

2020

(Alpha by Author)

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1. Alexander, Michelle. With a new preface by the author. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press, 2020. First published by The New Press, in 2010.

This book should appear at some point on the syllabus of a required course in every college or university in America. Portions of it could be taught in our high schools. Adult reading groups of all stripes should read it. The book is that important. It is that good. **“In 1972, fewer than 350,000 people were being held in prisons and jails nationwide, compared with more than 2 million people today” (10),** states Alexander.”

The New Jim Crow, however, is not only about numbers. It is about an entire *philosophy* in which White people can no longer discriminate outwardly (at the end of the old Jim Crow era) so in an era of colorblindness (“*I don’t mind if she’s Black.*”), they resort to setting up a new form of discrimination through mass incarceration. How does it work? It begins with the War on Drugs, in 1980, with the Reagan administration. It gains momentum with Bush Senior and gains real traction with Bill Clinton and Bush Junior. Alexander claims that even some of Obama’s policies contribute harm (though he does speak out against mass incarceration). With this new policy young Black and Brown men are given long sentences for minor drug infractions. Then when they finally return to their homes (uneducated and no longer young), they are marked as felons, so for the rest of their lives they cannot vote, cannot get jobs, and wind up in a constant loop of being prisoner or permanent criminal—all for a minor drug offense. And how do White men who commit the same offenses fare? Much better, because, one learns, all these cases are *adjudicated* by the police, who ignore White drug crime but not Black or Brown.

An excellent writer, Michelle Alexander makes her case in not only a lawyerly manner (perfect syllogisms) with logic and facts but also with heavy but artful doses of thinking from the greatest African-American scholars: Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, and Martin Luther King, Junior. She is rough on every one of us but in the best Tough Love tradition. There is enough blame for us all but also enough room to turn this around. It won’t be easy, she declares, but by looking at the concept of Race squarely in the eye, we can do it. And I believe her.

2. Andrews, Julie. *Home: A Memoir of My Early Years*. New York: Hachette, 2008.

This book was a joy to read, as I thought it would be, having read Andrews’s latest memoir, *Home Work*, concerning her years in Hollywood. This earlier book covers her childhood and youthful successes in vaudeville and on the stage in London and New York. Included are the use of nearly sixty photographs which help to illustrate her story.

Andrews manages to highlight the positive things that happen in her life while baring her soul to tell of the negative, for one, finding out that her biological father is really the result of her mother having had an affair with a family friend. She's already gone through the tumult of losing the man she thought was her father (Dad) to divorce and changing her name from Wells to Andrews, after her stepfather (Pop) who, though he helps launch her career, also emotionally abuses her. Both her mother and her Pop are alcoholics, which almost always calls upon at least one child to bear the responsibility of keeping (or feeling she must keep) the family together.

Unlike some celebrities or artists, she goes into great detail about her instrument—her mellifluous voice—how it works technically to achieve what it does. At the same time, she spends a page and a half at one point explaining in precise yet abstract terms (for only the artist herself can describe it) what performing means to her. By her own account (and I believe her) she makes many friends in the world of performance, some that last a lifetime, as with Carol Burnett, with whom she has a lot in common regarding their rough childhoods. Other friendships she can renew with a single phone call or visit.

The most astounding aspect about Julie Andrews may be her generosity, a generosity that begins with her family. As a very young person she begins to support her mother and stepfather and sister. She is also generous with her fellow performers whether they be actors, singers, dancers, directors. It is a generosity of spirit that never seems to fail, proving perhaps, that the more one gives to the world, the more one receives from it.

3. Arenas, Reinaldo. *The Assault*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin, 1994.

Think *Animal Farm* meets *1984*. Arenas creates his own biting satire of what life is like for Cubans, homosexuals in particular, in Castro's Communist Cuba. Rather than recreating this hell realistically (as he does in *Before Night Falls*), Arenas limns a dystopian animal world in which the narrator—a hardline, hateful, and clawed beast—searches out his mother so that he can kill her. He also orders that any man (or woman) who dares to stare at an attired male animal's crotch (even for a microsecond, as if one might discern such a move) will be annihilated. This cruelty is so absurd as to be laughable in a manner it would not be if portrayed realistically. I'm issuing no spoiler alert (oh, I guess this is it): narrator searches and searches for his wicked mother whom he hates with all his might, to no avail. Meantime, for his fine work killing queers, he is awarded one of the highest honors to be bestowed by the *Represident*. The narrator is shocked to learn that this represident is none other than his mother! He obtains a raging erection which is not allayed until he porks (to put it nicely) his own mother, she explodes into a million bits, and the narrator's rage is finally released (ew). Ah, now that's a climax: Killing queers and the Oedipal impulse all in one go.

4. Arenas, Reinaldo. *Old Rosa: A Novel in Two Stories*. Translated by Ann Tashi Slater and Andrew Hurley. New York: Grove, 1981.

“Old Rosa” begins with a conflagration of an old woman’s home. Through an elegant and gradual flashback, readers learn of young Rosa’s past, the husband she sends away after he’s given her three children. The story is set just as the Cuban Revolution is getting underway. The eldest brother joins up, and, in fact is responsible for helping the State “purchase” Rosa’s farm from her. Her daughter, as well, signs up and marries another soldier in the fight. The youngest child, Arturo, is a dreamer. He is always playing his transistor radio up in his room unless Rosa makes him work cutting cane in the fields. Near the end of the story, she discovers a naked teenage Arturo with another boy together and, in a rage, chases them off the property. In the end, readers return to the fire that they saw in the beginning, Old Rosa meeting her end.

In “The Brightest Star,” Arturo is arrested and interned in a prison for homosexuals. At first he attempts to distance himself from the hordes of “feminine” queens who seem to camp it up 24/7. But because of their harassment, he finally joins them in their behavior and outdoes them at times. There is a gorgeous extended scene in which Arturo, attempting to flee his captors (for a while and uselessly), dreams of the fabulous dwelling he would build, the beautiful landscaping he would grace the property with. He meets his end amid this setting he has dreamed up.

Arenas’s portrayal of this mother and son is both lyrical and starkly real.

5. Arenas, Reinaldo. *Singing from the Well*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin, 1988.

When the first fantastic event takes place, I realize I cannot read this novel as a conventional or *realistic* one. Oh, this novel set in old Cuba contains plenty of realism: boys being beaten or browbeaten by two older generations, but it has plenty of magical realism, as well. And that’s when I decide to read it like one takes a roller coaster ride, accepting all the bumps, turns, and headlong journeys downward along the way. It is basically the story of Celestino, a Cuban boy who writes poetry and is shunned for it by nearly everyone he knows. He writes on every scrap of paper available to him, and when he can find no more he writes on bare barked trees, trees that Grandfather cuts down, thus soon denuding the family property of greenery, a sharp metaphor for how this simple family is attempting to destroy Celestino’s talent.

6. Bailey, Blake. *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates*. New York: Picador, 2003.

Tragedy is a horrendous thing for any human to endure, and yet we all do endure it to one extent or another: adverse childhood experiences, deaths, career failures, and more. The author of this exhaustive literary biography, Blake Bailey, does not employ the word lightly, neither in the title nor how he uses it throughout the book. Bailey’s subject, novelist Richard Yates, born in 1926, has about as tragic life as one can live, yet Yates uses it to formulate his fiction with a high degree of success, perhaps too well, to listen to some critics, many of whom are put off by his lack of

“happy endings” or his “dim view” of humanity.

No matter what, Yates comes by his viewpoint honestly. In short, his parents’ divorce, not to mention he is raised by a mother who probably has a better opinion of herself than her real talents manifest themselves in her life. She believes herself to be an “artist,” and because of her opinion, her two children (Richard and sister Ruth) are always at the bottom of her priorities. On the other hand, she is a highly seductive person, among other things, encouraging her young son to sleep in her bed. On nights that she stays out late or all night, the boy child lies in bed, wondering where she is. And when she comes home and falls in next to him and vomits on his pillow, his rage is stoked in a way that remains with him his entire life.

### Some nuggets:

**“. . . he fixed on his round eyes and plump lips as physiognomic signs of weakness; more to the point, he thought they made him look feminine, ‘bubbly,’ and he had a lifelong horror of being perceived as homosexual” (39).** Hm, I wonder why, with the mother thing he has going on.

Friend and fellow writer Kurt Vonnegut writes about war: **“People don’t recover from a war. There’s a fatalism that he [Yates] picked up as a soldier. Enlisted men are surprisingly indifferent to survival. Death doesn’t matter that much” (75).**

Friend and former student DeWitt Henry notes: **“Dick cultivated an anti-intellectual manner, but there was nothing phony or affected about it. In places like the army and tuberculosis wards he was put in contact with unlettered people, who were just as sensitive as anybody else” (78).** Yates did his best to capture natural intelligence in characters, and, in life, in his teaching at the Iowa Workshop, he landed hard on any, any arrogant student who put another’s writing down.

Yates discovers what the term “objective correlative” means: **“I had never understood what Eliot meant by the curious phrase ‘objective correlative’ until the scene in *Gatsby* where the almost comically sinister Meyer Wolfsheim, who has just been introduced, displays his cuff links and explain that they are ‘the finest specimens of human molars.’ Get it? Got it. *That’s* what Eliot meant” (109).** He now gets that Wolfsheim, true to his naturalistic name, traffics in human flesh and uses his understanding to find such tokens for his own characters. **“Flaubert offered a further tutorial on the proper use of the ‘objective correlative’—the telling detail that transmits meaning and emotion without laboring the point” (175)**

**“The only hope of escape was to write a successful novel—the raw material of which, he already sensed, would be the stuff of his own predicament. But he wanted to transcend the merely personal, to avoid the pitfalls of sentiment and self-pity” (175).**

Bailey comments on claims of French critic, Jacques Cabau, that Yates is a master: **“Not surprisingly the Frenchman was especially pleased by Yates’s insights into the hollowness of American life: *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*—a courageous theme in**

**America, where loneliness is a sin, where success is obligatory and happiness is the first duty of every citizen” (271).**

Long-term friend and publisher, Sam Lawrence, says at Yates’s funeral (more of a come-as-you-are wake): **“He drank too much, he smoked too much, he was accident-prone, he led an itinerant life, but as a writer he was all in place. He wrote the best dialogue since John O’Hara, who also lacked the so-called advantages of Harvard and Yale. And like O’Hara he was a master of realism, totally attuned to the nuances of American behavior and speech. You know what I think he would have said to all this? ‘C’mon, Sam, knock it off. Let’s have a drink” (607).**

Any reader wanting to get inside the head of one of the greatest American twentieth-century novelists must consider reading this book. It’s that great. My second-hand copy is marked with a “WITHDRAWN” stamp from the Mishawaka-Penn-Harris Public Library in Indiana. Guess it wasn’t much of a hit there.

7. Berg, Scott. *Max Perkins: Editor of Genius*. New York: Dutton, 1978.

As distinguished editor and later editor-in-chief and vice president for the famed Scribner’s and Sons, Maxwell E. Perkins was probably more of a priest than five out of ten clergy. Though a skeptical secularist, he was nonetheless a great humanitarian with regard to writers and *his* writers in particular. Unlike today, when writers can only access editors of the big publishing houses by way of an agent (transoms nailed shut for some time now), he would sit down with the majority of people who just showed up at the Scribner offices with manuscript in hand. He would read the MS right away and almost as fast, if he accepted it, would outline what the writer needed to do to shape the story into a workable novel. Author Berg cites writer after writer—from Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe to others not as *successful*—who claim that without Perkins his or her book would not have been possible; indeed, entire careers would not have been possible. Smart people who knew their material would see what he was after right away and get the corrections (sometimes months later) back to him, and he would reward them both with his genuine affection and with more material concerns. F. Scott Fitzgerald, in particular, did not manage his money well. He and his wife lived lavishly when they had money and Scott would show up at Perkins’s door when they didn’t. Max would lend Scott money from Scribner’s. He would even provide loans from his personal funds. He was quite professorial in that he would take home a brief case full of MSS on the weekend and not only read them all but write perhaps a thirty-page letter to the author about what needed to be done. Essentially, though this book develops the family and friends of Max Perkins, it is mostly about the writers whom he edited. They became what we would call today extended family members: uncles to his children, he a father to his young writers like Tom Wolfe, brother-in-arms with hosts of writers, including females whom he championed in a manner that other editors did not (although he was also accused of being a misogynist). Though the book is certainly not a how-to, the reader might be able to pick up any number tips from Perkins’s brand of editing:

—Perkins takes fourteen of Hemingway’s stories and arranges them **“to space the strongest pieces at the beginning, middle, and end, varying the rest of the contents by alternating stories of different qualities back to back”** (109).

—Perkins, for Tom Wolfe, writes out a twelve-point prescription for revisions, suggestions such as, **“Cut out references to previous books and to success,” “Intersperse jealousy and madness scenes with more scenes of dialogue with woman,”** or **“Fill in memory of childhood scenes much more fully with additional stories and dialogue”** (237).

—About developing plot, Perkins says, **“A deft man may toss his hat across the office and hang it on a hook if he just naturally does it, but he will always miss if he does it consciously. That is a ridiculous and extreme analogy, but there is something in it”** (447).

Though this book came out in 1978 it still seems fresh, mostly because its subject’s life continues to shine as sort of beacon for all writers.

8. Bigsby, C. W. E. *Contemporary Writers: Joe Orton*. London: Methuen, 1982.

This British scholar compresses (seventy-five pages) yet illumines Orton’s short but expansive oeuvre. He reduces Orton’s work to what he calls “anarchic farce.” Through his several plays and one novel Orton lampoons that which he detests about mid-twentieth-century British society: its ossified moral system, its laws, its strictures against freedom including sexual freedom. Through his own sense of narcissism, he develops characters who are objectified, unreal but give the appearance of verisimilitude through their parodying of expected behaviors. Yet there are always the one or two characters who, like a bowler, intends to mow down all the others by bowling a strike. For anyone who admires farce yet doesn’t know quite how to approach writing it, the reading of Orton (including his diaries) is quite a schooling, and Bigsby’s short study points readers in the right direction.

9. Bolt, Robert. *A Man for All Seasons*. New York: Scholastic, 1962.

This play first performed in November 1961, in New York, remains a monument to a man who would stand against the monarchy of England’s King Henry VIII. If only Sir Thomas More would renounce his belief that the king should not remarry, More would be saved, but his conscience does not allow and thus Henry executes More. Of course, getting to that moment is complex. There are all the king’s emissaries who try unsuccessfully to convince More of his *folly*, not to mention his distraught wife, who has come to enjoy her position in society, ready and well-paid servants. But to be true to himself and his beliefs, More chooses death rather than compromise. A mighty example for us all, but one that would be difficult to emulate. The work, not to be trite, still stands up, a play for all seasons.

10. Brodkey, Harold. *First Love and Other Sorrows*. New York: Vintage, 1986.

This collection first published in 1954 when Brodkey was twenty-four is still a gem, has hardly aged at all. In fact, the stories seem to enlighten readers as to what that period was like, and, at the same time, show how little in human nature has changed. Also ... he may be among the first short story writers to have constructed what editors have come adoringly to call “linked” stories (so much more novel-like than, say, fifteen *disparate* stories).

The first two stories are connected by way of St. Louis’s red-brick buildings, its clammy climate, its propensity for lightning bugs. More important, its people, neither eastern sophisticates nor western ruffians, take up the page with their circumspect curiosity about life’s challenges. The next two stories, linking a St. Louisan to his undergraduate years at Harvard University, explore the angst that college people face, one in which two buddies spend a summer traveling in Europe and wind up (like lovers, but *not*) despising one another. The other story is similar, only the couple are male and female experiencing intercourse for the first time ever and how that plays out over the period of a school year. The final five stories concern a young woman named Laurie/Laura, the stories ranging from a date she is preparing for while a nineteen-year-old at Wellesley College. The remaining follow her through early marriage where she seems to struggle with post-partem depression following the birth of her daughter, Faith. In the next story, Faith is fifteen months old, and Laura must settle for a substitute babysitter, a brusque African-American woman, whose apparent roughness with the child may nevertheless be healthier than Laura’s constant hand-wringing over her decisions. And finally, the last story explores the testy relationship between Laura and her husband Martin, as she is pregnant with their second child. Her depression, her lack of confidence, seem to have increased in intensity, and Brodkey appears to have put his finger on the nuances of a woman’s life in 1950s America before Betty Freidan even identifies the problem. He does so with subtlety so grand readers then may not have been able to recognize them. A superb read for short-story lovers.

11. Broyard, Anatole. *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir*. New York: Southern, 1993.

Some poor or average writers sometimes make better critics than authors. They can (or can’t) see what’s wrong with another person’s writing but not their own. This guy may have been a book critic for the *New York Times*, but this effort, at least, is a sad attempt to memorialize his youth in the late 1940s in New York’s West Village. Even the title, which may be what drew me to the book, is but a flashy bauble, for he hardly says anything about Kafka and *why* he might have been all the *rage* at that time. What I’m probably most offended by is his piling on of similes and metaphors as if the reader might be a complete dolt, as if he hasn’t interesting enough material to mostly allow it to speak for itself:

“My nerves—I suppose it was my nerves—gave off a high, faint whirring, *like the sound that billions of insects make in the tropics at night*. It was a disturbance as remote as *grinding your teeth in your sleep*. Or it was as if my brain had something *stuck in its teeth*. It may have been merely the friction of consciousness, but I chose to see it as a symptom” (46). [Italics mine]

Paragraph after paragraph is marred with this layering of mostly unrelated analogous images which serve to belabor or muddle his point, whatever it might be.

Another fault with the book may be its structure. Part One, clearly sixty percent of the book, is about Sheri, the man's first love, a borderline sadomasochistic relationship at best. Part Two seems totally unrelated being more about his male friendships. What may be missing most is a point of view that is realistic. He is clearly writing this work near the end of his life about a period that is nearly fifty years gone, and it has that hazy quality in places; it does not seem to be enhanced by passages from journals or interviews with some of the guilty parties. Some passages like the one where a close friend tells Anatole that he has leukemia, rings with a poignancy that still remains. I only wish the book were made up of more of such scenes.

12. Carlson, Paul. *The Plains Indians*. College Station: Texas A&M UP, 1998.

I grew up in Kansas amid the Great Plains, and I have lived my adult life in what is locally called the South Plains of Texas. As a child, because of all the Indian street names (Seneca, Pawnee, Osage) in my Wichita neighborhood, and because of artifacts I found, I believed there was an invisible life beneath the "civilization" that had been superimposed over the top of the previous one. Well, Professor Carlson unveils that previous world so that it is no longer invisible. Through detailed treatment of Indian life—its beginning, how horses and bison effected change, economics, the various social structures (tribes differed), war with other tribes as well as whites, and reservation life—he portrays the truth about native plains cultures. Indian tribes were quite capable of assimilating change, sometimes to their detriment. Slowly, over a century and a half, European culture squelched or eviscerated Indian life, breaking treaties and reservation agreements when it suited the federal government to take land that it wanted. One can only imagine the sort of country the U.S. would be today if Europeans had treated the Indians (as many as five million coast to coast) fairly and with respect: perhaps there would have been no African slave trade, there would have existed cities of mixed heritage, Indian forms of governing that might be fairer than our amalgam of democracy and capitalism which seems to eat human flesh at an astounding rate: Perhaps less greed and more consideration for all human life.

I could be wrong, but I encountered a couple of typos that a copyeditor at an academic press should not have missed:

On page 49, the author uses "**dominate**," a verb, for what should be "dominant," an adjective: "**Just over a century later, the Plains Indians were living on reservations, and many of their traditional ways changed again—or for a time endured—beneath *dominant* white culture before reemerging again in the twentieth century**" (49).

On page 174, the author misspells "possessed" by omitting the first "s": "**In 1890 fifty-nine agencies *possessed* an Indian law-enforcement squad**" (174).

These errors mar an otherwise scholarly and informative book.



13. Carlson, Ron. *Betrayed by F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Norton, 1977.

Obviously, one of Carlson's earliest books. He may still be twenty-nine at the time, his protagonist Larry Boosinger closer to twenty, at least emotionally. It takes a lot of balls to hitch your literary wagon to one of the masters, making Fitzgerald Larry's hero. He *refers* to Fitzgerald and milieu in strategic spots but I never quite feel it. How has he come to know F. Scott this well? Yes, well, he *is* in graduate school, at least until he isn't, and he is no longer engaged to be married, oh, and he's under arrest for something he did not do—but Larry's romanization of a romantic never quite comes off. Carlson's authority with language is obvious and fine, but the novel is somehow unsatisfying.

14. Carson, Anne. *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*. New York: Knopf, 1998.

I admire Carson for taking an ancient story and updating it through the use of verse. It is a fascinating narrative that deserves wide attention.

15. Cenziper, Debbie. *Citizen 865: The Hunt for Hitler's Hidden Soldiers in America*. New York: Hachette, 2019.

Cenziper focuses her book on two main groups. First, she tells the story of Polish Jews who, during World War II, become Hitler's pawns. Hitler is looking to expand Germany's borders so that his people have more space in which to live, so he *annexes* Poland. After the war, some of these displaced persons flee to the US, for they have no one or nothing left at home. The other group Cenziper develops is the people who work for the Office of Special Investigations (OSI), one of whom is a fresh new historian, Peter Black. Historians are relentless researchers, so they make a good team along with others, lawyers, in particular.

Their work is to ferret out particular ex-Nazi's, particularly "Citizen 856," who, after the war, minimize their involvement with killing Jews to US Immigration officials, and thus gain illegal entry into the country—a frightening idea to the legal immigrants living nearly side-by-side their torturers in some cases. The OSI spends decades building cases against this group of Ukrainians and Russians who are recruited and rewarded by the Nazis for carrying out their orders to exterminate about 1.7 people. The OSI's work is arduous and their results are mixed. Because most of the accused Nazis appeal the decision to be returned to their native countries to face trial there (except in Germany, where officials do NOT want these people back), some of them die before deportation, but a few do have to face justice in their home countries.

Some Americans, like Pat Buchanan, oppose the OSI's work, want to dispose of the OSI. They believe those mass murderers should be forgiven and forgotten. It is difficult to see how these usually conservative people, can form such a free-and-easy view of what should happen to war criminals—when otherwise they are usually such hawks. Is that really a *Christian* posture? Maybe someone will write a book about them to figure out why they would hold such a position.

16. Coetzee, J. M. *Diary of a Bad Year*. New York: Viking, 2007.

Coetzee relates the story of an aging author dying of cancer who hires an attractive young woman in his building to do typing for him. In the evenings the woman relates to her boyfriend what the developing book is like. She also engages in dialogue with the author concerning his *strong opinions* (also the title of the book). At some point the boyfriend becomes the author's accountant and devises a failproof plan to cheat the author out of his estate at the time of his death.

What makes this simple plot compelling is Coetzee's structure: the top third of each page is assigned to fragments from the fictional author's essays. A middle portion of the page, usually quite slim, is a continuing dialog between the author and the typist, where he discovers she isn't only pretty but smart as well. The bottom section of each page portrays the relationship between the typist and her boyfriend. At least, in theory, one may read all three parts separately, from front to back because Coetzee presents them as three distinct but interrelated stories. However, I mostly read the book conventionally, attempting to keep each of the threads separately yet trying, at the same time, to see how the three threads related to one another.

This novel is a fascinating read mostly because of the structure. If Coetzee had given the book a more traditional approach with alternating chapters or sections, it might have been a different book indeed, though I cannot predict how. Such is the alchemy of fine writing by a fine author.

17. De Saint Exupéry, Antoine. Translated by Curtis Cate. *Southern Mail*. New York: Harcourt, 1972.

If I had been someone looking for a novel like Ernest K. Gann's *The High and the Mighty*, I would be sorely disappointed. However, since I am reading the same author who wrote about a little prince stranded on a star, I know the book is to be about one who loves the skies in a different way. The novel is divided into three parts: In the brief Part One, readers encounter French pilot Jacques Bernis, who flies a mail plane on a route south to northern Africa and back, sometimes his clients not receiving mail for up to six months. In Part Two, a flashback to the prior two months, Bernis tells of his love affair with a very young woman named Geneviève. And he's not entirely satisfied with his life on earth, referring to himself as a "sorrowful archangel" (24). In perhaps the author's subconscious nod to his novel, *Le Petit Prince*, Bernis says, "Two minutes later, standing on the grass, I felt young, as though put down on some star where life begins anew" (26). Exupéry seems to have used his experience as an aviator for all kinds of miracles and metaphors. In Part Three, Bernis is back in the air. Italicized reports of his progress informs us, on the last pages: "*Saint-Louis du Sénégal to Toulouse: France-America located east Timeris stop Bullet holes in controls stop Enemy forces in vicinity stop Pilot killed plane smashed stop Proceeding to Dakar*" (119-20).

18. Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Andrew H.

MacAndrew and with an introductory essay by Konstantin Mochulsky. New York: Bantam, 1970.

Another book that sat on my shelf unread, this time since 1986. 936 pages. This was nineteenth-century entertainment: a book that might take readers twenty hours to read. I'm not sure twenty-first century readers believe they have twenty hours to spend on one book. Even the denouement and epilogue take up the last one hundred pages. My mental image of this book was always four brothers kicking their heels up, Cossack style, in great revelry, but, ah, no.

One of the four is said to be illegitimate, Smerdyakov. The eldest of the remaining brothers is Mitya or Dmitry. Next is Vanya or Ivan. And the youngest is Alyosha or Alexei. The Russian literary custom of assigning multiple names to a character broadens his or her dynamic, more so than the Anglo/American Bob and Robert or Jim and James. I'm not sure why. Perhaps the author uses a different name depending on the context.

No need to belabor the plot: Readers become acquainted with all four brothers. Certain conflicts arise between father and sons, particularly father and Dmitry. Father is found dead and one of the sons is accused of his murder. Like all epic novels, the author spends a great deal of leisurely time acquainting readers with each character, even the minor ones, so that one's curiosity nearly rivals the curiosity one has in waiting to see what happens next in, say, a soap opera or an evening TV series. Only with much more gravitas. I'm certainly glad I spent the time reading this novel with a time-worn theme that surprisingly still reads fresh almost two hundred years after its writing.

19. Doty, Mark. *Sweet Machine: Poems*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.

Great collection. Especially liked the title poem.

20. Doty, Mark. *Turtle, Swan & Bethlehem in Broad Daylight: Two Volumes of Poetry by Mark Doty*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 2000.

Doty transforms the personal into the universal like no one I know. He takes the historical and brings it alive. He takes the concrete, and in the flip of a word or phrase christens it metaphorical with skilled legerdemain. Because of this touch, his poems never age (if a poem can do such a thing), the subject matter and treatment always remaining fresh.

21. Doty, Mark. *Deep Lane: Poems*. New York: Norton, 2015.

One of my favorite poems from this collection may be "The King of Fire Island." *Hard by our fence in tea-dance light / he seemed the very model of his kind: / a buck in velvet at the garden rim, / bronze lightly shagged, split thumbs...* As a gay man myself, I'm thinking, Oh, boy, oh, boy. Literally, boyz, I'm thinking. But Doty's first important image, one of a deer, is fraught with tempting language in

regard to the other wildlife found on the island: “tea-dance,” “model,” “buck,” and “bronze.” These all could evoke a gay man’s thoughts of debauchery. Then the persona chastises himself for his own salaciousness: ... *We were objects of his regal, / mild regard. / Did I really say tea? / Measure the afternoon by a bar event?* Even Doty’s use of a cliché—*in the thick of buzzing bodies, intent / in quick talk, though their subtle eyes / won’t miss a trick*—because it is also a pun, elevates his usage. Almost as if the deer and the persona are one, they are sharing the same environment but with more in common than one might think. This poem of 131 lines is one of my favorite kind of poems, one that both compresses and expands, the magic of creating a long story of depth, made short—kind of.

22. Doty, Mark. *My Alexandria*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993.

A perfect gathering of poems. In the next to the last poem, the death of a dog seems to function as a climax for the entire collection.

23. Douglas, Norman. With an introduction by Dorothy Scarborough. *South Wind*. New York: Macmillan, 1929.

In this novel which is set on the fictitious island of Nepenthe (largely believed to be based on Italy’s Isle of Capri), I counted fifty-one references either to “south wind” or “sirocco,” averaging one mention per chapter though not every chapter bears one. This phenomenon of the wind passing up from North Africa and over the Mediterranean Sea could make wind *the* primary character in the book. This irritating south wind character—sere, constant, and fierce—causes mostly Brits or non-Nepenthean visitors, who have come to the island to *recover* from civilization, to lie, cheat, and kill. Not always crazy about plot-driven novels, I would have appreciated a bit more of one here. The chapters seem to pass episodically from one to the next without much in the way of the cause-effect nature of plot points. For example, a significant murder takes place, and yet, though the reader knows whodunit, there is little by way of resolution. Though the reason *why* is apparent, the conflict between the guilty woman and her former husband might have been resolved in a different way. All the murder seems to do is set up the author’s book-length struggle of Catholicism against atheism. Even so, this reader followed one page after another until the novel was blessedly over. Don’t ask me why.

24. Eberhardt, Jennifer L. *Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do*. New York: Viking, 2019.

An excellent book for every American to read. Why? Dr. Eberhardt addresses the concept of implicit bias, and she begins with some great examples that lead to a clear definition:

**“Whether bad or good, whether justified or unjustified, our beliefs and attitudes can become so strongly associated with the category that they are automatically triggered, affecting our behavior and decision making. So, for example, simply seeing a black person can automatically bring to mind a host of associations that we have picked up from our society: this person is a good athlete, this person doesn’t**

do well in school, this person is poor, this person dances well, this person lives in a black neighborhood, this person should be feared. The process of making these connections is called bias. It can happen unintentionally. It can happen unconsciously. It can happen effortlessly. And it can happen in a matter of milliseconds. These associations can take hold of us no matter our values, no matter our conscious beliefs, no matter what kind of person we wish to be in the world” (31-2).

Eberhardt doesn't come to the topic without a personal story of her own. As an African-American she is raised in a middle-class home in Cleveland, Ohio, and attends noted Shaker Heights High School, which leads to a first-class education. On the night before she is to receive her PhD and head the procession as flag bearer, she and a friend are stopped by a white Massachusetts policeman because her Ohio license plate is over six weeks past expiration. I can imagine him saying (to a white person), *Did you realize your tag has expired? Oh, you're about to graduate? Congratulations. Since you're leaving town, you might want to put that renewal high on your list when you get back to Ohio. I normally issue a warning, but I'm going to let it slide today.* This is NOT what happens to Jennifer Eberhardt. She is so shaken by the policeman's demand that she get out of her car that she refuses. He not only drags her out of the car but slams her slight body on top of it so hard it creates a dent (and not a few aches and pains for her), now in full sight of bystanders and a policeman of a higher rank who claims to see nothing. Fortunately, Eberhardt is allowed to call her dean at Harvard and the woman bails the two students out. But the experience mars the graduation experience for Doctor Eberhardt and renews her resolve to continue studying implicit bias.

