but somehow, when one is suddenly on the other side of the desk peering through the *eyes* of those editors one begins to understand. One begins to change how one might structure one's book or write a book proposal. One suddenly sees what is important. One sees what editors *do not* want to see. I found three essays to be particularly helpful to me, but I imagine that each reader of this book may find others more attractive precisely because they have different priorities than I do.

1. "The Other Side of the Desk: What I learned about Editing When I Became a Literary Agent," by Susan Rabiner.

"It's the value added by the author to what is essentially a set of facts, stories, and commentary in search of a larger meaning. To conceptualize is to link these facts, stories, and commentary to a compelling point. A successful book proposal offers to take the reader on a journey. It may be one he has taken, in some form, many times before. An author's concept for the book is her promise [is] that with the benefit of new research, new stories, new insights, and her authorial guiding vision, the reader will see new things on the journey and arrive at a new destination—and even, at the end, be changed by the experience" (77).

2. "The Half-Open Door: Independent Publishing and Community," by Jeff Shotts.

"There is now, as a result, a vast commercial enterprise around book publishing, where annual profits are valued above cultural currency, books are spoken of in terms of 'units,' and readers are sorted by algorithm into categories by which they can be told with increasing accuracy just what it is they want. Commercial values have conflated quantity with quality, and commercial publishers are forced to create the appearance of quality, if there is none, in service of quantity. High advances and movie deals make the news, as do celebrity authors and their book parties and television appearances" (142).

3. "Marginalia: On Editing General Nonfiction," by Matt Weiland.

"I also remind the reader that clarity is king. 'There is nothing that requires more precision, and purity of express, than to write in a familiar style,' as the great English essayist William Hazlitt put it nearly two hundred years ago. 'To write as anyone would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with *ease, force, and perspicuity* . . .' To me these are the cardinal virtues of strong, convincing English prose. (Hazlitt's last term, meaning 'clarity,' is now, alas, an antique word)" (173).

These essays are ones that I shall refer to again and again as I attempt to maintain and writing and a publishing life. Perhaps you might like them, as well.

Houston, Pam. *Contents May Have Shifted: A Novel*. New York: Norton, 2012.

I first heard Pam Houston speak in 2000 when she gave a reading for her new book, *Waltzing the Cat*. As she addressed a sizeable audience, and, as I met her afterward at a reception I told myself if I ever got a chance to take one of her workshops I would. I managed three: Taos, 2004 and 2005; I even journeyed to Mallorca, Spain to study with her. I didn't do so as a groupie necessarily (though I am); it took me three different week-longers to digest her method for creating fiction—a method that resonated with me, using one's own life and one's own observations to create narrative.

I've always admired Houston's ability to transform intensely autobiographical information into strong fiction. Some writers refuse to touch such material; others wallow in their biographies like dogs in the dust, trying but failing to rid themselves of their demon fleas. Pam has been the most influential contemporary writer, in that respect, on my thinking about writing. She taught me how to transform *my* autobiographical material, or perhaps she taught me to give myself permission to do so because by being that honest writers can hurt someone they love or even people they don't. And you have to balance your honesty against how much you value the relationship, and honesty doesn't always lose out.

Anyway . . . I feel that I was in on the inception of *Contents*, as well as several of its chapters because during class or at a meal, Pam would share an anecdote that eventually wound up in this novel. In 2008, at a Point Reyes bookstore, I heard her read one of the book's short chapters-in-progress. At the time, she planned, I think, to write 144 of those chapters giving voice to the many hundreds of trips she had taken around the world, the hundreds of places she had visited in the States, the myriad human beings who had influenced her life. Why 144? "I have always, for some reason, thought in twelves" (308), Pam declares in the very last section of her book, the "Reading Group Guide." She ends up with 132 chapters and 12 airplane stories, but still, I think she delivers on her original plan. The novel feels very global, in its fast-paced, jet-flight episodes knitted together like bones on the mend. How else could she portray a trip around the world, one which may never end as long as she lives?

