

Any novel in which every word of each chapter title begins with the letter “A” must hint of a certain organization, for this is itself a difficult task. Limiting oneself to only one letter is sort of a self-imposed puzzle-making signifying the author must dig deep to formulate apt titles with his hands tied. At first, one may think that this is a historical novel, and, in a sense, it is. But if it is such, it is also much much more. Some historical novels come off like a literary paint by numbers. History provides the scaffolding and the lazy author must paint characters and story inside certain lines. Not so with Amor Towles’s rendition of this tale from the first half of the twentieth century.

In script form, the novel begins in 1922 with Count Rostov’s “hearing” in front of Soviet officials. There, referring to him as a Former Person, they strip him of his aristocratic status by confining him for the rest of his life to the famed Moscow Metropol Hotel where he has already lived for four years. Things could be worse (think Siberia, think death camp), because Rostov has a lovely large suite of rooms at the hotel. But when he arrives back at the hotel, the Soviets further strip him by confining him now to a small room in what he refers to as the belfry on the sixth floor, a place where butlers and other servants used to live. He has just enough room for the iron bedstead found there and a few heirlooms he brings from his lavish suite below. Thus begins this era of his life. Oh, and if he should ever step outside the Metropol, he, the Soviets tell him, will be shot on sight. To say much more is to enter spoiler territory. Suffice it to say that Count Rostov deepens friendships with hotel staff members. He establishes an intermittent amorous relationship with a Russian film star. He meets a precocious nine-year-old who grows up, and, because of difficult circumstances leaves *her* five-year-old daughter to his care until she can return. Which she never does. He becomes the little girl’s Papa, providing the orphan the same kind stability that his grandmother had provided him when he was left alone. The novel is rich with historical and cultural references, all in the service of providing readers with a clear view a particular era, one that may not have really ended.

Total: 40

her short stint in a Reality TV show is more confessional in nature, and brutally honest:

“Reality TV enacts the various self-delusions of the emotionally immature: the dream that you are being closely watched, assessed, and categorized; the dream that your life itself is movie material, and that you deserve your own carefully soundtracked montage when you’re walking down the street” (44).

My favorite essay may be “Pure Heroines,” one in which Tolentino takes a hard look at how girls and women are treated in literature. She goes deep on this topic, examining books that are from fifty to one hundred years old: Maud Hart Lovelace (whom I read in elementary school), E. L. Konigsburg, Lucy Maud Montgomery. But this discussion is to lay the foundation for her look at more contemporary literature. Tolentino’s observation is that the girl-heroines, who are brave and outspoken in childhood, become hemmed in by the sexism and patriarchy in adulthood.

“Traditionally, male literary characters are written and received as emblems of the human condition rather than the male one . . . [f]emale literary characters, in contrast, indicate the condition of being a *woman*. They are condemned to a universe that revolves around sex and family and domesticity” (118).

Yet I also enjoyed “The Cult of the Difficult Woman,” and the final essay, “I Thee Dread,” in which Tolentino declares that in her young adulthood (born 1988), she and her partner (she plans never to marry) have attended forty-six weddings, expending over a period of nine years as much as \$35,000 to gift their friends, arrange for transportation to the weddings, not to mention the “uniform” and finally hotel accommodations. But if one is spending an average of \$30,000 for a wedding why not expect your guests to put out their share, as well? Jia’s primary objection to marriage is the inequity that awaits a woman once she crosses the threshold into wedded unbliss. Here, Tolentino deftly references her title, providing a sort of recap of her entire book:

“I wonder if women today would so readily accept the unequal diminishment of the independence without their sense of self-importance being overinflated first. It feels like a trick, a trick that has worked and is still working, that the bride remains the image of womanhood at its most broadly celebrated—and that planning a wedding is the only period in a woman’s life where she is universally and unconditionally encouraged to conduct everything on her terms” (289).

After that, the bride’s life is over as she splits into two personalities: one who is “large and resplendent,” and one who “vanishes underneath the name change and the veil” (290). Tolentino nails not only this vision of marriage (the thesis is not original) but she does so for her generation of women who still seem to be falling into the trick mirror of self-delusion.

learns early not to edit (in the psychological sense) his writing. He turns a trip to the market into a comic play. His desperate work situations, the same. He records jokes people have told him. He's not a writer who stays at home, and, because of that, life serves him a big platter of human waste to transform into delectable satire. I marked so many funny or moving passages but I'll only list a few nuggets here:

**“Man to a woman he'd just screwed: If I'd known you were a virgin, I'd have taken more time.
Woman: If I'd known you had more time, I would have taken my panty hose off” (35).**

“Edith Sitwell said that one of her favorite pastimes was to sharpen her claws on the wooden heads of her opponents” (112). [I cannot corroborate this anywhere on line, but it sounds like Sitwell. Must have thieved it at a party.]

“Deodorizing puck = urinal cake” (130)

From Patricia Marx, in 1986, Sedaris gets a bit of advice we could now pass along to Congress or Trump about how to handle the Russians: **“If we want a three-year-old not to put his hand on a hot stove, we do not beat him unmercifully. Rather, we *teach* him that a stove is hot, by pressing his hand to the burner for a minute or two” (155).** We need to press Russia's fat little hands to the burner!

While working as Santa at SantaLand: **“Yesterday a woman had her son pee into a cup, which of course tipped over. ‘That's fine,’ I said, ‘but Santa's also going to need a stool sample’” (278).**

Sedaris's entries become even funnier, in 1993, when his career takes off with *Barrel Fever*.

“Harry Rowohlt, the fellow who translated my book into German and is reading with me on my tour, told me that when someone on the bus or at a nearby table in a restaurant talks on a cell phone, he likes to lean over and shout, ‘Come back to bed, I'm freezing’” (391). This was written in 1991. Good luck with that stunt now.

Of course, Sedaris's theft by finding not only refers to the \$45 or \$50 or \$100 he happens upon but also to the stories he hears, dramas that play out around him, whether they be in his family or at airports or in the marketplace. He records his thoughts on world events, Diana's death in Paris, JFK Junior's demise. He has something to say about everything, and I believe that is one of his work that makes him a fine writer. Nothing is too highbrow or lowbrow for fodder. Step up to the trough and feed!

Tolentino, Jia. *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*. New York: Random, 2019.

Jia Tolentino may be one of the most eloquent spokespersons for members of the Millennial generation. These nine essays cover topics, among others, concerning her informed opinions about the Internet and social media. Another essay about

uniquely difficult time in life. They often wield too much power for their own good, and Scott herself says it best:

“The diaries, I began to think, were an inheritance of sorts—unanticipated, undeserved, a stroke of fortune. But, like an inheritance, they came at a cost. Land, houses, money: Wealth had tumbled in my father’s family from one generation to the next. Each new descendant arrived as an unwitting conduit for its transmission. You had a right to enjoy it, an obligation to protect it, a duty to pass it on to your own unsuspecting children. It was a stroke of good fortune, of course. But what you could never know, starting out, was how those things would influence decisions you’d make over a lifetime” (220).

In the epilogue, Scott makes clear that the Scott money ran out. Descendants of the railroad baron now live as far away as Los Angeles or Paris and many points in between. **“They work in education, medicine, technology, consulting, music, banking, business, finance, landscape gardening, the law. They don’t live in big houses. They work for a living. But they’re beneficiaries, in one way or another, now and forever, for better and worse” (260).**

As any good journalist, Scott knows when to remove herself from the story, always maintaining that important distance. At the same time, she lets us in on one of life’s greatest secrets, yet also a platitude, that money alone cannot buy happiness.

Sedaris, David. *Holidays on Ice*. New York: Little, 2008.