And study she has. Eberhardt teaches at Stanford University and is a well-respected scientist in her field. In this finely written book, she combines research (statistics) with personal examples (her own plus observations of others). She begins the book speaking about the Oakland, California police department whose leadership is attempting to address bias. She addresses a small auditorium of polite, white officers, most of whom have their arms crossed, body language for *Show me*. It may be the most difficult lecture she ever gives. In wrapping up her book she speaks once again of the Oakland police, after ten years of training, and she views things from their perspective, demonstrating, I believe, her global understanding of the problem and of human nature. Again, a must-read for all of us.

25. Edwards, George C. With a foreword by Neal R. Peirce. *Why the Electoral College Is Bad for America*. New Haven, Yale UP, 2004.

For years the electoral college mystified me, but it seemed like a concept that *worked* because more or less the *right* candidate always won both the popular vote *and* the electoral college vote. Then came the 2000 election, a bizarre turn of events by which five people on the Supreme Court would, through their action/inaction allow the candidate with fewer popular votes to *win*. And one of those justices would tell the rest of us *to get over it*—instead of taking the time, like a reasoned person, to explain to us *why* we should get over it, *why* their decision was such a wise one. Another justice, years later, before her death, would confess that

she *regretted* her vote. Nice. I hope it made *her* feel better. The electoral college is a roulette wheel that is loaded. Rigged. Like any roulette wheel, we don't really know until the last second which way the falseness is going to lie.

Author Edwards logically and factually proves his thesis as to why the electoral college ought to be drummed out of existence. Interestingly, instead of beginning with the historical context of its origins, he begins with how the electoral college works, how it among other things, cheats the voters in a particular state who vote for the "losing" candidate who may actually have more popular votes. Most important in his discussions may be the idea of *political equality* or more important the political inequity that the electoral college tends to foster. The biggest takeaway from Edwards's chapter on history is the recorded fact that the electoral college was not a well-thought-out concept that received rigorous attention from its founders. No, Philadelphia was hot that summer, and men [and I mean only men] formed the electoral college in a hurry, so that they could find cooler places in which to spend the rest of their summer vacations. At every turn, Edwards has an answer for those who would retain the electoral college, especially by noting when the proponents begin with false premises. The e.c. does *not* protect the smaller states, as some claim. It does *not* maintain cohesion and harmony among citizens. Candidates are *not* more attentive to small states with a low number of electors *nor* to large states that are entrenched in one party or another.

In the book's foreword, scholar Neal R. Peirce sums up what is most flawed about the electoral college: **"The electoral college process, Edwards reminds us, doesn't simply aggregate or reflect popular votes; it consistently distorts and often directly misrepresents the votes citizens have cast. Indeed, the unit vote actually takes votes of the minority in individual states and awards those votes, in the national count, to the candidate they opposed" (x).**

Don't worry that Edwards's tome was published in 2004; nothing much has changed concerning the institution. Author Edwards's study is prescient in that he states emphatically that what happened in 2000 with Bush v. Gore will happen again. Voilà, 2016! The United States *must* abolish the electoral college when it comes to voting for the office of the president. The time to do so has past.

[This book published by Yale University Press has, by my count, five typographical errors derived mainly from a lack of close reading by copy editors—rather egregious for an Ivy League press, eh?]

26. Egan, Jennifer. *Look at Me*. New York: Doubleday, 2001.

I read Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* in 2012 to study how nonlinear plots work and enjoyed it very much. This earlier book, her second novel, is a bit more traditional although she does some very interesting things like presenting the main character's chapters by way of first person but the rest of the chapters in third person; she also cuts, rotating quickly from one character's point of view (omnisciently) to the next in one of the final chapters, to sustain suspense and perhaps coalesce their views into one. It would seem that the basic plot is that one

Charlotte Swenson, a beautiful young fashion model is involved in a car accident, and the surgeon who puts her face back together does so (and I find this hard to believe) with eighty titanium screws just beneath the skin. Her face is still beautiful, but it is no longer her face. People don't recognize her. She is invisible.

But Charlotte is not without curiosity, a certain inventiveness, to keep her life interesting after losing her livelihood (her booker can no longer get her any modeling jobs)—including a festive sex life. By her own recognizance she can identify what she calls the *shadow self* of almost any person with whom she comes in contact. Later in the novel, she encounters a man who will now direct a television special about her accident and recovery, in which she plays herself. Even though outwardly he is somewhat fit and sophisticated, she limns his shadow self as an insecure fat kid, the one lurking just beneath the surface of his life, his skin. Though Charlotte's character is flawed, she leads us to believe she is an astute judge of character, and we tend to believe her.

As with any fine novel, there is a lot going on here. Egan weaves together the story that Charlotte and two other characters are destined to tell, along with a cast of supporting characters, who, in themselves, are fascinating: for one, Z, a young Middle Eastern would-be terrorist who seems to adapt to America quite well; also, a recently recovered alcoholic detective; a mysterious teacher who is seduced by a young female pupil (one of the three main characters) and has also come from some distant or foreign background (one almost thinks that he and Z could be one, but no, 'tis not true). Jennifer Egan is one of those novelists who meticulously create plot, who meticulously create believable characters to carry it out, all in the service of larger literary themes which are also captured by a title as apt as, *Look at Me*.

[By the way, this is an "Advance Reading Copy" that claims it is "Not for Sale." However, I paid twelve dollars for it at a used book store, and I wuz robbed. I can now see at least one good reason publishers do not want readers to see this sort of copy sold. It had (I always mark them) a variety of twenty-one typos, averaging more than one per chapter. And those are just the ones I caught.]

27. Eisen, Cliff and Dominic McHugh, eds. *The Letters of Cole Porter*. New Haven: Yale, 2019.

If you are a fan of Cole Porter and his music, you will probably enjoy this collection of letters. Though some of them refer to his bisexuality, most of them pertain to his many professional and personal connections. Such communications illustrate many characteristics about Mr. Porter. One, he is a consummate professional, in spite of his propensity to *play* and play hard during vacations and between gigs on Broadway or Hollywood. He answers every bit of mail himself, except when he occasionally calls on his secretary to take care of something. He is a team player, important for anyone working in a collaborative arena like the theatre. Second, he is also fierce but polite about not doing anything musically that would (in his opinion) ruin a show. At the same time, when overpowered by those above him, he sometimes gives in, particularly, it seems, when the issue does not matter *that* much to him. In a business that can be crass and cold at times, Porter is also very caring

and thoughtful of everyone he comes in contact with. He sends thank you notes for the smallest favors, and, because he often runs short of money before he makes it big, he is generous with cash gifts and loans later in life. Third, his wit and sharp tongue are unmatched with regard to the social whirl of the 1930s through the 1950s. Though he wouldn't dream of hurting anyone publicly, he does not mind getting off a zinger or two during a personal letter to a dear friend. Perhaps most interesting is how Porter shares some of his methods for songwriting:

**"I start with the title first. From this title I work out the psychology of the tune. Next I write the lyric backward, and in this way build it up to a climax. In the lyric I work first for the climax, and if I can't find a good climactic line I throw out the tune . . . I consult rhyme dictionaries. I swear by them. For long, easy rhymes I use Andrew Loring's *Lexicon*. Other books I have in constant use are Roget's 'Thesaurus,' and atlas, Fowler's 'Modern English Usage' and a dictionary" (146).**

In a related matter, of what compels him to accept a job or assignment, he says:

**"My sole inspiration is a telephone call from a producer. If Feuer and Martin phoned me today and asked me to write a new song for a spot, I'd just begin thinking. First, I think of the idea and then I fit it to a title. Then I go to work on the melody, spotting the title at certain moments in the melody, and then I write the lyric—the end first—that way, it has a strong finish . . . I do the lyrics like I'd do a crossword puzzle. I try to give myself a meter which will make the lyric as easy as possible to write without being banal. On top of the meter, I try to pick for my rhyme words of which there is a long list with the same ending" (499).**

A friend who travels with Porter in 1955 relates this story: **"We were not stopped very long at the border. On the Spanish side, one of the soldiers came out with Cole's passport in his hand, looked in the car, and said, 'Cole Porter . . . Begin the Beguine!' and kissed his fingers to the air, and began to sing the song. Cole's music is known everywhere we go—even in the remote spots" (507).**

I think that just about says it all about Cole Porter, his music, and how many fans he still has in the world!

28. Epstein, Joseph. *Fabulous Small Jews*. Boston: Houghton, 2003.

There is so much to like about these eighteen stories mostly featuring characters over the age of sixty. Indeed, as the title suggests, each protagonist is short, yet Epstein never makes a to-do about it, and indeed it is a point of irony because many of them, though short in stature, are *not* small people. In fact, Epstein pulls readers into every narrative about poor Jews, poor Jews who become comfortable or well-off, or Jews who have always had money. Most everyone in these Chicago-based stories attends good schools, earns good money. But money alone cannot in any way make up for the heartache they suffer: marriages ending in divorce; fathers who die in war; widows looking (or not) for a man to fill their lives. Fabulous small Jews have their own stores, their own banks, their own restaurants and delis, their own you-name-its. Epstein very quietly limns the lives of Jews almost anywhere in



the world: because of prejudices held against them for thousands of years they *must* band together to protect, coddle, nurture, and love one another. And yet, readers can't help but love these characters, too: an old man belatedly gets to know his grandson (I cried); a man secretly writes poems about a woman and the executor of his will, to preserve the woman's reputation, instead of burning the manuscript, spreads it to the four winds from his car window on the freeway; a man quietly helps another man to end his life. Is the act one of suicide, euthanasia, or murder? Epstein does not answer that question but leaves it to each reader to decide, and I admire his courage in taking such a stance.

A must-read for Gentiles (like me) and Jews alike.

29. Fallada, Hans. *Every Man Dies Alone*. Translated by Michael Hofmann and with an afterword by Geoff Wilkes. New York: Melville, 2009. First published by Aufbau, 1947.

This novel, originally published in German in 1947, is the fictionalized story of a true-life married couple who denounce the Nazi regime. The couple are solid followers of Hitler until their only son is killed in battle. They then turn their anger outward in a quiet manner by handwriting postcards of denunciation which they deposit all over the city of Berlin. They carry on for over two years, placing nearly 300 cards without notice. Yet their campaign is basically a failure because most people who find the cards turn them into the Gestapo so that they do not themselves wind up in trouble. Due to a bit of carelessness, the couple are caught and wind up in prison. Fallada deftly portrays their ending as fearful but brave souls who have no problem talking back to prison officials. Fallada concludes the novel on a positive note by bringing back into view a boy who, because of his terrible home life, has begun a life of crime until he is adopted by a caring and loving couple who help to change his ways. Fallada's writing is very nineteenth century by way of its omniscient point-of-view in which we know what every character is thinking. He is also quite skilled in creating a large number of characters, yet giving the reader periodic hints about who is whom, thus keeping the narrative moving. Finally, he, from time to time, repeats or skillfully echoes his title, *Every Man Dies Alone*, in ways that expand its obvious or concrete meaning. Fallada's novel is a keen reminder that freedom requires sacrifice, that no matter what culture we live in, we must always be on guard against its being taken away from us, or worse yet, that we hand it over without question.

30. Fellows, Will. *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*. Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

This book has been on my shelf for over twenty years. If I had read it when it was new, it might have seemed fresher. As it is, the men featured here, born between 1907 and 1967, seem stuck in their contemporary argot. I wonder if gay farm boys are still experiencing the same universals, some of which dovetail well with so-called urban gays. Young farm boys seem to have more interest in growing beautiful things like gardens instead of livestock; they enjoy cooking more than being outside. Insofar as it is possible, given small rural school districts, they become involved in

the arts and often excel in them. Over and over again, you see gay farm boys say they don't care for picking up tricks or one-night stands, that they would prefer long-term relationships but that rural life makes that kind openness impossible. The reader cannot imagine the number of these men who have sex with male siblings and other relatives before they begin to engage with and marry women. Perhaps the most prevalent commonality is the harm religion, particularly Catholicism, causes young boys and men as they search for a way to express their sexuality and find a partner with whom they can share a life. Like the urban gay youth, they more often than not experience a sympathetic mother and a distant or hostile father because the gay son doesn't fall into line. By the end, I almost felt as if I were reading the same four or five profiles over and over again. And yet I know I wasn't. Every gay man's story has something in common with others and every story has its differences, its unique qualities, which set that man apart.

What would be interesting now would be for Fellows (or some other courageous writer/scholar with boundless energy) to interview gay farm boys born between 1970 and 1995. Have their experiences been different than the generations before them? How does arranging for sex online compare to picking someone up at a bar or at some Interstate rest room? Are fathers still as intractable about *masculinity* and what that means? Has the world at large made any dent at all into the sequestered lives of rural Americans? This fascinating book seems to invite an ongoing discussion in which these and other questions are explored.

31. Forster, E. M. With an introduction by Oliver Stallybrass. *The Life to Come: And Other Stories*. New York: Norton, 1987. First published by Cambridge U in 1972.

Oliver Stallybrass offers in his introduction a bit of background concerning these stories. **“On his death in June 1970, E. M. Forster left behind, at King’s College, Cambridge, England, a considerable corpus of unpublished literary work, complete and incomplete, and in a wide range of genres: novels (*Maurice*, published in 1971, and two substantial fragments), stories, plays, poems, essays, talks—to say nothing of letters, diaries and notebooks” (vii).** A number of these stories—because Forster creates gay characters and situations that cannot be published at the time he writes them—are instructive for gay writers alive today. One, he is courageous, given his prodigious talent, to write them anyway, not to edit his mind, his heart, his soul. Even if he stashes them away or editors reject them, he senses perhaps that subsequent generations might read and appreciate them. The language and imagery are tame, of course, compared with any so-called gay fiction written since the early 1970s. But the fact that he is willing to portray two men together sexually, employing words like “member” for “penis,” is quite remarkable. Second, he provides a foundation for writers to come, people such as Paul Monette, who, in his book of essays, *Last Watch of the Night*, pays quick homage to Forster as a *mentor*: Forster is a formidable and lyrical writer whose work transcends all and deserves to be read by anyone, even fifty years following his death.

32. Gallup, Donald. Selected and Edited by Donald Gallup and with a foreword by Isabel Wilder. *The Journals of Thornton Wilder: 1939-1961, with Two Scenes of an Uncompleted Play, “The Emporium.”* New Haven: Yale UP, 1985.

This volume differs greatly from many of the writers' journals I've read through the years in that Wilder uses very few lines for personal reflection or gossip or talk about family and friends. At least fifty percent of these entries seem over my head as I forge through the pages: criticism of this writer, that writer, but mostly of his own incubating work, scenes from this play or that play. And then! Every once in a while I do seize upon a paragraph or passage that speaks to me, holds my attention. From an excerpt concerning Wilder's thoughts about the recently released film, 1939's *The Grapes of Wrath*, he writes:

**"The great law of art is uniformity of tone; since it cannot record all experience, its fidelity to its chosen fragment of experience implies its consciousness of all experience as a similar though more variegated uniformity of tone. (To intrude into a work an unrelated tone is to imply that one is incorporating the 'all,' a presumption that speaks volumes on the author's inability to grasp experience's multiplicity.) Here lies the greatness of Jane Austen: her perfection in the small implies her comprehension of the large" (5).**

On the other hand, Wilder makes clear at least one reason for keeping the journal:

**"Now that I am thinking of becoming a critic I see that this Journal (or another started for that purpose) should become the store of those secondary observations made in reading which otherwise cross the mind and disappear (or rather merge into that large shadowy cloud from which come one's 'impressions' and 'ideas')" (29).**

At times, Wilder offers little kernels of writing pedagogy: **"Tonight . . . I wrote the Prologue (for the second time, but without consulting the previous draft) . . ."** (56).

If one wonders what playwrights do between plays, this journal may be a good indication. A great number of Wilder's entries are written on board ships, during those five- or six-day Atlantic crossing of the 1930s-1950s. He teaches. He lectures. And in between, while in the middle of nowhere, he reads Poe, Kierkegaard, Faulkner, and rather than allowing these thoughts to go adrift, he writes them down, for better or worse—for his future use or posterity, so that old men like me may read the golden thoughts of a once-old man, who would now be 123 years if Nature allowed him to continue living. Our thanks for his generosity and thoughtfulness.

33. García Márquez, Gabriel. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. New York: Random, 1983.

In junior high, a science teacher told us, in our oral presentations that we should have three parts. One, we should inform the audience what we plan to tell them. Then, in part two, we actually do tell what we want to say. And finally, we tell our audience what we've already told them. Márquez appears to do something similar in this novella's three parts: characters predict or indeed know that a murder is to take place. It takes place. And then the author looks back and tells us that a murder has taken place, adding a few details not revealed before. The book is never a murder mystery; we know whodunit. Why? is more the more pressing question.

Why does a young woman claim that a well-heeled man has defiled her when it is not at all the truth? So who is the real culprit? *That* the reader never knows.

34. García Márquez, Gabriel. *Love in the Time of Cholera*. New York: Knopf, 1988.

This is the saga of the enduring love one man has for a woman, waiting over fifty years to woo her again, after her husband dies. The book is quite romantic, particularly in the sense that heterosexual males have of themselves and of the women they love. There seems to exist a bit of *deus ex-machina*: the right thing always seems to happen at just the right time, in spite of the difficulties that both Fermina (the pursued) and Florentino (the pursuer) face. The most memorable section of the novel may be the end where the two take a river cruise together and become better acquainted and finally make love as octogenarians. García Márquez's portrayal is realistic in that not everything falls into place as it might have when they were young. This makes the event all the more exciting or meaningful. Their voyage, which takes place in the time of a cholera epidemic, is fevered by this disease, and yet the metaphor never seems quite developed.

35. Gibson, Scott, editor. *Blood and Tears: Poems for Matthew Shepard*. New York: Painted Leaf, 1999.

Many of these seventy plus poems are in direct response to the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998, and some are poems that seem to reflect the poets' grief as it reflects off their previous experiences. Both types seem equally profound and make for a good blend of work. Some abstractions work, as in Mark Bibbins's poem, ". . . as true of martyrs . . ." : **"More to the point, death is not an appropriate consequence for an / unwanted flirtation. If it were, how many heterosexual men / might be alive today?"** (10). Bravo. Yet, my favorite poems seem to be the ones rooted in the physical world, the concrete nature of Shepard's life and death and those who mourn him, the ones which capture his slight and delicate nature (5'2" 102 lbs.), like Stephen Potter's "[X]": **"Slight form, shy weight / caught in / the middle, / how did it happen to / a body so small, // a boy reduced to a / little triangle / inked in with blood / and meaning, bearing / our load of need . . ."** (101). No matter which type of poem is registered here, it registers the mass outpouring of love and mourning for a young man wronged, from the many millions to whom it could have happened but didn't.

36. Gilliat, Penelope. *Sunday Bloody Sunday: The Script of the John Schlesinger Film Produced by Joseph Janni for United Artists*. New York: Bantam, 1971.

Rather daring for its time period, the script is probably a little dated now. I saw the film once, but after reading the script and getting a clearer idea of the writer's intent, I would like to see it again—script in hand. Not many films were dealing with closeted homosexuals back then (under the guise of bisexuality), but this one about a male/female couple having an affair with the same young man (though not at the same times nor in the same beds), is worth the time, if for no other reason than viewing British cultural history through a little window of time.

37. Gordon, Mary. *Good Boys and Dead Girls and Other Essays*. New York: Penguin, 1992. First published by Viking in 1992.

Mary Gordon publishes these twenty-eight essays at a time that is solidly mid-career. She is an opinionated essayist, probably one of its requirements, as long the writer can substantiate or document what she is purporting. And I believe Gordon does so. Whether writing about other writers and their work, or The (Catholic) Church and related topics (abortion, women in art, what her family think of her books), or those that take the shape of personal journals. She, for example, as a fellow Catholic, astutely evaluates Flannery O'Connor:

**“She seems to belong to another age, but then in what age could one place her? Certainly she is a kind of Puritan, but of a very particular variety. Her interest lay not in the damnation of her characters but in their redemption. She has the formality and the reasonableness of a neoclassicist, the social acuity of a Victorian. But the darkness of her conclusions about the world, a darkness illuminated only be her belief in mystery and in mysterious salvation, personally expressed in a passionate, traditional Catholicism, creates both her appeal for modern readers and their problems with her” (38).**

She also asserts that Ford Madox Ford is a feminist, a “womanly man” who loves women.

Gordon, though a staunch Catholic, keeps her thinking about abortion logical:

**“Most commonly abortion is compared to murder; but one has no doubt that the victim of a murder is an independent person, and it is hard to believe that one created a murder victim in one’s own body when one thought one was doing something entirely different. And it is probably never true that the victim of a murder could not survive unless he were fed by the blood and protected by the body of the murderer, or that it would be precisely the refusal of this protection that would constitute the murderous act. To compare abortion to murder is at best naïve. And yet there is no other human act to which it comes closer” (131).**

Gordon’s most lively work probably lands in the midst of her Roman Catholic faith. Her family detest her fiction because her sexual acts are too real, and yet she has a much more nimble mind when it comes to thinking about her faith, and, in fact, the entire Gospel of Mark, which she ends this collection with.

38. Green, Anna Katherine. *The Affair Next Door*. Free Audio Books.

I mostly enjoyed this mystery written by Anna Katherine Green who may have been the most popular writer of American mysteries prior to Dashiell Hammett. Her vocabulary is fastidiously nineteenth century. A woman in her fifties, looking out her window at night, notes that a young man and woman enter the house next door, and only the man leaves ten minutes later. This narrator then leads readers on quite a ride as she conspires with male detectives to solve a murder mystery which ensues from this first incident. I'm not sure modern writers would spring on

readers the introduction of the murderer until near the end (the trend now is to fully introduce all the suspects from the beginning), but still, it is a satisfying read with well-developed characters.

39. Greene, Graham. *The Human Factor*. New York: Avon, 1978.

There is always something cold about spy thrillers, most likely what part of the genre is all about: that netherworld where a person exists neither in the real world nor in the one where he or she must wear masks and pretend *that* world exists not at all. Greene takes a bit of a turn in this novel by bringing a certain “human factor” to the forefront. A British agent working for many years in Africa falls in love with and marries a black (important because, of course, prejudice is at work) woman. He adopts the woman’s son as his own, and they relocate in England. Readers learn he is a double agent, also working with the Russian Communists. When his young partner agent dies, it begins a chain reaction of events that brings him to his knees and threatens his life with his wife and son. An exciting read.

40. Greenwell, Garth. *Cleanness*. New York: Farrar, 2020.

I didn’t make one annotation on first reading of this novel (and I *shall* read it again), in part because it held me spellbound and in part because I wanted to experience vicariously the joyride the unnamed narrator (except for *Gospodar*, the Bulgarian word for Mister) is taking through his young life.

Gospodar (*Gospodine* to his pupils) teaches accelerated English at a high school in Sofia, Bulgaria, sometime in the last decade, and unravels his story of love and loss. At the same time, our Gospodar employs the powers of travelogue to acquaint readers with a post-Soviet culture still burdened with its corrupt architecture (crumbling worse than the geopolitical realm itself). The novel is part language lesson: Gospodar translates (upon first mention) each Bulgarian word or phrase and in such a way that one is acquainted with the word’s fullness. At one point, a male sex partner Gospodar has met online calls him Bulgarian for *bitch*. But the narrator doesn’t leave it there, massaging the meaning within the context of the indigenous culture. The novel is part love story, in which the narrator meets a man he only calls R (every character is reduced to a single initial, in some way *protecting the identities* of his co-characters, almost creating the feel that one is absorbing a roman à clef). I’ve never read such sensual yet meaningful sex scenes (for want of a better term). At one point, the narrator makes love to his lover, R, taking perhaps twenty minutes to kiss every part of the man’s body. When he is finished, his partner is attempting to hide his tears, the fact that perhaps no one has ever loved him so completely. These scenes, though graphic, serve a larger purpose, never feeling pornographic (if there is such a thing) or gratuitous.

Ultimately, the narrator and R end their relationship, because R hails from Lisbon, and cannot see finding a way to earn a living in Bulgaria. In the last major scene of the novel, the narrator parties with a few young men who have graduated from his school the year before. The three of them get very drunk, and the teacher, Gospodar, makes a play for one of the young men. He is horrified by his own

behavior yet is willing to give into it at the same time, if enticed or encouraged by the student. He withdraws from the party just before making a fool of himself or endangering his reputation as a responsible adult. Gospodar does this throughout the book, brings himself to some sort of brink, only to pull back after exploring the full impact that the act is about to make (sometimes within a few seconds), thus making the character more like all of us, ready to jump yet waiting to defer to a better angel.

41. Greenwell, Garth. *What Belongs to You*. New York: Farrar, 2016.

I read Greenwell's more recent novel, *Cleanmess*, first, a few months earlier. It almost seems that that novel about a young American teacher of high school literature in Sofia, Bulgaria, could be a sequel to this one, Greenwell's first. If "R" is the same "R" in both novels, then the narrator meets "R" in this the first novel, but he is not in the picture much.

No, this is indeed a different novel. In Part I, "Mitko," the narrator meets the eponymous hustler, in a public rest room and gets entangled in his life of drugs, though not as a user himself. The narrator is charmed by the sparely built, handsome young man, so much so that he gives him money for various enterprises until he realizes he is only enabling Mitko. Mitko is sent on his way though he will make more appearances.

In Part II, "Grave," the narrator is informed of his father's death and returns to the States. In a long passage, that is both expansive and yet compressed, readers learn how the almost idyllic relationship he has with his father as a boy comes to an end when he confesses to his father that he is gay. Almost every gay man in the world can identify with the sense of rejection and betrayal the narrator feels.

In "Pox," Part III, Mitko returns to inform the narrator that he has not only contracted syphilis but that the narrator and his lover, "R," both need to get tested. The disease seems to be an apt metaphor for the poison that the three of them share at this point. Mitko is surprised when the narrator indicates it's all right. It's a disease; it's treatable. "R" is much the same way when he is informed. No harm, no foul. Yet, like a bad penny, Mitko continues to return, wanting to start something up with the narrator again, but he realizes he cannot. One last time he sends Mitko on his way with enough money to buy a meal for his emaciated body and entrain his way back to his home town. In a moving final scene, the narrator entertains his mother who has never traveled outside the U.S. before. On a train trip, in a roomy but unairconditioned *first class* compartment with several others, the narrator is charmed by a young boy, who, he ultimately realizes, reminds him of Mitko: the same intelligence, the same robust fight with the world to be his own person. The powerful novel ends with the narrator at the clinic being told that they do not have the shots to treat his disease. He will have to go elsewhere for salvation.

42. Guibert, Hervé. *To the friend who did not save my life*. South Pasadena: Semiotexte, 2020. First published by Éditions Gallimard in 1990.

It's difficult to know what I think of this book, thirty years after it is first published. On the one hand, it is a fair representation of what the times are like in 1991 Paris. When the author dies at thirty-six from AIDS, I am forty-three—very much a part of the same demographic. I've taken an HTLV test which claims I am negative. Whew. Yet there is no real relief for anyone: neither the men and women who test positive and will soon die nor for their friends who have partaken of the same risky behaviors and remain *free*. Guibert portrays for gay Frenchmen, as do many American gay writers at the time, the devastation that overtakes our community from coast to coast. On the other hand, after thirty years, most of the scientific information Guibert possesses is redundant or has been proven wrong. It's painful to read about either party. Even if this work functions as a sort of roman à clef by not naming names, it certainly portrays the dastardly acts of treacherous friends. A character named Muzil is supposedly the noted philosopher Michel Foucault; Marine is based on the life of actor, Isabelle Adjani; and yet "Bill," Guibert's *friend* of the title remains a mystery, a traitor who brags about, as a Miami pharmaceutical executive, getting Guibert in on the ground floor of a vaccine, but cruelly fails to do so. This book, a combination of linear and nonlinear elements, takes us back to the past, but it strangely plops us into the present of yet another untamable virus and directs us toward a future of even more death and destruction. Not a gay book in the original literary sense, but *so* gay in a tragic way.

43. Hanh, Thich Nhat. *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*. Translated by Mobi Ho. Boston: Beacon, 1987.

This book is an excellent introduction for someone just beginning to meditate, as well as a refresher course for one who wishes to *upgrade* one's skills. In essence, it is the best of handbooks, returned to again and again, for the concept of mindful meditation is a simple idea, yet a difficult concept to implement in one's life.

44. Harrison, Jim. *The Summer He Didn't Die*. New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2005.

These three novellas, each one striking for its individuality, are immensely satisfying. The longer-than-a-story-but-shorter-than-a-novel format seems to be perfect for each narrative. My favorite character in *The Summer He Didn't Die*, the title novella, is Berry, a child who is born with alcohol fetal syndrome. She is mute but indicates by her actions, quick and sprite-like, how she shall act upon the world and its many rules. Most of the action is of her family (excepting her wayward mother) evading Michigan's children's protective agency and depositing their lives over the border in Canada so that Berry can live out her life in peace. *Republican Wives*, hilarious for its verisimilitude (uncannily written for a male writer), takes readers inside the minds of three different women, friends since childhood, who have been hoodwinked for the last time by a man (also a college acquaintance) with whom they have all had affairs (mostly at different times). *Tracking* tells the story of an author who outlines his literary career and personal life, from feckless yet ardent college boy to a grandpa, finally finished with world travel and content to be near his grown children and grandchildren. The collection is a great testament to the novella form in which it is just the right length to tell each one of these stories.



45. Heyerdahl, Thor. *Kon-Tiki: Across the Pacific by Raft*. New York: Rand, 1950.

This book may have been written for adults, but I have to believe its adventurous tale appeals to the child inside each one of us. A Norwegian scholar develops a theory that at one time people of Peru crossed the South Pacific; Heyerdahl acquires this idea because huge statues on Easter Island so closely resemble ones found in Peru. Very quickly it seems he scrabbles together a crew of five other men and from drawings of a raft that would have been used in earlier times, the men build the *Kon-Tiki* essentially from nine huge balsa logs. That feat itself is a large undertaking as the men somehow receive permission from Peruvian officials to go into the forest and harvest such logs from balsa trees—even though commercial logging of balsa has been disallowed for some time. Then there is the 4,000 mile adventure in which, at first, the raft with a sail is seized by the Humboldt Current. However, as they escape its grasp, the six men embark on a most idyllic, though challenging, cruise across the South Pacific. They worry little about food (though they've brought certain stores with them) as they are besieged in the morning with flying fish that they either cook for breakfast or use as bait to catch bigger fish. Creatures large and small are curiously drawn to their vessel, and, though the men are wary at first, they become *friends* with the aquatic beasts. The primitive raft has its shortcomings so when they finally come upon an island, because of the raft's steering limitations, they must pass it by. Sometime later, however, they spot another island group, and this time their voyage comes to an abrupt end as the raft breaks up on a reef. What follows may be the most delightful part of Heyerdahl's perfectly arced narrative. Curious natives from a nearby island of 127 inhabitants see smoke from the men's cooking fire and carefully approach them. The six men become heroes to the village and are treated royally for weeks on end before they are able to use their ham (amateur) radio and contact Tahiti and then Norwegian officials. A 4,000 ton ship is dispatched to pick them up, and then the six men and all villagers part with tears in their eyes. The book may be tinged with a childlike naiveté, but it is also filled with a certain curiosity and courage, qualities that are necessary for cultures to cross boundaries and for its inhabitants to realize they have more in common than they don't.