Both Pam-the-person and Pam-the-author nearly lose their lives as four-year-olds when their fathers seriously abuse them, and their mothers cover up the story, amuse themselves through *retelling* it over cocktails, falsehoods about her pulling large pieces of furniture over on top of herself. Nearly losing their lives gives both Pams permission to push their lives to the limits because otherwise they might not be worth living. Planes that almost fall out of the sky. Boyfriends *who don't work out*. Bedeviled by chronic pain since the childhood *accident* . . . neither Pam is comfortable unless *her* contents have shifted a bit since her last outing. She must be on the move, searching for that next glimmering glimpse of life, whether it is of a Tibetan monk or the life of a child whom she helping to raise. She must move.

Such a novel reflects the life that Pam lives, right? In any given year, Pam-the-author is equally at home on her ranch in Colorado, which she purchased after the phenomenal success of her first book, *Cowboys Are My Weakness*, equally at home on campus, equally at home teaching scores of workshops or giving readings, equally at home traveling to remote parts of the world to test her physical or emotional strength, equally at home revealing the parental abuse she was subject to as a child, lovers who have betrayed her. In this book, in particular, she manages to transform the latter three issues into a gross of clipped chapters, in which Pam-the-character (in the manner of Christopher Isherwood naming his protagonist *Herr Issywoo* after himself) makes herself at home on flights to Exhuma in the Bahamas, to places as obscure as Ozona, Texas. Tibet. New Zealand. Paris. Chapters named with a flight number UA #368. Your life, as long as you are reading this book, is as discombobulated as Pam-the-character's. You live it with her, the flashback in which Pam-the-character is hospitalized for injuries caused by her abusive father. Pam Houston—the author—gives her all to every minute that she lives, I would suspect, even when she is lying very still, devouring the pages of a new book or romping with her Irish wolf hounds through the meadowlands of her ranch. As long as she is breathing, she is inhaling the content of her next book, itself spinning inside her brain while all she seems to do is become a vessel for it, channeling the narrative burning inside her at that moment. *That* is what *Contents May Have Shifted* is about. After having been moved and enlightened by her first four books, I can now say the same for this one.

And Pam Houston's new book, *Deep Creek: Finding Hope in the High Country*, comes out January 29, 2019. You'd better believe I've already ordered it, that I can't wait to begin feasting on her pages once more. You see, I'm still learning from Pam.

Jackson, Shirley. *Life Among the Savages*. New York: Farrar, 1948.

Jackson's memoir about family life up through the birth of her fourth and final child is entertaining and timeless, though it is written in the 1940s. What contributes to this timelessness is Jackson's grasp of the universal through developing the specific.

This is a woman's story to tell, though it is for everyone to read. Jackson published many of these narratives in women's magazines before releasing them in this book. She develops the universal by delving into the concrete. She never names her husband: it is always *my husband this*, *my husband that*, objectifying him as the head-in-the-clouds academic that he is, in the same manner in which she, as housewife, is objectified in this post-World War II period. She has pet names for her oldest three children: Laurie for Laurence (which he vehemently sluffs off at one point); Jannie for Joanne, and Sally for Sarah. It's as if by naming them something more intimate, they cannot possibly belong to someone else, the world at large.

What saves her persona from being a martyr is that Jackson actually enjoys being a mother and wife while at the same time pursuing a serious career as a writer of fiction. She would be considered a permissive mother, but such a free household allows all her children to develop unfettered: Laurie is allowed to take on a boisterous, all-boy personality; Jannie develops as one who expresses herself as bluntly as Jackson herself does; and charming little Sally is a princess, who quotes fairy tales and talks in oblique sort of riddles when she is angry about something. To be sure, Jackson spars with her children (and her husband) on occasion, nudges them back and forth over the goal line, but she allows them simply to be. One would love to know how they developed as adults, and how *their* children fared.

This free and delightful yet sophisticated read is timeless and should be perused by everyone: women and men, old and young, especially those who think they know everything about raising children. They could learn a thing or two from the late great Shirley Jackson.

Jackson, Shirley. *Raising Demons*. New York: Farrar, 1957.