Some pieces are funnier than others. And unlike most of his humor, some seem to be a bit dated. In “Let It Snow,” for example, he tells the story of his family moving from upstate New York to North Carolina, where winter snow is but a wish sometimes. After five straight days of putting up with her kids, Sedaris’s mother locks them out of the house to play in the snow. **“What little snow there was would usually melt an hour or two after hitting the ground, and there you’d be in your windbreaker and unconvincing mittens, forming a lump figure made mostly of mud. Snow Negroes, we called them” (141).** This phrase have been “funny” in the early sixties when this happened, less so in 2004 when published, but certainly now seems way wrong to recall that term. Wouldn’t the incident remain as funny without the racial tinge to it? At any rate, Sedaris manages to make one laugh at makes Christmas bad and what makes it . . . good.

Sedaris, David. *Theft By Finding: Diaries 1977-2002*. New York: Little, 2017.

Sedaris explains the meaning of his title right away, stating that in England if you find something, particularly money, you are duty bound to try and locate the owner or else you are guilty of theft by finding. At least in the beginning, when Sedaris is poor, he seems to find all kinds of money. Good thing he’s an American!

The voyeur in me always loves reading authors’ diaries and letters (email has obliterated the latter for future readers), and Sedaris’s diaries are among the best I’ve read. His mind is one that, for the most part, is completely unbridled. He

“genosociogram,” which she denotes as “a representation of ties, links and relations . . . a family tree that graphically represents and brings to light important life events and their connections” (10), often using one to help share the history of one of her patients. She encourages readers to construct their own genosociograms to help understand their families.

Another concept she discusses is “family justice.” “When justice is not accomplished, there is injustice, unfairness and exploitation among family members, which sometimes translates into fleeing, revenge or vengeance, or even illnesses or repetitive accidents.” If so-called ledgers do not balance, “problems can be passed on from generation to generation” (18). This is a concept members of most families can identify with, at least those “cheated” be the ledger.

While the author’s book is interesting, I wonder how scientific it is. I kept wading through its pages to see when she might offer more than observations, that she might also site research or experiments that might strengthen her thesis, and they never seemed to materialize, or if they did, they were not strong enough to complete the arguments that she was making.

Scott, Janny. *The Beneficiary: Fortune, Misfortune, and the Story of My Father*. New York: Riverhead, 2019.

Journalist Janny Scott limns a harrowing portrait of her father, Robert Montgomery Scott, yet his story does not begin that way. Between the dedication and epigraph pages of the book appears a family tree extending back three generations. From a vast variety of sources, Scott brings to light the larger-than-life characters who are her ancestors, one set of grandparents and two sets of great-grandparents. Most persons would not necessarily know that much about their people, but for generations this family live off the good fortune and largesse of Thomas A. Scott, a railroad baron of the nineteenth century. They live on one property, Ardrossan, larger than New York’s Central Park, west of Philadelphia. Scott’s grandmother, flamboyant Helen Hope Montgomery, is the real-life personage upon which Katherine Hepburn’s character is based in the 1940 film, *The Philadelphia Story*. There is so much spectacle in this family, people who can, and do, almost anything they wish to do, that we almost lose sight of the subject of the book, Janny Scott’s father.

At one point, when journalist Scott is young and becomes interested in writing, her father promises her possession of his journals one day. Through the years the promise is lost, both because she puts the idea on a back burner and because her father is apparently reluctant to hand them over. Following his death, from a long bout with alcoholism, Janny Scott unearths them in one of those hiding-in-plain-sight locations, where all she must do is recall the four-digit default household code to unlatch his trunk, and voila, there they are: decades of notebooks full of loose-leaf pages. Scott magically (it’s really arduous work, one must realize) gathers all of her sources, including this gold mine, and produces a portrait of her father, the *beneficiary* of generations of great fortune. Only, the portrayal of a human life is never that simple. The rich—we often don’t have much sympathy for them—have a

This barely three-hundred-page novel contains a cast of thirty-five characters and spans nearly fifty years of American life from the 1970s until President Obama's first term in office. At times, one must check back at the beginning to see who is whom. But for the most part, Porter does a remarkable job of refreshing the reader's memory when the time comes. Even more remarkable, she paints a picture of our country as it really is: a world inhabited by white and black people who intermarry, have children, some of whom belong to the LGBTQ community. Is it all love and roses as our hippy friends of the seventies (including me) had hoped our future would be? Not by a long shot. The life she unearths is as messy as an all-white or an all-black one, but it is a life that is also marked with joys and trials of raising children, finding one's own place in the world. This is a novel of high and low culture, one in which Stoppard's play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, becomes a major motif throughout the book, but a work in which current argot makes a place for itself without being annoying. It is a novel that requires the reader to put the nonlinear pieces together, a novel for now *and* always.

Rocca, Mo. *Mobituaries: Great Lives Worth Reliving*. New York: Simon, 2019.

My partner and I watch *CBS Sunday Morning* every week. It is sort of our *church*. One of my favorites personalities is Mo Rocca, who, of late, has begun to produce podcasts called *mobituaries*, in which he eulogizes a personality who has been underrated, underappreciated, or completely forgotten. Having listened to his podcasts religiously (not a pun), I just had to give his book a go!

In some ways, each mobituary in the book reveals as much about Rocca's demented but lovely mind (he and I should stage a love-in for Barbra Streisand to see who adores her the most). He moves easily from forgotten politicians to forgotten men and women, such as early the earliest African-Americans to win seats in early Reconstruction-era Congress. He memorializes actors, his one of Audrey Hepburn just killing me, because, having been born the same year as my Dutch aunt, 1929, the same years as Anne Frank, Hepburn's story only deepens my understanding of that period. Mo Rocca is witty and gay (in every sense). I love the child-like intensity with which he pursues his work, ferreting out all he can about his subjects. I have to confess that I probably love his podcasts better than the book, because there he interviews a variety of people, and he uses a variety of audio clips to broaden his portraits. He jokes with these folks, jokes with listeners, yet always maintains a seriousness about, and, most of all, an empathy for his subjects. Still . . . I love his book, and everyone should read it (I gave copies as Xmas gifts). In his own wacky way, Mo Rocca portrays personalities that are courageous, winsome, and in most cases bold. As is he.

Schützenberger, Anne Ancelin. *The Ancestor Syndrome: Transgenerational Psychotherapy and the Hidden Links in the Family Tree*. London: Routledge, 1998.

An odd book, to be sure, but fascinating, as well. The author works from the premise that our DNA predicts many of the behaviors that we will participate in throughout our lives, including "accidents," or "mistakes." She makes good use of a

being an attorney. She must search for other paths to become fulfilled as a person, and she settles on several ways to serve others but also demanding that organizations recognize her professional capacity and pay her an adequate salary. In working for a hospital, she feels fulfilled, that she is really making a difference in the lives of others.

Finally, Michelle Robinson Obama never holds back when discussing issues like racism, how, from the time she is a child, she must work harder, climb higher and faster, to prove to white people that she is just as good as they. The journey must be exhausting, knowing inside that you are as smart or smarter than white men and women but being put down in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. This book is a work of grace under pressure, how she becomes the person she wants to become, the wife and mother she wants to become, and how she becomes her own version of the First Lady, the first black First Lady, and it succeeds greatly in sharing with readers her love of life.

Peck, Garrett. *The Great War in America: World War I and Its Aftermath*. New York: Pegasus, 2018.

Studying history allows us to learn from past mistakes so that we don't repeat them in the future, yet sadly, as the old saw goes, we see history repeat (or rhyme with) itself every day. Take isolationism, for instance. Both before and after the Great War, Americans wanted nothing to do with the rest of the world. After many decades of American stature following World War II, Americans are leaning toward isolationism again.