46. Hijuelos, Oscar. *Our House in the Last World: A Novel*. New York: Persea, 1982.

I read this title quite sometime after reading the author's novel, *Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* and his memoir, *Thoughts without Cigarettes*. This is an endearing read, bundling very nicely an autobiographical novel (without being too biographical) with magical realism (without being too magical, or too real for that matter). For example, in his memoir, readers learn that the author was unhealthy as a child, spent extended time away from the family in a hospital setting. In this novel, however, while using this setting to great effect, to create a somewhat wimpy yet complex character, Hijuelos does not dwell on the matter; it merely explains certain *deficits* in young Hector's personality. Likewise, in his memoir, the author goes into great detail about his dumb luck (however you look at it) at having skin that is a bit *whiter* than anyone else in his family (with blond hair, both traced to his Spanish roots), and, as a companion piece, that he does not speak Spanish very well (although he does understand it). When the character Hector tries to speak it with

others, they say he has an American accent and sometimes refuse to converse with him. In real life, it allows the author to slide easily between an Anglo-New York and a Cuban-New York, in which he ultimately earns an education. Hector Santinio, on the other hand, has more difficulties. He's overweight. Though he has sex with various females, he does not happen upon a girlfriend or wife. The novel traces the Santinio family from 1929 to 1975, compressing an extensive family history into a mere two hundred pages. In the last two chapters, Hijuelos punches up the magical realism by way of "Ghosts," in which he plays a game of "What if?" In "Voices from the Last World," the final chapter, the author gives final voice to Hector, his brother Horacio, and his mother, Mercedes, and he does so by way of their dreams. In these magical dreams everyone is "happier," largely because they are of the "last world" to which they once belonged, the hazy, effervescent world of an old Cuba. This is a cozier world than the one that they must adapt to in New York. Hector, who has done little but criticize his mother and father, forgives them, sees them in a larger context ... grows up. A happy ending they've all earned.

47. Hill, Fiona and Clifford G. Gaddy. *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin. New and Expanded*. Washington: Brookings, 2015.

When I tuned in to President Trump's impeachment trial at the end of 2019, I was impressed with the testimony of Fiona Hill, at that time former Deputy Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European and Russian Affairs on Trump's National Security Council. Her credentials seemed impeccable, and I told myself I would read the book she co-authors with Mr. Gaddy.

The Hill/Gaddy team paint a portrait of Russian President Vladimir Putin that is *not* personal. They do not delve much into his upbringing or family life, only as those elements may apply to his long political life. They formulate what they refer to as Putin's six identities, by which the book is structured: "**the Statist, the History Man, the Survivalist, the Outsider, the Free Marketeer, and the (KGB) Case Officer (18).**" The man manipulates or exploits each one of these identities in order to further his own career, his own strategies, and each study is an eye-opening view into the life of the real Mr. Putin.

Mr. Putin declares himself to be a *gosudarstvennik*, "**a builder of the state, a servant of the state . . . a person who believes that Russia must be and must have a strong state**" (40). The State is of ultimate importance, *not the individual*. Hill/Gaddy claim that "**Putin continued with an analysis that echoed the language of the tsarist statist school, noting that Russia will 'muscle up' by 'being open to change' through state-sanctioned procedures and rules**" (55). The authors reinforce what President Obama once said of Putin, that Putin still maintains a nineteenth-century view of the world. He may utilize some of the tactics he learns while serving in the KGB, but his worldview is rooted in a glorified, pre-Soviet past: he aspires to be a tsar.

To summarize most of the other five areas, Putin manipulates history to strengthen his power. He is a survivalist who will do anything to get what he wants. Ultimately, his sense of strategy (over tactics, which only serve to fulfill his overarching set of goals) is one of his greatest strengths, one that Hill/Gaddy claim the West

underestimates at its own peril. A man who creates a long-term strategy for the success of his State and is willing to do anything to see that it succeeds is to be watched very carefully, something that the authors indicate the West has failed to do thus far. The West must see clearly how the man views himself, and the West, while not forfeiting its own values, must develop strategies for dealing with him, ones that realistically exploit his perceived strengths and weaknesses. Until the man is taken seriously, the rest of the world cannot deal with him in a realistic manner, and such a stance is not good for that world.

48. Hollander, John. *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*. New Haven: Yale, 1981.

The book is a nice, concise version of what I learned about particular rhetorical devices. Hollander does an admirable job of giving examples that also explain a particular patterns.

49. Hurston, Zora Neale. *Mules and Men*. With a preface by Franz Boas, a foreword by Arnold Rampersad, illustrations by Miguel Covarrubias, and an afterword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: HarperCollins, 1990.

Part I consists of African-American folk tales that Hurston collects in the late 1920s and early 1930s in Florida. She begins in her hometown of Eatonville, a primarily African-American town. Amazing it is the number of times the word “mule” does appear in these tales, as if the beast is a metaphor for the “beasts” that white people take black men and women to be: though compliant, also stubborn, and intelligent. On the face of it, the tales might reflect a certain ignorance, but I think they simply reflect that slaves had to develop their own language because the whites refused to educate them in their own (if they themselves were versed well enough in English to do so).

Part II is about hoodoo (or voodoo), and Hurston heads for what she calls its capital, New Orleans, Louisiana. These passages are fascinating, as well. All throughout Hurston includes herself as a character. In order to retrieve the information she wants, she must *become* one of hoodoo's adherents and spends much time and effort seeking to know its ways. She recreates for readers exact *formulae* for getting rid of one's husband, for getting him back if she changes her mind, for many ways of dealing with one's neighbors. She never judges but fully participates, absorbing its, at times, headiness, as when she dizzies herself from dancing for forty straight minutes as part of a ceremony.

In his afterword Henry Louis Gates (PBS's *Finding Your Roots*) identifies Hurston's proper historical place in American literature. After having achieved a higher education and published seven important books, she is virtually ignored or denounced by leading black male literary figures during the time she should be receiving accolades (among them Richard Wright). This happens, in part, because she identifies herself in a more conservative, Clarence Thomas-like stance, in which she refuses to be defined by white people. It takes Alice Walker's landmark 1975 article in *Ms.* to resurrect Hurston and bring her to the fore of American literary studies. As happens to many whose ideas are published ahead of their time,

Hurston's work languishes for decades amid a poverty of thought. If only she had not been shunned, she might not have died amid a more corporeal sort of poverty at age sixty-nine.

50. Irving, John. *My Movie Business: A Memoir*. New York: Random, 1999.

I don't believe this is one of Irving's best outings. Ostensibly, it is mostly about bringing three of his novels to the big screen: *The Cider House Rules*, *The World According to Garp*, and *The Hotel New Hampshire*. *A Son of the Circus* gets some attention, but then it ultimately is not made into a film. For almost 170 pages (along with a large number of photographs), he *tells* the reader about the experience of writing the screenplay for *The Cider House Rules*, getting his son cast for a minor role, and tells about his relationships with four different directors, right up to the end, when the cast wraps the film about an hour from Irving's home in Maine.

Having read six of his novels and his book of essays, I believe Irving usually swarms the page with important detail: sensory detail, historical detail, emotional detail, whatever is required to bring alive the scene or the chapter. However, here he seems to shorthand a lot of that information. Anecdotes that could be opened up are not. Arguments with others on the set could be brought alive; mostly they are not. He is privileged to be on the set of a major motion picture (Miramax) with access to everyone from the best boy to the seamstress to someone in charge of mess. And yet he doesn't seem to want to share the finer details of that experience with the reader. If he had, the book could easily have been 250 pages or more. Disappointing.

51. Joyce, James. *Collected Poems*. New York: Viking, 1946.

What's not to like or admire or love? One of my favorites from *Pomes Penyeach*:

ON THE BEACH AT FONTANA  
 Wind whines and whines the shingle,  
 The crazy pierstakes groan;  
 A senile sea numbers each single  
 Slimesilvered stone.

From whining wind and colder  
 Grey sea I wrap him warm  
 And touch his trembling fineboned shoulder  
 And boyish arm.

Around us fear, descending  
 Darkness of fear above  
 And in my heart how deep unending  
 Ache of love! (52).

52. Kendig, Robert E. *Sojourn at Stevenson College: Campus Tales from a Bygone Era*. A

compendium of whimsical events that actually did occur, modestly embellished. Wilmington: Winoca, 2005.

This book is a satisfying read because the author opts to tell his story of teaching in a college town in the 1930s in a nonlinear manner. Although some characters carry over from one chapter to the next (like a meddling underling in the history department), each tale can more or less stand alone.

This book has its poignant moments, but it is largely about humor:

A filling station owner installs a large speaker under the seat (ew) in his customer outhouse and connects it to a microphone. **“Lady, would you move over please, we’re working down here”** (46-7).

At Stevenson College, students are a bit perturbed because the faculty are **“unnecessarily indolent”** (78) in standing for the opening and closing hymns. **“During the holidays, some of the students—we never knew who were the guilty ones—gained access to the chapel. They ran uninsulated wires through the tops of the cushions on the front pews, and under the carpeting on the floor to the loud foot pedal of the piano and thence to a substantial dry cell battery located to the rear of the instrument”** (79). Well, one can imagine that on that day, every faculty member stood for the opening and closing hymns.

Later, the meddling underling commandeers the visit of a literary figure from England, attempting to make his visit as English-like as possible, even to the point of faking a British accent in what is probably a mid-South state. All throughout she rudely attempts to guide the discussion away from the local department and what and how the professors teach. Finally, when the woman expresses her fascination with the spelling of British names, the Brit himself has had enough: **“This was more than Sir Reginald could stand. He sat upright in his chair and, looking directly at Mrs. Garber, he responded, ‘No, madam, I am not hyphenated. I am not even circumcised?’”** (108).

The story that may touch educators comes near the end when Kendig renders how he advises a star pupil who, upon graduating, has the opportunity either to play a professional sport or take advantage of a Rhodes Scholarship. The pupil asks Kendig what he ought to do. The esteemed professor asks him to ponder the following: **“But think about the two opportunities ahead of you and assume for a moment that either one can lead to your being famous. Then you might ask, ‘For what would I want to be famous?’”** (165-6). I won’t say which he chose.

This is one of those books published by a small press that may not be picked up because it is “too parochial or too regional” in its nature. Yet it is a book that is well edited, well-designed, and one that is both enlightening and entertaining. Kudos to publisher/editor Barbara Brannon for bringing this book to light for all of us.

Before I left public school teaching in 2002, the district I worked for had implemented, at a low level, a plan to mentor potential dropouts. Kirp's book argues for the need to have American universities tackle the same problem, citing the fact that, nationwide, colleges and universities support a 40% dropout rate. The rate is even higher among community colleges: 60% of students drop out before completing an associate degree.

Kirp visits a number of universities who have implemented innovative programs to retain more students: Georgia State University, the joint campuses of the University of Central Florida and Valencia College, the University of Texas, and an "elite" school, Amherst College. His research indicates that, in some cases, small adjustments can allow a student to finish a degree. One helpful practice is to provide small grants (not loans) during the last semester or two; it can make the difference of finishing or not. Another is for the institution to provide professional advisors (not professors) whose job it is to keep tabs on students, particularly those at risk of dropping out; students cannot escape contact. The institutions have even provided experiences that help students to think positively about themselves. Some forward-thinking professors use the Internet to provide lecture material to be read on the students' own time; then they use class time to work more actively together. Other places provide accelerated tutoring to catch students up in, say, math in the period of one semester without having to slow down the student's advancement through a program.

In essence, Kirp asserts that because of the great expense involved in attending college now, institutions of higher education owe their students something better than the old sink-or-swim or trial-by-fire approaches of the past. They should meet halfway these bright students who have met the entrance qualifications and make sure they have every opportunity to finish their schooling. Although I attended a small, private school (a half a century ago) and found great comfort in attending small classes led by professors who were highly accessible, with the practices mentioned above, I might have succeeded at an even higher level. There were times that I felt like dropping out, and only the military draft, the threat of being sent to Vietnam, kept me in school. I wound up getting a degree in music that I only used tangentially to earn a living until I left the field entirely at age thirty. Professor Kirp's book is one all college professors and administrators should read and consider. After all, in corporate parlance, students are the "business" of higher education: their "clients." They should be given every opportunity to succeed.

54. Knowles, John. *The Private Life of Axie Reed*. New York: Dutton, 1986.

I taught Knowles's novel, *A Separate Peace*, to tenth graders for several years. His bildungsroman is a novel rich with fully developed characters, a book that has, rightfully so, been read by millions for decades. Perhaps it is not fair to do (it's like comparing one's children), but when one stands *Axie* up against *Peace*, it simply does not fare as well. One, one doesn't believe that Knowles really *knows* the main character, Axie, or for that matter, the narrator of certain chapters, Nick, Axie's cousin. Although as a celebrity himself, Knowles may be acquainted with a famous actor, one doesn't really quite believe his portrayal. Oh, his descriptions are fine,

but she's fleshed out only to a certain point. Likewise, one learns absolutely little about Nick (and why does Knowles select a name so closely associated with the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*?), and much of it comes later in the novel. Second, one doesn't believe the situation, and, in part that may be due to the novel's structure. After readers learn who Axie is, an actor retiring at age fifty because she can no longer get desirable parts (one assumes this is set in the 1980s), she suffers a quirky accident at a fête of some kind and is seriously injured. The rest of the novel weaves back and forth between Axie's and Nick's past and the present. Chapters about her being in the hospital are portrayed in first person through her subterranean world of unconsciousness, which strains credulity a bit, because how does a person in a near-coma state know what she is thinking? Too much of the novel consists of backstory, yet such backstory is necessary because Knowles has set it up that way. Axie's acting jobs, her loves, her only marriage, lack a certain verisimilitude because, in part, the portrayal is shorthanded or speeded up, so one can get back to the present, where a former actor is in the hospital with broken ribs from her quirky fall. In the beginning, one is given some hints about the cause of Axie's fall: a series of dizzy spells. One expects to learn more about such spells, particularly, near the end. However, one never does whether such spells are even relevant, whether they are the cause of her quirky fall at the ball. The main physician seems a bit dizzy himself, speaking in (if you've listened to doctorspeak enough) a manner, at times, that seems more lay-person than physician. In all, Knowles has done his job; he just hasn't done it well enough. Would this novel have been published in 1986 if it had been shoved over the transom by someone other than John Knowles?

55. Kingsolver, Barbara. *The Poisonwood Bible*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.

In 1959, a Baptist minister, his wife, and his four daughters, leave their Bethlehem, Georgia home for a year of service to the Congo in Africa. The mother, Orleanna, opens the novel with a long lens; we learn right away she will lose one of her daughters, and so we read on patiently to see how such an event will unfold. Of course, we sort of forget, and we're shocked when the youngest, Ruth May, is killed by a poisonous snake much later in the story after we have come, like her mother, to love her. This expansive novel is divided into seven books, always a sign of what will be a sprawling narrative. Each book opens with a chapter narrated by Orleanna, the frazzled mother who dares not rile the ire of her preacher husband. The remaining chapters of each book are narrated alternatively by each one of the daughters: Rachel, a light-haired blonde, probably born about 1945, who has visions of high fashion and easy living in her life—having not much use for her father's strict evangelical life; the twins, Leah and Adah, one a healthy adherent of her father's ways (for a while), the latter injured before birth and who limps yet has a brain equal to her twin sister's. The former will eventually marry a Congo native; Adah will return to Atlanta and become a doctor. Before her demise, Ruth May, the youngest, is a sprite, a child with her own language, her own worldview, a darting derring-do that will eventually serve to take her life. Each chapter then widens our view of their village in the Congo as it survives an historical upheaval: one popular but revolutionary leader being killed within three months of his election, and the return to office of a corrupt man who will conspire with the West

(mostly America) to spend thirty-five years amassing great wealth while his countrymen and women survive (or don't) lives of poverty. One additional character, Mother Nature, or her evil sister, makes life at the least difficult, at the most, a disaster of magnificent proportions. In what feels like the climax, a giant wave of ants marauds their Congolese village, and its inhabitants must survive by, among other things, climbing trees until the rampage has passed. When this family returns to their *house* and accompanying buildings, they find only bones left where their chickens once roosted. The house is spotless, as if cleaned by a squad of maids. At this point, Oleanna gathers her three remaining children and abandons her husband. Now this is not as easy as it sounds. She has always served Nathan and his god with blind faithfulness, but now she sees that he is not well (think heart of darkness) and must save her remaining three daughters. Only she is not even able to do that. Rachel marries a South African man of questionable character (and three more men in serial monogamy). Leah marries her native. Adah returns to Georgia with her mother. It is a family broken in so many ways it takes an entire book to portray how. Oh, and the title? The poisonwood tree is an apt name because of the substance it oozes; its *bible* an apt metaphor for the despoliation of one family. A stunning, timeless read.

56. Lane, Byron. *A Star Is Bored: A Novel*. New York: Holt, 2020.

Twenty-eight-year-old Charlie leaves his night job writing news copy for a Los Angeles TV station to become “personal assistant” to actor and movie star, Kathi Kannon. When one learns that author Lane once served as Carrie Fisher’s PA, one wants to turn Kathi’s voice into Carrie’s, Gracie Gold’s (Kathi’s mother) into Debbie Reynolds. As with any competent fiction, however, Lane creates two great characters that only reflect that he once knew them both, not that he’s out to recreate them.

And this book is full of so many unforgettable voices. Begin with Kathi’s: off the bat she renames Charlie “Cockring.” From there, it’s only a short step to all the other outrageous things she says while he shops with her, travels with her, sees her in and out of hospitals for . . . well, read for yourself to find out what. Cockring’s head is full of voices: his father bellowing at him through the years by way of sentences in all caps: “**WE ALL HAVE TO DO THINGS IN LIFE WE DON’T WANT TO DO!**” (66); his own fears as he speaks to his inner Siri: “*Hey, Siri, I want to impress. I want to be the best assistant. I want to rescue my failing grade*” (77); the voice of Cockring’s Therapist; the voices of all the other PAs to Hollywood stars, all with their own nicknames, who collectively write what is known as The Assistant’s Bible, chock full of information every great PA should memorize.

Cockring realizes early: “**I have to be: to accept life as it happens, to be still and rest in knowing the universe is friendly, that good things will come, that good things are already here, that ‘good things’ include tidying her house, getting her car serviced, sorting her pills, surrendering my needs to hers**” (91).

At a certain point, however, Cockring will learn this lesson a bit too well, and, like all good young protagonists, will have a crisis of identity. How that turns out will



have to be the reader's adventure. I'm not spoiling it for anybody. For laughs and tears, for good feelings and bad, you must read this book.

57. Langella, Frank. *Dropped Names: Famous Men and Women as I Knew Them*. New York: Harper, 2013.

In Langella's "Cast of Characters"—notable people he has known throughout his long acting career—he lists them in the order of their “disappearance” from the earth. The first personality is Marilyn Monroe, whom he “meets” in a fortuitous incident as a kid in which he exchanges waves with the woman as she enters a limousine. Further in to the book Langella describes his relationship with John F. Kennedy. This episode also begins his relationship with Paul and Bunny Mellon and their daughter whom he has met first by way of his youthful thespian activities in summer stock. Many of his acquaintances, like these, wash back and forth over one another until he ends his book by way of his long friendship with Bunny Mellon who lives to be 103.

Langella is at turns generous and blunt about the talents of these people. With Rita Hayworth he can't possibly heap the praise high enough. By his account, Bette Davis is an arrogant bitch. Raul Julia is a prince, almost a brother to Frank. Paul Newman is a so-so actor who can't quite reach down deep enough in to himself to grab the stuff of which great acting is made.

The book is also one of confession. Langella, throughout his life, though retaining threads of friendship with hundreds of people, manages to let other relationships fall off. In a stunning chapter, one learns of Elizabeth Taylor's deep insecurities, about living out her life alone. He tells of his own arrogance when he treats British actor Deborah Kerr dismissively over a long period of time—until it is too late.

If readers are to learn anything from Langella's book it may be that no matter what road we take in life, we owe a debt of gratitude to those who have helped us along the way; it behooves us to help the sick and needy; and it pays to be kind and polite to nearly everyone, saving the stinging but measured remark for the few who may deserve it. The book is now over a decade old, but the content is timeless.

58. Lardner, Kate. *Shut Up He Explained: The Memoir of a Blacklisted Kid*. New York: Ballantine, 2004.

About halfway through this book, I realized I had read it before—not because I recognized the material but because I found little thumbnail indentions indicating where I'd stopped a reading session. My first “review,” sketched in 2004, was rather short and not very positive: *Poor writing and poor editing. What could have been enlightening and touching was scattered and uninteresting. Lardner keeps an emotional distance throughout that is not very pleasant.*

In a way, I still feel the same. The writing is fine enough; it just lacks a certain depth. Perhaps that is the point where a better editor might have helped the author. Much of the book is really about Kate Lardner's father, Ring Lardner, Jr., a

distinguished screenwriter who is blacklisted in the 1950s because he refuses to answer the question at a hearing whether he is or ever has been a communist. He spends twelve months in prison simply for attempting to practice his First (or Fifth) Amendment right to speak (or not). And, of course, such an event does have harmful effects on a burgeoning family: A wife, herself a working actor, who ceases to be offered film roles because she is related to Ring; a daughter and two sons who need him to balance out an impatient mother who, though loving, is also bound and determined to have her own career. What is most troubling, I think, is the pacing. Of ten chapters, "The Penal Interlude," is the longest at 120 pages. Conclusions that the author could draw about the effects on her as a "blacklisted kid" are missing or shortchanged. At the end of the book, Lardner gives a hurried account of her college years, her stumbling around to find out what she wishes to do with her life, thumbnail sketches of her two marriages, and boom, we're done. Either the book should focus more on her father, or she should have a book longer than 272 pages, in order to discuss *how* being a blacklisted kid has affected her entire life (she's about sixty at the time she writes the book). This time around I don't notice the "emotional distance" as much as I do in 2004, but there exists rather a flippant tone that seems to reduce the import of what she is saying about one of the most destructive periods in US political history and its ramifications for her family. Perhaps it's her way of dealing.

59. Lewis, Oscar. With a foreword by Oliver La Farge. *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. New York: Basic, 1959.

Never has an "old" book seemed so relevant. Lewis's tome, by now, is history, but he takes five Mexican families (some of whom he has known since the 1940s) in the 1950s and makes a study of them. According to his own account, his approach is multi-faceted: 1) a holistic approach with regard to a single family 2) through the lens of one family member 3) to study a problem area in the family, and 4) another holistic method by taking in a typical day of a family.

Lewis's process makes for a fascinating read. You feel as if you are reading a novel, that you are in the midst of each one of these families: The Martínez family living in the highland village of Azteca, the Gómez family of the Casa Grande neighborhood in Mexico City, the Gutiérrez family living on MC's "Street of the Bakers," the Sánchez family, "on the edge of Mexico City," and the Castro family in the wealthiest neighborhood studied, the Lomas de Chapultepec area of Mexico City.

Lewis takes you into the various hovels that four of the families live in: earthen floors, primitive or substandard heating and cooking stoves, crowded conditions with multiple family members occupying beds or spaces on the floors. He lets us in on the daily grind of the working poor, always borrowing a few pesos from a friend, neighbor, or family member to make ends meet, and sometimes failing. The drudge of dead-end jobs or self-employment, i.e. selling off items in the street for yet a few more pesos. This all happens sixty years ago, and yet it would not be surprising to find out that many Mexicans still live the same way. No wonder they find conditions, as difficult as they are, in the United States "better" by comparison.

The final family, The Castro family, is by contrast, a representative of what Lewis calls the *nouveau riche*. David Castro, has come from poverty but has worked hard and successfully to bring his family to the “fringe” of one of the wealthier neighborhoods of MC. They have enough bedrooms for each of their four children, three boys and one girl. They have plenty of money, apparently, but David is largely in control of it. He and his wife, Isabel, have a “free union” marriage which is recognized neither by the government nor the church, but it suits David Castro’s needs: to control his wife and his four spoiled children. They have three servants, but nothing is ever done to Isabel’s satisfaction. David never gives her enough money, she claims, and yet what she does have she spends quite freely on expensive items for herself and her children. The Castro family stands in stark contrast to the other four, and yet there seem to be some similarities. All five families with the exception of one are ruled by a macho man with an iron fist. All except one man (and Lewis suspects he may have “homosexual tendencies”) has affairs with multiple women. Children bicker and vie for their parents’ attention in various dysfunctional ways. Nutrition is poor (fried “meat” that is the dregs of what a shopper can buy). In all, however, the book still stands as an compelling study, one that should still interest Mexico’s neighbors who live along the border of the United States of America.

60. Lodge, David. *The Art of Fiction: Illustrated from Classic and Modern Texts*. New York: Viking, 1993.

Lodge offers a very good review of traditional elements of writing fiction, most notably the novel, from the beginning to the ending and everything in between. As promised by the subtitle, he takes elements such as point of view, weather, repetition, magical realism, to name just a few, and uses extensive example from British and American literature.

61. Martin, Steve. *Born Standing Up: A Comic’s Life*. New York: Scribner, 2007.

Martin’s book is certainly funny but more by way of chuckles that catch me by surprise than big belly laughs. And I think that is the way Martin wants it: he’s serious, serious about this master class he is giving to wannabe comics. It’s fucking hard and LONELY work. It’s also, by his account, rewarding, at least at first. He loves getting everything in order. Jotting down jokes. Learning magic tricks. Trying innovative things. Eventually, after a decade or so of comic clubs, he, as he says, gets control of his material. He knows how to work the audience, do this joke here, that gag there. But—the oldster’s oft unheeded warning—be careful what you wish for. Martin, an introvert, finds that fame, once he attains it, is distasteful. He’s now making great money, can buy whatever he wants, and yet the huge crowds of scores of thousands are killing him: his timing, his joy, his spirit, his energy. And he leaves stand-up forever.

Martin, throughout the book, also shares a bit about his relationship to his family: a father who belittles him and forces him out of the house by age eighteen; a mother who should intercede on Steve’s behalf but is afraid; a big sister he really doesn’t know that well. By book’s end, he tells of an emotional reconciliation he makes

with all three, winding up with a father who, nearing death, tells Steve he loves him, a mother who apologizes for not interceding, a sister who corroborates that their father *did* treat Steve like shit. This is a brief, satisfying read, and I thank my ophthalmologist for recommending it to me.

62. Millhauser, Steven. *The Knife Thrower and Other Stories*. New York: Vintage, 1998.

This is a collection of stories in which an image from the title story—the knife—appears in nearly all the other stories, varied though they may be in character. In “Sisterhood of Night,” a gang of teenage girls leave their homes each night and meet in a wood: **“Rumor has it that the girls are instructed to carry weapons: scissors, jackknives, needles, kitchen knives” (38)**. A character named **“Mary Warren displayed a bone-handled kitchen knife” (39)**. This rather gothic story is marked by the use of third person plural, as if the narrator is one of the girls not a citizen of the town. The girls, after all, are only after silence and invisibility, not mischief.

In “The New Automaton Theater,” Millhauser again employs the third person plural to great effect, as well as the heavy use of passive voice, creating an objectified distance between the material and the reader. He also brings into use another knife, though this time metaphorical in nature: **“That long-awaited performance was like a knife flashed in the face of our art” (107)**.

The story, “Clair de Lune,” is an ode to the moon a fifteen-year-old would write if he could write this well at fifteen. A male teen prowls through his town on a moonlit night and lauds its shadowed “blueness” multiple times. Haunting.

In “The Dream of the Consortium,” a large, multi-storied department store is repurposed. Again, a knife plays a part in the author’s imagery: **“One window showed a six-foot scale model of a thirty-four-story hotel, in which each of its more than two hundred rooms was lit up in turn, revealing in each instance an exquisitely detailed scene performed by miniature automated figures: a little man was murdering a little woman with repeated stabbings of a little bloody knife” (138)**. Again the third person plural creates a certain air, expressing perhaps the thoughts of an entire culture. The story may ultimately be a cautionary tale about the excesses of capitalism. Millhauser creates a dry, biting satire by way of a playful tone.

“Balloon Flight, 1870” is a lovely combination of history, travel, war, peace of being on a four-and-a-half hour balloon ride—escaping *from* one place *to* another. Plenty of time to daydream. One of Millhauser’s strength seems to be creating a unique point of view; this one: watching the world from thousands of feet in the air at a time when humans can only view the earth from a tall tree or a two-story dwelling.

The longest story, “Paradise Park,” is about the history of a Coney Island amusement park, in which one man, having become wealthy from other business interests, desires to fund the rebuilding of this park. The park, a multi-leveled sprawl, is a character that takes the first eight of fifty pages to be described in its

entirety; one wonders if a human will appear. Then Sarabee, the owner-manager, does build more and more elaborate parks, sometimes on top of one another, until he, at one point, goes “dark.”

If one wishes to enjoy both reading and being challenged by short stories, Millhauser is your author, and this is the book!

63. Monette, Paul. *Last Watch of the Night: Essays Too Personal and Otherwise*. New York: Harcourt, 1994.

Dear Paul,

I’m pretending that you gaze over my shoulder and peruse this piece about you and *Last Watch of the Night*. On pages 267-8, you discuss your hoarding of books, and I’m so glad to learn that I’m not the only one who does this. In recataloging my library of 1,300 books I realize that 300 of them remain unread, and, until now [during Covid I am endeavoring to catch up], yours has been one of them. I feel disgusted that I didn’t read it when it came out, but that was the first year of teaching AP English in high school, and my reading tasks were to stay at least one chapter ahead of my five classes of bright bulbs. So now to why I love this book and why it will never be *dated*.

Your essays, at times, seem long and meandering, but readers, make no mistake, they are ordered; they have organization. I believe it is a nonlinear order in which, for example, in an essay about travel, you mention sojourning with all three of your long-term relationships: Roger, Stevie, and Winston. What I like about this sort of organization is it allows the essayist to discuss bigger pictures, larger topics. In the first essay entitled, “Puck,” ostensibly about yours and Roger’s Rhodesian ridgeback-Lab mix, the piece spans out, in which this “noble beast” (28) is the glue holding you two lovers together until Roger succumbs to AIDS.

In another essay, “Gert,” you bring to light your first relationship with a lesbian, in this case, Gertrude Macy, a “maiden great-aunt” of one of your pupils. After she reads your novel manuscript, Gert asks, “Does it have to be so gay?” You answer:

**“Oh, indeed it did. The gayer the better. I launched into my half-baked credo, invoking the name of Forster [E. M. Forster], the writer to whom I was most in thrall, and the one who had failed me the most as well. When Forster decided he dare not publish *Maurice*, for fear of the scandal and what his mother would think; when he locked that manuscript in a drawer for fifty years until he died, he silenced much more than himself. He put up a wall that prevented us, his gay and lesbian heirs, from having a place to begin” (43).** I tend to agree, but one must think about the consequences for Forster if he had released *Maurice*. Lost revenue? Loss of a career? His life?

A fallen Catholic, in fact a defiant ex-Catholic, you discuss your relationship with several different “priests.” You cover gravesites and “The Politics of Silence.” “A One-Way Fare,” your paean to travel, becomes a metaphor for the one-way trip we

all make through life. I love how you move from Mont-Saint-Michel to Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, to a ten-line excerpt from that play, and on to Greece, all within a page—yet all connected.