I loved this sequel to Jackson's first memoir about family, *Life Among the Savages*. For those readers who might think that a successful writer with a family of four children (five if you count her husband) might neglect any of them, such readers should take note of the following passage, in which a mother who is in full grasp of the personality of each one of her children writes:

**"It has long been my belief that in times of great stress, such as a four-day vacation, the thin veneer of family unity wears off almost at once, and we are revealed in our true personalities; Laurie, for instance, is a small-town mayor, Jannie a Games Mistress, Sally a vague, stern old lady watching the rest of us with remote disapproval, and Barry a small intrepid foot soldier, following unquestioningly and doggedly. The two nervous creatures hovering in the background, making small futile gestures and tending to laugh weakly, are, of course, unmistakable. They are there to help with the luggage. These several personalities began to emerge in the car driving to Albany, and Sally's hat began to unravel" (237).**

Shirley Jackson may have been the first Tiger Mother as she reared her four children in the 1950s. Now, I don't mean that she micromanaged their lives, but she did see, by her own accounting, that they were properly cared for, not just in terms of the basics like food and clothing, but also their emotional and psychological development. She knew the *essence* of each child and attempted to open up the world to them, or, at the very least, she stayed out of their way. She allowed Laurie to be all boy, Sally to be a starry-eyed dreamer of tales, Jannie to be just as bossy as her mother, and Barry, the youngest, he was allowed to drink in the wonder of life. Who could ask for more (perhaps her children's memoirs might reveal a different dynamic).

Mundy, Liza. *Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II*. New York: Hachette, 2017.

Award-winning author Mundy writes of 11,000 women recruited in the early 1940s to help break codes of Japanese and German intelligence. The Navy recruits from exclusive women's colleges in the Northeast, and the Army recruits from the ranks of teachers (mostly math but some who teach foreign languages), many of whom are disenchanted with their poor salaries and tough classroom conditions.

**“Sworn to secrecy, the women were forbidden from telling anybody what they were doing: not their friends, not their parents, not their family, not their roommates. They were not to let news of their training leak into campus newspapers or disclose it in a letter, not even to their enlisted brother or boyfriend. If pressed, they could say they were studying communications: the routing of ordinary naval messages” (5).**

This dictum is one that is repeated throughout the book until the very end. Even as some of these women survive into their nineties, even after the government grants them permission, finally, they are reticent to tell their stories. However, Mundy does a superb job of seeking out these sources, still sharp mentally, and getting their stories down. Mundy also combs written sources to fill out her epic narrative of quiet courage among these women—not only their work lives but their personal lives as well.

The code girls tackle many important difficulties, including the one of German U-boats sinking US ships in the Atlantic (as many as 500 by 1942). The women slowly but methodically solve this problem so that American ships are able to get supplies and matériel to troops in Europe. They are also paramount in intercepting official messages between Japanese and German leaders and confounding their strategies. Because of their unique skills they make the work look far easier than it is. With a combination of innate ability and extreme dedication these women are able to shorten the war and help save lives.

Every man should think about what it would be like to minimize his intellect, to hide what he does for a living, to keep it a secret for almost seventy years—and come to the conclusion that it is not fair. And never again in our history should women be called upon to keep silent in this manner. It's not only unfair but it cuts in half the sources our country could be using to solve problems. This book is not only a tribute to these particular women but to the idea of women taking their true place in the world as multifaceted individuals.

Posey, Parker. *You're on an Airplane: A Self-Mythologizing Memoir*. New York: Blue Rider, 2018.

I must preface my remarks by professing that I am a HUGE Parker Posey fan. I luh, luh, love her work. I can't say I've seen ALL of her films, because sometimes they're not easy to find, but I have to declare that whether Posey is the kooky character in the *Tales of the City* series or featured in one of her other roles, she is a brilliant character actress who prefers those roles to leading ones; at least that is the impression she gives. Yet I believe that because of her power as an actor her best roles may yet lie ahead, if she can find the right properties. So say I.

Unlike many actors, who have suffered untold damage in their childhoods, Posey seems to have flourished *because* of the strong relationships with family members, particularly her parents, who encouraged her in her creativity. Yet Posey does not make acting sound easy or even appealing. Rather, she shares in great detail what many of her film shoots are like, the actors and directors with whom she associates herself for weeks or months. The squabbles, insightful observations about the business of making film.