Peck's book causes the reader to contemplate the Great War within the context of America only. Why did the U.S. stay out for so long? Why didn't the U.S. have an adequate military force? Why didn't the U.S. want to join the League of Nations following the war? Why were so many Americans disillusioned once the Armistice had been signed? Why was President Woodrow Wilson beloved by many yet only gained stature for his wisdom long after he had died? Peck explores all these questions and more and to a satisfying end. For him, history isn't just facts and figures and chronology. It's about relationships between individuals and relationships between nations, and he discusses these at length.

I have only one beef with the book distributed by W. W. Norton, one of the most respected names in modern publishing. I came across (I was not looking for) at least nine typos: the kind which reflects hurried or no copyediting: words are repeated needlessly or subject/verb agreement is in error because the letter "s" has been left off the verb. In this day and age, following thirty-five years of computerized book printing, with its sophisticated technology, there is no excuse for finding this many errors in a published book for which the public is paying a cover price of just under thirty dollars. Just saying. I photocopied the pages and sent them to the editor.

Porter, Regina. *The Travelers*. New York: Hogarth, 2019.

Biology, and How You Can Heal. New York: Simon, 2015.

This important book states its expressed purpose early in the introduction:

“Cutting-edge research tells us that what doesn’t kill you doesn’t necessarily make you stronger. Far more often, the opposite is true: the early chronic unpredictable stressors, losses, and adversities we face as children shape our biology in ways that predetermine our adult health” (xiii).

Author Nakazawa spends the entire book demonstrating how Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can and often do, depending on the individual, have detrimental effects on a child’s physiology—not just his or her emotional or psychological well-being. In fact, the research she cites shows that such havoc can also damage one’s DNA. And in so doing, that broken DNA can be passed along to one’s children—setting up a chain of continuing abuse by which one damaged adult injures his or her own children and so on. The author makes clear that while ACEs are similar to PTSD, they are not exactly the same. Adverse events happening to the adult brain have a different effect than the ones that happen to the child’s brain, particularly if very young.

There are a number of compelling aspects to Nakazawa’s book. One, she brings to light a large number of case studies to make her point and follows them throughout. You begin to hear about “Kat” in the beginning and you learn in the end how her life improves. Two, the author cites a great deal of cutting edge research on the topic. For example, studies show that women, by a significant percentage, who consult a doctor concerning their history of ailments are dismissed by male doctors as being flaky or hysterical (common treatment throughout history). And finally, the author devotes an entire section of the book to treatments, because with appropriate care and therapy, the brain, which is plastic, can be retrained. Individuals can and do recover from Adverse Childhood Experiences. I highly recommend this book to be your first if you are exploring the topic.

Obama, Michelle. *Becoming.* New York: Crown, 2018.

I love Mrs. Obama’s book for many reasons. Honesty. Very subtly the former First Lady reveals much about her life, which one thinks would make her vulnerable, yet by sharing these details, she shares her humanity, her likeness to us. For example, when she first meets and begins to date Barack Obama, the reader suddenly realizes that for all practical purposes, they are living together and that must include the act of sex. Yet, having moved on beyond the mores of the Greatest Generation and the Boomers, she makes no big deal of this, doesn’t in any way try to disguise the fact. She is just as frank when discussing her husband’s involvement in politics. She never wanted to be a part of it, even in the days when he was an Illinois state representative. To become First Lady, Mrs. Obama must make many concessions, in essence, give up her own career, and be something others wanted her to be.

Sincerity. Michelle Obama realizes, several years after earning her law degree from Harvard and becoming part of an elite firm in Chicago, that she doesn’t really like

What editor Mary Morris may be trying to indicate is that women travel *through* the world differently than men. Author Barbara Grizzuti Harrison indicates so in this passage from her Italian travels, a passage that only a woman could write:

“After dinner, in a dim lounge, I watch *Two Women* [1960], a movie with Sophia Loren. I am joined by the Italian woman who smokes. Out of an abundance of feeling I cry, not so much because this is the story of a rape, not because of the girl’s loss of innocence and the mother’s rage and grief, but because the injured girl is singing, her voice, frail, a song my grandmother used to sing: *‘Vieni, c’è una strada nel bosco . . . I want you to know it too . . . c’è una strada nel cuore . . . There’s a road in my heart . . .’* The woman who smokes is crying, too. I am thinking of my daughter. When she leaves, the woman kisses the crown of my head. We have exchanged no words. Men have stood on the threshold and not come in. I never see her again” (333).

Only women could have traveled through the world in this manner, something all men could learn from. Other writers included in the collection are Vita Sackville-West, Isak Dinesen, Freya Stark, Rebecca West, Mary McCarthy, Joan Didion, Christina Dodwell, Helen Winternitz, and Annie Dillard.

Moser, Benjamin. *Sontag: Her Life and Work*. New York: Ecco, 2019.

So many books I would not hear of if I did not watch C-SPAN’s Book-TV on the weekends—and so much cheaper than an expensive subscription to something like *Publisher’s Weekly*. In hearing Benjamin Moser speak of his years of research on this biography, I knew right away I wanted to read his book. He has undertaken an encyclopedic yet nuanced telling of Susan Sontag’s life, both the good and the bad, and her works both the lauded and the reviled. Moser divides his monumental book into four major parts of many chapters of short to moderate length, allowing the reader to absorb the material instead of being overwhelmed by it. In addition to many varied sources, Moser utilizes much evidence from Sontag’s own voluminous journals.

He begins with important early biography because Susan Sontag’s childhood gels her personality into one that haunts her until the day she dies. Her mother is hardly a nurturing person and helps to germinate Sontag’s many insecurities, including her body, which is eventually consumed by cancer. While though she is a brilliant intellectual and contributes much to a broad understanding of literature as well as world politics, she can be childishly petulant and hold a grudge longer than most. She tries the patience of all the people whom she purports to love. In spite of all her faults, however, Moser paints a sympathetic portrait of his subject because she does seem to be a victim of her own literary success, as well as a victim of her childhood. Moser is able to draw from many sources, including Sontag’s own words, and distill the facts in such a manner that one can understand the legend in terms that are both realistic and reverential—a must-read for fans or those (like me) who would like to know more about the subject.

Nakazawa, Donna Jackson. *Childhood Disrupted: How Your Biography Becomes Your*

two women he becomes involved with romantically, are *not* nurturing. In fact, one, Mildred (portrayed by Bette Davis in the 1934 film), tests the limits of credulity. Yet, when aligned with the profile of a closet homosexual (trying hard to fit into heterosexual life), may be quite accurate. Philip is convinced he *loves* Mildred and rejoins with her several times after she rejects him, and, except for the final fling, always takes her back no matter how cruel she has been, in one instance, wrecking his apartment and destroying all of his valuables, including paintings he has made or bought. This character knows, even if he has carnal relationships with women, he should not get married. **“In Paris he had come by the opinion that marriage was a ridiculous institution of the philistines” (276).** When he finishes medical school, he wants to travel, see the world. He only chooses to marry on the last page of the book, when, at last, he has *natured* and realizes he must settle down.

One other observation about the novel I would make is that, in contrast to how fiction writers have worked for the last fifty years, Maugham *tells* a great deal more than he shows. He spends many, many pages, sometimes, foreshortening a long period of time or era in Philip’s life. Of course, as a playwright, his dialog is on the mark and believable, and the characters do act out some of their emotions, but many times Maugham takes the short-cut of telling the reader how the characters feel. Yet, I do have to say that Maugham does manage to hold my attention for over five hundred pages, and that is saying a lot.

Morris, Mary, editor. *Maiden Voyages: Writings of Women Travelers*. New York: Vintage, 1993.