Young gays need to read you, just as we read Forster and Isherwood, our forebears, so that they may know from whence they come. They must realize that the fight for freedom and equality is never over. It just shifts from one opponent to another. You fought to bring AIDS into a national focus, and perhaps the young will see that the Covid-19 battle is much the same: unless we change our national leadership Covid will be with us forever, just like AIDS is still with us. One must thank you for your fight, which ended all too soon. You would just now be enjoying a long-deserved homage at the ripe age of seventy-five.

64. Moore, Harry T., and Warren Roberts. *D. H. Lawrence*. New York: Thames, (1966) 1988.

Easily read in one sitting, this book is a delightful combination of photographs and text. At times, the authors seem to wrap things up a bit too tidily, but the book does seem to offer one an introduction to the literary life of D. H. Lawrence.

65. Murata, Sayaka. *Convenience Store Woman*. Translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori. New York: Grove, 2018.

A compact book at 163 small pages, this novel is a more substantive read than one would think at first. The simple language that the narrator Keiko uses may lull the reader into thinking this will be a simple story. In a way, it is. This young Japanese woman who works in a convenience store shifts to a flashback about her childhood. There she reveals her odd personality, a certain problem with affect, in which she would like to cook and eat a beautiful little blue bird that has died, much to the horror of her mother. Then in primary school, when no teacher appears to break up a fight at recess, Keiko takes it upon herself to hit one of the boys on the skull with a spade. At that point, after getting into trouble, Keiko decides to become a little rule follower, making her, upon high school graduation, a perfect candidate for convenience store worker. Keiko is unusually attuned to the store's needs, both at the macro and micro levels—responding to the store's needs the way a mother might respond to her children. Remaining single, without much apparent interest in sex, Keiko works part-time and sustains a secularly ascetic existence until she's thirty-six. Then she meets a man, creating the novel's conflict, and I won't reveal the ending because it's pretty odd and yet satisfying. I do have a question for the author. Keiko is often more skilled in managing the store than her male, mostly younger managers (eight of them in eighteen years). Why does her demonstrated competency (all her colleagues acknowledge her abilities) ever put her in a position to become a manager herself? Is this author Murata's point, a comment on Japanese culture? Or is she more concerned with portraying people who happen not to fit the mold of ordinary citizens and how society treats such people?

66. Obama, Barack. *A Promised Land*. New York: Crown, 2020.

Having read President Obama's 1995 memoir *Dreams from My Father* a number of years ago, I pre-ordered this book and anxiously awaited its arrival from Amazon on November 17, 2020. *Dreams* had revealed to me a skilled and sensitive writer. The scene in which Mr. Obama kneels at his father's grave in Kenya is deeply moving and serves as the striking climax. It remains fresh in my memory.

*A Promised Land* is a title that resonates in a global way. However, Mr. Obama transforms it a bit to reveal how the United States of America has functioned as a promised land for him, for his life. The book seems to possess a unique structure. The former president limns in this the first volume of his long-awaited memoir his political life. Yet he does not hesitate to return readers by way of carefully selected flashbacks to his humble beginnings: we learn things about his family that we perhaps did not know before, the boldly liberal nature of his Kansas-born grandparents who flee to Hawaii to live a freer life; their daughter who marries a Kenyan man and gives birth to Barack Hussein Obama.

At the same time, this memoir develops a strand of history focused as readers would expect to see through the eyes of the person to whom it happened, the one who witnessed first-hand his several political campaigns, his earthy language in dealing with staff who have displeased him or fallen short of their expected performance. In spite of the subjectivity of such a view, one senses that Mr. Obama is being fair, that not many can argue with his point of view, his memory, his own fact-checking.

But finally, this book is silver-lined with personal and moving vignettes the president experiences throughout his first term: campaign events, public and private; White House anecdotes (he gives an inviting description of the contemporary White House); the relationships he develops with everyday WH employees, the large majority of whom are African-American, one essentially declaring, "You're one of us." At the same time, though he avoids making too much of the issue, Mr. Obama sets the record straight on the political evils he must endure: Donald Trump's birtherism campaign; the media's daily tearing at his flesh even though he is far more transparent and open than the previous administration's leader; obstructionist Republicans who wish to thwart the President's agenda, not because they so much disagree with him ideologically (which they do) but because they object so blatantly to *him*. Mr. Obama very elegantly portrays their vitriol without saying what I have no problem stating: Republicans regularly respond with a latent but powerful sense of White person's entitlement, racism, and bigotry that have laced our American life since before its formation. That the man continues to rule with great dignity is a tribute to his stature as an adult who wishes to build on our democracy, not destroy it.

Mr. Obama relates the night at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, in which he takes stand-up potshots at a seated and furious Donald Trump. I think Mr. Obama must later realize how much this *roasting* inspires DT to run for president. Finally, skillfully building toward the narrative arc's fine climax, Mr. Obama relates the fulsome scenario by which Osama bin Laden is assassinated and buried at sea. Though at times the reading is a slog, because the former prez wishes

to be thorough and exact (a quality I appreciate), the book is well worth the time. And that infamous date, May 2, 2011, is where the first half of this memoir ends.

67. Ondaatje, Michael. *In the Skin of a Lion*. New York: Penguin, 1987.

With almost every Ondaatje novel I've read I've tried to discern how he constructed it, and I never seem to succeed. I've learned to board one of his novels like a wild roller coaster and allow it to take me where it will. In its barest terms (and there is so much more to its 243 pages than one can imagine), the novel is about one Patrick Lewis, who moves as a young man from a rural setting to Toronto, Ontario, Canada. He's particularly adept, almost like a gymnast, at working rather acrobatically on a bridge (what is to become the Bloor Street Viaduct) and later a waterworks project involving Lake Ontario. His skills will remain valuable throughout the novel and into its dramatic but subtle climax. In between, readers learn of physical injuries, the women he loves and saves in various ways (he literally catches and saves a falling nun from sure death), and the relationship he builds with his daughter, Hana. The novel opens with Patrick and Hana headed in a car toward their destination. In between, he tells Hana the story of his and Hana's mother's life. It is a trip all readers should find worthwhile taking.

68.-69. Orton, Joe. X2 With an introduction by John Lahr. *Head to Toe: A Novel and Up Against It: A Screenplay for the Beatles*. New York: Da Capo, 1998.

Just as well that the Beatles didn't option this play. It doesn't approach the brilliance of Orton's stage plays. As it is, in part, based on *Head to Toe*, well, if you start with bad material . . .

70. Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*. UK: Dog's Tail Books, nd.

This edition (with or without permission) has been produced by one Will Jonson and Dog's Tail Books in the UK. When I ordered it at (where else) Amazon, I wasn't paying attention to the editions, and for \$6.98, this is what Amazon sent me. I didn't encounter any typos, but the edition is nevertheless strange: the lines are justified left with spaces between paragraphs; the printer uses two en dashes – instead of one em dash — to set off certain parentheticals; footnotes are presented in brackets, not at the foot of the page; and the chapters seem to be numbered differently than the chapters summarized at Wikipedia.

Still, I read the whole thing. It *seemed* authentic enough. The book is, indeed, a memoir of author Orwell's 1936-7 experiences of fighting in the Spanish Civil War. He presents vivid and sensual representations:

**“We were near the front line now, near enough to smell the characteristic smell of war—in my experience a smell of excrement and decaying food . . . [t]he constant come-and-go of troops had reduced the village to a state of unspeakable filth . . . [t]he church had long been used as a latrine; so had all the fields for a quarter of a mile round. I never think of my first two months at war without thinking of wintry stubble fields whose edges are crusted with dung” (14).**



Yet, there were many pages when my eyes glazed over, probably due to my lack of proper historical-political background: forcing myself to memorize the endless acronyms such as PSUC (Unified Socialist Part Catalonia)

and POUM (Workers Party Marxist Unification). Finally, I just flowed with the reading, trying to do the best I could do to take it all in.

The book is also, as the title would suggest, an homage to the international group of men and women Orwell encounters in his jaunt with war. One party is Orwell's wife (whose name he fails to mention), who is always out of sight, "back at the hotel," but she manages to give him some of his best advice. Another person is George Kopp:

**"I admit I was angry when I heard of Kopp's arrest. He was my personal friend, I had served under him for months, I had been under fire with him, and I knew his history. He was a man who had sacrificed everything—family, nationality, livelihood—simply to come to Spain and fight against Fascism. By leaving Belgium without permission and joining a foreign army while he was on the Belgian Army reserve, and, earlier, by helping to manufacture munitions illegally for the Spanish Government, he had piled up years of imprisonment for himself if he should ever return to his own country" (158).**

In a bit of narrative building, Orwell relates of two or three times in which he is *almost* shot, and he seems quite taken aback when a bullet shoots through his throat: **"I had been about ten days at the front when it happened. The whole experience of being hit by a bullet is very interesting . . . I felt a tremendous shock—no pain, only a violent shock, such as you get from an electric terminal; with it a sense of utter weakness, a feeling of being stricken and shrivelled up to nothing" (139).**

With some men's writing, particularly of a certain generation, even though they write of emotional material, it reads at some distance between him and the reader. This memoir seems a perfect example.

71. O'Toole, Peter. *Loitering with Intent: The Child*. New York: Hyperion, 1992.

Born in 1932, noted British actor Peter O'Toole is but a child throughout the Depression as well as World War II. So of course his remembrances are colored by those events. The man's diction is curious, part northern England (he is from a suburb of Leeds), part student of RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts), part guttersnipe, part Orson Welles stinging wit. It may even sound a bit as if he recorded his words and then transcribed them. That is usually a mistake, but if he did so, here it is a marvel, for terms like Moo Cow (recalling perhaps Joyce's *nicens little moo cow* from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) seem to roll off his tongue. O'Toole employs the words "I fancy" to recreate an imagined conversation of his father's. He employs the rhythm and meter of a man who has performed Shakespeare on the loftiest of stages and portrayed a British icon in the 1962 film

*Lawrence of Arabia*, a work which seems to gain more scope and clarity as the years pass. All throughout, he alternates sections directly about his childhood with sections in which he traces in very salty terms the life of one Adolph Hitler, dubbing him Alf from time to time. Even as a child he realizes how much Hitler has affected his life, and the older he gets perhaps the more bitter he becomes. At the same time, this is a man who will never remain bitter; he is too grateful for his exceptional life, and this is even before he becomes famous. An enjoyable read.

72. Pascoe, Sara. *Sex Power Money*. London: Faber, 2019.

I first saw Ms. Pascoe on BBC America's *Graham Norton Show* and realized I *must* read this, her second book. In it she not only expresses her opinion on feminism but does so in a manner that is by turns hysterically funny, sobering concerning the reality for sex workers, and an honest reveal of her own life. She spends a great deal of time debating (with herself) the ins and outs and rights and wrongs of pornography. One keeps reading both because of her sharp humor and her incisive research.

Some nuggets:

"With our beloved prairie voles the female has her ovulation induced by the smell of male urine. It's a sure sign there's a male nearby and so her body gets ready for mating. The exact opposite of a human female getting a whiff of urinals in a nightclub and her vagina falling off in disgust" (47).

"When I was at primary school there was a Tango advert where an orange blob man tapped people on the back, slapped them round the face and yelled informatively, 'You've been Tangoed.' This went whatever things went before they went viral. Crazy? Popular? It went crazy popular. The kids in my school did it all day long. We slapped and got slapped, and we loved it even though it hurt. We were unified by it for several cheek-smarting days. Then the advert got banned, orange blob man was elected President of the United States and the fun was over" (164).

"I don't think that paying for someone's dinner is *explicitly* transactional—buying a homeless person a sandwich doesn't mean you're expecting a hand job in the park later. Your manager pays for lunch at a meeting without expecting you to drop your trousers, your mum cooks you a roast every Sunday with no sexual undertones whatsoever—it's clear people can provide sustenance for each other without tensions and obligations. But where dating is concerned, expectations and implications could be different for the people either side of the table" (300).

Having heaped my praise upon Ms. Pascoe's efforts, I wonder how combining humor with highly researched material concerning sex can work. Is the scientific a bit tainted by her insouciance, or is her humor, likewise, deadened a bit by the scientific? You read. You judge. I loved it!

73. Porter, Katherine Anne. With an afterword by Mark Schorer. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*.

New York: Signet, 1962.

This collection of three short novels, as it was sold in the 1930s, is a stunning piece of literature, especially *Noon Wine* and the title novel, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. In *Noon Wine*, what begins as a rather bucolic scene of rural life in Texas transforms into one of mayhem and psychological complexity. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* is at this moment in time particularly fascinating because it is set during the 1918 influenza pandemic. Porter, better than almost anyone I've ever read, portrays what it might be like for a woman to live through such a dizzying and debilitating illness, only to discover on the other side that something terrible has happened to one she loves.

74. Rhyne, Nancy. *More Tales of the South Carolina Low Country*. Winston-Salem: Blair, 1984.

This *sequel* collection to *Tales of the South Carolina Low Country* contains twenty-two tales, ghost stories, and humorous narratives and seems as interesting as her first collection. However, she has a much greater chronological range, some of them dating from the 1700s to twentieth-century stories. Again, a smooth retelling of Low Country stories of mysterious happenings with voodoo and unexplainable events of nature.

75. Rhyne, Nancy. *Tales of the South Carolina Low Country*. Winston-Salem: Blair, 1982.

This combination of fourteen folk tales, ghost stories, and humorous narratives is largely entertaining as well as informative. Rhyne, much like Zora Neale Hurston, albeit about fifty years later, combs the countryside of South Carolina to hear these tales first-hand. She makes an elegant retelling of these pieces, careful to respectfully recreate the language citizens share with her, even when she retells one from the first-person viewpoint of one of the characters. She is careful to give credit to the rich but painful tales of African-Americans (some of these tales having been passed on from slave ancestors). Most of all, readers get a feel for the richness and the hardship of living on the South Atlantic coast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: hurricanes, floods, the cracked whip of slavery.

76. Robinson, Marilynne. *Gilead*. New York: Farrar, 2004.

Robinson writes this novel in a very different but masterful fashion from most contemporary novels. She undertakes to have a third-generation (at least) Protestant minister tell his family's story to his very young son by way of a letter, reviving a long epistolary tradition in storytelling. It is the kind of novel that wends itself back and forth over the same geographical (from Iowa to Kansas, literally on foot) and temporal (several generations) territories. One must retain part of the information, at least, to make sense of it all; yet Robinson skillfully reminds readers of pertinent facts, and they can uncover more as they continue their journey through the book.

The elderly Rev. John Ames, who has married late in life, is fatally ill and thus wishes to share his life with his young son. Early on, he shares that in his life as a pastor he has written and filed away a large number of sermons:

**“Your mother . . . was the one who actually called my attention to the number of boxes I have filled with my sermons and my prayers. Say, fifty sermons a year for forty-five years, not counting funerals and so on, of which there have been a great many. Two thousand two hundred and fifty. If they average thirty pages, that’s sixty-seven thousand five hundred pages . . . two hundred twenty-five books which puts me up there with Augustine and Calvin for quantity” (19).**

One doesn’t know if the son is impressed because he hasn’t yet read this long epistle, but to the reader it seem be a daunting figure. Even most novelists do not produce that much material in a lifetime. So what occupies the thoughts of a trained minister? Family issues, certainly, and we learn of his older brother Edward who studies in Europe and returns an atheist. One problem with a liberal education is that one is taught to think for oneself and what Edward thinks does not please their father; in fact, he is quite hurt that Edward refuses to deliver the prayer at a meal but even more disappointed that his son will not be following in his footsteps.

Another major thread of the narrative has to do with a fellow pastor and friend, a man named Robert Boughton. (One is not sure if the first syllable is pronounced bough as in a tree’s bough, bow as in bow tie, or even buffton or booton.) Robert’s son, Jack, is a bit of a problem in a number of ways I shall not reveal, and because of them John Ames does not trust Jack. But as a matter of putting his faith in action, he finally steps up to help the troubled young man to grow and move on—his own father, Robert, not ever knowing of Jack’s troubled past. I, too, like Edward, am a former Christian, but I find the book explores the topic of spirituality in a manner that is respectful to all parties who may read the book, and that is a feat difficult to achieve.

77. Rubinstein, Arthur. *My Young Years*. New York, Knopf, 1973.

Renowned pianist Rubinstein publishes this autobiography in his mid-eighties, yet it is seemingly written by someone who has a great memory of his life. By way of his own recognizance, his memory is superior early on. He can memorize anything, particularly music, very quickly. And also by his admission, he is a bit lazy—a quirk he must overcome later in life (I shall have to read his accompanying biography, *My Many Years* to see if it is true). Instead of attacking a piece with necessary technique, he often performs by emphasizing emotional interpretation as he glosses over difficult passages he has not mastered. While it is a “successful” practice, he realizes it is also dishonest.

The book is filled with history (he is born into a divided Poland: Russia, Germany, and Austria “owning” certain chunks), delightful and painful anecdotes of growing up in which he early disinherits his parents and an overly paternalistic piano teacher to find his own way through the world. He celebrates an uncanny manner of always being saved at the last second from destitution (he calls these times *deus ex machina* moments) in which he is to but ask or hint to the right person and he receives a loan or an outright gift (of cash or sometimes paying concerts) that put his budget back in the black again. Sometimes, good things happen out of the blue.

Yet, instead of being prudent following such windfalls, young Rubinstein spends money like he's rich, staying in the best hotels and dining in the finest restaurants. He makes many friends, including persons of royalty, distinguished musicians and composers (for example when he spots Igor Stravinsky at an event, he makes a point of speaking with the man, begging for an audience, and they wind up being fast friends).

While not a *literary* book, this entertaining tome is well-written by a multilingual man who possesses a great command over the English language. It is delightful reading that kept me turning page after page.

78. Sedaris, David. *Barrel Fever*. New York: Little, 1994.

I'm not sure I've ever seen an author place twelve short stories and four essays in the same collection, but the combination seems to work, especially with someone as witty as Sedaris. Having read his journals first and knowing about his family members, I sometimes wonder which piece is a story and which is an essay.

**Some jewels I picked up along the way and send along to you:**

From the story, "Barrel Fever": **"Gill once had an idea for a show about a detective in an iron lung called 'Last Gasp for Justice.'** (130). This is not funny unless you're old enough to know about polio.

**"Dolph is the name I go by because really, nobody can walk around with the name of Adolph. It's poison in a name. Dolph is bad too, but it's just box-office poison"** (130).

**"That's the sort of thing that destroys my sisters but doesn't bother me in the least. I expect it in a person and am constantly amazed to hear someone refer to it wrongly as gossip and get all bent out of shape about it"** (132).

The character drops in on his ex-lover Gill and some sedate friends, and says, **"Jesus, Gill, where have you been? Your parole officer has been looking everywhere for you"** (134).

**"The father, an alcoholic, had received thirty-seven shock treatments following an episode of what his daughter referred to as 'Barrel Fever,' the D.T.'s [delirium tremens]"** (139).

I love Sedaris's penchant for combining hyperbole with his gigantic, filthy wit, by way of the story, "Giantess": **"You'd have no privacy and every bowel movement would evacuate entire cities"** (157).

**"This is a publication for men who long to explore a vagina the way others might visit the Luray Caverns"** (159).

I could go on and on, but suffice it to say, Sedaris's humor never ages.

79. Shaw, Bernard. *Candida*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1952.

Shaw's ideas, in spite of the several forms of English he utilizes, still seem fresh after more than a hundred and twenty-five years. With a similar apparently misogynist character as his *Pygmalion*, Shaw nevertheless, and with some irony, creates a female character, Candida, who is stronger than either her famous husband or the young lad who is bold enough to declare his love for her.

80. Shelley, Mary. With an introduction and Notes by Karen Karbiener. *Frankenstein*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004. First published by Mary Shelley in 1831.

This novel, written when Shelley is a teenager, at times, *reads* like a first novel. One wonders why she employs the first person instead of the third. By the end she must use machinations like switching to an epistolary form so that a different party can finish the story when Doctor Frankenstein (*the* first person) dies. She does little to explain *how* Frankenstein creates his monster, or how the monster can propel himself through the world with such great speed or so easily gain access to the loved ones of Frankenstein whom the monster murders. Perhaps that is the nature of what will become science fiction. Poof. There you are, in another world.

Having spoken my piece, however, I find the novel fascinating and wonder why no one has ever tried to make a film *following the actual plot and intent of the book* (no offense to Mel Brooks), which is actually quite interesting. Young man with idyllic childhood, against his father's wishes, sets out to create this creature. Creature murders two of Frankenstein's loved ones. Creature-now-monster demands that Doctor Frankenstein create a woman for him so that he won't be lonely; monster promises to go to some distant land and live forever with his woman. Frankenstein considers the request but refuses. That's when the killing really begins, including the death of Frankenstein's wife, Elizabeth, as well as his best friend. From that point, the doctor rather *becomes* the monster searching for his creation so that he can destroy him, but he, too, becomes a victim. In the final pages we also learn of the monster's victimhood and develop a bit of sympathy for the figure fading "and lost in darkness and distance" (197).

81. Shikibu, Murasaki. *Tale of the Genji*. Translated by Edward Seidensticker. New York: Knopf, 1992. [Began reading aloud 7/27/20.]

I read this tome of 1,184 pages aloud to my partner for numerous evenings over three months. I believe there were several advantages to digesting the work in this manner. One, even though it is a translation, one does sense the delicacy of the Japanese royal court depicted in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, the apparent highly educated level of its men and women. I selected this book because author Jane Smiley includes it as number one in her list of 100 books found in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel*, and I was curious. Reading aloud also prevents the reader from *falling asleep* from the apparently repetitive or rhythmic nature (heavily tied to the seasons) of the narrative. Many rituals also are linked to certain days of certain months. Finally, I believe, there is a narrative tone that I, as the reader, am finally

able to master to some degree, reading exposition one way, dialogue (according to each character) in another, the poetic passages in yet another. At least I believe so.

Most scholars, including Smiley, consider this book the *first* novel. In large part that may be true. The complex narrative does sustain itself over a long period, more than fifty years, exploring the lives of two primary characters (Genji and his son) and their cohorts. However, there exist some differences. Many times *Genji* feels like a long narrative that drifts from story to story, as one wanders from room to room of the sprawling architecture of the court's many palaces. *Genji* may be the first novel but only in the same way that a Model-T Ford is one of the earliest mass-produced cars. It's a bit primitive, a suggestion of what is to come.

Shikibu does make great use of figurative language, particularly as it relates to nature, as well as the supernatural. She employs trees, flowers, bramble, snow, rain, wind to make comparisons. At the same time, she speaks, on behalf of characters who must believe in this heavily Buddhist period, of former lives now paying for past sins. They follow the Blessed One, are bothered by evil or devilish spirits who, among other things, cause characters to become ill or die. Spirits seem to be a continuation of life on Earth. They can't accept the peace of death. Furthermore, Shikibu uses foreshadowing to great effect. The savvy reader catches these and appreciates her arrow-pointing. At the same time, Shikibu has some practices that seem underdeveloped. Often, in dialogue, she does not remind the reader who is speaking. And though the omniscient narrator has for a long time been a literary convention, Shikibu herself shifts to the first person numerous times through sly, wink-and-a-nod sort of asides—most often to excuse herself for not adding more detail to a certain scene: **“There were many others [poems], but I neglected to set them down” (727)**. These instances seem clumsy compared to how that POV has been handled since the nineteenth century. She also demonstrates an odd sense of narrative pace, often extending a single scene over pages but passing over a longer era by way of a single sentence. A stylistic quirk, or lack of development?

Though *Genji* is presented as one tome, it is in reality two separate books. The eponymous character, Genji, dies at the end of chapter forty-one. The second part of the narrative is about his heirs. It seems that the first part is more complex, more alive, whereas the complexity of the second part diminishes to no more than a romance novel. But even this characteristic may be the result of serious intent on the part of Shikibu. Perhaps she wishes to portray a certain vapidness among the royals, whose voluptuous but empty lives are repeated again and again throughout the centuries by way of their own progeny. She may also be portraying a social transition. This work is more or less the view of the court, for even the royal servants have status that ordinary Japanese outside of its realm do not have. There is no mention of Samurai warriors or a military or any kind. No battles. No skirmishes that are found in the writing of male novelists, giving the book a uniquely feminine flair. One final thought: Shikibu does not seem to capture at a sophisticated level the characters' emotions. The only exception may be the emotion of *sadness*, during which times she refers to their copious tears or their weeping or crying. There seems to be little joy or the portrayal of even ordinary

emotions. Perhaps she is only portraying the culture as it appears to her, one where most royals hide their emotions from each other.

It seems that this book is much more complex and sophisticated than anything that was happening in Europe at the same time (one may disagree). The use of indirection alone is something that Jane Austen or Alcott would employ much later in time. During any other era I might not have taken the time to read this book, but given the need to do something constructive during the evenings of Covid, I think it a great gift to have done so now.

82. Smith, Aaron. *The Book of Daniel: Poems*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 2019.

This poet's persona clearly has a crush on actor Daniel Craig and cleverly weaves together nearly fifty poems with pop culture in mind. A couple deal directly with our eponymous persona, Daniel, but many cover other icons. In "I Need My O'Hara Frank" he idolizes other poets:

**I Need Sharons:**

**Tate and Olds,  
but mostly Olds,**

**and never, ever  
the Rose of.**

In "Celebrity," he, stream-of-conscious style, connects the deaths of various celebs with himself:

**Anne Sexton died in 1974, the year I was born.  
Thomas James died in 1974 and was born  
in Joliet, Illinois, where I was born. He wrote  
*Letters to a Stranger* before he killed himself.  
I've written three books few people read  
and wanted to kill myself. He was 27 like  
Joplin Hendrix Morrison Cobain.**

In the title poem, the persona levels with readers about Daniel Craig:

**I made a Daniel Craig scrapbook  
called *The Book of Daniel*. For years I bought  
every magazine with him on the cover. In *Interview*  
he's stripped to the waist, hopping around on the beach.  
Jamie Dornan was in *Interview*, too: arms behind his  
head in a bathtub. I fell in love with Daniel Craig  
when he was stalked by a man in *Enduring Love*—  
before he was Bond-hot and too famous.**

I rarely read a book of poetry in one sitting. To me, that's like eating an entire box



of chocolates in thirty minutes or less (which I've never done but know better than to try). Yet I found myself turning page after page, *getting* Smith's poetry when often I do not *get* what a poet wants me to. And when I was finished, it may also be the only book of poetry I turned around and read all the way through again. There.

83. Smith, Alison. *Name All the Animals*. New York: Scribner, 2004.

If I had had the time, I would have read *Name All the Animals* in one sitting. In this memoir, the author begins benignly by sharing with readers in great detail how close she and her brother Roy are at ages nine and twelve, respectively, so close that their mother names them Alroy. Together, they explore an abandoned house in their neighborhood. And then, in a similar way to how it must shock the narrator and her parents, it shocks the reader to learn of Roy's death at eighteen. The rest of the book covers several years following in which Alison finishes high school. She demonstrates how her family, good Catholics, avoid all the questions that should be asked and tackled. Alison develops an inner and outer world of her own making, all in aid of forgetting and yet commemorating her brother. In failing to grieve, however, she cuts herself off from most people until she meets one she can't resist. Smith tells this harrowing story without sentiment but with all due regard for the truth. She structures it in such a manner that readers discover along with her how she must grow up, how she must proceed without Roy in her life.

84. Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr I. Translated by Thomas P. Whitney. *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation I-II*. New York: Harper, 1974.

In some ways I'm embarrassed to say that this book has been on my shelf since 1974—unread. It is a paperback of such vintage that I had to be careful about cracking the ancient glue in the spine or pages would have fallen out. Though the read was a slog—not having a Russian history background—I was able to glean much of its purpose. The writer wishes for people in the West to know that Russian citizens experienced a purge probably as horrendous as what took place in Germany in the 1940s, if not worse. At least a million Soviet citizens held in custody by the Allies at the end of World War II were handed over to officials at the end of the war. This does not include other *enemies of the people*.

One must remember scads of acronyms in this book, and yet they are based on the Russian words, not the English version, so it is more difficult to recall the connections. For example SMERSH stands for Soviet counterintelligence but means “death to spies.” GPU stands for Russian words meaning State Political Administration. Also difficult to recall for an English reader are people's names; except for Stalin, most are quite multisyllabic.

Yet there is much the naïve reader can take from this book. Solzhenitsyn speaks bluntly of many things.

**“I smiled in pride that I had been arrested not for stealing, nor treason, nor desertion, but because I had discovered through my power of reasoning the evil secrets of Stalin. I smiled at the thought that I wanted, and might still be able, to**

**effect some small remedies and changes in our Russian way of life” (167).**

Perhaps Part II, about the prison conditions themselves, is most understandable of all, the most universal. Solzhenitsyn calls the trains that take people to the prisons “ships.” I’m not sure I’ve ever read anything as painfully disgusting as his descriptions of the conditions: men literally sitting on top of one another; few if any toilets so men must soil themselves; at best, a kind of gruel to eat, if anything at all; unbearable cold or heat. Then there are the prisons themselves: again little or no heat; no healthcare; poor food and sanitation. Draconian punishments for the tiniest of (sometimes manufactured) infractions. And the people must bear these sentences, most begin as tenners (ten-years), with great aplomb, hoping they will in one way or another escape the hell they are in (even death would be preferable).

The Russians present to the world such a mixed and puzzling heritage. On the one hand, we treasure great Russian literature and drama, superb music including ballet, fine visual art and more. On the other, Russians, either by way of their isolation from the rest of the world, and its inherent paranoia, have a mean streak in their DNA, whether it is by way of the Czarist leaders, the Soviets, or post-Soviet PutinWorld. They desire to be respected as a substantial part of the world, but simply put, do not know how to play nice. And it seems to be a cycle that is difficult to break.

85. Spaggiari, Albert. Translated by Martin Sokolinsky. *Fric-Frac: The Great Riviera Bank Robbery*. Boston: Houghton, 1979.

I bought this book for \$1.50 in 2005 at a used book store, and it was almost worth the price. I selected it because I do like to read (in sinful moments) true crime. Only I didn’t realize until I began it that it was written by the perp himself. Besides being a homophobe and a racist, Spaggiari is also a masterminded criminal, who joins with maybe a dozen other men to drill through a bank vault to steal what they hope will be 40,000,000 francs (before the Euro). It is slimy, filthy work beneath the streets of Nice, France, but the dirty dozen manage to get away with not quite their goal and they split it. At the time this *fric-frac* (French for “heist”) compares magnificently to the Great Train Robbery in England. I won’t say much more in case one wants to read this *memoir* of a criminal telling his smarmy story from the inside out. I never destroy books, but I may make an exception with this one. Spaggiari died at age 56 in 1989, according to Wikipedia, from lung cancer. His crime may pay, but smoking (as he mentions doing all throughout the book) certainly does not.