What a fun yet significant read! Part scrapbook, part photo album, part Dear Diary, part tell-all, part recipe book, this memoir reads as if it is a monologue right out of one of her films. At turns, kooky, serious, honest, even a bit mean (in a kind sort of way):

**“I also started doing this thing when I drove around, that is completely obnoxious or funny, depending on who you are and how you feel: I’d roll down my window, get a person’s attention on the sidewalk or crossing the street, and call out, ‘Excuse me! Are you a vegan?!’ Or I got the attention of someone in a car at a stop sign and said causally (but a little too loud), ‘I AM A VEGAN.’ This was more fun in the passenger seat, when I’d get to hang out of the car. It was good clean fun—unlike veganism, which is hard work.**

**I get this from my parents—doing silly, unexpected stuff. One time we went on a trip and my mon wanted to stop at a mall for a shopping fix, so we went into a store called Spencer’s and bought some plastic masks. My dad wore a Nixon one, I remember, and my mom was a pig. They’d put them on as they drove, and we’d see who they could freak out, laughing until we made ourselves tired. It wasn’t cool anymore to drink in the car, so that’s how they replaced their fun. Not really, they still drank in the car, but in moderation” (189).**

This passage seems so indicative of Parker Posey’s life: somewhat carefree, devil-may-care-what-happens-to-me, opinionated, fearless. Sort of her generation’s Tallulah Bankhead; in fact, I could *so* see her playing Bankhead in a biopic. Hey, Parker’s agent, are you reading this? Tallulah Bankhead, you hear!

Yet, Posey reveals what may be her true view of acting:

**“It’s an industry (an art, hopefully) full of orphans left to create their own worlds with one another. I don’t feel glamorous, I feel like a possum—the animal born clinging to its mother’s tail, that grows up by falling off it, and probably too soon. Acting is the possum’s defense. Have you ever seen this? When threatened, they play dead—and they’re very convincing at it. They scare themselves so deeply that their eyes roll back into their heads and their little tongues stick out. They’ll even take it so far as to froth at the mouth. They’ll go on with the act as long as they’re terrified and it’s truly ghoulish, because they’ve been known to be buried alive—they’re famous for it” (227).**

And Posey doesn’t sugarcoat what an actor’s life can be like:

**“A dollar seventy-five in my bank account, isn’t that too much? It doesn’t make sense, right? But all those independent movies I did in the nineties were done on the cheap. I was counting coins, which I’d put in those paper roll-ups to take to the deli so I could buy pasta to make for dinner. I didn’t know anyone else who was famous and broke” (288).**

The conceit that formulates this book is that Parker is seated on an airplane and sharing life with a seatmate. Occasionally, the reader forgets, until once again, Posey throws in a second-person address to this imaginary person. I say *imaginary* because I believe this person is really dead, or at least never talks back to Parker Posey. The format may or may not work, but Posey’s life is certainly quirky yet profound enough to sustain my interest for over 300 pages!

Potter, Margaret Yardley. *At Home on the Range*. With a foreword by Elizabeth Gilbert and introduction by the author. San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2012.

This book was originally published by Potter in 1947 and may be the second cookbook I’ve ever read from cover-to-cover (the other, Mildred O. Knopf’s *Memoirs of a Cook*). Often, I’ll casually peruse the contents, checking out the ingredients of a particular recipe, to see if I might like to prepare it. But *At Home on the Range* is no ordinary cookbook. The author seems to create a story with each recipe. Even its presentation on the page defies modern conventions where one lists the ingredients above and directions below. No, Potter’s entire recipe is frequently a delightful but informative narrative, giving one the most minute detail about how to prepare it. Here is a notable example:

**CHICKEN CACCIATORE is made for six with 2 three-pound frying chickens cut up, dusted with flour, salt and pepper, and browned in ½ cup of olive oil. Fish out the chicken, put the pieces in a casserole, and add to the oil a chopped garlic clove, 1 cup of chopped onions, and an optional pinch of sweet basil and rosemary. When the onions are soft, pour in 1 can of tomatoes and 2 tablespoons of tomato paste. Let this simmer for 15 minutes. Pour over the chickens, cover tightly, and cook in a 350° oven for 45 minutes. Serve it with buttered boiled spaghetti, and pass the grated Romano or Parmesan cheese.**