Morris’s title seems, even after reading the book, a bit of a misnomer. *Maiden voyage* always evokes thoughts of adventures on the open seas. Instead, the title is a bit of a pun: fifty-two travel tales by, it turns out, women of all ages, not just maidens. However, the book is enjoyable for the variety of narratives it contains, from rather staid ones from the likes of Edith Wharton to bawdier ones by people like Box-Car Bertha. Then there is the piece by Anna Leonowens, *the Anna of the Anna and the King of Siam*, the musical, *The King and I*. Beryl Markham, aviatrix, writes the following about her elephant hunt in Africa:

“There is a legend that elephant [sic] dispose of their dead in secret burial grounds and that none of these has ever been discovered. In support of this, there is only the fact that the body of an elephant, unless he had been trapped or shot in his tracks, has rarely been found. What happens to the old and diseased?” (232).

Perhaps anthropologist, Margaret Meade, dispenses the best advice concerning travel: **“Whether one learns to receive a gift in both hands or with the right hand only, to touch the gift to one’s forehead or to refuse it three times before accepting it, the task is always a double one. One must learn to do something correctly and not to become absorbed in the doing. One must learn what makes people angry but one must not feel insulted oneself. One must live all day in a maze of relationships without being caught in the maze. And above all, one must wait for events to reveal much that must be learned” (276).** Sage.

at a time, even if the sun is shining, even if, in the middle of an ocean, you see nothing but blue (you haven't yet spotted the great vortex of plastic bottles). The decay, the earth's demise is there, rolling in slow motion. And Leopold sees this. Seventy years ago!

Leopold expresses his deep love for Nature with a lengthy history of a good oak taking seed in 1865. Metaphorically, he cuts it down, and, by surveying its eighty rings, can tell the reader what traumas the local ecology has experienced:

“Now we cut 1910, when a great university president published a book on conservation, a great sawfly epidemic killed millions of tamaracks, a great drouth burned the pineries, and a great dredge drained Horicon Marsh.

We cut 1909, when smelt were first planted in the Great Lakes, and when a wet summer induced the Legislature to cut the forest-fire appropriations.

We cut 1908, a dry year when the forests burned fiercely, and Wisconsin parted with its last cougar” (11).

I cannot go on, but the author continues, year by year, until the fallen oak has revealed all that the land has enjoyed or endured, usually at the hand of human beings, politicians who have little understanding nor care for the environment:

“The congressmen who voted money to clear the ranges of bears were the sons of pioneers. They acclaimed the superior virtues of the frontiersman, but they strove with might and main to make an end of the frontier” (137).

Leopold reveals irony after irony, desecration after desecration of our native earth, and, again I say, seventy years ago! And still, we (as a species) do not listen.

Maugham, W. Somerset. *Of Human Bondage*. New York: Doubleday, 1936.

“It sings, it has color. It has rapture. In viewing it one finds nothing to criticize or regret.” –Theodore Dreiser

The blurb above appears on the dust jacket edition of the novel I read. In its foreword, the author explains, in part, why he writes the novel:

“I began once more to be obsessed by the teeming memories of my past life. They came back to me so pressingly, in my sleep, on my walks, at rehearsals, at parties, they became such a burden to me, that I made up my mind there was only one way to be free of them and that was to write them all down in a book” (iv).

My central response to the novel is that, knowing Maugham divorces his wife and lives in a domestic setting with two different men, I think the book is the perfect portrayal of a closeted homosexual or bisexual male. Like many Englishmen of his period, Philip Carey attends all-boy schools, and Maugham describes some of these young men in lustrous detail, whereas his descriptions of females are not as pointed or glowing. Carey's relationships with women are fraught with one of two modes. The woman, such as his mother or his aunt, is motherly and nurturing or she, like

six years earlier, and demonstrating how bizarrely people can treat others when their only crime may be they are different.

James, P. D. *Cover Her Face*. New York: Simon, 1962.

Having not read a mystery since I was in the sixth grade, I decided to peruse James's first published one, with the idea that if I liked it I would read the next published one about Adam Dalgliesh, detective. I see perhaps why I stopped reading the genre when I did. The mystery writer must erect a carefully constructed scaffolding: plot, one that is airtight, yet interesting, leading the reader down a number of paths yet winding up, usually, with a surprise. Characters can be interesting, but their actions must serve the needs of the plot. *Well, I never thought of her!* Well, of course you didn't, because the author led you away from believing it might be she.

The title, *Cover Her Face*, has significance in that it is only mentioned on page eighty-five, a point at which the person who turns out in the end to have been the murderer is shaking uncontrollably, as the body is first discovered. The person's son tells someone, "Cover her face." One of the author's first acts of subterfuge, to draw us away from the real killer. In this novel, a maid, a woman who has been hired from the nearby home for unwedded mothers, as they were delicately referred to in the last century, is found dead in her bed, her toddler still alive in his crib. James devotes individual chapters to each suspect, and, admirably also explores who might have done it by having the reader observe several conversations among the suspects, away from Detective Dalgliesh's presence. And, of course, there is the obligatory conclusion, where Dalgliesh gathers everyone into one room where he begins to unpeel the onion of suspense.

Janowitz, Tama. *The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group*. New York: Washington Square, 1992.

This novel is purely for fun, a silly romp through the mind of the narrator, who lives in New York in the early 1990s. Silly, though it is, I couldn't put it down!

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. With illustrations by Charles W. Schwartz. London: Oxford, 1949.

I came across this slim book while letting a house in the hill country of Texas, a place where the landowners raise native grass and wildflower seeds for wide distribution and sales, also a place where owners protect the environment and earnestly promote its care.

The author, born in the late 1880s, is around sixty when he writes this book about ecology. At that time he already sees the Earth's demise headed our way, now seventy years ago. And people wonder why we should be on fire about the current state of world environment? Since the age of early industrialization, humankind has been killing off the world, one species of botany and zoology at a time. And we're still at it: cars and jets, fracking, coal. Land, sea, and air ruined daily one molecule

glimmers in her life to reveal to readers her twenty-five year acquaintance with a patch of land high in the Colorado Rockies, at the headwaters of the Rio Grande, her ranch; the extreme physical, sexual, and emotional abuse her parents heaped upon her; the nanny, Martha Washington, who was more of a mother to her than anyone; obtaining the ranch property and hanging onto it by a thread at times, both financially and in terms of the physical world which, where she lives, has an extreme impact on human life whether it be the winter temperatures and snow and ice or a hundred-year fire or human encroachment. Many metaphors guide her. She lives by a purely spiritual (not religious) guide: *What are the best ways for me to be kind to others and to the earth I live on, and how can I leave both better off before I leave this earth?* Because of her childhood abuse, Pam grows up always on guard, always ready to leap into the future, and that is how she often lives: running literally to all four corners of our, at times, flat earth. She is invited or invites herself to some of the most strenuous and exhilarating activities around. And in this book she makes each one of them shine, or glimmer.

Israel, Lee. *Can You Ever Forgive Me: Memoirs of a Literary Forger*. New York: Simon, 2008.

This slim tome of 129 pages is both amusing and instructive. A woman with a biting wit, Israel writes both apologetically and *un* about her career as a professional forger. Of course, the author of three previously published books, Israel does not intend to take such a path. She always has earned her living as a writer—having never so much as waited on a table—and believes she always shall. She is shocked when any sign of a new book deal vanishes. As she and her cat become destitute, and, because she is such a fine writer and also a small collector of letters, she believes she can succeed in forging letters of celebrities. Yet, as she expands her *business*, she realizes she cannot do it alone and signs on a colleague who turns out not to be as tough as she is, nor as smart, and she is arrested. Due to having a competent attorney and a kind judge, her sentence is reduced to community service and a five-year probation. She lives out her life working as a copy editor for a children’s publishing company and dies in 2014. The film starring Melissa McCarthy and Richard E. Grant seems to fulfill the truth of the book.

Jackson, Shirley. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, edited by Joyce Carol Oates. New York: Library of America, 2010.