86. Tammet, Daniel. *Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant*. New York: Simon, 2006.

When writers are brutally honest about their own problems or shortcomings, they can create a powerful bond with readers. Daniel Tammet does just that in this fascinating memoir about a young autistic British man who, in spite of his many problems, is able to hone in on his strengths and shape a life that overcomes many of his problems and is satisfying to boot. He understands complex mathematical

concepts and learns to speak and write multiple foreign languages, even beginning his own language school. But most of all, he challenges himself to become a fuller human being. For one, at age twenty, he travels to Lithuania to do volunteer teaching (English). There he pushes himself out of his comfort zone to meet others and to make friends. He also meets another gay man and his partner who befriend Daniel—helping him to cope with this aspect of his life. Once he returns to England, after nine months, he begins to search out relationships on a fairly young Internet and meets a young man he falls in love with. From this point his life seems to soar. His story becomes known worldwide, and he has experiences most of us can only dream about. A completely unsentimental read.

87. Terry, Robert W. *For Whites Only*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970.

From my writing on the inside front cover: “For Consultation on Racism March 17-18, 1972. Perkins [School of Theology], SMU” It’s not evident that I read much of this book at the time, so in my quest finally to peruse unread books in my library, I slogged through this thin tome—for the fun of it.

Terry wishes during this period of the late 1960s to bridge the gap between Blacks and Whites. He seems to coin the term “New White,” in speaking of those who would attempt to change. These souls have six tasks, says he: 1) Become agents of change 2) Seek ethical clarity 3) Identify multiple forms of racism, both past and present 4) Find social strategies for change 5) Develop proper tactics and 6) **“Experiment, test, and refine personal styles of life congruent with our newly affirmed values—experience who we might be” (21).**

The first third of the book seems terribly dated, and yet his words written in the 1960s, in the latter part of his book, are eerily familiar:

**“In America, as well as other countries, civil disturbance is often intensified by overreaction by police and other law enforcement agencies. This overreaction is the fifth type of violence Hough [Joseph, Jr.] points out. ‘Police violence occurs,’ he says, ‘when more force is employed than is necessary to contain a civil disorder, or when excessive force is used as an ‘example to others who might be contemplating some kind of disruption’” (79).**

I cite these words the very weekend of the 2020 *disturbance* in Minneapolis, following demonstrations protesting the police murder of George Floyd. Have we come such a short distance in fifty years?

The book has one other difficulty for contemporary readers and that is the language itself. As many academics from that period, he displays an excessive use of the passive voice, which among other things removes or obscures the subject of a sentence—putting his readers at a distant remove from his emotional intent. I can see why I apparently did not finish reading this book in 1972. It was just too tedious and dry.

88. Theroux, Paul. *Blinding Light*. New York: Houghton, 2005.

This novel, set in the late 1990s, may essentially be about one's control over one's body and therefore one's life. Author Slade Steadman, rich beyond all measure from sales of his first book written twenty years earlier, has nonetheless failed to write another book in two decades. He decides to take a *drug tour* in Ecuador, and his live-in girlfriend, Ava, a physician, accompanies him. According to both parties, having reached a certain impasse concerning moving their relationship forward, they consider it their "break-up trip."

Part One of six may provide the most unfamiliar background and yet a most exciting one to most Americans. Theroux spares nothing in describing the local color, and readers live vicariously through the danger he evinces. The couple are part of a tour that includes five other people. Part of the deal, under certain precautions, is to experience natural highs found among tropical flora. In this section, Theroux paints a picture of the True Ugly American by bringing alive four beauts (one born a Brit) whose snobbery and arrogance and ethnocentricity are alarmingly racist. As stuffy as the two couples are, however, they are game for trying one drug, in which they all get sick and vomit over themselves. Steadman, after a certain wrangling on price, dickers with yet another member of the group to purchase "datura," yet another drug, one that "blinds" the user yet opens up yet other avenues of *seeing*. To demonstrate its strength, Steadman stares blindly at the group and reveals each one of their peccadilloes including one man's shady corporate dealings and the fact that one husband is having an affair with the other man's wife and has been for a long time. The fifth man—a German journalist working in America, who ultimately sells Steadman his stash of datura—Steadman reveals to be the son of a Nazi and intuits the man's deep shame over the fact. If you believe at the time that this man will return to haunt Steadman, you wouldn't be wrong.

In Book Two, Steadman and Ava return to their home in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, to renew their love life and for Steadman to write a brand new book. Day after day, Steadman partakes of the drug datura and dictates his new book (essentially a fictionalization of their renewed sex life) called *The Book of Revelation* to Ava who continues her leave of absence from the hospital where she is employed. Steadman becomes so comfortable with his *blindness* (always leaving him when the drug wears off) that he attends a local party where POTUS (Clinton and wife) show up as guests of honor. Ava has begged him not to take the drug before attending but he insists. Theroux seems to be at his best in creating these public personages we think we know so well through public media. President Clinton hones in on Steadman, keeps touching him, unctuously patronizes him, as do many of the hangers-on including many horny women. Steadman feels, intuits that Clinton is harboring a deep secret, which the astute reader realizes will be the unveiling of his relationship with a young (yet of legal age) intern.

The remaining four parts of the book take the reader through Steadman's experiences as he goes on tour for his explosive new book, a visit to the White House, a comeuppance as he runs out of the drug and a rather miraculous (though terrible) consequence that results. The moral seems to be: Be careful what you wish

for while taking a drug from the jungles of Ecuador, one you know nothing about. You may get exactly that and more.

89. Tolstoy, Leo N. *What Is Art?* Translated by Almyer Maude and with an introduction by Vincent Tomas. Indianapolis: Sams, 1960 (1896).

I was assigned to read this book for a half-credit, pass-fail humanities class in college. There is little indication that I actually did so (a few underlined passages in Chapter Two). It seems like a challenging read for eighteen-year-olds who've had little exposure to argumentation or (unless they have studied art as children) *art*. In general, to summarize an often unclear thesis, Tolstoy seems to believe that art is a *feeling* that the artist would like to *infect* the watcher, listener, reader with. He believes that high art is so only because it is heralded by the upper classes. Tolstoy goes on and on about how bad Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is, in part because Beethoven was deaf, and how could the composer possibly compose if he couldn't hear? And besides, Beethoven is attempting to combine two arts: music and chorus (based on another's lyric). Tolstoy abhors contemporary opera, Wagner in particular, again because it combines visual art, drama, music, singing, and more. When he uses the invective "filthy" to describe it, it seems he has a prejudice he can't explain. In fact, he leaves a lot unexplained by way of sometimes poor or faulty logic, and by using terms he has defined to his own satisfaction. He asserts that beauty is not art. He asserts that the basis of art must be religious, i.e. Christian (I think). However, Tolstoy does make a prescient remark when he argues that art (music, drawing, creative writing and more) should be taught to all children so that they may create art for all their lives, in order to enrich their lives and the lives of the people they love. That seems to be the most positive assertion that he makes, and, because many American school districts have abandoned the teaching of art, the result being a certain poverty, I believe he is right. The rest of this work seems like a highly subjective opinion he took fifteen years to develop; if he'd tried hard he probably could have done it in four or less.

90. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat's Cradle*. New York: Dell, 1973.

91. Vreeland, Susan. *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. New York: Penguin, 1999.

In contemporary times, a Philadelphia professor calls a colleague (who is an art scholar) into his locked study to reveal what he claims is an original work of the Dutch artist, Vermeer. The colleague argues against such a claim, but the man insists. He is in a bind because his father has confessed that he himself stole it from a Jewish home while he was working for the Nazis in WWII, but he cannot reveal such indicting provenance. Each succeeding chapter takes the reader farther back in history (à la the film *The Red Violin*) to reveal previous owners, right up to, the reader must assume, Vermeer himself. All owners are fascinated by the painting and yet must depend on its sale to save themselves or their family from financial disaster. The author explores the value of art. Is it entirely intrinsic, or is it monetary, or is it a bit of both? Vreeland manages to explore this unique idea in a poetic manner which is both compressed, yet expansive, a valuable topic for discussion. The novel is a timeless read, and I'm glad a friend recommended it to

me long ago and that I finally took the time to read it.

92. Waldman, Michael. *The Fight to Vote*. New York: Simon, 2016.

I wish I had read this book when it came out during the run-up to the 2016 election—when I bought it. Even though the last chapters seem dated now, considering what the country has been through, the early chapters give an excellent historical account of how this country has ALWAYS been divided into two camps: those who would like to allow everyone to vote and those who would only have so-called *elites* vote. White (heterosexual, one assumes) male landowners comprised that group in colonial times: **“And there were men who worked as hard to restrict the vote as others did to expand it, such as John Randolph of Roanoke, who fought to deny the franchise to men without property, declaring, ‘I am an aristocrat. I love liberty. I hate equality;’”** (xi).

Slowly, and only through arduous struggles, did other groups gain traction over great spans of time: African-American males, white women, African-American women and other minority groups (including the young). Still, the fight to vote has wavered back and forth, according to the whims of the SCOTUS and voter suppression activities. One group rises up and gains three feet, and another group grabs power and sends progress back two feet. And tragically . . . the struggle still continues. If readers have time, they should consider devouring this informative and at times humorous book. If you’re undecided about voting in 2020, perhaps its contents may sway you to get registered and do so now!

93. Walton, Anthony. *Mississippi: An American Journey*. New York: Viking, 1996.

This combination of “travel writing, history, and memoir,” as blurbled on the back cover is a profound work. Walton, noted poet and author, takes the reader on a multilayer journey. One of those journeys may be the physical. He tells of the move his Mississippian parents make from their home state to Chicago as young adults to establish a better life for their children. One is always aware of the physical: the hot Mississippi summer days, the fields of blindingly white cotton, the cool of air conditioning and iced drinks. Walton takes pains to give us a full history of the state, beginning with the Native Americans who occupy the land for centuries before others arrive and kill or move them off. He doesn’t stop there but gives us a history of the slave, the African-American: lynchings, beatings, the cold war that Whites take up against Blacks after the Civil War. But Walton’s journey of Mississippi, which begins mostly after he is an adult, includes memories of visiting family there, interviewing a broad range of white and black citizens. He describes the “polite” way that citizens treat each other, as long as one observes one’s role. He also describes the fight for the vote, which continues to this day. Included in his personal comments are original poems of note that help to illuminate his narrative. History. Travel. Poetry. He appeals to the broad spectrum of human perception and sensibility. I regret that it took me this long to read a book I bought in 2006, ten years after it was published. Walton’s message is still a vibrant one of truth.

94. Watson, Robert P. *The Nazi Titanic: The Incredible Untold Story of a Doomed Ship*

*in World War II*. Boston: Da Capo, 2016.

Even as a child, I was a sucker for disaster reads, particularly those taking place at sea: *Titanic*, *Andrea Doria*, and others. Watson seizes upon the fame of the *Titanic* to make a case for his story about the German ship, *Cap Arcona* (German for Cape Arcona). Without the *Titanic* reference in the title, the book might not have much shelf appeal. I'm not sure that there are too many real parallels between the two ships except that they both sank.

Nevertheless, Watson's book is a fascinating one about the extraordinary history of a German luxury liner that services travelers from the Baltic to South America from 1927 until 1939. At that time the Nazis expropriate the ship and transform it for war purposes. Its most important history comes at the end of its life, in 1945, and I'm not going to spoil the read by giving away the ending. Suffice it to say that the *Cap Arcona* story is one that has been overlooked, and we have Robert Watson to thank for keeping it and its historical significance alive.

95. Wharton, Edith. *The Mother's Recompense*. New York: Appleton, 1925.

Several topics concerning this novel (one can read the plot elsewhere) strike me immediately. First is the title, which looms large over the book and helps to guide its winding plot. When Wharton uses the article "The" instead of "A," it expands the meaning beyond just one mother's struggle to make amends with her grown daughter whom she knows she has wronged—first for abandoning her as a child, an issue which is never fully addressed and second, for realizing that the man her daughter is about to marry is a cad with whom the mother has had an affair eight years earlier—to perhaps all mothers who have certain issues with their daughters. The word "recompense" itself, *making amends for a wrongdoing*, is yet another word that casts its ironic shadow. How does the mother in that post World War I period "make amends" for two such horrendous errors, one she can't even tell her daughter about (and never does)? Seen through contemporary eyes, the problem does not seem as colossal, though it could prove embarrassing to say the least. Next, I admire Wharton for advancing the cause for the independent woman, yet I question how independent the protagonist really is. She often speaks of how lonely she is, and the relationship she develops with her daughter, after twenty years of neglect, seems superficial and fraught with problems of co-dependency. And perhaps that is Wharton's aim: to demonstrate what a "cad" this mother herself may be, hoping to waltz back into her daughter's life in such a facile manner and be forgiven so quickly for her sin of abandonment. Finally, it seems that Wharton nearly falls into the trap of creating too many coincidences or near misses or convenient disappearances of certain characters with simple explanations: very deus ex machina-ish (as when the young man's mother becomes ill just at the point where he is about to marry). Yet I can see why the book was and may remain a popular novel. It certainly held my attention until the very end, when the mother remains true to her original intent, and escapes once again from her responsibilities.

96. Wharton, Edith. With an introduction by Mary Suzanne Schriber. *A Motor-Flight through France*. DeKalb: NIU Press, 1991. First published by Scribner's, in 1908.

I believe author Edith Wharton (1862-1937) published as many as forty-eight books during her life, and among them were several travel tomes, including *A Motor-Flight through France*. It is based on tours she made of France in 1906-1907. She was delighted to be able to drive what we today would consider a primitive automobile instead of having to depend on trains and local forms of transportation to reach the sights or sites she wished to see. But I think the book is for a very special audience.

One, Wharton is a great student of architecture. In fact, her first few published books are about architecture. She visits many sites of ruins as well as churches and cathedrals about which she shows demonstrates great curiosity. Readers who have a common base with the author on these subjects are more likely to enjoy or make use of the book. If not, they may be doing a lot of research *as* they read. Also, if readers care for literary biography, they will enjoy Wharton's two stops at the former home of George Sand.

In all, however, the book leaves out a lot. Wharton does not comment much on the scenery except in cursory (or "architectural" terms). She doesn't pause to reflect much on local color provided through dining or local customs. Her trip seems indeed to be a *flight* through the countryside at the highest speed her car allows. I note the following exception:

**"It is for this reason, perhaps, that after a morning among the hills and valleys of the Morvan, in sight, almost continuously, of that astonishing Burgundian canal, with its long lines of symmetrical poplars, its massive masonry, its charming lock-houses, all repeating themselves like successive states of a precious etching—that after such a morning I seek, and seem to find, its culminating astonishment in the luncheon which crowned it in the grimy dining-room of the *auberge* at Précycy-sous-Thil. But was it an *auberge* [inn], even, and not rather a *gargote* [greasy spoon], this sandy onion-scented 'public,' with waggons and soldiers grouped cheerfully about the *petit vin bleu* [ordinary and mediocre], while a flushed hand-maid, in repeated dashes from the kitchen, lad before us a succession of the most sophisticated dishes—the tenderest filet, the airiest *pommes soufflées* [sliced potatoes fried twice], the plumpest artichokes that ever bloomed on the buffet of a Parisian restaurant?" (157). Wharton's blade seems to slice both ways.**

The main reason that this book was reissued was because Mary Suzanne Schriber and companion chose to retrace Wharton's steps in 1980, and enjoyed their trip so much that they felt that others should have the chance. Indeed, if anyone has the opportunity and *l'argent* (\$) or (€) to do that, more power to you, and be sure and take your copy of this book with you! BTW I bought my copy at Wharton's home, The Mount, near Lennox, Massachusetts. The house and grounds are lovely.

97. Wodehouse, P. G. *Jeeves Comes to America*. AudioBooks, 1957.

This piece was perfect for my daily walk. The voices are perfect and the story simple but satisfyingly funny!



98. Wolff, Tobias. *Old School*. New York: Knopf, 2003.

As always, as with any of Wolff's writing, the book holds my interest throughout. Like his story, "Smorgasbord," (from *The Night in Question*) this novel concerning a youth enrolled at a private school in the early 1960s is fascinating for a number of reasons. First, readers get a privileged view into this milieu, which in this case is more privileged than one realizes. This particular narrator attends as a scholarship student, the school's policy being *not* to reveal who is and who isn't. This retrospective narrator is heavy into literature and creative writing, and so readers get his opinion on all the American greats: Hawthorne, Hemingway, Ayn Rand, and others. Rand actually makes an appearance on campus, and the narrator challenges her on a number of issues, even after having been enthralled with her *The Fountainhead*. She responds with what must be characteristic candor and egoism. Third, tension mounts, near the end, as the narrator attempts to write a short story to enter in order to win an audience with visiting author, Ernest Hemingway himself. All the boys, nearly, in this school seem to be competing, but it is only the narrator who actually wins the award. A number of unusual events then take place, none of which I shall reveal here, all unveiling a number of ironies about private schools for boys and the all-too-human beings who populate them.

99. Woolf, Virginia. *The Voyage Out*. With an introduction by Michael Cunningham. New York: Modern Library, 2000.

This, Woolf's first novel, seems to derive its substance from the last gasp of the Victorian Age. The protagonist, twenty-four-year-old Rachel Vinrace, travels with her aunt and uncle on a ship to the coastal town of Santa Marina *somewhere* in South America. Woolf is a master at capturing the inner life of all her characters. There isn't a one that doesn't let us know what he or she is thinking. She is a master at capturing the bourgeoisie English, who (perhaps literally) take their tea sets wherever they travel around the globe.

Rachel is a rather naïve person, and when a fellow passenger, a Mr. Dalloway, seizes an opportunity to kiss her brusquely, she is more than taken aback. Later during the Santa Marina visit, she falls in love with one of the other guests, a gentleman just a few years older. One feels, that in spite of their *love* for one another and their almost immediate engagement, that their relationship will fail. They are simply too little alike, and they are too smitten to realize it. He has no understanding of how she envisions an independent life for herself, and she doesn't seem to grasp what a misogynist he is. Then, when Rachel succumbs to a fatal illness (vague, never identified or diagnosed), her young fiancé is devastated. The denouement, the last twenty pages, explores the thoughts of the fellow passengers who have been moved (or not) by Rachel's abrupt demise.

100. Yates, Richard. *The Easter Parade*. New York: Delacorte, 1976.

For the name of this novel's main characters, Yates chooses "Grimes," a common enough one. Perhaps readers have known at least one person named Grimes. For

me it is a professor I had in graduate school. But in *The Easter Parade*, Yates allows the filth and smut associated with such a name to attach itself to each member of the family—all the while the titular image of being well dressed and parading around in smart clothes serves as a background. There exists throughout a constant tug between these private and public aspects of the family: a public front that is clean and presentable a lot of the time, and a private one that is soiled.

Pookie Grimes is the mother of two daughters, Sarah and Emily, and Yates, from the first sentence lets readers know what they're in for: **"Neither of the Grimes sisters would have a happy life, and looking back it always seemed that the trouble began with their parents' divorce. That happened in the 1930s, when Sarah was nine years old and Emily five" (3).**

Pookie, who insists that her daughters call her by that name, has always perhaps held a higher view of herself and her abilities than are realistic, and to smooth out the rough edges of her cognitive dissonance, she drinks. She drinks a lot. So do her daughters as adults. Sarah marries a man who beats her. Emily being a bit more aware of what the substance does to family members, still drinks, but she is able to some degree to develop her own life, supporting herself with good jobs, seeing as many men as she likes, yet liking the ideal of being with one man (for however short a time it may be).

After having just read Blake Bailey's 2004 biography of Yates, I find it interesting to see just how many hats he wears, so to speak, to make his novel sort of a puppet show (no offense to puppets or Yates's characters who are fully three dimensional). First, to wear the Pookie hat, he must become his mother, Dookie, a drunk who keeps her children at arm's length physically but reels them in emotionally. For Sarah, he wears the hat of his older sister, a drunk whose husband beats her. For Emily, he wears his own hat. He is a drunk, too, but to play Emily he becomes more sober, the kind of drinker aspires to be: moderately heavy but in complete control. He also must wear the hat of living a feminist's life, although Emily never directly desires to do that (not belonging to any of the clubs, so to speak). Yates is purported to have despised *women's libbers*, yet he manages to be objective enough to develop fully an Emily who is always able to keep a job and who thinks highly enough of herself to leave a man when she knows it's over (except for one man, near the end of the novel, who dumps *her*).

Critics often have rolled their eyes or groaned that Yates's novels are too dark, that they have no chance of the happy ending that most American readers yearn for. I beg to differ. In the last few pages Emily changes several times, from being a lonely woman who contacts Sarah's son, now an Episcopalian priest. He picks her up at a train station, and their talk is pleasant enough, until she reaches an emotional boiling point where she angrily confronts Peter about the true cause of his mother's death. *Was it really due to a destroyed liver, or did her husband beat her to death?* She takes aim at Peter's religious beliefs (another Yatesian hat, that of a nonbeliever) by way of sexual innuendo, and he calmly tells her she's *out of line*. The story pivots to her grabbing her suitcase and heading for the street, where she is seized by a pang of sorrow. And for yet another time, her emotions turn again,

this time to a desperate ennui. She confesses to Peter: **“Yes, I’m tired,” she said. “And do you know a funny thing? I’m almost fifty years old and I’ve never understood anything in my whole life.”**

**“All right,” he said quietly. “All right, Aunt Emmy. Now. Would you like to come on in and meet the family?”**

This *is* a happy ending. It pivots several times before landing, but the ending is as happy an ending as this story can aspire to. Given who these people are and given all their faults and foibles, this may be as happy as they can ever be. But it’s real.

Total: 100

2020

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*Date Finished***January: 2 Titles**

1/15/20

1. Watson, Robert P. *The Nazi Titanic: The Incredible Untold Story of a Doomed Ship in World War II*. Boston: Da Capo, 2016.

Even as a child, I was a sucker for disaster reads, particularly those taking place at sea: *Titanic*, *Andrea Doria*, and others. Watson seizes upon the fame of the *Titanic* to make a case for his story about the German ship, *Cap Arcona* (German for Cape Arcona). Without the *Titanic* reference in the title, the book might not have much shelf appeal. I'm not sure that there are too many real parallels between the two ships except that they both sank.

Nevertheless, Watson's book is a fascinating one about the extraordinary history of a German luxury liner that services travelers from the Baltic to South America from 1927 until 1939. At that time the Nazis expropriate the ship and transform it for war purposes. Its most important history comes at the end of its life, in 1945, and I'm not going to spoil the read by giving away the ending. Suffice it to say that the *Cap Arcona* story is one that has been overlooked, and we have Robert Watson to thank for keeping it and its historical significance alive.

1/20/20

2. Kirp, David. *The College Dropout Scandal*. New York: Oxford, 2019.

Before I left public school teaching in 2002, the district I worked for had implemented, at a low level, a plan to mentor potential dropouts. Kirp's book argues for the need to have American universities tackle the same problem, citing the fact that, nationwide, colleges and universities support a 40% dropout rate. The rate is even higher among community colleges: 60% of students drop out before completing an associate degree.

Kirp visits a number of universities who have implemented innovative programs to retain more students: Georgia State University, the joint campuses of the University of Central Florida and Valencia College, the University of Texas, and an "elite" school, Amherst College. His research indicates that, in some cases, small adjustments can allow a student to finish a degree. One helpful practice is to provide small grants (not loans) during the last semester or two; it can make the difference of finishing or not. Another is for the institution to provide professional advisors (not professors) whose job it is to keep tabs on students, particularly those at risk of dropping out; students cannot escape contact. The institutions have even provided experiences that help students to think positively about themselves. Some forward-thinking professors use the Internet to provide lecture material to be read on the students' own time; then they use class time to work more actively together. Other places provide accelerated tutoring to catch students up in, say, math in the period of one semester without having to slow down the student's advancement

through a program.

In essence, Kirp asserts that because of the great expense involved in attending college now, institutions of higher education owe their students something better than the old sink-or-swim or trial-by-fire approaches of the past. They should meet halfway these bright students who have met the entrance qualifications and make sure they have every opportunity to finish their schooling. Although I attended a small, private school (a half a century ago) and found great comfort in attending small classes led by professors who were highly accessible, with the practices mentioned above, I might have succeeded at an even higher level. There were times that I felt like dropping out, and only the military draft, the threat of being sent to Vietnam, kept me in school. I wound up getting a degree in music that I only used tangentially to earn a living until I left the field entirely at age thirty. Professor Kirp's book is one all college professors and administrators should read and consider. After all, in corporate parlance, students are the "business" of higher education: their "clients." They should be given every opportunity to succeed.

### February: 3 Titles

2/10/20

3. Spaggiari, Albert. Translated by Martin Sokolinsky. *Fric-Frac: The Great Riviera Bank Robbery*. Boston: Houghton, 1979.

I bought this book for \$1.50 in 2005 at a used book store, and it was almost worth the price. I selected it because I do like to read (in sinful moments) true crime. Only I didn't realize until I began it that it was written by the perp himself. Besides being a homophobe and a racist, Spaggiari is also a masterminded criminal, who joins with maybe a dozen other men to drill through a bank vault to steal what they hope will be 40,000,000 francs (before the Euro). It is slimy, filthy work beneath the streets of Nice, France, but the dirty dozen manage to get away with not quite their goal and they split it. At the time this *fric-frac* (French for "heist") compares magnificently to the Great Train Robbery in England. I won't say much more in case one wants to read this *memoir* of a criminal telling his smarmy story from the inside out. I never destroy books, but I may make an exception with this one. Spaggiari died at age 56 in 1989, according to Wikipedia, from lung cancer. His crime may pay, but smoking (as he mentions doing all throughout the book) certainly does not.

2/20/20

4. Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Andrew H. MacAndrew and with an introductory essay by Konstantin Mochulsky. New York: Bantam, 1970.

Another book that sat on my shelf unread, this time since 1986. 936 pages. This was nineteenth-century entertainment: a book that might take readers twenty hours to read. I'm not sure twenty-first century readers believe they have twenty hours to spend on one book. Even the denouement and epilogue take up the last one hundred pages. My mental image of this book was always four brothers kicking their heels up, Cossack style, in great revelry, but, ah, no.

One of the four is said to be illegitimate, Smerdyakov. The eldest of the remaining brothers is Mitya or Dmitry. Next is Vanya or Ivan. And the youngest is Alyosha or Alexei. The Russian literary custom of assigning multiple names to a character broadens his or her dynamic, more so than the Anglo/American Bob and Robert or Jim and James. I'm not sure why. Perhaps the author uses a different name depending on the context.

No need to belabor the plot: Readers become acquainted with all four brothers. Certain conflicts arise between father and sons, particularly father and Dmitry. Father is found dead and one of the sons is accused of his murder. Like all epic novels, the author spends a great deal of leisurely time acquainting readers with each character, even the minor ones, so that one's curiosity nearly rivals the curiosity one has in waiting to see what happens next in, say, a soap opera or an evening TV series. Only with much more gravitas. I'm certainly glad I spent the time reading this novel with a time-worn theme that surprisingly still reads fresh almost two hundred years after its writing.

2/28/20

5. Egan, Jennifer. *Look at Me*. New York: Doubleday, 2001.

I read Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* in 2012 to study how nonlinear plots work and enjoyed it very much. This earlier book, her second novel, is a bit more traditional although she does some very interesting things like presenting the main character's chapters by way of first person but the rest of the chapters in third person; she also cuts, rotating quickly from one character's point of view (omnisciently) to the next in one of the final chapters, to sustain suspense and perhaps coalesce their views into one. It would seem that the basic plot is that one Charlotte Swenson, a beautiful young fashion model is involved in a car accident, and the surgeon who puts her face back together does so (and I find this hard to believe) with eighty titanium screws just beneath the skin. Her face is still beautiful, but it is no longer her face. People don't recognize her. She is invisible.

But Charlotte is not without curiosity, a certain inventiveness, to keep her life interesting after losing her livelihood (her booker can no longer get her any modeling jobs)—including a festive sex life. By her own recognizance she can identify what she calls the *shadow self* of almost any person with whom she comes in contact. Later in the novel, she encounters a man who will now direct a television special about her accident and recovery, in which she plays herself. Even though outwardly he is somewhat fit and sophisticated, she limns his shadow self as an insecure fat kid, the one lurking just beneath the surface of his life, his skin. Though Charlotte's character is flawed, she leads us to believe she is an astute judge of character, and we tend to believe her.

As with any fine novel, there is a lot going on here. Egan weaves together the story that Charlotte and two other characters are destined to tell, along with a cast of supporting characters, who, in themselves, are fascinating: for one, Z, a young Middle Eastern would-be terrorist who seems to adapt to America quite well; also, a

recently recovered alcoholic detective; a mysterious teacher who is seduced by a young female pupil (one of the three main characters) and has also come from some distant or foreign background (one almost thinks that he and Z could be one, but no, 'tis not true). Jennifer Egan is one of those novelists who meticulously create plot, who meticulously create believable characters to carry it out, all in the service of larger literary themes which are also captured by a title as apt as, *Look at Me*.

[By the way, this is an “Advance Reading Copy” that claims it is “Not for Sale.” However, I paid twelve dollars for it at a used book store, and I wuz robbed. I can now see at least one good reason publishers do not want readers to see this sort of copy sold. It had (I always mark them) a variety of twenty-one typos, averaging more than one per chapter. And those are just the ones I caught.]

### March: 6 Titles

3/05/20

6. Smith, Alison. *Name All the Animals*. New York: Scribner, 2004.

If I had had the time, I would have read *Name All the Animals* in one sitting. In this memoir, the author begins benignly by sharing with readers in great detail how close she and her brother Roy are at ages nine and twelve, respectively, so close that their mother names them Alroy. Together, they explore an abandoned house in their neighborhood. And then, in a similar way to how it must shock the narrator and her parents, it shocks the reader to learn of Roy's death at eighteen. The rest of the book covers several years following in which Alison finishes high school. She demonstrates how her family, good Catholics, avoid all the questions that should be asked and tackled. Alison develops an inner and outer world of her own making, all in aid of forgetting and yet commemorating her brother. In failing to grieve, however, she cuts herself off from most people until she meets one she can't resist. Smith tells this harrowing story without sentiment but with all due regard for the truth. She structures it in such a manner that readers discover along with her how she must grow up, how she must proceed without Roy in her life.

3/06/20

7. Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr I. Translated by Thomas P. Whitney. *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation I-II*. New York: Harper, 1974.

In some ways I'm embarrassed to say that this book has been on my shelf since 1974—unread. It is a paperback of such vintage that I had to be careful about cracking the ancient glue in the spine or pages would have fallen out. Though the read was a slog—not having a Russian history background—I was able to glean much of its purpose. The writer wishes for people in the West to know that Russian citizens experienced a purge probably as horrendous as what took place in Germany in the 1940s, if not worse. At least a million Soviet citizens held in custody by the Allies at the end of World War II were handed over to officials at the end of the war. This does not include other *enemies of the people*.

One must remember scads of acronyms in this book, and yet they are based on the Russian words, not the English version, so it is more difficult to recall the

connections. For example SMERSH stands for Soviet counterintelligence but means “death to spies.” GPU stands for Russian words meaning State Political Administration. Also difficult to recall for an English reader are people’s names; except for Stalin, most are quite multisyllabic.

Yet there is much the naïve reader can take from this book. Solzhenitsyn speaks bluntly of many things.