I’ve prepared perhaps a half a dozen different recipes for chicken cacciatore (my late Italian uncle informed me *cacciatore* means “of the hunter,” intimating a certain flexibility of contents), but I find this one fascinating. First, Potter uses different phraseology, “dusted with flour,” instead of perhaps the more common “dredged;” she specifies “fish out the chicken,” instead of “remove the chicken;” “pass the Romano or Parmesan cheese” instead of “sprinkle with,” subtly indicating that cheese is an option. “Buttered boiled spaghetti,” however, sounds a bit redundant to today’s ear. Second, Potter departs from most cacciatore recipes by preparing the sauce separately and then pouring it over the chicken; most directions require one to add all ingredients following the browning of the chicken (usually with garlic and onion). And finally, her recipe is baked in the oven instead of simmering in a skillet or Dutch oven.



Overall, Potter's directions are exacting yet flexible, her opinions strong, so much so that I shall have to try this one, too, just to see how it tastes—not to mention the other two dozen recipes I've marked with Post-It arrows! McSweeney's has recreated the original end papers and added engaging chapter fonts, as well as pert little illustrations, giving the book its historical and artistic due. If you love to cook AND read, you'll love this book.

St. Aubyn, Edward. *Patrick Melrose*. New York: Picador, 2015.

I more often read a novel *before* viewing a film version, but less often do I read the novel *after* tuning into something like, say, Showtime's "five-part limited series," of the same title. It is one of those series which may have been equal to the book, or books, because *Patrick Melrose* is a compendium of St. Aubyn's five novels about the same character, and it unfolds almost as luxuriously as the book.

*Patrick Melrose* may be one of the best contemporary novels to come to grips with the life of a drug addict. But more important, I believe St. Aubyn traces the aspect of abuse within a family over several generations, and how, unaddressed, it can devastate a family—wealthy or not. Substance abuse is merely a symptom of the deeper problems buried in the Melrose family history.

Patrick Melrose, born in 1960, approximately the same time as his creator, experiences physical abuse when his father perpetrates sodomy on him at an early age—repeatedly over several years. But then there is also the emotional abuse, when Patrick's father, David, swears Patrick to secrecy or he will be **"very severely punished" (79)**. (In the film, he says he *will snap him like a twig*.)

Patrick's mother? Well, her abuse of him manifests itself as ignorance—blissful, willful ignorance of how David is treating their son. She, too, has suffered abuse as a child and at the hands of her husband, and they, without even trying, do their best to destroy Patrick's life. What is most remarkable about this novel is that St. Aubyn manages to limn the skeletal remains of the several generations of this family without any shortcuts or platitudes. On the next to the last pages of the book, Patrick has earned the profound conclusions at which he arrives:

**"He imagined himself as the little boy he had been at that time, shattered and mad at heart, but with a ferocious, heroic persona, which had eventually stopped his father's abuses with a single determined refusal. He knew that if he was going to understand the chaos that was invading him, he would have to renounce the protection of that fragile hero, just as he had to renounce the illusion of his mother's protection by acknowledging that his parents had been collaborators as well as antagonists" (855-6).**

**"He was after all not an infant, but a man experiencing the chaos of infancy welling up in his conscious mind. As the compassion expanded he saw himself on equal**

terms with his supposed persecutors, saw his parents, who appeared to be the cause of his suffering, as unhappy children with parents who appeared to be the cause of their suffering: there was no one to blame and everyone to help, and those who appeared to deserve the most blame needed the most help” (856).

My God, in a nutshell, the entire novel portrays the unraveling of this moneyed British family, their accumulated abuses and how they lead to “drug and alcohol abuse” by Patrick, his chosen method of coping. Cause and effect, folks. Cause and effect.

I have only a couple of observations which might manifest themselves as criticisms: In spite of St. Aubyn’s lyrical and commanding prose, sustained over nearly nine hundred pages, I was often distracted. First, he participates in what American workshoppers call *head-hopping*, that is, employing the third-person omniscient point of view, not commonly used since the nineteenth century. Yet, I must probably applaud him because he manages to employ it with great skill, and, in a novel of this breadth, it is amusing and strategically important for the reader to know exactly what each character is thinking at any given time.