Jackson has an uncanny ability to make the reader believe anything. She convinces you, sentence by sentence, that the scene she is creating on the page is real, even if it defies logic of nature or reason. The work may even be a bit impressionistic in that we see things through the eyes of a disturbed and unreliable narrator, things always being a little bit off. The novel, though penned in 1962, seems timely in its handling of “otherness,” Jackson’s exploration of people who are different from the local community. Knowing Jackson’s biography, I tend to think she is recreating or sending up the locals in Bennington, Vermont, where her husband is a professor for many years. She examines aspects of behavior she finds most repellant and exaggerates them: portraying the lives two teenage sisters living in a large family home, in which one of the girls has been acquitted of having poisoned her relatives

Greer's ease with the proper metaphor at the proper time, the deepening of a certain scene with the proper use of such metaphors. The blue suit. The concept that Less is a *bad* gay, not a bad writer. The literary allusions that *don't* hit you over the head but are part of the fabric of the novel. The gray suit purchased in one country that arrives in the nick of time in another. All these combine to make not only a great read but something of a literary phenom. I now want to read all of Greer.

Hagan, William T. *American Indians: Revised Edition*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1979.

If one had never read much about the American Indian, this book may be a good place to begin. The six chapters cover colonial times, Indian "removal," the brave stand that Indians take against white people stealing their land, "changing" the Indian to be more like white people, and an Indian New Deal. Of course, much has changed (or maybe not) since this revised edition came out forty years ago, but nothing about history has changed. The reader can still become informed about the inequities that begin to take place from the moment white men from basically four nations—UK, France, Spain, and Holland—step off their respective boats.

Hesse, Hermann. *Steppenwolf*. New York: Holt, 1969.

This novel studied so often in college is probably best left to the professors and critics to dissect. At my age, I *am* Steppenwolf, to a degree.

Houston, Pam. *Deep Creek: Finding Hope in the High Country*. New York: Norton, 2019.

Pam Houston may be the single best teacher of writing in the U.S. today, not only by way of her classroom techniques (which I know of firsthand) but by way of example, and *Deep Creek* proves my case. Houston's main tenet, always, is to begin with the concrete details—whether fiction or nonfiction—and those details will lead you to your narrative.

"I have always believed that if I pay strict attention while I am out in the physical world—and for me that often meant the natural world—the physical world will give me everything I need to tell my stories" (78). Having studied with Pam, I can tell you she calls one's paying attention to these details "glimmers": that conversation you overhear at the market, the accident you see on the way to your doctor's appointment. *Your* doctor's appointment. Everywhere you look throughout your day, if you're alive, you should be paying attention to these glimmers. Of course, they can come from your past, as well, but something from the past can be a bit dusty, so, once again, your mind must return to the concrete details. Houston says, **"I believe—like religion—that the glimmer, the metaphor, if you will, knows a great deal more than I do. And if I stay out of its way, it will reveal itself to me. I will become not so much its keeper as its conduit, and I will pass its wisdom on to the reader, without actually getting in its way" (79).**

And once again, as in all Houston's stories, novels, or essays, she mines the

hundred voices, ‘No, not yet,’ and they sky said, ‘No, not there.’” (362).

Greer, Andrew Sean. *Less: A Novel*. New York: Little Brown, 2017.

While I admire a number of contemporary fiction writers, I don’t often *envy* one of them. This may be the book that many a gay author has wanted to write and been unable to do so, including me. It’s that good. So-called gay fiction, with this book, has joined mainstream. This novel is not a coming out story. Our culture is beyond that. Coming out is now something that every gay person must do—whether it takes years or a matter of minutes—the narratives and challenges so similar that how could one write a unique story about it? No, such fiction has advanced to a character named Arthur Less who is about to turn fifty.

Less is a self-described second-shelf writer. Nonetheless, he’s well published and in demand. When his former boyfriend of nine years announces he’s getting married (need I say to a man), Less suddenly checks his drawer for all the opportunities to lecture and teach internationally and RSVPs *No* to the wedding and *yes* to the offers. He then cobbles together a months-long tour to five or six countries.

Greer’s structure seems interesting at first. In each new locale, whether it is Mexico, Italy, Germany, or Japan, Arthur Less is thrust into a new life of sorts. At the same time, Less’s old life keeps returning to him in waves, sometimes rushing to the reader in the middle of other thoughts. Yes, suddenly you find Arthur wrestling with some momentous event out of his past. While I can certainly understand Greer’s receiving the Pulitzer Prize (funny, in one bit, Arthur makes clear how it is to be pronounced), I question this structure.

In several key spots in the novel, Greer informs readers that someone other than he is narrating the story. Who can it be? At first, the issue seems unimportant. The story unfolds in the third person, as told by this, as yet, unidentified narrator. I’m not as quick as others; I only suspected halfway through that the narrator was Freddie, the very boy whose wedding Less is avoiding. *Okay*, I think to myself. *That’s fun*. All along, Freddie is the one in the know, telling all about Arthur’s around-the-world trip in great detail, yet he has *not* accompanied Arthur. Oh, of course, at the end (spoiler) when the two men reunite, one assumes that Arthur will reveal all that has happened on his trip to Freddie, but that poses the question: Arthur presumably does not tell Freddie of his trip until *after* he returns to the U.S., so how can Freddie possibly know all that has taken place? I re-read the beginning to find the exact spot, page eleven, where Freddie begins, ostensibly, to refer to himself in the third person.

Why does Greer structure the novel in this manner? It’s clever, and, I suppose to the casual beach reader, the point of view probably doesn’t matter that much. But why doesn’t Greer just place the novel in the third person anyway or allow Freddie to narrate the novel by way of first person? Does Greer fashion it this way only to be *novel*, or does he have some other reason for doing so, one I cannot discern?

No matter what, I do love this book and envy it for its grand storytelling. I love

national movement of gay, Christian congregants. Not by the farthest stretch of the imagination, had I concluded my seminary studies at SMU, and had I accepted a job in NO, I could very well have been present that disastrous evening.

Robert Fieseler has earned our gratitude for bringing to light this long-forgotten story and for bringing it before the public's attention when, once again, fragments of our society are acting with hatred against anyone who isn't heterosexual, male, or white. As with the European Holocaust, every story must be told.

Forster, E. M. *A Passage to India*. New York: Houghton, 1984.

Forster accomplishes so much in this novel first published in 1924. It is one of those books that, because of the author's elegant but subtle insights, is timeless. Readers feel as if they are there in Chandrapore experiencing the British condescension towards Indians, experiencing the many geographical and topographical wonders, observing or participating in the various religious sects, which bubble up against one another yet are a bit tolerant of one another. It is against this rich backdrop that the novel's tension unfolds. When a young Doctor Aziz first meets Mrs. Moore, a British visitor, it is in a mosque. Before thinking, he chastises her for not having removed her shoes, but quickly apologizes when she states that she already has done so. They strike up a friendship for she is anxious to befriend the Indians, to understand their beautiful land, and Doctor Aziz is only too pleased to oblige her.

Forster also limns an Indian which is a stranger to us today, by way of Doctor Aziz. He is at by turns arrogant, defiant, then apologetic, childlike in his seeking of British approval, then ashamed, as a grown man that he has sunk so low. Since the British left India a long time ago, Indians have had time to regain or reframe their national profile while perhaps holding onto certain institutions the Brits left behind. In any case, cultures clash when Doctor Aziz, unconfident and really unwilling, is put in a position to take Mrs. Moore and her young female companion, Miss Quested, on a tour of Marabar Cave. It is a bitter irony that the expedition which he organizes explodes in his face, when something dark happens to Miss Quested in the cave, something for which Aziz is held directly responsible.