**“I smiled in pride that I had been arrested not for stealing, nor treason, nor desertion, but because I had discovered through my power of reasoning the evil secrets of Stalin. I smiled at the thought that I wanted, and might still be able, to effect some small remedies and changes in our Russian way of life” (167).**

Perhaps Part II, about the prison conditions themselves, is most understandable of all, the most universal. Solzhenitsyn calls the trains that take people to the prisons “ships.” I’m not sure I’ve ever read anything as painfully disgusting as his descriptions of the conditions: men literally sitting on top of one another; few if any toilets so men must soil themselves; at best, a kind of gruel to eat, if anything at all; unbearable cold or heat. Then there are the prisons themselves: again little or no heat; no healthcare; poor food and sanitation. Draconian punishments for the tiniest of (sometimes manufactured) infractions. And the people must bear these sentences, most begin as tenners (ten-years), with great aplomb, hoping they will in one way or another escape the hell they are in (even death would be preferable).

The Russians present to the world such a mixed and puzzling heritage. On the one hand, we treasure great Russian literature and drama, superb music including ballet, fine visual art and more. On the other, Russians, either by way of their isolation from the rest of the world, and its inherent paranoia, have a mean streak in their DNA, whether it is by way of the Czarist leaders, the Soviets, or post-Soviet PutinWorld. They desire to be respected as a substantial part of the world, but simply put, do not know how to play nice. And it seems to be a cycle that is difficult to break.

3/12/20

8. Cenziper, Debbie. *Citizen 865: The Hunt for Hitler’s Hidden Soldiers in America*. New York: Hachette, 2019.

Cenziper focuses her book on two main groups. First, she tells the story of Polish Jews who, during World War II, become Hitler’s pawns. Hitler is looking to expand Germany’s borders so that his people have more space in which to live, so he *annexes* Poland. After the war, some of these displaced persons flee to the US, for they have no one or nothing left at home. The other group Cenziper develops is the people who work for the Office of Special Investigations (OSI), one of whom is a fresh new historian, Peter Black. Historians are relentless researchers, so they make a good team along with others, lawyers, in particular.

Their work is to ferret out particular ex-Nazi’s, particularly “Citizen 856,” who, after the war, minimize their involvement with killing Jews to US Immigration officials,



and thus gain illegal entry into the country—a frightening idea to the legal immigrants living nearly side-by-side their torturers in some cases. The OSI spends decades building cases against this group of Ukrainians and Russians who are recruited and rewarded by the Nazis for carrying out their orders to exterminate about 1.7 people. The OSI's work is arduous and their results are mixed. Because most of the accused Nazis appeal the decision to be returned to their native countries to face trial there (except in Germany, where officials do NOT want these people back), some of them die before deportation, but a few do have to face justice in their home countries.

Some Americans, like Pat Buchanan, oppose the OSI's work, want to dispose of the OSI. They believe those mass murderers should be forgiven and forgotten. It is difficult to see how these usually conservative people, can form such a free-and-easy view of what should happen to war criminals—when otherwise they are usually such hawks. Is that really a *Christian* posture? Maybe someone will write a book about them to figure out why they would hold such a position.

3/20/20

9. Fellows, Will. *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*. Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

This book has been on my shelf for over twenty years. If I had read it when it was new, it might have seemed fresher. As it is, the men featured here, born between 1907 and 1967, seem stuck in their contemporary argot. I wonder if gay farm boys are still experiencing the same universals, some of which dovetail well with so-called urban gays. Young farm boys seem to have more interest in growing beautiful things like gardens instead of livestock; they enjoy cooking more than being outside. Insofar as it is possible, given small rural school districts, they become involved in the arts and often excel in them. Over and over again, you see gay farm boys say they don't care for picking up tricks or one-night stands, that they would prefer long-term relationships but that rural life makes that kind openness impossible. The reader cannot imagine the number of these men who have sex with male siblings and other relatives before they begin to engage with and marry women. Perhaps the most prevalent commonality is the harm religion, particularly Catholicism, causes young boys and men as they search for a way to express their sexuality and find a partner with whom they can share a life. Like the urban gay youth, they more often than not experience a sympathetic mother and a distant or hostile father because the gay son doesn't fall into line. By the end, I almost felt as if I were reading the same four or five profiles over and over again. And yet I know I wasn't. Every gay man's story has something in common with others and every story has its differences, its unique qualities, which set that man apart.

What would be interesting now would be for Fellows (or some other courageous writer/scholar with boundless energy) to interview gay farm boys born between 1970 and 1995. Have their experiences been different than the generations before them? How does arranging for sex online compare to picking someone up at a bar or at some Interstate rest room? Are fathers still as intractable about *masculinity* and what that means? Has the world at large made any dent at all into the

sequestered lives of rural Americans? This fascinating book seems to invite an ongoing discussion in which these and other questions are explored.

3/25/20

10. Andrews, Julie. *Home: A Memoir of My Early Years*. New York: Hachette, 2008.

This book was a joy to read, as I thought it would be, having read Andrews's latest memoir, *Home Work*, concerning her years in Hollywood. This earlier book covers her childhood and youthful successes in vaudeville and on the stage in London and New York. Included are the use of nearly sixty photographs which help to illustrate her story.

Andrews manages to highlight the positive things that happen in her life while baring her soul to tell of the negative, for one, finding out that her biological father is really the result of her mother having had an affair with a family friend. She's already gone through the tumult of losing the man she thought was her father (Dad) to divorce and changing her name from Wells to Andrews, after her stepfather (Pop) who, though he helps launch her career, also emotionally abuses her. Both her mother and her Pop are alcoholics, which almost always calls upon at least one child to bear the responsibility of keeping (or feeling she must keep) the family together.

Unlike some celebrities or artists, she goes into great detail about her instrument—her mellifluous voice—how it works technically to achieve what it does. At the same time, she spends a page and a half at one point explaining in precise yet abstract terms (for only the artist herself can describe it) what performing means to her. By her own account (and I believe her) she makes many friends in the world of performance, some that last a lifetime, as with Carol Burnett, with whom she has a lot in common regarding their rough childhoods. Other friendships she can renew with a single phone call or visit.

The most astounding aspect about Julie Andrews may be her generosity, a generosity that begins with her family. As a very young person she begins to support her mother and stepfather and sister. She is also generous with her fellow performers whether they be actors, singers, dancers, directors. It is a generosity of spirit that never seems to fail, proving perhaps, that the more one gives to the world, the more one receives from it.

3/31/20

11. Walton, Anthony. *Mississippi: An American Journey*. New York: Viking, 1996.

This combination of "travel writing, history, and memoir," as blurbbed on the back cover is a profound work. Walton, noted poet and author, takes the reader on a multilayer journey. One of those journeys may be the physical. He tells of the move his Mississippian parents make from their home state to Chicago as young adults to establish a better life for their children. One is always aware of the physical: the hot Mississippi summer days, the fields of blindingly white cotton, the cool of air conditioning and iced drinks. Walton takes pains to give us a full history of the

state, beginning with the Native Americans who occupy the land for centuries before others arrive and kill or move them off. He doesn't stop there but gives us a history of the slave, the African-American: lynchings, beatings, the cold war that Whites take up against Blacks after the Civil War. But Walton's journey of Mississippi, which begins mostly after he is an adult, includes memories of visiting family there, interviewing a broad range of white and black citizens. He describes the "polite" way that citizens treat each other, as long as one observes one's role. He also describes the fight for the vote, which continues to this day. Included in his personal comments are original poems of note that help to illuminate his narrative. History. Travel. Poetry. He appeals to the broad spectrum of human perception and sensibility. I regret that it took me this long to read a book I bought in 2006, ten years after it was published. Walton's message is still a vibrant one of truth.

#### April: 6 Titles

4/02/20

12. García Márquez, Gabriel. *Love in the Time of Cholera*. New York: Knopf, 1988.

This is the saga of the enduring love one man has for a woman, waiting over fifty years to woo her again, after her husband dies. The book is quite romantic, particularly in the sense that heterosexual males have of themselves and of the women they love. There seems to exist a bit of *deus ex-machina*: the right thing always seems to happen at just the right time, in spite of the difficulties that both Fermina (the pursued) and Florentino (the pursuer) face. The most memorable section of the novel may be the end where the two take a river cruise together and become better acquainted and finally make love as octogenarians. García Márquez's portrayal is realistic in that not everything falls into place as it might have when they were young. This makes the event all the more exciting or meaningful. Their voyage, which takes place in the time of a cholera epidemic, is fevered by this disease, and yet the metaphor never seems quite developed.

4/09/20

13. Eberhardt, Jennifer L. *Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do*. New York: Viking, 2019.

An excellent book for every American to read. Why? Dr. Eberhardt addresses the concept of implicit bias, and she begins with some great examples that lead to a clear definition:

**“Whether bad or good, whether justified or unjustified, our beliefs and attitudes can become so strongly associated with the category that they are automatically triggered, affecting our behavior and decision making. So, for example, simply seeing a black person can automatically bring to mind a host of associations that we have picked up from our society: this person is a good athlete, this person doesn't do well in school, this person is poor, this person dances well, this person lives in a black neighborhood, this person should be feared. The process of making these connections is called bias. It can happen unintentionally. It can happen unconsciously. It can happen effortlessly. And it can happen in a matter of milliseconds. These associations can take hold of us no matter our values, no**

matter our conscious beliefs, no matter what kind of person we wish to be in the world” (31-2).

Eberhardt doesn't come to the topic without a personal story of her own. As an African-American she is raised in a middle-class home in Cleveland, Ohio, and attends noted Shaker Heights High School, which leads to a first-class education. On the night before she is to receive her PhD and head the procession as flag bearer, she and a friend are stopped by a white Massachusetts policeman because her Ohio license plate is over six weeks past expiration. I can imagine him saying (to a white person), *Did you realize your tag has expired? Oh, you're about to graduate? Congratulations. Since you're leaving town, you might want to put that renewal high on your list when you get back to Ohio. I normally issue a warning, but I'm going to let it slide today.* This is NOT what happens to Jennifer Eberhardt. She is so shaken by the policeman's demand that she get out of her car that she refuses. He not only drags her out of the car but slams her slight body on top of it so hard it creates a dent (and not a few aches and pains for her), now in full sight of bystanders and a policeman of a higher rank who claims to see nothing. Fortunately, Eberhardt is allowed to call her dean at Harvard and the woman bails the two students out. But the experience mars the graduation experience for Doctor Eberhardt and renews her resolve to continue studying implicit bias.

And study she has. Eberhardt teaches at Stanford University and is a well-respected scientist in her field. In this finely written book, she combines research (statistics) with personal examples (her own plus observations of others). She begins the book speaking about the Oakland, California police department whose leadership is attempting to address bias. She addresses a small auditorium of polite, white officers, most of whom have their arms crossed, body language for *Show me*. It may be the most difficult lecture she ever gives. In wrapping up her book she speaks once again of the Oakland police, after ten years of training, and she views things from their perspective, demonstrating, I believe, her global understanding of the problem and of human nature. Again, a must-read for all of us.

4/20/20

14. Smith, Aaron. *The Book of Daniel: Poems*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 2019.

This poet's persona clearly has a crush on actor Daniel Craig and cleverly weaves together nearly fifty poems with pop culture in mind. A couple deal directly with our eponymous persona, Daniel, but many cover other icons. In "I Need My O'Hara Frank" he idolizes other poets:

**I Need Sharons:**

**Tate and Olds,  
but mostly Olds,**

**and never, ever  
the Rose of.**

In “Celebrity,” he, stream-of-conscious style, connects the deaths of various celebs with himself:

Anne Sexton died in 1974, the year I was born.  
 Thomas James died in 1974 and was born  
 in Joliet, Illinois, where I was born. He wrote  
*Letters to a Stranger* before he killed himself.  
 I’ve written three books few people read  
 and wanted to kill myself. He was 27 like  
 Joplin Hendrix Morrison Cobain.

In the title poem, the persona levels with readers about Daniel Craig:

I made a Daniel Craig scrapbook  
 called *The Book of Daniel*. For years I bought  
 every magazine with him on the cover. In *Interview*  
 he’s stripped to the waist, hopping around on the beach.  
 Jamie Dornan was in *Interview*, too: arms behind his  
 head in a bathtub. I fell in love with Daniel Craig  
 when he was stalked by a man in *Enduring Love*—  
 before he was Bond-hot and too famous.

I rarely read a book of poetry in one sitting. To me, that’s like eating an entire box of chocolates in thirty minutes or less (which I’ve never done but know better than to try). Yet I found myself turning page after page, *getting* Smith’s poetry when often I do not *get* what a poet wants me to. And when I was finished, it may also be the only book of poetry I turned around and read all the way through again. There.

4/22/20

15. Carlson, Ron. *Betrayed by F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Norton, 1977.

Obviously, one of Carlson’s earliest books. He may still be twenty-nine at the time, his protagonist Larry Boosinger closer to twenty, at least emotionally. It takes a lot of balls to hitch your literary wagon to one of the masters, making Fitzgerald Larry’s hero. He *refers* to Fitzgerald and milieu in strategic spots but I never quite feel it. How has he come to know F. Scott this well? Yes, well, he *is* in graduate school, at least until he isn’t, and he is no longer engaged to be married, oh, and he’s under arrest for something he did not do—but Larry’s romanization of a romantic never quite comes off. Carlson’s authority with language is obvious and fine, but the novel is somehow unsatisfying.

4/24/20

16. Greenwell, Garth. *Cleanness*. New York: Farrar, 2020.

I didn’t make one annotation on first reading of this novel (and I *shall* read it again), in part because it held me spellbound and in part because I wanted to experience vicariously the joyride the unnamed narrator (except for *Gospodar*, the Bulgarian word for Mister) is taking through his young life.

Gospodar (*Gospodine* to his pupils) teaches accelerated English at a high school in Sofia, Bulgaria, sometime in the last decade, and unravels his story of love and loss. At the same time, our Gospodar employs the powers of travelogue to acquaint readers with a post-Soviet culture still burdened with its corrupt architecture (crumbling worse than the geopolitical realm itself). The novel is part language lesson: Gospodar translates (upon first mention) each Bulgarian word or phrase and in such a way that one is acquainted with the word's fullness. At one point, a male sex partner Gospodar has met online calls him Bulgarian for *bitch*. But the narrator doesn't leave it there, massaging the meaning within the context of the indigenous culture. The novel is part love story, in which the narrator meets a man he only calls R (every character is reduced to a single initial, in some way *protecting the identities* of his co-characters, almost creating the feel that one is absorbing a roman à clef). I've never read such sensual yet meaningful sex scenes (for want of a better term). At one point, the narrator makes love to his lover, R, taking perhaps twenty minutes to kiss every part of the man's body. When he is finished, his partner is attempting to hide his tears, the fact that perhaps no one has ever loved him so completely. These scenes, though graphic, serve a larger purpose, never feeling pornographic (if there is such a thing) or gratuitous.

Ultimately, the narrator and R end their relationship, because R hails from Lisbon, and cannot see finding a way to earn a living in Bulgaria. In the last major scene of the novel, the narrator parties with a few young men who have graduated from his school the year before. The three of them get very drunk, and the teacher, Gospodar, makes a play for one of the young men. He is horrified by his own behavior yet is willing to give into it at the same time, if enticed or encouraged by the student. He withdraws from the party just before making a fool of himself or endangering his reputation as a responsible adult. Gospodar does this throughout the book, brings himself to some sort of brink, only to pull back after exploring the full impact that the act is about to make (sometimes within a few seconds), thus making the character more like all of us, ready to jump yet waiting to defer to a better angel.

4/26/20

17. Vreeland, Susan. *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. New York: Penguin, 1999.

In contemporary times, a Philadelphia professor calls a colleague (who is an art scholar) into his locked study to reveal what he claims is an original work of the Dutch artist, Vermeer. The colleague argues against such a claim, but the man insists. He is in a bind because his father has confessed that he himself stole it from a Jewish home while he was working for the Nazis in WWII, but he cannot reveal such indicting provenance. Each succeeding chapter takes the reader farther back in history (à la the film *The Red Violin*) to reveal previous owners, right up to, the reader must assume, Vermeer himself. All owners are fascinated by the painting and yet must depend on its sale to save themselves or their family from financial disaster. The author explores the value of art. Is it entirely intrinsic, or is it monetary, or is it a bit of both? Vreeland manages to explore this unique idea in a poetic manner which is both compressed, yet expansive, a valuable topic for

discussion. The novel is a timeless read, and I'm glad a friend recommended it to me long ago and that I finally took the time to read it.

### May: 23 Titles

5/03/20

18. Rubinstein, Arthur. *My Young Years*. New York, Knopf, 1973.

Renowned pianist Rubinstein publishes this autobiography in his mid-eighties, yet it is seemingly written by someone who has a great memory of his life. By way of his own recognizance, his memory is superior early on. He can memorize anything, particularly music, very quickly. And also by his admission, he is a bit lazy—a quirk he must overcome later in life (I shall have to read his accompanying biography, *My Many Years* to see if it is true). Instead of attacking a piece with necessary technique, he often performs by emphasizing emotional interpretation as he glosses over difficult passages he has not mastered. While it is a “successful” practice, he realizes it is also dishonest.

The book is filled with history (he is born into a divided Poland: Russia, Germany, and Austria “owning” certain chunks), delightful and painful anecdotes of growing up in which he early disinherits his parents and an overly paternalistic piano teacher to find his own way through the world. He celebrates an uncanny manner of always being saved at the last second from destitution (he calls these times *deus ex machina* moments) in which he is to but ask or hint to the right person and he receives a loan or an outright gift (of cash or sometimes paying concerts) that put his budget back in the black again. Sometimes, good things happen out of the blue. Yet, instead of being prudent following such windfalls, young Rubinstein spends money like he's rich, staying in the best hotels and dining in the finest restaurants. He makes many friends, including persons of royalty, distinguished musicians and composers (for example when he spots Igor Stravinsky at an event, he makes a point of speaking with the man, begging for an audience, and they wind up being fast friends).

While not a *literary* book, this entertaining tome is well-written by a multilingual man who possesses a great command over the English language. It is delightful reading that kept me turning page after page.

5/03/20

19. Hijuelos, Oscar. *Our House in the Last World: A Novel*. New York: Persea, 1982.

I read this title quite sometime after reading the author's novel, *Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* and his memoir, *Thoughts without Cigarettes*. This is an endearing read, bundling very nicely an autobiographical novel (without being too biographical) with magical realism (without being too magical, or too real for that matter). For example, in his memoir, readers learn that the author was unhealthy as a child, spent extended time away from the family in a hospital setting. In this novel, however, while using this setting to great effect, to create a somewhat wimpy yet complex character, Hijuelos does not dwell on the matter; it merely explains certain *deficits* in young Hector's personality. Likewise, in his memoir, the author goes into

great detail about his dumb luck (however you look at it) at having skin that is a bit *whiter* than anyone else in his family (with blond hair, both traced to his Spanish roots), and, as a companion piece, that he does not speak Spanish very well (although he does understand it). When the character Hector tries to speak it with others, they say he has an American accent and sometimes refuse to converse with him. In real life, it allows the author to slide easily between an Anglo-New York and a Cuban-New York, in which he ultimately earns an education. Hector Santinio, on the other hand, has more difficulties. He's overweight. Though he has sex with various females, he does not happen upon a girlfriend or wife. The novel traces the Santinio family from 1929 to 1975, compressing an extensive family history into a mere two hundred pages. In the last two chapters, Hijuelos punches up the magical realism by way of "Ghosts," in which he plays a game of "What if?" In "Voices from the Last World," the final chapter, the author gives final voice to Hector, his brother Horacio, and his mother, Mercedes, and he does so by way of their dreams. In these magical dreams everyone is "happier," largely because they are of the "last world" to which they once belonged, the hazy, effervescent world of an old Cuba. This is a cozier world than the one that they must adapt to in New York. Hector, who has done little but criticize his mother and father, forgives them, sees them in a larger context ... grows up. A happy ending they've all earned.

5/04/20

20. Brodkey, Harold. *First Love and Other Sorrows*. New York: Vintage, 1986.

This collection first published in 1954 when Brodkey was twenty-four is still a gem, has hardly aged at all. In fact, the stories seem to enlighten readers as to what that period was like, and, at the same time, show how little in human nature has changed. Also ... he may be among the first short story writers to have constructed what editors have come adoringly to call "linked" stories (so much more novel-like than, say, fifteen *disparate* stories).

The first two stories are connected by way of St. Louis's red-brick buildings, its clammy climate, its propensity for lightning bugs. More important, its people, neither eastern sophisticates nor western ruffians, take up the page with their circumspect curiosity about life's challenges. The next two stories, linking a St. Louisan to his undergraduate years at Harvard University, explore the angst that college people face, one in which two buddies spend a summer traveling in Europe and wind up (like lovers, but *not*) despising one another. The other story is similar, only the couple are male and female experiencing intercourse for the first time ever and how that plays out over the period of a school year. The final five stories concern a young woman named Laurie/Laura, the stories ranging from a date she is preparing for while a nineteen-year-old at Wellesley College. The remaining follow her through early marriage where she seems to struggle with post-partem depression following the birth of her daughter, Faith. In the next story, Faith is fifteen months old, and Laura must settle for a substitute babysitter, a brusque African-American woman, whose apparent roughness with the child may nevertheless be healthier than Laura's constant hand-wringing over her decisions. And finally, the last story explores the testy relationship between Laura and her husband Martin, as she is pregnant with their second child. Her depression, her



lack of confidence, seem to have increased in intensity, and Brodkey appears to have put his finger on the nuances of a woman's life in 1950s America before Betty Freidan even identifies the problem. He does so with subtlety so grand readers then may not have been able to recognize them. A superb read for short-story lovers.

5/11/20

21. Hurston, Zora Neale. *Mules and Men*. With a preface by Franz Boas, a foreword by Arnold Rampersad, illustrations by Miguel Covarrubias, and afterword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: HarperCollins, 1990.

Part I consists of African-American folk tales that Hurston collects in the late 1920s and early 1930s in Florida. She begins in her hometown of Eatonville, a primarily African-American town. Amazing it is the number of times the word "mule" does appear in these tales, as if the beast is a metaphor for the "beasts" that white people take black men and women to be: though compliant, also stubborn, and intelligent. On the face of it, the tales might reflect a certain ignorance, but I think they simply reflect that slaves had to develop their own language because the whites refused to educate them in their own (if they themselves were versed well enough in English to do so).

Part II is about hoodoo (or voodoo), and Hurston heads for what she calls its capital, New Orleans, Louisiana. These passages are fascinating, as well. All throughout Hurston includes herself as a character. In order to retrieve the information she wants, she must *become* one of hoodoo's adherents and spends much time and effort seeking to know its ways. She recreates for readers exact *formulae* for getting rid of one's husband, for getting him back if she changes her mind, for many ways of dealing with one's neighbors. She never judges but fully participates, absorbing its, at times, headiness, as when she dizzies herself from dancing for forty straight minutes as part of a ceremony.

In his afterword Henry Louis Gates (PBS's *Finding Your Roots*) identifies Hurston's proper historical place in American literature. After having achieved a higher education and published seven important books, she is virtually ignored or denounced by leading black male literary figures during the time she should be receiving accolades (among them Richard Wright). This happens, in part, because she identifies herself in a more conservative, Clarence Thomas-like stance, in which she refuses to be defined by white people. It takes Alice Walker's landmark 1975 article in *Ms.* to resurrect Hurston and bring her to the fore of American literary studies. As happens to many whose ideas are published ahead of their time, Hurston's work languishes for decades amid a poverty of thought. If only she had not been shunned, she might not have died amid a more corporeal sort of poverty at age sixty-nine.

5/15/20

22. De Saint Exupéry, Antoine. Translated by Curtis Cate. *Southern Mail*. New York: Harcourt, 1972.

If I had been someone looking for a novel like Ernest K. Gann's *The High and the Mighty*, I would be sorely disappointed. However, since I am reading the same author who wrote about a little prince stranded on a star, I know the book is to be about one who loves the skies in a different way. The novel is divided into three parts: In the brief Part One, readers encounter French pilot Jacques Bernis, who flies a mail plane on a route south to northern Africa and back, sometimes his clients not receiving mail for up to six months. In Part Two, a flashback to the prior two months, Bernis tells of his love affair with a very young woman named Geneviève. And he's not entirely satisfied with his life on earth, referring to himself as a "sorrowful archangel" (24). In perhaps the author's subconscious nod to his novel, *Le Petit Prince*, Bernis says, "Two minutes later, standing on the grass, I felt young, as though put down on some star where life begins anew" (26). Exupéry seems to have used his experience as an aviator for all kinds of miracles and metaphors. In Part Three, Bernis is back in the air. Italicized reports of his progress informs us, on the last pages: "*Saint-Louis du Sénégal to Toulouse: France-America located east Timeris stop Bullet holes in controls stop Enemy forces in vicinity stop Pilot killed plane smashed stop Proceeding to Dakar*" (119-20).

5/15/20

23. Douglas, Norman. With an introduction by Dorothy Scarborough. *South Wind*. New York: Macmillan, 1929.

In this novel which is set on the fictitious island of Nepenthe (largely believed to be based on Italy's Isle of Capri), I counted fifty-one references either to "south wind" or "sirocco," averaging one mention per chapter though not every chapter bears one. This phenomenon of the wind passing up from North Africa and over the Mediterranean Sea could make wind *the* primary character in the book. This irritating south wind character—sere, constant, and fierce—causes mostly Brits or non-Nepenthean visitors, who have come to the island to *recover* from civilization, to lie, cheat, and kill. Not always crazy about plot-driven novels, I would have appreciated a bit more of one here. The chapters seem to pass episodically from one to the next without much in the way of the cause-effect nature of plot points. For example, a significant murder takes place, and yet, though the reader knows whodunit, there is little by way of resolution. Though the reason *why* is apparent, the conflict between the guilty woman and her former husband might have been resolved in a different way. All the murder seems to do is set up the author's book-length struggle of Catholicism against atheism. Even so, this reader followed one page after another until the novel was blessedly over. Don't ask me why.

5/15/20

24. O'Toole, Peter. *Loitering with Intent: The Child*. New York: Hyperion, 1992.

Born in 1932, noted British actor Peter O'Toole is but a child throughout the Depression as well as World War II. So of course his remembrances are colored by those events. The man's diction is curious, part northern England (he is from a suburb of Leeds), part student of RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts), part

guttersnipe, part Orson Welles stinging wit. It may even sound a bit as if he recorded his words and then transcribed them. That is usually a mistake, but if he did so, here it is a marvel, for terms like Moo Cow (recalling perhaps Joyce's *nicens little moo cow* from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) seem to roll off his tongue. O'Toole employs the words "I fancy" to recreate an imagined conversation of his father's. He employs the rhythm and meter of a man who has performed Shakespeare on the loftiest of stages and portrayed a British icon in the 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*, a work which seems to gain more scope and clarity as the years pass. All throughout, he alternates sections directly about his childhood with sections in which he traces in very salty terms the life of one Adolph Hitler, dubbing him Alf from time to time. Even as a child he realizes how much Hitler has affected his life, and the older he gets perhaps the more bitter he becomes. At the same time, this is a man who will never remain bitter; he is too grateful for his exceptional life, and this is even before he becomes famous. An enjoyable read.

5/17/20

25. Knowles, John. *The Private Life of Axie Reed*. New York: Dutton, 1986.

I taught Knowles's novel, *A Separate Peace*, to tenth graders for several years. His bildungsroman is a novel rich with fully developed characters, a book that has, rightfully so, been read by millions for decades. Perhaps it is not fair to do (it's like comparing one's children), but when one stands *Axie* up against *Peace*, it simply does not fare as well. One, one doesn't believe that Knowles really *knows* the main character, Axie, or for that matter, the narrator of certain chapters, Nick, Axie's cousin. Although as a celebrity himself, Knowles may be acquainted with a famous actor, one doesn't really quite believe his portrayal. Oh, his descriptions are fine, but she's fleshed out only to a certain point. Likewise, one learns absolutely little about Nick (and why does Knowles select a name so closely associated with the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*?), and much of it comes later in the novel. Second, one doesn't believe the situation, and, in part that may be due to the novel's structure. After readers learn who Axie is, an actor retiring at age fifty because she can no longer get desirable parts (one assumes this is set in the 1980s), she suffers a quirky accident at a fête of some kind and is seriously injured. The rest of the novel weaves back and forth between Axie's and Nick's past and the present. Chapters about her being in the hospital are portrayed in first person through her subterranean world of unconsciousness, which strains credulity a bit, because how does a person in a near-coma state know what she is thinking? Too much of the novel consists of backstory, yet such backstory is necessary because Knowles has set it up that way. Axie's acting jobs, her loves, her only marriage, lack a certain verisimilitude because, in part, the portrayal is shorthanded or speeded up, so one can get back to the present, where a former actor is in the hospital with broken ribs from her quirky fall. In the beginning, one is given some hints about the cause of Axie's fall: a series of dizzy spells. One expects to learn more about such spells, particularly, near the end. However, one never does whether such spells are even relevant, whether they are the cause of her quirky fall at the ball. The main physician seems a bit dizzy himself, speaking in (if you've listened to doctorspeak enough) a manner, at times, that seems more lay-person than physician. In all, Knowles has done his job; he just hasn't done it well enough. Would this novel

have been published in 1986 if it had been shoved over the transom by someone other than John Knowles?

5/19/20

26. Eisen, Cliff and Dominic McHugh, eds. *The Letters of Cole Porter*. New Haven: Yale, 2019.

If you are a fan of Cole Porter and his music, you will probably enjoy this collection of letters. Though some of them refer to his bisexuality, most of them pertain to his many professional and personal connections. Such communications illustrate many characteristics about Mr. Porter. One, he is a consummate professional, in spite of his propensity to *play* and play hard during vacations and between gigs on Broadway or Hollywood. He answers every bit of mail himself, except when he occasionally calls on his secretary to take care of something. He is a team player, important for anyone working in a collaborative arena like the theatre. Second, he is also fierce but polite about not doing anything musically that would (in his opinion) ruin a show. At the same time, when overpowered by those above him, he sometimes gives in, particularly, it seems, when the issue does not matter *that* much to him. In a business that can be crass and cold at times, Porter is also very caring and thoughtful of everyone he comes in contact with. He sends thank you notes for the smallest favors, and, because he often runs short of money before he makes it big, he is generous with cash gifts and loans later in life. Third, his wit and sharp tongue are unmatched with regard to the social whirl of the 1930s through the 1950s. Though he wouldn't dream of hurting anyone publicly, he does not mind getting off a zinger or two during a personal letter to a dear friend. Perhaps most interesting is how Porter shares some of his methods for songwriting:

**"I start with the title first. From this title I work out the psychology of the tune. Next I write the lyric backward, and in this way build it up to a climax. In the lyric I work first for the climax, and if I can't find a good climactic line I throw out the tune . . . I consult rhyme dictionaries. I swear by them. For long, easy rhymes I use Andrew Loring's *Lexicon*. Other books I have in constant use are Roget's '*Thesaurus*,' and atlas, Fowler's '*Modern English Usage*' and a dictionary" (146).**

In a related matter, of what compels him to accept a job or assignment, he says:

**"My sole inspiration is a telephone call from a producer. If Feuer and Martin phoned me today and asked me to write a new song for a spot, I'd just begin thinking. First, I think of the idea and then I fit it to a title. Then I go to work on the melody, spotting the title at certain moments in the melody, and then I write the lyric—the end first—that way, it has a strong finish . . . I do the lyrics like I'd do a crossword puzzle. I try to give myself a meter which will make the lyric as easy as possible to write without being banal. On top of the meter, I try to pick for my rhyme words of which there is a long list with the same ending" (499).**

A friend who travels with Porter in 1955 relates this story: **"We were not stopped very long at the border. On the Spanish side, one of the soldiers came out with Cole's passport in his hand, looked in the car, and said, 'Cole Porter . . . Begin the**

**Beguine!’ and kissed his fingers to the air, and began to sing the song. Cole’s music is known everywhere we go—even in the remote spots” (507).**

I think that just about says it all about Cole Porter, his music, and how many fans he still has in the world!