And two, the author uses, repeatedly, speech attributions which seem inappropriate or awkward. What do I mean? Any speech attribution, to my way of thinking, ought to be a synonym for the word “said,” or “spoke”: “declared,” “replied,” or similar verbs. Not so here: **“The daughter is impossible,” grinned Laura (408).** “Grin” is *not* a synonym for “said,” and it gives the sentence an amateurish patina. I wonder: Is this an acceptable practice in the writing of fiction within the United Kingdom? I should hope not. Another scathing example: **“You may well ask,” scowled Nicholas (704).** Seriously? How is “scowling” like “speaking?” This questionable practice is rife throughout the novel, marring what is otherwise impeccable prose, and could have been nipped in the bud by a good editor. Please help me to understand, Mr. St. Aubyn. Why would you do this to your book?

Strout, Elizabeth. *Anything is Possible*. New York: Random, 2017.

Strout is a master at creating simple stories that are riddled with complexities and nuance that are difficult to apprehend with one reading. You might think you’re finished reading about one character, and then he or she returns to another chapter. Charles Macauley, for example, has layer upon layer added to his part until we might think we understand him. In the meantime, we learn of others: Two sisters, one who marries well, one who does not. And a prodigal daughter/citizen, who becomes a famous author and returns to her humble beginnings to have more than a little abuse heaped upon her. But now Lucy Barton is ready to face it all.

Tribe, Laurence, and Joshua Matz. *To End a Presidency: The Power of Impeachment*. New York, Basic, 2018.

This eminently readable book explicates a complex subject, one worthy of study during a period when the term “impeachment” is bandied about in the media with

incredible ease. The authors do a commendable job of, first of all, discussing the laws governing impeachment of a president and how they sprang to life in the first place as part of the US Constitution.

On the other hand, Tribe and Matz help readers to understand that nothing about impeachment is simple. They limn the intricacies of the laws, how the proceedings must begin in the House of Representatives and can conclude only in the Senate. They tell us about how difficult it is to obtain a two-thirds majority vote (under normal times, let alone now with such great partisan divides) in either house to advance impeachment. They explain which offenses are impeachable and which are not and why, that it is not a matter of removing a president from office because he is a boor. He must have committed a crime or misdemeanor. Even with those parameters, it is never a simple matter for Congress to decide.

Ultimately, the authors rule against impeaching our current President, largely because of the disruption it would cause in our society. Under normal circumstances, the executive and judicial branches of the government would help to reign in the abuses of a president. Even now, during times that do not seem normal to those of us of a certain age, the other two branches are doing their job. The House will be governed, beginning in January, 2019, by Democrats, who can begin to call the actions of President 45 into question. Even the Supreme Court, which has now been loaded with conservatives, could surprise the president. The two men whom he seated owe him absolutely nothing. The president cannot remove them from their seats if they should rule against him. And if they do favor him in ways that are questionable, they themselves could be subject to impeachment . . . theoretically. As the authors say in conclusion:

**“We must abandon fantasies that the impeachment power will swoop in and save us from destruction. It can’t and it won’t. When our democracy is threatened from within, we must save it ourselves. Maybe impeachment should play a role in that process; maybe it will only make things worse. Either way, reversing the rot in our political system will require creative and heroic efforts throughout American life. And at the heart of those efforts will be the struggle to transcend our deepest divisions in search of common purpose and mutual understanding” (240-1).**

**“Transcending forces of decay, disinformation, and disunion will not be easy. This is the great national calling of our time—the North Star that must guide decisions about ending, or enduring disastrous presidencies. There is no quick fix for the challenges we face. They are surmountable only if each of us resolves anew that American and democracy are well worth fighting for” (241).**

Tur, Katy. *Unbelievable: My Front-Row Seat to the Craziest Campaign in American History*. New York: Morrow, 2017.

This engrossing book seems to be made up of at least three strands: 1) MSNBC reporter Katy Tur’s narrative of her assignment to follow then candidate Donald Trump throughout the entirety of the 2016 presidential campaign. 2) In doing so she shares a great deal about what it’s like to be a reporter placed in such a position,

the great moments, the uncomfortable moments, the shortchanging of her personal life. 3) And speaking of that, Tur interweaves bits of her personal life—including her childhood and youth, her love life, and her travels—into the weft of her fascinating storytelling.