The novel's end provides an intriguing closure, when Aziz and his hard-won British friend (who's moved back to England) returns to Chandrapore in the future for a visit. They have become quite fond of one another yet can never seem to *consummate* their friendship. The last paragraphs of the novel seems to sum up their 1924 dilemma:

“Why can't we be friends now?” said the other, holding him affectionately. ‘It's what I want. It's what you want.’

But the horses didn't want it—they swerved apart: the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their

Yes, I said, unsure if I was awake or still in a dream.
 “I’m sorry to inform you. Your father is dead.”
 “What? How could . . . this be?”
 “Some time after five this morning.”
 “I see,” I said, now alert—and accusatory. “What was the cause?”
 “Nothing special,” the doctor said. “She just died” (458).

As with the entirety of Susan’s relationship with Steven/Stefi, this process has not gone as it should. According to Susan’s thinking, she was to have located a dementia specialist, and that act would perhaps extend his life. At worst, Susan was to have been at Stefi’s side; they were to have had one final word of reconciliation before he parted; one final hand-holding while blood still flowed through both bodies.

An astounding book, where, echoing off the title, the author guides the reader through many dark rooms, including photographic darkrooms, but others more sinister, to limn the lives of an extraordinary father and her daughter. A must read.

Fieseler, Robert W. *Tinderbox: The Untold Story of the Up Stairs Lounge Fire and the Rise of Gay Liberation*. New York: Norton, 2018.

On June 24, 1973, manager of the Up Stairs Lounge, in New Orleans, a gay bar, ejected a disgruntled and damaged individual for fighting, and he returned with a seven-ounce can of lighter fluid. Dispersing the entire container of accelerant, he set the entrance on fire which spread almost instantaneously, trapping scores of gay men and a few women upstairs. Because the establishment was cursed with a number of unchecked fire hazards, the blaze trapped and killed, in the end, thirty-two individuals, three of whom were never identified their bodies were so badly charred.

Journalist Fieseler does a persuasive job of tracing the history of this event, developing the characters of its key players, limns a portrait of the arsonist and his personal difficulties, as well bringing to light the tepid response of the New Orleans community, including a police department more comfortable taunting gay men and treating them like second-class citizens than attempting to conduct an investigation of the fire.

On that June night in 1973, I myself was twenty-five years old, not quite out of the closet, and because news of the fire only made it to print in the largest of national newspapers, I’m sorry to say I never knew of it until I read this book. Earlier, in 1971, I had visited New Orleans as part of a seminary choir tour, in which, without my young wife around, I drank, smoked (along with other seminarians), and tossed a choir stole around my neck like a feather boa, as I sauntered through the French Quarter. Halfway out the closet door, I would not shed my wife until 1975; I would not come out entirely until age twenty-seven, feeling as if I had lived a lifetime without knowing why. Reading now of the fire, I thought, under different circumstances, I could very well have been one of those victims. The Up Stairs Lounge, after all, was also home to MCC (Metropolitan Community Church), a

Durrell, Gerald. *The Corfu Trilogy: My Family and Other Animals; Birds, Beasts, and Relatives; The Garden of the Gods*. New York: Penguin, 2006.

In viewing the PBS Masterpiece series *The Durrells in Corfu*, I was spurred on to read the original material, and I was not disappointed. Gerald Durrell, youngest of four children, records his eccentric family's doings in a rather unique and remarkable manner. In all three books—*My Family and Other Animals (1956)*; *Birds, Beasts, and Relatives (1969)*; *The Garden of the Gods (1978)*—Durrell wafts back and forth between two kinds of scenes. In one type, he writes extensively of his family: his mother, his brothers Larry and Leslie, and his sister Margo, not to mention a host of odd characters both Greek and British, who visit the Durrells in Corfu. In the other type, Durrell writes elegantly of his love for the natural world: spending entire chapters sometimes describing odd or unusual creatures from the very small to much larger, from owls he rescues to a stubborn mule he bargains for. I kept reading the 750 pages, with delight, until I was finished—almost sorry that the adventures were over. Well worth your time if a saga about a British family living on a Greek island just prior to World War II piques your interest.

Faludi, Susan. *In the Darkroom*. New York: Picador, 2016.

One sign that a book may be spectacularly well written is that the author's process seems inscrutable. In the case of Susan Faludi, she combines journalistic techniques of conducting interviews, whether recorded or not, along with months, perhaps years of tedious research of all kinds, but finally she observes and interprets the relationship she has (or has not) with her own father. Yet *how* she weaves all these together remains a wonderful mystery.

Faludi's memoir is comprised of many things: history of the tragic past of Hungary and Hungarian Jews, how that history informs her father's life as Steven Faludi, *her* more recent life as Stefi Faludi; it is a journal of the author's relationship with her father over many years, even years in which they neither speak nor see one another; it is a book about identity, how one can shapeshift to obscure oneself, whether it is her father's masquerading as a young Nazi in order to rescue family members from being executed or whether it is his change from male to female, whether it is a family changing its name from Friedman to Faludi. Ultimately, the book portrays the long, fraught journey that father and daughter take together, a journey that, at any time could be cut short, but because of an imperceptible, ephemeral formula, manages to continue until the very end, when Stefi's very substantial constitution finally fails. This body—lying on a hospital bed in Budapest has sustained parental neglect, physical and emotional battles of war, marriage, and family life, abuse it has both endured and afflicted on her daughter, the physical and emotional rigors of gender reassignment surgery—finally succumbs to death. The author has flown from Portland, Oregon, to be with her father Stefi in Budapest, yet Susan sees that her father is resting, she decides she must get some rest at her father's apartment. She is awakened by a phone call at six a.m. the next morning:

“Hallo,” the voice in the receiver said. “This is Dr. Molnárné.”

does a credible job serving as an introduction to the fascinating persona of DP. Born Dorothy Rothschild, in August 1893 (a year after my grandmother), she retains her first husband's name throughout the rest of her life. Known for her stinging witticisms, she, by her own admission, feels insecure about her writing. She seems to swing back and forth between trying to please men and trying to establish her life free of them, as well—domestically and professionally.

I double over laughing at one anecdote that Day relates and must share it here:

“Mrs. Parker had a rooted aversion to [A. A.] Milne in all his pastel moods and a little history to go with it. In 1928 she had been required—in her capacity as ‘Constant Reader’—to review his latest offering, a book called *The House at Pooh Corner*, in which Piglet asks Pooh why he has added the phrase ‘Tiddely-pom’ to a song, and Pooh answers, ‘To make it more hummy.’

‘And it is that word “hummy,” my darlings, that marks the first place in *The House at Pooh Corner* at which Tonstant Weeder frowned up’ (25).

I laughed for five minutes. In bed. Late at night. I almost couldn't go to sleep. I memorized the last few words so I could use them as a party trick, should the time arise (*That's the point when little Dicky Jespers frowned up*). The book is full of such moments, but also tinged with a certain melancholy. The woman drank heavily, and I find it sad that such a bright person's life would conclude rather unfulfilled. Still, we have her words, which should resonate throughout eternity.

Dillard, Annie. *The Writing Life*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1989.

This short tome, little more than one hundred pages, consists of seven terse chapters. In each one Dillard addresses, quite indirectly, at times, different aspects of what it means to be a writer. Like most successful writers, she wields an opinionated pen, but successful artists are allowed to do that, to teach what they know. And yet the task is difficult. Writers accomplish writing their books in different ways, even if they *do* some of the same things, differently.

“Putting a book together is interesting and exhilarating. It is sufficiently difficult and complex that it engages all your intelligence. It is life at its most free. Your freedom as a writer is not freedom of expression in the sense of wild blurting; you may not let rip . . . [i]t is life at its most free, if you are fortunate enough to be able to try it, because you select your materials, invent your task, and pace yourself” (11).