5/19/20

27. Gilliatt, Penelope. *Sunday Bloody Sunday: The Script of the John Schlesinger Film Produced by Joseph Janni for United Artists*. New York: Bantam, 1971.

Rather daring for its time period, the script is probably a little dated now. I saw the film once, but after reading the script and getting a clearer idea of the writer’s intent, I would like to see it again—script in hand. Not many films were dealing with closeted homosexuals back then (under the guise of bisexuality), but this one about a male/female couple having an affair with the same young man (though not at the same times nor in the same beds), is worth the time, if for no other reason than viewing British cultural history through a little window of time.

5/21/20

28. Gibson, Scott, editor. *Blood and Tears: Poems for Matthew Shepard*. New York: Painted Leaf, 1999.

Many of these seventy plus poems are in direct response to the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998, and some are poems that seem to reflect the poets’ grief as it reflects off their previous experiences. Both types seem equally profound and make for a good blend of work. Some abstractions work, as in Mark Bibbins’s poem, “. . . as true of martyrs . . .” : **“More to the point, death is not an appropriate consequence for an / unwanted flirtation. If it were, how many heterosexual men / might be alive today?” (10)**. Bravo. Yet, my favorite poems seem to be the ones rooted in the physical world, the concrete nature of Shepard’s life and death and those who mourn him, the ones which capture his slight and delicate nature (5’2” 102 lbs.), like Stephen Potter’s “[X]”: **“Slight form, shy weight / caught in / the middle, / how did it happen to / a body so small, // a boy reduced to a / little triangle / inked in with blood / and meaning, bearing / our load of need . . .” (101)**. No matter which type of poem is registered here, it registers the mass outpouring of love and mourning for a young man wronged, from the many millions to whom it could have happened but didn’t.

5/21/20

29. Joyce, James. *Collected Poems*. New York: Viking, 1946.

What’s not to like or admire or love? One of my favorites from *Pomes Penyeach*:

ON THE BEACH AT FONTANA  
Wind whines and whines the shingle,  
The crazy pierstakes groan;  
A senile sea numbers each single  
Slimesilvered stone.

From whining wind and colder  
 Grey sea I wrap him warm  
 And touch his trembling fineboned shoulder  
 And boyish arm.

Around us fear, descending  
 Darkness of fear above  
 And in my heart how deep unending  
 Ache of love! (52).

5/22/20

30. Moore, Harry T., and Warren Roberts. *D. H. Lawrence*. New York: Thames, (1966) 1988.

Easily read in one sitting, this book is a delightful combination of photographs and text. At times, the authors seem to wrap things up a bit too tidily, but the book does seem to offer one an introduction to the literary life of D. H. Lawrence.

5/24/20

31. García-Márquez, Gabriel. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. New York: Random, 1983.

In junior high, a science teacher told us, in our oral presentations that we should have three parts. One, we should inform the audience what we plan to tell them. Then, in part two, we actually do tell what we want to say. And finally, we tell our audience what we've already told them. Márquez appears to do something similar in this novella's three parts: characters predict or indeed know that a murder is to take place. It takes place. And then the author looks back and tells us that a murder has taken place, adding a few details not revealed before. The book is never a murder mystery; we know whodunit. Why? is more the more pressing question. Why does a young woman claim that a well-heeled man has defiled her when it is not at all the truth? So who is the real culprit? *That* the reader never knows.

5/24/20

32. Rhyne, Nancy. *Tales of the South Carolina Low Country*. Winston-Salem: Blair, 1982.

This combination of fourteen folk tales, ghost stories, and humorous narratives is largely entertaining as well as informative. Rhyne, much like Zora Neale Hurston, albeit about fifty years later, combs the countryside of South Carolina to hear these tales first-hand. She makes an elegant retelling of these pieces, careful to respectfully recreate the language citizens share with her, even when she retells one from the first-person viewpoint of one of the characters. She is careful to give credit to the rich but painful tales of African-Americans (some of these tales having been passed on from slave ancestors). Most of all, readers get a feel for the richness and the hardship of living on the South Atlantic coast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: hurricanes, floods, the cracked whip of slavery.

5/25/20

33. Hanh, Thich Nhat. *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*. Translated by Mobi Ho. Boston: Beacon, 1987.

This book is an excellent introduction for someone just beginning to meditate, as well as a refresher course for one who wishes to *upgrade* one's skills. In essence, it is the best of handbooks, returned to again and again, for the concept of mindful meditation is a simple idea, yet a difficult concept to implement in one's life.

5/25/20

34. Arenas, Reinaldo. *Old Rosa: A Novel in Two Stories*. Translated by Ann Tashi Slater and Andrew Hurley. New York: Grove, 1981.

"Old Rosa" begins with a conflagration of an old woman's home. Through an elegant and gradual flashback, readers learn of young Rosa's past, the husband she sends away after he's given her three children. The story is set just as the Cuban Revolution is getting underway. The eldest brother joins up, and, in fact is responsible for helping the State "purchase" Rosa's farm from her. Her daughter, as well, signs up and marries another soldier in the fight. The youngest child, Arturo, is a dreamer. He is always playing his transistor radio up in his room unless Rosa makes him work cutting cane in the fields. Near the end of the story, she discovers a naked teenage Arturo with another boy together and, in a rage, chases them off the property. In the end, readers return to the fire that they saw in the beginning, Old Rosa meeting her end.

In "The Brightest Star," Arturo is arrested and interned in a prison for homosexuals. At first he attempts to distance himself from the hordes of "feminine" queens who seem to camp it up 24/7. But because of their harassment, he finally joints them in their behavior and outdoes them at times. There is a gorgeous extended scene in which Arturo, attempting to flee his captors (for a while and uselessly), dreams of the fabulous dwelling he would build, the beautiful landscaping he would grace the property with. He meets his end amid this setting he has dreamed up.

Arenas's portrayal of this mother and son is both lyrical and starkly real.

5/26/20

35. Arenas, Reinaldo. *Singing from the Well*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin, 1988.

When the first fantastic event takes place, I realize I cannot read this novel as a conventional or *realistic* one. Oh, this novel set in old Cuba contains plenty of realism: boys being beaten or browbeaten by two older generations, but it has plenty of magical realism, as well. And that's when I decide to read it like one takes a roller coaster ride, accepting all the bumps, turns, and headlong journeys downward along the way. It is basically the story of Celestino, a Cuban boy who writes poetry and is shunned for it by nearly everyone he knows. He writes on every scrap of paper available to him, and when he can find no more he writes on bare barked trees, trees that Grandfather cuts down, thus soon denuding the family

property of greenery, a sharp metaphor for how this simple family is attempting to destroy Celestino's talent.

5/26/20

36. Shaw, Bernard. *Candida*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1952.

Shaw's ideas, in spite of the several forms of English he utilizes, still seem fresh after more than a hundred and twenty-five years. With a similar apparently misogynist character as his *Pygmalion*, Shaw nevertheless, and with some irony, creates a female character, Candida, who is stronger than either her famous husband or the young lad who is bold enough to declare his love for her.

5/28/20

37. Rhyme, Nancy. *More Tales of the South Carolina Low Country*. Winston-Salem: Blair, 1984.

This *sequel* collection to *Tales of the South Carolina Low Country* contains twenty-two tales, ghost stories, and humorous narratives and seems as interesting as her first collection. However, she has a much greater chronological range, some of them dating from the 1700s to twentieth-century stories. Again, a smooth retelling of Low Country stories of mysterious happenings with voodoo and unexplainable events of nature.

5/29/20

38. Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*. UK: Dog's Tail Books, nd.

This edition (with or without permission) has been produced by one Will Jonson and Dog's Tail Books in the UK. When I ordered it at (where else) Amazon, I wasn't paying attention to the editions, and for \$6.98, this is what Amazon sent me. I didn't encounter any typos, but the edition is nevertheless strange: the lines are justified left with spaces between paragraphs; the printer uses two en dashes -- instead of one em dash — to set off certain parentheticals; footnotes are presented in brackets, not at the foot of the page; and the chapters seem to be numbered differently than the chapters summarized at Wikipedia.

Still, I read the whole thing. It *seemed* authentic enough. The book is, indeed, a memoir of author Orwell's 1936-7 experiences of fighting in the Spanish Civil War. He presents vivid and sensual representations:

“We were near the front line now, near enough to smell the characteristic smell of war—in my experience a smell of excrement and decaying food . . . [t]he constant come-and-go of troops had reduced the village to a state of unspeakable filth . . . [t]he church had long been used as a latrine; so had all the fields for a quarter of a mile round. I never think of my first two months at war without thinking of wintry stubble fields whose edges are crusted with dung” (14).



Yet, there were many pages when my eyes glazed over, probably due to my lack of proper historical-political background: forcing myself to memorize the endless acronyms such as PSUC (Unified Socialist Part Catalonia)

and POUM (Workers Party Marxist Unification). Finally, I just flowed with the reading, trying to do the best I could do to take it all in.

The book is also, as the title would suggest, an homage to the international group of men and women Orwell encounters in his jaunt with war. One party is Orwell's wife (whose name he fails to mention), who is always out of sight, "back at the hotel," but she manages to give him some of his best advice. Another person is George Kopp:

**"I admit I was angry when I heard of Kopp's arrest. He was my personal friend, I had served under him for months, I had been under fire with him, and I knew his history. He was a man who had sacrificed everything—family, nationality, livelihood—simply to come to Spain and fight against Fascism. By leaving Belgium without permission and joining a foreign army while he was on the Belgian Army reserve, and, earlier, by helping to manufacture munitions illegally for the Spanish Government, he had piled up years of imprisonment for himself if he should ever return to his own country" (158).**

In a bit of narrative building, Orwell relates of two or three times in which he is *almost* shot, and he seems quite taken aback when a bullet shoots through his throat: **"I had been about ten days at the front when it happened. The whole experience of being hit by a bullet is very interesting . . . I felt a tremendous shock—no pain, only a violent shock, such as you get from an electric terminal; with it a sense of utter weakness, a feeling of being stricken and shrivelled up to nothing" (139).**

With some men's writing, particularly of a certain generation, even though they write of emotional material, it reads at some distance between him and the reader. This memoir seems a perfect example.

5/31/20

39. Bolt, Robert. *A Man for All Seasons*. New York: Scholastic, 1962.

This play first performed in November 1961, in New York, remains a monument to a man who would stand against the monarchy of England's King Henry VIII. If only Sir Thomas More would renounce his belief that the king should not remarry, More would be saved, but his conscience does not allow and thus Henry executes More. Of course, getting to that moment is complex. There are all the king's emissaries who try unsuccessfully to convince More of his *folly*, not to mention his distraught wife, who has come to enjoy her position in society, ready and well-paid servants. But to be true to himself and his beliefs, More chooses death rather than compromise. A mighty example for us all, but one that would be difficult to emulate. The work, not to be trite, still stands up, a play for all seasons.

5/31/20

40. Terry, Robert W. *For Whites Only*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970.

From my writing on the inside front cover: “For Consultation on Racism March 17-18, 1972. Perkins [School of Theology], SMU” It’s not evident that I read much of this book at the time, so in my quest finally to peruse unread books in my library, I slogged through this thin tome—for the fun of it.

Terry wishes during this period of the late 1960s to bridge the gap between Blacks and Whites. He seems to coin the term “New White,” in speaking of those who would attempt to change. These souls have six tasks, says he: 1) Become agents of change 2) Seek ethical clarity 3) Identify multiple forms of racism, both past and present 4) Find social strategies for change 5) Develop proper tactics and 6) **“Experiment, test, and refine personal styles of life congruent with our newly affirmed values—experience who we might be” (21).**

The first third of the book seems terribly dated, and yet his words written in the 1960s, in the latter part of his book, are eerily familiar:

**“In America, as well as other countries, civil disturbance is often intensified by overreaction by police and other law enforcement agencies. This overreaction is the fifth type of violence Hough [Joseph, Jr.] points out. ‘Police violence occurs,’ he says, ‘when more force is employed than is necessary to contain a civil disorder, or when excessive force is used as an ‘example to others who might be contemplating some kind of disruption’” (79).**

I cite these words the very weekend of the 2020 *disturbance* in Minneapolis, following demonstrations protesting the police murder of George Floyd. Have we come such a short distance in fifty years?

The book has one other difficulty for contemporary readers and that is the language itself. As many academics from that period, he displays an excessive use of the passive voice, which among other things removes or obscures the subject of a sentence—putting his readers at a distant remove from his emotional intent. I can see why I apparently did not finish reading this book in 1972. It was just too tedious and dry.

### June: 11 Titles

6/02/20

41. Wolff, Tobias. *Old School*. New York: Knopf, 2003.

As always, as with any of Wolff’s writing, the book holds my interest throughout. Like his story, “Smorgasbord,” (from *The Night in Question*) this novel concerning a youth enrolled at a private school in the early 1960s is fascinating for a number of reasons. First, readers get a privileged view into this milieu, which in this case is more privileged than one realizes. This particular narrator attends as a scholarship student, the school’s policy being *not* to reveal who is and who isn’t. This retrospective narrator is heavy into literature and creative writing, and so readers get

his opinion on all the American greats: Hawthorne, Hemingway, Ayn Rand, and others. Rand actually makes an appearance on campus, and the narrator challenges her on a number of issues, even after having been enthralled with her *The Fountainhead*. She responds with what must be characteristic candor and egoism. Third, tension mounts, near the end, as the narrator attempts to write a short story to enter in order to win an audience with visiting author, Ernest Hemingway himself. All the boys, nearly, in this school seem to be competing, but it is only the narrator who actually wins the award. A number of unusual events then take place, none of which I shall reveal here, all unveiling a number of ironies about private schools for boys and the all-too-human beings who populate them.

6/03/20

42. Murata, Sayaka. *Convenience Store Woman*. Translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori. New York: Grove, 2018.

A compact book at 163 small pages, this novel is a more substantive read than one would think at first. The simple language that the narrator Keiko uses may lull the reader into thinking this will be a simple story. In a way, it is. This young Japanese woman who works in a convenience store shifts to a flashback about her childhood. There she reveals her odd personality, a certain problem with affect, in which she would like to cook and eat a beautiful little blue bird that has died, much to the horror of her mother. Then in primary school, when no teacher appears to break up a fight at recess, Keiko takes it upon herself to hit one of the boys on the skull with a spade. At that point, after getting into trouble, Keiko decides to become a little rule follower, making her, upon high school graduation, a perfect candidate for convenience store worker. Keiko is unusually attuned to the store's needs, both at the macro and micro levels—responding to the store's needs the way a mother might respond to her children. Remaining single, without much apparent interest in sex, Keiko works part-time and sustains a secularly ascetic existence until she's thirty-six. Then she meets a man, creating the novel's conflict, and I won't reveal the ending because it's pretty odd and yet satisfying. I do have a question for the author. Keiko is often more skilled in managing the store than her male, mostly younger managers (eight of them in eighteen years). Why does her demonstrated competency (all her colleagues acknowledge her abilities) ever put her in a position to become a manager herself? Is this author Murata's point, a comment on Japanese culture? Or is she more concerned with portraying people who happen not to fit the mold of ordinary citizens and how society treats such people?

6/04/20

43. Tolstoy, Leo N. *What Is Art?* Translated by Almyer Maude, with an introduction by Vincent Tomas. Indianapolis: Sams, 1960 (1896).

I was assigned to read this book for a half-credit, pass-fail humanities class in college. There is little indication that I actually did so (a few underlined passages in Chapter Two). It seems like a challenging read for eighteen-year-olds who've had little exposure to argumentation or (unless they have studied art as children) *art*. In general, to summarize an often unclear thesis, Tolstoy seems to believe that art is a *feeling* that the artist would like to *infect* the watcher, listener, reader with. He

believes that high art is so only because it is heralded by the upper classes. Tolstoy goes on and on about how bad Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is, in part because Beethoven was deaf, and how could the composer possibly compose if he couldn't hear? And besides, Beethoven is attempting to combine two arts: music and chorus (based on another's lyric). Tolstoy abhors contemporary opera, Wagner in particular, again because it combines visual art, drama, music, singing, and more. When he uses the invective "filthy" to describe it, it seems he has a prejudice he can't explain. In fact, he leaves a lot unexplained by way of sometimes poor or faulty logic, and by using terms he has defined to his own satisfaction. He asserts that beauty is not art. He asserts that the basis of art must be religious, i.e. Christian (I think). However, Tolstoy does make a prescient remark when he argues that art (music, drawing, creative writing and more) should be taught to all children so that they may create art for all their lives, in order to enrich their lives and the lives of the people they love. That seems to be the most positive assertion that he makes, and, because many American school districts have abandoned the teaching of art, the result being a certain poverty, I believe he is right. The rest of this work seems like a highly subjective opinion he took fifteen years to develop; if he'd tried hard he probably could have done it in four or less.

6/05/20

44. Arenas, Reinaldo. *The Assault*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin, 1994.

Think *Animal Farm* meets *1984*. Arenas creates his own biting satire of what life is like for Cubans, homosexuals in particular, in Castro's Communist Cuba. Rather than recreating this hell realistically (as he does in *Before Night Falls*), Arenas limns a dystopian animal world in which the narrator—a hardline, hateful, and clawed beast—searches out his mother so that he can kill her. He also orders that any man (or woman) who dares to stare at an attired male animal's crotch (even for a microsecond, as if one might discern such a move) will be annihilated. This cruelty is so absurd as to be laughable in a manner it would not be if portrayed realistically. I'm issuing no spoiler alert (oh, I guess this is it): narrator searches and searches for his wicked mother whom he hates with all his might, to no avail. Meantime, for his fine work killing queers, he is awarded one of the highest honors to be bestowed by the *Represident*. The narrator is shocked to learn that this represident is none other than his mother! He obtains a raging erection which is not allayed until he porks (to put it nicely) his own mother, she explodes into a million bits, and the narrator's rage is finally released (ew). Ah, now that's a climax: Killing queers and the Oedipal impulse all in one go.

6/07/20

45. Ondaatje, Michael. *In the Skin of a Lion*. New York: Penguin, 1987.

With almost every Ondaatje novel I've read I've tried to discern how he constructed it, and I never seem to succeed. I've learned to board one of his novels like a wild roller coaster and allow it to take me where it will. In its barest terms (and there is so much more to its 243 pages than one can imagine), the novel is about one Patrick Lewis, who moves as a young man from a rural setting to

Toronto, Ontario, Canada. He's particularly adept, almost like a gymnast, at working rather acrobatically on a bridge (what is to become the Bloor Street Viaduct) and later a waterworks project involving Lake Ontario. His skills will remain valuable throughout the novel and into its dramatic but subtle climax. In between, readers learn of physical injuries, the women he loves and saves in various ways (he literally catches and saves a falling nun from sure death), and the relationship he builds with his daughter, Hana. The novel opens with Patrick and Hana headed in a car toward their destination. In between, he tells Hana the story of his and Hana's mother's life. It is a trip all readers should find worthwhile taking.

6/13/20

46. Carlson, Paul. *The Plains Indians*. College Station: Texas A&M UP, 1998.

I grew up in Kansas amid the Great Plains, and I have lived my adult life in what is locally called the South Plains of Texas. As a child, because of all the Indian street names (Seneca, Pawnee, Osage) in my Wichita neighborhood, and because of artifacts I found, I believed there was an invisible life beneath the "civilization" that had been superimposed over the top of the previous one. Well, Professor Carlson unveils that previous world so that it is no longer invisible. Through detailed treatment of Indian life—its beginning, how horses and bison effected change, economics, the various social structures (tribes differed), war with other tribes as well as whites, and reservation life—he portrays the truth about native plains cultures. Indian tribes were quite capable of assimilating change, sometimes to their detriment. Slowly, over a century and a half, European culture squelched or eviscerated Indian life, breaking treaties and reservation agreements when it suited the federal government to take land that it wanted. One can only imagine the sort of country the U.S. would be today if Europeans had treated the Indians (as many as five million coast to coast) fairly and with respect: perhaps there would have been no African slave trade, there would have existed cities of mixed heritage, Indian forms of governing that might been fairer than our amalgam of democracy and capitalism which seems to eat human flesh at an astounding rate: Perhaps less greed and more consideration for all human life.

I could be wrong, but I encountered a couple of typos that a copyeditor at an academic press should not have missed:

On page 49, the author uses "**dominate**," a verb, for what should be "dominant," an adjective: "**Just over a century later, the Plains Indians were living on reservations, and many of their traditional ways changed again—or for a time endured—beneath *dominant* white culture before reemerging again in the twentieth century**" (49).

On page 174, the author misspells "possessed" by omitting the first "s": "**In 1890 fifty-nine agencies *possessed* an Indian law-enforcement squad**" (174).

These errors mar an otherwise scholarly and informative book.

6/14/20

47. Fallada, Hans. *Every Man Dies Alone*. Translated by Michael Hofmann, with an afterword by Geoff Wilkes. New York: Melville, 2009. First published by Aufbau, 1947.

This novel, originally published in German in 1947, is the fictionalized story of a true-life married couple who denounce the Nazi regime. The couple are solid followers of Hitler until their only son is killed in battle. They then turn their anger outward in a quiet manner by handwriting postcards of denunciation which they deposit all over the city of Berlin. They carry on for over two years, placing nearly 300 cards without notice. Yet their campaign is basically a failure because most people who find the cards turn them into the Gestapo so that they do not themselves wind up in trouble. Due to a bit of carelessness, the couple are caught and wind up in prison. Fallada deftly portrays their ending as fearful but brave souls who have no problem talking back to prison officials. Fallada concludes the novel on a positive note by bringing back into view a boy who, because of his terrible home life, has begun a life of crime until he is adopted by a caring and loving couple who help to change his ways. Fallada's writing is very nineteenth century by way of its omniscient point-of-view in which we know what every character is thinking. He is also quite skilled in creating a large number of characters, yet giving the reader periodic hints about who is whom, thus keeping the narrative moving. Finally, he, from time to time, repeats or skillfully echoes his title, *Every Man Dies Alone*, in ways that expand its obvious or concrete meaning. Fallada's novel is a keen reminder that freedom requires sacrifice, that no matter what culture we live in, we must always be on guard against its being taken away from us, or worse yet, that we hand it over without question.

6/20/20

48. Kingsolver, Barbara. *The Poisonwood Bible*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.

In 1959, a Baptist minister, his wife, and his four daughters, leave their Bethlehem, Georgia home for a year of service to the Congo in Africa. The mother, Orleana, opens the novel with a long lens; we learn right away she will lose one of her daughters, and so we read on patiently to see how such an event will unfold. Of course, we sort of forget, and we're shocked when the youngest, Ruth May, is killed by a poisonous snake much later in the story after we have come, like her mother, to love her. This expansive novel is divided into seven books, always a sign of what will be a sprawling narrative. Each book opens with a chapter narrated by Orleana, the frazzled mother who dares not rile the ire of her preacher husband. The remaining chapters of each book are narrated alternatively by each one of the daughters: Rachel, a light-haired blonde, probably born about 1945, who has visions of high fashion and easy living in her life—having not much use for her father's strict evangelical life; the twins, Leah and Adah, one a healthy adherent of her father's ways (for a while), the latter injured before birth and who limps yet has a brain equal to her twin sister's. The former will eventually marry a Congo native; Adah will return to Atlanta and become a doctor. Before her demise, Ruth May, the youngest, is a sprite, a child with her own language, her own worldview, a darting derring-do that will eventually serve to take her life. Each chapter then

widens our view of their village in the Congo as it survives an historical upheaval: one popular but revolutionary leader being killed within three months of his election, and the return to office of a corrupt man who will conspire with the West (mostly America) to spend thirty-five years amassing great wealth while his countrymen and women survive (or don't) lives of poverty. One additional character, Mother Nature, or her evil sister, makes life at the least difficult, at the most, a disaster of magnificent proportions. In what feels like the climax, a giant wave of ants marauds their Congolese village, and its inhabitants must survive by, among other things, climbing trees until the rampage has passed. When this family returns to their *house* and accompanying buildings, they find only bones left where their chickens once roosted. The house is spotless, as if cleaned by a squad of maids. At this point, Oleanna gathers her three remaining children and abandons her husband. Now this is not as easy as it sounds. She has always served Nathan and his god with blind faithfulness, but now she sees that he is not well (think heart of darkness) and must save her remaining three daughters. Only she is not even able to do that. Rachel marries a South African man of questionable character (and three more men in serial monogamy). Leah marries her native. Adah returns to Georgia with her mother. It is a family broken in so many ways it takes an entire book to portray how. Oh, and the title? The poisonwood tree is an apt name because of the substance it oozes; its *bible* an apt metaphor for the despoliation of one family. A stunning, timeless read.

6/24/20

49. Harrison, Jim. *The Summer He Didn't Die*. New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2005.

These three novellas, each one striking for its individuality, are immensely satisfying. The longer-than-a-story-but-shorter-than-a-novel format seems to be perfect for each narrative. My favorite character in *The Summer He Didn't Die*, the title novella, is Berry, a child who is born with alcohol fetal syndrome. She is mute but indicates by her actions, quick and sprite-like, how she shall act upon the world and its many rules. Most of the action is of her family (excepting her wayward mother) evading Michigan's children's protective agency and depositing their lives over the border in Canada so that Berry can live out her life in peace. *Republican Wives*, hilarious for its verisimilitude (uncannily written for a male writer), takes readers inside the minds of three different women, friends since childhood, who have been hoodwinked for the last time by a man (also a college acquaintance) with whom they have all had affairs (mostly at different times). *Tracking* tells the story of an author who outlines his literary career and personal life, from feckless yet ardent college boy to a grandpa, finally finished with world travel and content to be near his grown children and grandchildren. The collection is a great testament to the novella form in which it is just the right length to tell each one of these stories.

6/27/20

50. Gallup, Donald. Selected and Edited by Donald Gallup, with a foreword by Isabel Wilder. *The Journals of Thornton Wilder: 1939-1961, with Two Scenes of an Uncompleted Play, "The Emporium."* New Haven: Yale UP, 1985.

This volume differs greatly from many of the writers' journals I've read through the

years in that Wilder uses very few lines for personal reflection or gossip or talk about family and friends. At least fifty percent of these entries seem over my head as I forge through the pages: criticism of this writer, that writer, but mostly of his own incubating work, scenes from this play or that play. And then! Every once in a while I do seize upon a paragraph or passage that speaks to me, holds my attention. From an excerpt concerning Wilder's thoughts about the recently released film, 1939's *The Grapes of Wrath*, he writes:

**“The great law of art is uniformity of tone; since it cannot record all experience, its fidelity to its chosen fragment of experience implies its consciousness of all experience as a similar though more variegated uniformity of tone. (To intrude into a work an unrelated tone is to imply that one is incorporating the ‘all,’ a presumption that speaks volumes on the author’s inability to grasp experience’s multiplicity.) Here lies the greatness of Jane Austen: her perfection in the small implies her comprehension of the large” (5).**

On the other hand, Wilder makes clear at least one reason for keeping the journal:

**“Now that I am thinking of becoming a critic I see that this Journal (or another started for that purpose) should become the store of those secondary observations made in reading which otherwise cross the mind and disappear (or rather merge into that large shadowy cloud from which come one’s ‘impressions’ and ‘ideas’)” (29).**

At times, Wilder offers little kernels of writing pedagogy: **“Tonight . . . I wrote the Prologue (for the second time, but without consulting the previous draft) . . .” (56).**

If one wonders what playwrights do between plays, this journal may be a good indication. A great number of Wilder's entries are written on board ships, during those five- or six-day Atlantic crossing of the 1930s-1950s. He teaches. He lectures. And in between, while in the middle of nowhere, he reads Poe, Kierkegaard, Faulkner, and rather than allowing these thoughts to go adrift, he writes them down, for better or worse—for his future use or posterity, so that old men like me may read the golden thoughts of a once-old man, who would now be 123 years if Nature allowed him to continue living. Our thanks for his generosity and thoughtfulness.

6/30/20

51. Green, Anna Katherine. *The Affair Next Door*. Free Audio Books.

I mostly enjoyed this mystery written by Anna Katherine Green who may have been the most popular writer of American mysteries prior to Dashiell Hammett. Her vocabulary is fastidiously nineteenth century. A woman in her fifties, looking out her window at night, notes that a young man and woman enter the house next door, and only the man leaves ten minutes later. This narrator then leads readers on quite a ride as she conspires with male detectives to solve a murder mystery which ensues from this first incident. I'm not sure modern writers would spring on readers the introduction of the murderer until near the end (the trend now is to



fully introduce all the suspects from the beginning), but still, it is a satisfying read with well-developed characters.

### July: 12 Titles

7/01/20

52. Lardner, Kate. *Shut Up He Explained: The Memoir of a Blacklisted Kid*. New York: Ballantine, 2004.

About halfway through this book, I realized I had read it before—not because I recognized the material but because I found little thumbnail indentions indicating where I'd stopped a reading session. My first “review,” sketched in 2004, was rather short and not very positive: *Poor writing and poor editing. What could have been enlightening and touching was scattered and uninteresting. Lardner keeps an emotional distance throughout that is not very pleasant.*

In a way, I still feel the same. The writing is fine enough; it just lacks a certain depth. Perhaps that is the point where a better editor might have helped the author. Much of the book is really about Kate Lardner's father, Ring Lardner, Jr., a distinguished screenwriter who is blacklisted in the 1950s because he refuses to answer the question at a hearing whether he is or ever has been a communist. He spends twelve months in prison simply for attempting to practice his First (or Fifth) Amendment right to speak (or not). And, of course, such an event does have harmful effects on a burgeoning family: A wife, herself a working actor, who ceases to be offered film roles because she is related to Ring; a daughter and two sons who need him to balance out an impatient mother who, though loving, is also bound and determined to have her own career. What is most troubling, I think, is the pacing. Of ten chapters, “The Penal Interlude,” is the longest at 120 pages. Conclusions that the author could draw about the effects on her as a “blacklisted kid” are missing or shortchanged. At the end of the book, Lardner gives a hurried account of her college years, her stumbling around to find out what she wishes to do with her life, thumbnail sketches of her two marriages, and boom, we're done. Either the book should focus more on her father, or she should have a book longer than 272 pages, in order to discuss *how* being a blacklisted kid has affected her entire life (she's about sixty at the time she writes the book). This time around I don't notice the “emotional distance” as much as I do in 2004, but there exists rather a flippant tone that seems to reduce the import of what she is saying about one of the most destructive periods in US political history and its ramifications for her family. Perhaps it's her way of dealing.