With regard to 1) she has mixed feelings about leaving her assignment which places her in London, England. Accepting it means moving to New York, giving up her flat in London, her friends there, a boyfriend in Paris, I believe. Turning it down would mean giving up the opportunity to cover one of the most controversial presidential candidates in history, and might also mean squelching her career by not playing ball with the producers at MSNBC.

Katy Tur shares with the reader the details of her travels with DT: flying coach, packing economically yet in a way that allows her to appear fresh on camera (dry shampoo?); a significant lack of sleep because she can be wakened at any moment to be given an assignment; keeping up with tens of thousands of work-related emails, many of which she winds up dumping. Sad, sad meals grabbed here and there, the lack of exercise on any given day or week. But most of all, we see what it feels like to be on camera nation-wide:

**“*Hardball* wants me live. I take a deep breath, stand up, put in my earpiece, and hook back into MSNBC’s live coverage.**

**‘Well, let’s go to Katy Tur. Katy, are you used to this kind of trash talk from him?’ I hear Chris Matthews but I can’t understand what he’s saying. Trump is still bellowing behind me. Chris tries again. ‘I’m trying to couch this in the most politically correct way. Are you used to the trash talk that Donald Trump threw at you tonight?’” (77).**

Finally, Tur’s personal history adds a tantalizing touch to her career. It seems that her parents, Bob and Marika Tur begin in the 1970s a helicopter service in which they cover in Los Angeles such happenings as **“fires, shootings, and most unforgettably, police pursuits. Their first big get was Madonna’s 1985 wedding to Sean Penn” (108).**

From her parents, especially, father, she learns the thrill of the hunt. As a child, she goes up with her dad in his ‘copter, and one point she, without benefit of a harness, hangs out the cockpit a bit too far. Her dad says little but apparently turns white. At thirty-two or -three Tur must feel jaded in some sense, as anyone who’s been in a business for a decade must, but she’s got a long career ahead of her if she can sustain this kind of reporting and writing—if she can continue to hang out there without a harness.

Weinman, Sarah. *The Real Lolita: The Kidnapping of Sally Horner and the Novel That Scandalized the World*. New York: HarperCollins, 2018.

Weinman takes two narratives—one, the actual kidnapping case of Sally Horner, in 1948, and two, author Vladimir Nabokov’s shaping of his 1950 novel, *Lolita*—and weaves them into a single, seamless story. About halfway through the Weinman’s

book, Sally Horner is rescued by the FBI and returned to her mother. Two years later, Sally dies, at fifteen, in a car accident, and I wonder, *In what direction could the author possibly now take this book?*

All along, Weinman has woven the saga of how Nabokov writes *Lolita* with the story of Sally Horner, providing textual proof by way of his notecards and other documents that Nabokov was indeed influenced by Horner's story. To what degree foments a debate between Nabokov and the literati that Weinman covers extensively. She also develops the idea that Nabokov has long been fascinated by the narrative of pedophiles and the children to whom they are attracted; in *Lolita* he finally produces the right combination of elements, one of which is the deployment of an unreliable narrator to steer the reader away from what a sinister crime he is actually participating in. Weinman skillfully stitches together these two narratives and provides a long, relaxed denouement tying up all the loose ends: relatives affected by Sally's premature death, the imprisonment of her captor, a discussion of the abuse of young girls and women, and more.

Because of her unrelenting research and attention paid to detail, Weinman provides a fascinating read combining the genre of true crime with serious literary discussion of Nabokov's novel. It is one of the few books I've read this year that I have not been able to put down once started. It's that good.

Wiesel, Elie. *The Night Trilogy: Consisting of a Memoir, Translated by Marion Wiesel, and Two Novels, Night - Dawn - Day*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2008.

*Night* may be one of the bleakest books I've ever read, but also one of the most uplifting. Although the Nazis are one the most heinous groups ever to grace the face of the earth, they do manage to create a sacred brotherhood among those whom they are persecuting. The word "night" must appear scores if not hundreds of times throughout the account. The entire memoir of being dragged through this desert of degradation is one long nightmare of depraved darkness. One cannot use enough alliteration. There is no hyperbole for this kind of *meanness*.