Freedom to write. Yes. A heady thing. Dillard ends her book with a narrative about a stunt pilot who invites her up in his plane. Before doing that she watches from the ground as he does his artful work in the sky. In the midst of it, strapped in with him, when he flips the plane and flies upside down, blood rushes to her head, life is on an edge thinner than even a razor. This, this is what it means to be an artist, she is saying, and yet the experience of writing is difficult to articulate. We just strap ourselves in each day and hope, unlike Dillard's pilot friend, that we don't eventually crash land during a routine stunt maneuver.

at no time does he allow sentimentality to interfere with his message. The entire collection—like a group of short stories, like a novel—possesses a narrative arc that is subtle, inching readers toward the climax, easing into a quiet denouement. The book *seems* nonlinear, but Chee glides readers from a few youthful months spent in Mexico becoming fluent in Spanish, to his older youth in college with Annie Dillard as a professor, to his maturation into an astute, caring professor of creative writing, to the publication of his first novel and how it explores and ultimately exposes the biggest secret of his life.

The Publishing Triangle, a long-established organization for LGBTQ writers based in New York, recently awarded this work the Randy Shilts Award for Gay Nonfiction. I hope, as a tour de force, it will win even more accolades in the coming months or years. Chee is a remarkable writer, and anyone who takes a seminar from him ought to feel fortunate.

Davis, Robert Murray. *The Ornamental Hermit*. Lubbock: TTU Press, 2004.

Nuggets:

“In fact, thought Steinbeck probably did not know and certainly, concerned with the plight of what he clearly thought of as real (i.e. white) Americans, did not care, the Arkansas was not only the boundary between the Choctaw and Cherokee Nations when this was Indian Territory, but it was one route for the Trail of Tears that brought the Five Civilized Tribes to the region after an upheaval at least comparable to the Joads’ displacement by dust and tractors” (57).

No offense to either Lubbock or Phoenix: **“All very pleasant, but I made no connection between my stay and the trip out, nor did I look ahead to the trip back. People mattered; not the place. In fact, Phoenix offers a great deal to assault the senses but not much to stimulate the imagination. Any given neighborhood or suburb looks pretty much like any other. With its six-lane streets and fast-moving traffic, it feels a lot like Lubbock, Texas, with the addition of palm and orange trees and some humpbacked mountains jutting unaccountable out of the landscape” (88).** Davis is, if nothing, opinionated.

“The very worst case was presented in Stiles’s satiric article on Moab in 2020, which may be the source of the now solidified rumor about Wal-Mart [sic] coming to San Juan County. Some boosters want an interstate highway built through the town, though it’s not clear where it could go. Many people worry about development on the rim to the west of the town. Stiles talks of moving to western Australia to find the room he needs but concedes that things may not be as bad as he thinks, since many new people feel that Moab is a special place” (125).

The book grinds down toward the end, so much so that I did not finish it.

Day, Barry, editor. *Dorothy Parker: In Her Own Words*. Lanham: Taylor, 2004.

To Dorothy Parker fans this work may seem repetitive or reductive, but Day’s book

apparently applying the same journalistic skills to the Maxwell case, but she ultimately abandons the book, believing she just doesn't have enough information to make it a *great* book. Cep's portrayal of Lee is one that readers may not be familiar with: an alcoholic (she eventually, unlike Capote, gets clean); a millionaire who lives, in some ways, like the poorest among her; someone who writes because she loves it, not because she must make a living from it; her own kind of philanthropist, taking care of people and causes she believes in.

Cep weaves together these three strands into one compelling narrative which contributes to even a larger picture: a last gasp of the Old South and its many, many contradictions. A descendant of a slave who allegedly kills members of his own race. A liberal attorney who attempts to evolve the white race in his home state of Alabama. And a writer, childhood friends with Truman Capote, who may be more Libertarian than Liberal, never really finding her rightful place in the American canon of literature.

Chee, Alexander. *Edinburgh: A Novel*. New York: Houghton, 2001.

This acclaimed novel is a tough read for any number of reasons. The author means for it to be tough, constructing a complex web of connections fraught with but enlivened by a mythology based on one character's Asian background. He mentions the name "Edinburgh" only a few times, yet its unique connotation is prime in setting up the underground nature of sexual abuse, its secrets, its shame.

The shame that an abused child experiences is difficult to write of, let alone portray by way of characters in a novel, but Chee, a master wordsmith, seems to come at everything by way of a side door, abstrusely, which is all the better, for readers are able to view abuse without having to wallow in it or be subject to its pain. One can feel empathy for the abused, as well as the abuser.

The novel depends a great deal on coincidence; the one which is germane to this novel could have really happened in life. The characters hail from a small geographic region, a small state isolated by the sea and a great rurality. To bring it off in fiction, however, such coincidence must not only be plausible but it must have its own logic, set up from the beginning by the author. My only quarrel with the novel may be its conclusion. Chee wants to hurry its resolution (spoiler), bringing together the odd triangle of people at the end and easily murdering one of them, while the other two do so with impunity. Such a chain of events *is* possible, but I believe it happens too quickly; its execution is too facile. But perhaps that is Chee's aim, after all, to give the two innocents a sense of retribution, readers a sense that the villain got what was coming to him. Bravo.

Chee, Alexander. *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel: Essays*. Boston: Houghton, 2018.

This collection of essays is a staggering one. In the way that fiction writers link short stories, Chee links essays to explicate how he works as a fiction writer. His metaphors are simple yet profound. His advice is wrenched from the heart, and yet

but apparent. Two, one's goal as a writer is to compel a reader to *see* what you see or even feel what others feel. Three, slower is faster. Do a thorough job.

Caro divides his book into seven parts: Part I concerns his time as a newspaper writer. Part II, he shares how he wrote of Robert Moses in *The Power Broker*—how one man can accrue and use power. Part III, Caro goes into more detail about the forty-five million pieces of pages he “turned” to write *The Power Broker*. In Part IV, he writes concerning the importance of interviews, how important it is to get answers to questions, even if you must circle back as many as eleven times, as he did with Moses, when he asked him the most important question last. Part V explains how Caro develops what he calls “sense of place,” providing rich and telling details about each setting of his book. In Part VI, the author reveals how he researched and wrote each of the first four books about President Lyndon B. Johnson, and included a bit about the fifth and final one, yet to be published. And finally, in Part VII, Caro reprints an interview *The Paris Review* conducted in 2016.

In all, *Working* is an engaging and unique memoir, and I recommend it to any writer or reader who has an interest in the five or six topics listed above. The man is a pro.

Cep, Casey. *Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud, and the Last Trial of Harper Lee*. New York: Knopf, 2019.

This fascinating book unfolds by way of three sections. In the first, Cep brings to life a decades-old Alabama story of insurance fraud in which one Rev. Willie Maxwell begins buying up life insurance policies on relatives and others close to him. If that isn't unusual enough, then each one of those persons begins to die in car “accidents” or by other strange circumstances. Even stranger, Cep makes clear, is that for some reason law enforcement cannot seem to pin these crimes on the prime suspect: Willie Maxwell. When Maxwell attends the funeral of the last victim, a relative of the deceased pulls out a revolver and kills the minister.

The second section of the book is about the attorney who not only helps the minister stay out of prison for years previous to the murder but who is so skilled that he gets an acquittal for the minister's murderer. The attorney himself is a colorful figure, a liberal Democrat who throws caution to the wind and runs for office. After he wins, his actions are too liberal for some and he is harassed (in a dangerous KKK style) out of office, never running again. Along the way, he makes friends with author Harper Lee, known for her novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The reason the two become acquainted is that Harper Lee is attempting to write a book, à la her friend Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, about the Reverend (*The Reverend* also being her working title). After all, when *Mockingbird* was finished, Lee had little to do, and not yet much money, so Capote hired Lee as his assistant to help him research his book. And what a great assistant she was. Cep makes clear that, in all, Lee offers Capote at least 150 pages of typewritten notes. Her talent is combing the physical landscape for specific details; his has more to do with affect, interviewing the related parties, getting them to open up. Lee spends years

Not as sensational as it probably was in the early 1950s. Interesting though, even if her prose sounds as if it has been transcribed from an audio recording (she admits as much in the end).

Ms. Bankhead probably paved the way for many other female actors or women of independence. She married only once, and it lasted four years. She had, by her own admission, many affairs. Most important, she lived the life of an artist. Sometimes in the money; many times not. She loved acting onstage more than making money, eschewing for a long time the lure of film or radio or television. But each time, her conservative (traditional) thinking would sway to the new medium, mostly because she was running low on funds.

For as much as she tells all, she is not entirely forthcoming, particularly with regard to alleged alcoholism and other peccadilloes.

Fifty years after her death, however, Bankhead is still remembered for her whisky tenor voice, her scathing remarks to those who cross her, and for her notable performances in films such as *Lifeboat*.

This particular edition published by the University of Mississippi Press, contains a number of typos. Sad.

Burns, Anna. *Milkman*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2018.

This winner of the UK's Man Booker Prize is a stunning read. From the outset, one is struck by this Irish writer's Joycean style or even point of view. The novel is ostensibly set in Northern Ireland of the 1970s. Her stream-of-consciousness prose includes the practice of keeping her characters anonymous. The narrator calls herself *middle sister*, one of several female siblings, and refers to them as *First Sister* and so forth. Other characters include *Milkman*, the *real milkman*, and *Somebody McSomebody*. Such a practice paints a society of strict norms, in which everyone is judged by whom they associate with or don't associate with, why one isn't married to a particular man by a certain age. The practice also keeps the reader at a distance, viewing this particular time period of strife with as much objectivity as possible. The novel might have been reduced by a hundred pages if the author had chosen real names instead of hyphenated characters like *maybe-boyfriend* being repeated hundreds of times, yet after establishing its own pace, the prose swoops in and snatches the reader up. At times you cannot put down the book. The narrator is her own Stephen Daedalus, striving to know her world, but also afraid to find out too much. Finding out too much might get her killed. A must read for 2019.

Caro, Robert A. *Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing*. New York: Knopf, 2019.

I took three important ideas from this esteemed journalist's book concerning the books he's written. One, his first editor, Alan Hathaway of *Newsday*, advised him: "Turn every page." Don't merely flip through a folder or skim a document. Overlook nothing. You may see *patterns* in the material, something which unstated

said, ‘Oh, hi, girls,’ and continued down the corridor. *Touché!*” (77).

Anyone like me, who has followed the career of Ms. Andrews from Mary Poppins until now, will appreciate the depths to which she mines her soul to share once again with us her life and her talents. It’s quite a ride.

Baker, Chet. *As Though I Had Wings: The Lost Memoir* with an introduction by Carol Baker. New York: St. Martin’s, 1997.

Published posthumously, this thin tome is not very well written, and we must respect that because the author probably didn’t intend for the public to read it. Yet the memoir does give some insight into one of my favorite jazz musicians, the brilliant trumpeter and vocalist, Chet Baker. I probably love his vocals as much as I do his instrumental renditions because they are so raw and soulful. His phrasing is so intuitive, yet *correct*; he knows the song inside and out, owning every word. If he slides down a half or quarter of a step on a tone, it is most deliberate.

In spite of the flaw of not having much a narrative arc—the book is largely a confessional about his frank drug use in the 1950s and 1960s and ensuing prison time, as well as his prodigious sex life—his prose is engaging, fresh and does display some interesting quirks. Even though he uses a lot of slang from the period (*cat* as in *cool cat*, grass for marijuana), he manages to employ a few words that have held on (dude, gig). Because of his word choice and syntax, readers can tell he is a very intelligent man. At the same time, if he is so smart, why is he mesmerized by the life of a junkie? What demons propel him to escape from his life while trying to dive into it at the same time? What may be missing from this brief account of his life, written perhaps twenty-five years before his body finally gave out and he died at fifty-eight, is a certain sense of reflection. *Why am I doing these things? What makes me shoot up, put everything on the line for a few minutes or hours of bliss?* But what can we expect, perhaps, from one who so tellingly reveals his soul to us in every song he’s ever played or sung. When Chet is riffing on “The Touch of Your Lips,” he *is* reflecting; he’s giving us everything he has, and yet Baker seldom plays louder than a mezzo forte. A very controlled and clean sound.

In Barcelona, in 1963, for a series of gigs, he ends with a tale about making contact with a doctor who procures drugs for him, as if the man is a prince: **“He was a surgeon whose skill and facilities brought patients from all over the world. I was soon obtaining scripts from him, and it all began once again”** (115).

Up to this point, in his early thirties, Baker has already been in and out of rehab dozens of times, situated in some of the best institutions in the world. One can only speculate what the last two and a half decades of his life must be like. Yet when I view him in a 1983 documentary, his face sunken and body shriveled, he is nothing like the handsome self of his youth, and I believe my question has been answered. Pity.

Bankhead, Tallulah. *My Autobiography*. Jackson: U of Mississippi, 2004.

Andrews, Julie with Emma Walton Hamilton. *Home Work*. New York: Hachette, 2019.

Andrews begins the book with a summary of her first memoir, *Home*, that came out in 2009, which is a good thing. It induces the reader to want to locate a copy (for the details must be juicy), as well as it gives readers a view of what her early life was like before she became famous and moved to Hollywood to work.

Unlike many memoirs which can be of a meandering nature, this one moves quickly from one locale to the next, one creative project to the next, one family crises to the next with little reflection, except by way of journal entries from the time period Andrews is calling to mind. Having said that, I believe Andrews moves from locale to locale because that is the nature of the business she is in. In making a film, she must relocate to where the project is being shot. With regard to each film there are preproduction stories, stories during the shooting, and then stories about when the film or live show opens—the reviews, both good and bad. And I’m sorry, of course, Ms. Andrews does reflect upon the relationships she has with her two husbands, her daughter by the first one, the step children she acquires (happily) from her second husband, her siblings and her Moms and Dads, plus the two daughters that she and Blake Edwards adopt from Vietnam. Julie reflects, but it’s often a hand-wringing followed, most of the time, by things turning out all right. Still, the memoir has more than a few amusing anecdotes. My favorite involves one with Mike Nichols and Carol Burnett. The three are staying in the same hotel as Julie and Carol prepare for their joint TV special. He wants to meet late at night after his train has been delayed, and the women agree. They get into their pajamas and robes and when they know he’s in the hotel, they wait for him at the elevators. They decide it would be funny if they are kissing when Nichols gets off the elevator:

“At this point, one of the elevators went ‘ping!’ so I whipped Carol across my lap, making it look as if I had her in a full embrace. The doors opened ... and the elevator was packed Nobody got out, nobody got in. As the doors closed, they collectively leaned toward the center so they could get a better view. Carol and I simply cracked up.

Suddenly another elevator went ‘ping’; I quickly dipped Carol over my knee again. The doors opened and a lone woman stepped out, glanced at us both, and then hurried on down the hall. By now, we were both weeping with laughter. Carol slid off my knee and crawled behind the sofa to hide.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked.

She couldn’t even reply, she was laughing so hard. With a touch of panic, I noticed that the lady who had just passed us had turned around and was now coming back. Leaning over the sofa, she inquired, ‘Excuse me, are you Carol Burnett?’

In a strangled voice Carol said, ‘Yes,’ Then raising a hand above the sofa to point at me, she added, ‘And this is my friend, Mary Poppins!’” (76).

The elevator pings again, and the two women stage their kiss once again, “and Mike stepped out of the elevator. Without pausing or even breaking a smile, he casually