*Dawn*

*Day*

Willner, Nina. *Forty Autunns: A Family's Story of Courage and Survival on Both Sides of the Berlin Wall*. New York: Morrow, 2016.

Just under twenty-one, young Hanna flees East Germany to pursue a life of freedom in the West, and she must do it twice to succeed. The second escape, however, sticks, and she makes a life in America.

Her daughter, Nina, is the author of this amazing and absorbing account of what the division of Germany following World War II did to Hanna's family. Under the heavy thumb of Erich Honecker, the East German regime was perhaps more repressive than its mother, the Soviet Union.

This forty-year tale follows the lives of those left in East Germany, as well as the life of Hanna and her children in America. Daughter Nina winds up working for the US government in West Germany and comes very close to where her family lives, but she is unable to visit with them or even let them know she is present.

Hanna's father, Opa, is a respected and revered school teacher in the town where they live, but eventually he is exiled to a small village because he will not fully support the Communist line. His children who remain in East Germany, however, become somewhat more compliant, although none of them ever joins the Communist party—which does inhibit their *success*.

Willner's story of how the family finally unites after forty autumns is more than touching; it is the richest kind of poignancy.

## Other Readings

[Each year I try to peruse short stories found in literary magazines and post brief profiles for the excellent ones at my blog. Since this task is the equivalent of reading as many as three collections a year, or 250,000 words, I'm electing to list them below in a special section of my reading for 2018. The short story is really an entertaining and edifying art form. Read one, if you're not afraid.]

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January/February 2018, [David Greendonner](#). "[Lionel, for Worse](#)": This story, winner of the *Kenyon Review* Short Fiction 2017 competition, is a gem of understatement. Narrated by a woman, she tells of her husband, Lionel, who a month earlier has lost his best friend, Stan. The woman and Lionel discuss how they'd like to have their ashes disposed of someday. While making a trial run on the shore of Lake Michigan of just such a disposition, using ashes from their own hearth, they encounter some high school girls, one of whom says, "I'm so sorry for your loss" (5). The line is both humorous and subtly poignant concerning the man's true loss.

Profile of author from contributor's page: "David Greendonner is from Bridgman, Michigan, and is a graduate of Western Michigan University's MFA program in fiction. From 2015 to 2017 he was the managing editor of the literary magazine *Third Coast*" (115).

2017/19.4 Connections, [Iron Horse Literary Review](#) "Like Breadcrumbs, Like Shards," [Lucas Southworth](#). Lucas Southworth won [AWP's Grace Paley Prize](#), in 2013, for his collection, [Everyone Here Has a Gun](#). He is a professor of fiction and screenwriting at Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore.

"Like Breadcrumbs, Like Chards":

Even though I am gay, came out a long time ago, have been with the same *Grady* for forty-two years, not until I reached the following sentence on the second page of Southworth's story did I realize I was reading about a gay couple.

**"At first glance my husband fills so many gay stereotypes. He's all muscle, all tank top on the weekends, all styled hair and double-entendre" (4).**

Now . . . is my failed perception my fault or the writer's? I'm willing to accept at least half the responsibility; I *was* lulled into the hackneyed convention that a husband must be paired with a wife, not another husband. But would it have been too unsophisticated to let the reader know this tidbit a wee bit earlier?

In this story where young marrieds are struggling to become acquainted, the narrator, *Mike*, often texts his husband Grady—even when they are located in the same dwelling or in the same room. Seriously? Has texting become so ubiquitous that it has seeped into our literary fiction? Must we now work texting into the weft of our stories for them to be *real*, to be truly *au courant*? Okay, okay. F. Scott, I'm sure, employed an early phone or two, had a character *cable* someone that he didn't love her any longer. I am totally humble and down from my horse. Mike's texting his husband is a manner in which he attempts both to be close to Grady and yet distant from him at the very same time.

At one point Mike uses an emoji of the Swiss flag (to indicate fidelity?) and in the same text a heart with an arrow shot through it to communicate his *feelings*. Is this how removed he is from the relationships with his husband, his mother, and mother-in-law, at least what he can find of his feelings?

Southworth purposely keeps the reader at a distance from the character's feelings—not entirely but enough for us to get the message. We can see the words on the page, or the text on the screen, but I'm not sure we can feel them.