7/02/20

53. Sedaris, David. *Barrel Fever*. New York: Little, 1994.

I'm not sure I've ever seen an author place twelve short stories and four essays in the same collection, but the combination seems to work, especially with someone as witty as Sedaris. Having read his journals first and knowing about his family members, I sometimes wonder which piece is a story and which is an essay.

**Some jewels I picked up along the way and send along to you:**

From the story, "Barrel Fever": **"Gill once had an idea for a show about a detective in an iron lung called 'Last Gasp for Justice.'** (130). This is not funny unless you're old enough to know about polio.

**"Dolph is the name I go by because really, nobody can walk around with the name of Adolph. It's poison in a name. Dolph is bad too, but it's just box-office poison"** (130).

**"That's the sort of thing that destroys my sisters but doesn't bother me in the least. I expect it in a person and am constantly amazed to hear someone refer to it wrongly as gossip and get all bent out of shape about it"** (132).

The character drops in on his ex-lover Gill and some sedate friends, and says, **"Jesus, Gill, where have you been? Your parole officer has been looking everywhere for you"** (134).

**"The father, an alcoholic, had received thirty-seven shock treatments following an episode of what his daughter referred to as 'Barrel Fever,' the D.T.'s [delirium tremens]"** (139).

I love Sedaris's penchant for combining hyperbole with his gigantic, filthy wit, by way of the story, "Giantess": **"You'd have no privacy and every bowel movement would evacuate entire cities"** (157).

**"This is a publication for men who long to explore a vagina the way others might visit the Luray Caverns"** (159).

I could go on and on, but suffice it to say, Sedaris's humor never ages.

7/04/20

54. Wodehouse, P. G. *Jeeves Comes to America*. AudioBooks, 1957.

This piece was perfect for my daily walk. The voices are perfect and the story simple but satisfyingly funny!

7/04/20

55. Epstein, Joseph. *Fabulous Small Jews*. Boston: Houghton, 2003.

There is so much to like about these eighteen stories mostly featuring characters over the age of sixty. Indeed, as the title suggests, each protagonist is short, yet Epstein never makes a to-do about it, and indeed it is a point of irony because many of them, though short in stature, are *not* small people. In fact, Epstein pulls readers into every narrative about poor Jews, poor Jews who become comfortable or well-off, or Jews who have always had money. Most everyone in these Chicago-based stories attends good schools, earns good money. But money alone cannot in any way make up for the heartache they suffer: marriages ending in divorce; fathers

who die in war; widows looking (or not) for a man to fill their lives. Fabulous small Jews have their own stores, their own banks, their own restaurants and delis, their own you-name-its. Epstein very quietly limns the lives of Jews almost anywhere in the world: because of prejudices held against them for thousands of years they *must* band together to protect, coddle, nurture, and love one another. And yet, readers can't help but love these characters, too: an old man belatedly gets to know his grandson (I cried); a man secretly writes poems about a woman and the executor of his will, to preserve the woman's reputation, instead of burning the manuscript, spreads it to the four winds from his car window on the freeway; a man quietly helps another man to end his life. Is the act one of suicide, euthanasia, or murder? Epstein does not answer that question but leaves it to each reader to decide, and I admire his courage in taking such a stance.

A must-read for Gentiles (like me) and Jews alike.

7/10/20

56. Greene, Graham. *The Human Factor*. New York: Avon, 1978.

There is always something cold about spy thrillers, most likely what part of the genre is all about: that netherworld where a person exists neither in the real world nor in the one where he or she must wear masks and pretend *that* world exists not at all. Greene takes a bit of a turn in this novel by bringing a certain "human factor" to the forefront. A British agent working for many years in Africa falls in love with and marries a black (important because, of course, prejudice is at work) woman. He adopts the woman's son as his own, and they relocate in England. Readers learn he is a double agent, also working with the Russian Communists. When his young partner agent dies, it begins a chain reaction of events that brings him to his knees and threatens his life with his wife and son. An exciting read.

7/14/20

57. Berg, Scott. *Max Perkins: Editor of Genius*. New York: Dutton, 1978.

As distinguished editor and later editor-in-chief and vice president for the famed Scribner's and Sons, Maxwell E. Perkins was probably more of a priest than five out of ten clergy. Though a skeptical secularist, he was nonetheless a great humanitarian with regard to writers and *his* writers in particular. Unlike today, when writers can only access editors of the big publishing houses by way of an agent (transoms nailed shut for some time now), he would sit down with the majority of people who just showed up at the Scribner offices with manuscript in hand. He would read the MS right away and almost as fast, if he accepted it, would outline what the writer needed to do to shape the story into a workable novel. Author Berg cites writer after writer—from Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe to others not as *successful*—who claim that without Perkins his or her book would not have been possible; indeed, entire careers would not have been possible. Smart people who knew their material would see what he was after right away and get the corrections (sometimes months later) back to him, and he would reward them both with his genuine affection and with more material concerns. F. Scott Fitzgerald, in particular, did not manage his money well. He and his wife lived lavishly when they

had money and Scott would show up at Perkins's door when they didn't. Max would lend Scott money from Scribner's. He would even provide loans from his personal funds. He was quite professorial in that he would take home a brief case full of MSS on the weekend and not only read them all but write perhaps a thirty-page letter to the author about what needed to be done. Essentially, though this book develops the family and friends of Max Perkins, it is mostly about the writers whom he edited. They became what we would call today extended family members: uncles to his children, he a father to his young writers like Tom Wolfe, brother-in-arms with hosts of writers, including females whom he championed in a manner that other editors did not (although he was also accused of being a misogynist). Though the book is certainly not a how-to, the reader might be able to pick up any number tips from Perkins's brand of editing:

—Perkins takes fourteen of Hemingway's stories and arranges them **“to space the strongest pieces at the beginning, middle, and end, varying the rest of the contents by alternating stories of different qualities back to back”** (109).

—Perkins, for Tom Wolfe, writes out a twelve-point prescription for revisions, suggestions such as, **“Cut out references to previous books and to success,” “Intersperse jealousy and madness scenes with more scenes of dialogue with woman,”** or **“Fill in memory of childhood scenes much more fully with additional stories and dialogue”** (237).

—About developing plot, Perkins says, **“A deft man may toss his hat across the office and hang it on a hook if he just naturally does it, but he will always miss if he does it consciously. That is a ridiculous and extreme analogy, but there is something in it”** (447).

Though this book came out in 1978 it still seems fresh, mostly because its subject's life continues to shine as sort of beacon for all writers.

7/15/20

58. Wharton, Edith. *The Mother's Recompense*. New York: Appleton, 1925.

Several topics concerning this novel (one can read the plot elsewhere) strike me immediately. First is the title, which looms large over the book and helps to guide its winding plot. When Wharton uses the article “The” instead of “A,” it expands the meaning beyond just one mother's struggle to make amends with her grown daughter whom she knows she has wronged—first for abandoning her as a child, an issue which is never fully addressed and second, for realizing that the man her daughter is about to marry is a cad with whom the mother has had an affair eight years earlier—to perhaps all mothers who have certain issues with their daughters. The word “recompense” itself, *making amends for a wrongdoing*, is yet another word that casts its ironic shadow. How does the mother in that post World War I period “make amends” for two such horrendous errors, one she can't even tell her daughter about (and never does)? Seen through contemporary eyes, the problem does not seem as colossal, though it could prove embarrassing to say the least. Next, I admire Wharton for advancing the cause for the independent woman, yet I

question how independent the protagonist really is. She often speaks of how lonely she is, and the relationship she develops with her daughter, after twenty years of neglect, seems superficial and fraught with problems of co-dependency. And perhaps that is Wharton's aim: to demonstrate what a "cad" this mother herself may be, hoping to waltz back into her daughter's life in such a facile manner and be forgiven so quickly for her sin of abandonment. Finally, it seems that Wharton nearly falls into the trap of creating too many coincidences or near misses or convenient disappearances of certain characters with simple explanations: very *deus ex machina*-ish (as when the young man's mother becomes ill just at the point where he is about to marry). Yet I can see why the book was and may remain a popular novel. It certainly held my attention until the very end, when the mother remains true to her original intent, and escapes once again from her responsibilities.

7/18/20

59. Guibert, Hervé. *To the friend who did not save my life*. South Pasadena: Semiotexte, 2020. First published by Éditions Gallimard in 1990.

It's difficult to know what I think of this book, thirty years after it is first published. On the one hand, it is a fair representation of what the times are like in 1991 Paris. When the author dies at thirty-six from AIDS, I am forty-three—very much a part of the same demographic. I've taken an HTLV test which claims I am negative. Whew. Yet there is no real relief for anyone: neither the men and women who test positive and will soon die nor for their friends who have partaken of the same risky behaviors and remain *free*. Guibert portrays for gay Frenchmen, as do many American gay writers at the time, the devastation that overtakes our community from coast to coast. On the other hand, after thirty years, most of the scientific information Guibert possesses is redundant or has been proven wrong. It's painful to read about either party. Even if this work functions as a sort of roman à clef by not naming names, it certainly portrays the dastardly acts of treacherous friends. A character named Muzil is supposedly the noted philosopher Michel Foucault; Marine is based on the life of actor, Isabelle Adjani; and yet "Bill," Guibert's *friend* of the title remains a mystery, a traitor who brags about, as a Miami pharmaceutical executive, getting Guibert in on the ground floor of a vaccine, but cruelly fails to do so. This book, a combination of linear and nonlinear elements, takes us back to the past, but it strangely plops us into the present of yet another untamable virus and directs us toward a future of even more death and destruction. Not a gay book in the original literary sense, but *so gay* in a tragic way.

7/19/20

60. Heyerdahl, Thor. *Kon-Tiki: Across the Pacific by Raft*. New York: Rand, 1950.

This book may have been written for adults, but I have to believe its adventurous tale appeals to the child inside each one of us. A Norwegian scholar develops a theory that at one time people of Peru crossed the South Pacific; Heyerdahl acquires this idea because huge statues on Easter Island so closely resemble ones found in Peru. Very quickly it seems he scrabbles together a crew of five other men and from drawings of a raft that would have been used in earlier times, the men build the *Kon-Tiki* essentially from nine huge balsa logs. That feat itself is a large

undertaking as the men somehow receive permission from Peruvian officials to go into the forest and harvest such logs from balsa trees—even though commercial logging of balsa has been disallowed for some time. Then there is the 4,000 mile adventure in which, at first, the raft with a sail is seized by the Humboldt Current. However, as they escape its grasp, the six men embark on a most idyllic, though challenging, cruise across the South Pacific. They worry little about food (though they've brought certain stores with them) as they are besieged in the morning with flying fish that they either cook for breakfast or use as bait to catch bigger fish. Creatures large and small are curiously drawn to their vessel, and, though the men are wary at first, they become *friends* with the aquatic beasts. The primitive raft has its shortcomings so when they finally come upon an island, because of the raft's steering limitations, they must pass it by. Sometime later, however, they spot another island group, and this time their voyage comes to an abrupt end as the raft breaks up on a reef. What follows may be the most delightful part of Heyerdahl's perfectly arced narrative. Curious natives from a nearby island of 127 inhabitants see smoke from the men's cooking fire and carefully approach them. The six men become heroes to the village and are treated royally for weeks on end before they are able to use their ham (amateur) radio and contact Tahiti and then Norwegian officials. A 4,000 ton ship is dispatched to pick them up, and then the six men and all villagers part with tears in their eyes. The book may be tinged with a childlike naiveté, but it is also filled with a certain curiosity and courage, qualities that are necessary for cultures to cross boundaries and for its inhabitants to realize they have more in common than they don't.

7/21/20

61. Irving, John. *My Movie Business: A Memoir*. New York: Random, 1999.

I don't believe this is one of Irving's best outings. Ostensibly, it is mostly about bringing three of his novels to the big screen: *The Cider House Rules*, *The World According to Garp*, and *The Hotel New Hampshire*. *A Son of the Circus* gets some attention, but then it ultimately is not made into a film. For almost 170 pages (along with a large number of photographs), he *tells* the reader about the experience of writing the screenplay for *The Cider House Rules*, getting his son cast for a minor role, and tells about his relationships with four different directors, right up to the end, when the cast wraps the film about an hour from Irving's home in Maine.

Having read six of his novels and his book of essays, I believe Irving usually swarms the page with important detail: sensory detail, historical detail, emotional detail, whatever is required to bring alive the scene or the chapter. However, here he seems to shorthand a lot of that information. Anecdotes that could be opened up are not. Arguments with others on the set could be brought alive; mostly they are not. He is privileged to be on the set of a major motion picture (Miramax) with access to everyone from the best boy to the seamstress to someone in charge of mess. And yet he doesn't seem to want to share the finer details of that experience with the reader. If he had, the book could easily have been 250 pages or more. Disappointing.

7/24/20

62. Forster, E. M. With an introduction by Oliver Stallybrass. *The Life to Come: And Other Stories*. New York: Norton, 1987. First published by Cambridge U in 1972.

Oliver Stallybrass offers in his introduction a bit of background concerning these stories. **“On his death in June 1970, E. M. Forster left behind, at King’s College, Cambridge, England, a considerable corpus of unpublished literary work, complete and incomplete, and in a wide range of genres: novels (*Maurice*, published in 1971, and two substantial fragments), stories, plays, poems, essays, talks—to say nothing of letters, diaries and notebooks”** (vii). A number of these stories—because Forster creates gay characters and situations that cannot be published at the time he writes them—are instructive for gay writers alive today. One, he is courageous, given his prodigious talent, to write them anyway, not to edit his mind, his heart, his soul. Even if he stashes them away or editors reject them, he senses perhaps that subsequent generations might read and appreciate them. The language and imagery are tame, of course, compared with any so-called gay fiction written since the early 1970s. But the fact that he is willing to portray two men together sexually, employing words like “member” for “penis,” is quite remarkable. Second, he provides a foundation for writers to come, people such as Paul Monette, who, in his book of essays, *Last Watch of the Night*, pays quick homage to Forster as a *mentor*. Forster is a formidable and lyrical writer whose work transcends all and deserves to be read by anyone, even fifty years following his death.

7/25/20

63. Monette, Paul. *Last Watch of the Night: Essays Too Personal and Otherwise*. New York: Harcourt, 1994.

Dear Paul,

I’m pretending that you gaze over my shoulder and peruse this piece about you and *Last Watch of the Night*. On pages 267-8, you discuss your hoarding of books, and I’m so glad to learn that I’m not the only one who does this. In recataloging my library of 1,300 books I realize that 300 of them remain unread, and, until now [during Covid I am endeavoring to catch up], yours has been one of them. I feel disgusted that I didn’t read it when it came out, but that was the first year of teaching AP English in high school, and my reading tasks were to stay at least one chapter ahead of my five classes of bright bulbs. So now to why I love this book and why it will never be *dated*.

Your essays, at times, seem long and meandering, but readers, make no mistake, they are ordered; they have organization. I believe it is a nonlinear order in which, for example, in an essay about travel, you mention sojourning with all three of your long-term relationships: Roger, Stevie, and Winston. What I like about this sort of organization is it allows the essayist to discuss bigger pictures, larger topics. In the first essay entitled, “Puck,” ostensibly about yours and Roger’s Rhodesian ridgeback-Lab mix, the piece spans out, in which this “noble beast” (28) is the glue holding you two lovers together until Roger succumbs to AIDS.

In another essay, “Gert,” you bring to light your first relationship with a lesbian, in this case, Gertrude Macy, a “maiden great-aunt” of one of your pupils. After she reads your novel manuscript, Gert asks, “Does it have to be so gay?” You answer:

**“Oh, indeed it did. The gayer the better. I launched into my half-baked credo, invoking the name of Forster [E. M. Forster], the writer to whom I was most in thrall, and the one who had failed me the most as well. When Forster decided he dare not publish *Maurice*, for fear of the scandal and what his mother would think; when he locked that manuscript in a drawer for fifty years until he died, he silenced much more than himself. He put up a wall that prevented us, his gay and lesbian heirs, from having a place to begin” (43).** I tend to agree, but one must think about the consequences for Forster if he had released *Maurice*. Lost revenue? Loss of a career? His life?

A fallen Catholic, in fact a defiant ex-Catholic, you discuss your relationship with several different “priests.” You cover gravesites and “The Politics of Silence.” “A One-Way Fare,” your paean to travel, becomes a metaphor for the one-way trip we all make through life. I love how you move from Mont-Saint-Michel to Noel Coward’s *Private Lives*, to a ten-line excerpt from that play, and on to Greece, all within a page—yet all connected.

Young gays need to read you, just as we read Forster and Isherwood, our forebears, so that they may know from whence they come. They must realize that the fight for freedom and equality is never over. It just shifts from one opponent to another. You fought to bring AIDS into a national focus, and perhaps the young will see that the Covid-19 battle is much the same: unless we change our national leadership Covid will be with us forever, just like AIDS is still with us. One must thank you for your fight, which ended all too soon. You would just now be enjoying a long-deserved homage at the ripe age of seventy-five.

### August: 8 Titles

8/02/20

64. Bailey, Blake. *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates*. New York: Picador, 2003.

Tragedy is a horrendous thing for any human to endure, and yet we all do endure it to one extent or another: adverse childhood experiences, deaths, career failures, and more. The author of this exhaustive literary biography, Blake Bailey, does not employ the word lightly, neither in the title nor how he uses it throughout the book. Bailey’s subject, novelist Richard Yates, born in 1926, has about as tragic life as one can live, yet Yates uses it to formulate his fiction with a high degree of success, perhaps too well, to listen to some critics, many of whom are put off by his lack of “happy endings” or his “dim view” of humanity.

No matter what, Yates comes by his viewpoint honestly. In short, his parents’ divorce, not to mention he is raised by a mother who probably has a better opinion of herself than her real talents manifest themselves in her life. She believes herself to be an “artist,” and because of her opinion, her two children (Richard and sister



Ruth) are always at the bottom of her priorities. On the other hand, she is a highly seductive person, among other things, encouraging her young son to sleep in her bed. On nights that she stays out late or all night, the boy child lies in bed, wondering where she is. And when she comes home and falls in next to him and vomits on his pillow, his rage is stoked in a way that remains with him his entire life.

**Some nuggets:**

**“. . . he fixed on his round eyes and plump lips as physiognomic signs of weakness; more to the point, he thought they made him look feminine, ‘bubbly,’ and he had a lifelong horror of being perceived as homosexual” (39).** Hm, I wonder why, with the mother thing he has going on.

Friend and fellow writer Kurt Vonnegut writes about war: **“People don’t recover from a war. There’s a fatalism that he [Yates] picked up as a soldier. Enlisted men are surprisingly indifferent to survival. Death doesn’t matter that much” (75).**

Friend and former student DeWitt Henry notes: **“Dick cultivated an anti-intellectual manner, but there was nothing phony or affected about it. In places like the army and tuberculosis wards he was put in contact with unlettered people, who were just as sensitive as anybody else” (78).** Yates did his best to capture natural intelligence in characters, and, in life, in his teaching at the Iowa Workshop, he landed hard on any, any arrogant student who put another’s writing down.

Yates discovers what the term “objective correlative” means: **“I had never understood what Eliot meant by the curious phrase ‘objective correlative’ until the scene in *Gatsby* where the almost comically sinister Meyer Wolfsheim, who has just been introduced, displays his cuff links and explain that they are ‘the finest specimens of human molars.’ Get it? Got it. *That’s* what Eliot meant” (109).** He now gets that Wolfsheim, true to his naturalistic name, traffics in human flesh and uses his understanding to find such tokens for his own characters. **“Flaubert offered a further tutorial on the proper use of the ‘objective correlative’—the telling detail that transmits meaning and emotion without laboring the point” (175)**

**“The only hope of escape was to write a successful novel—the raw material of which, he already sensed, would be the stuff of his own predicament. But he wanted to transcend the merely personal, to avoid the pitfalls of sentiment and self-pity” (175).**

Bailey comments on claims of French critic, Jacques Cabau, that Yates is a master: **“Not surprisingly the Frenchman was especially pleased by Yates’s insights into the hollowness of American life: *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*—a courageous theme in America, where loneliness is a sin, where success is obligatory and happiness is the first duty of every citizen” (271).**

Long-term friend and publisher, Sam Lawrence, says at Yates’s funeral (more of a come-as-you-are wake): **“He drank too much, he smoked too much, he was accident-prone, he led an itinerant life, but as a writer he was all in place. He wrote**

the best dialogue since John O'Hara, who also lacked the so-called advantages of Harvard and Yale. And like O'Hara he was a master of realism, totally attuned to the nuances of American behavior and speech. You know what I think he would have said to all this? 'C'mon, Sam, knock it off. Let's have a drink'" (607).

Any reader wanting to get inside the head of one of the greatest American twentieth-century novelists must consider reading this book. It's that great. My second-hand copy is marked with a "WITHDRAWN" stamp from the Mishawaka-Penn-Harris Public Library in Indiana. Guess it wasn't much of a hit there.

8/04/20

65. Yates, Richard. *The Easter Parade*. New York: Delacorte, 1976.

For the name of this novel's main characters, Yates chooses "Grimes," a common enough one. Perhaps readers have known at least one person named Grimes. For me it is a professor I had in graduate school. But in *The Easter Parade*, Yates allows the filth and smut associated with such a name to attach itself to each member of the family—all the while the titular image of being well dressed and parading around in smart clothes serves as a background. There exists throughout a constant tug between these private and public aspects of the family: a public front that is clean and presentable a lot of the time, and a private one that is soiled.

Pookie Grimes is the mother of two daughters, Sarah and Emily, and Yates, from the first sentence lets readers know what they're in for: **"Neither of the Grimes sisters would have a happy life, and looking back it always seemed that the trouble began with their parents' divorce. That happened in the 1930s, when Sarah was nine years old and Emily five"** (3).

Pookie, who insists that her daughters call her by that name, has always perhaps held a higher view of herself and her abilities than are realistic, and to smooth out the rough edges of her cognitive dissonance, she drinks. She drinks a lot. So do her daughters as adults. Sarah marries a man who beats her. Emily being a bit more aware of what the substance does to family members, still drinks, but she is able to some degree to develop her own life, supporting herself with good jobs, seeing as many men as she likes, yet liking the ideal of being with one man (for however short a time it may be).

After having just read Blake Bailey's 2004 biography of Yates, I find it interesting to see just how many hats he wears, so to speak, to make his novel sort of a puppet show (no offense to puppets or Yates's characters who are fully three dimensional). First, to wear the Pookie hat, he must become his mother, Dookie, a drunk who keeps her children at arm's length physically but reels them in emotionally. For Sarah, he wears the hat of his older sister, a drunk whose husband beats her. For Emily, he wears his own hat. He is a drunk, too, but to play Emily he becomes more sober, the kind of drinker aspires to be: moderately heavy but in complete control. He also must wear the hat of living a feminist's life, although Emily never directly desires to do that (not belonging to any of the clubs, so to speak). Yates is purported to have despised *women's libbers*, yet he manages to be objective

enough to develop fully an Emily who is always able to keep a job and who thinks highly enough of herself to leave a man when she knows it's over (except for one man, near the end of the novel, who dumps *her*).

Critics often have rolled their eyes or groaned that Yates's novels are too dark, that they have no chance of the happy ending that most American readers yearn for. I beg to differ. In the last few pages Emily changes several times, from being a lonely woman who contacts Sarah's son, now an Episcopalian priest. He picks her up at a train station, and their talk is pleasant enough, until she reaches an emotional boiling point where she angrily confronts Peter about the true cause of his mother's death. *Was it really due to a destroyed liver, or did her husband beat her to death?* She takes aim at Peter's religious beliefs (another Yatesian hat, that of a nonbeliever) by way of sexual innuendo, and he calmly tells her she's *out of line*. The story pivots to her grabbing her suitcase and heading for the street, where she is seized by a pang of sorrow. And for yet another time, her emotions turn again, this time to a desperate ennui. She confesses to Peter: **"Yes, I'm tired," she said. "And do you know a funny thing? I'm almost fifty years old and I've never understood anything in my whole life."**

**"All right," he said quietly. "All right, Aunt Emmy. Now. Would you like to come on in and meet the family?"**

This *is* a happy ending. It pivots several times before landing, but the ending is as happy an ending as this story can aspire to. Given who these people are and given all their faults and foibles, this may be as happy as they can ever be. But it's real.

8/05/20

66. Broyard, Anatole. *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir*. New York: Southern, 1993.

Some poor or average writers sometimes make better critics than authors. They can (or can't) see what's wrong with another person's writing but not their own. This guy may have been a book critic for the *New York Times*, but this effort, at least, is a sad attempt to memorialize his youth in the late 1940s in New York's West Village. Even the title, which may be what drew me to the book, is but a flashy bauble, for he hardly says anything about Kafka and *why* he might have been all the *rage* at that time. What I'm probably most offended by is his piling on of similes and metaphors as if the reader might be a complete dolt, as if he hasn't interesting enough material to mostly allow it to speak for itself:

**"My nerves—I suppose it was my nerves—gave off a high, faint whirring, *like the sound that billions of insects make in the tropics at night*. It was a disturbance as remote as *grinding your teeth in your sleep*. Or it was as if my brain had something *stuck in its teeth*. It may have been merely the friction of consciousness, but I chose to see it as a symptom" (46). [Italics mine]**

Paragraph after paragraph is marred with this layering of mostly unrelated analogous images which serve to belabor or muddle his point, whatever it might be.

Another fault with the book may be its structure. Part One, clearly sixty percent of the book, is about Sheri, the man's first love, a borderline sadomasochistic relationship at best. Part Two seems totally unrelated being more about his male friendships. What may be missing most is a point of view that is realistic. He is clearly writing this work near the end of his life about a period that is nearly fifty years gone, and it has that hazy quality in places; it does not seem to be enhanced by passages from journals or interviews with some of the guilty parties. Some passages like the one where a close friend tells Anatole that he has leukemia, rings with a poignancy that still remains. I only wish the book were made up of more of such scenes.

8/09/20

67. Robinson, Marilynne. *Gilead*. New York: Farrar, 2004.

Robinson writes this novel in a very different but masterful fashion from most contemporary novels. She undertakes to have a third-generation (at least) Protestant minister tell his family's story to his very young son by way of a letter, reviving a long epistolary tradition in storytelling. It is the kind of novel that wends itself back and forth over the same geographical (from Iowa to Kansas, literally on foot) and temporal (several generations) territories. One must retain part of the information, at least, to make sense of it all; yet Robinson skillfully reminds readers of pertinent facts, and they can uncover more as they continue their journey through the book.

The elderly Rev. John Ames, who has married late in life, is fatally ill and thus wishes to share his life with his young son. Early on, he shares that in his life as a pastor he has written and filed away a large number of sermons:

**“Your mother . . . was the one who actually called my attention to the number of boxes I have filled with my sermons and my prayers. Say, fifty sermons a year for forty-five years, not counting funerals and so on, of which there have been a great many. Two thousand two hundred and fifty. If they average thirty pages, that's sixty-seven thousand five hundred pages . . . two hundred twenty-five books which puts me up there with Augustine and Calvin for quantity” (19).**

One doesn't know if the son is impressed because he hasn't yet read this long epistle, but to the reader it seem be a daunting figure. Even most novelists do not produce that much material in a lifetime. So what occupies the thoughts of a trained minister? Family issues, certainly, and we learn of his older brother Edward who studies in Europe and returns an atheist. One problem with a liberal education is that one is taught to think for oneself and what Edward thinks does not please their father; in fact, he is quite hurt that Edward refuses to deliver the prayer at a meal but even more disappointed that his son will not be following in his footsteps.

Another major thread of the narrative has to do with a fellow pastor and friend, a man named Robert Boughton. (One is not sure if the first syllable is pronounced bough as in a tree's bough, bow as in bow tie, or even buffton or booton.) Robert's son, Jack, is a bit of a problem in a number of ways I shall not reveal, and because

of them John Ames does not trust Jack. But as a matter of putting his faith in action, he finally steps up to help the troubled young man to grow and move on—his own father, Robert, not ever knowing of Jack’s troubled past. I, too, like Edward, am a former Christian, but I find the book explores the topic of spirituality in a manner that is respectful to all parties who may read the book, and that is a feat difficult to achieve.

8/10/20

68. Wharton, Edith. With an introduction by Mary Suzanne Schriber. *A Motor-Flight through France*. DeKalb: NIU Press, 1991. First published by Scribner’s, in 1908.

I believe author Edith Wharton (1862-1937) published as many as forty-eight books during her life, and among them were several travel tomes, including *A Motor-Flight through France*. It is based on tours she made of France in 1906-1907. She was delighted to be able to drive what we today would consider a primitive automobile instead of having to depend on trains and local forms of transportation to reach the sights or sites she wished to see. But I think the book is for a very special audience.

One, Wharton is a great student of architecture. In fact, her first few published books are about architecture. She visits many sites of ruins as well as churches and cathedrals about which she shows demonstrates great curiosity. Readers who have a common base with the author on these subjects are more likely to enjoy or make use of the book. If not, they may be doing a lot of research *as* they read. Also, if readers care for literary biography, they will enjoy Wharton’s two stops at the former home of George Sand.

In all, however, the book leaves out a lot. Wharton does not comment much on the scenery except in cursory (or “architectural” terms). She doesn’t pause to reflect much on local color provided through dining or local customs. Her trip seems indeed to be a *flight* through the countryside at the highest speed her car allows. I note the following exception:

“It is for this reason, perhaps, that after a morning among the hills and valleys of the Morvan, in sight, almost continuously, of that astonishing Burgundian canal, with its long lines of symmetrical poplars, its massive masonry, its charming lock-houses, all repeating themselves like successive states of a precious etching—that after such a morning I seek, and seem to find, its culminating astonishment in the luncheon which crowned it in the grimy dining-room of the *auberge* at Précý-sous-Thil. But was it an *auberge* [inn], even, and not rather a *gargote* [greasy spoon], this sandy onion-scented ‘public,’ with waggoners and soldiers grouped cheerfully about the *petit vin bleu* [ordinary and mediocre], while a flushed hand-maid, in repeated dashes from the kitchen, lad before us a succession of the most sophisticated dishes—the tenderest filet, the airiest *pommes soufflées* [sliced potatoes fried twice], the plumpest artichokes that ever bloomed on the buffet of a Parisian restaurant?” (157). Wharton’s blade seems to slice both ways.

The main reason that this book was reissued was because Mary Suzanne Schriber and companion chose to retrace Wharton's steps in 1980, and enjoyed their trip so much that they felt that others should have the chance. Indeed, if anyone has the opportunity and *l'argent* (\$ or €) to do that, more power to you, and be sure and take your copy of this book with you! BTW I bought my copy at Wharton's home, The Mount, near Lennox, Massachusetts. The house and grounds are lovely.

8/16/20

69. Theroux, Paul. *Blinding Light*. New York: Houghton, 2005.

This novel, set in the late 1990s, may essentially be about one's control over one's body and therefore one's life. Author Slade Steadman, rich beyond all measure from sales of his first book written twenty years earlier, has nonetheless failed to write another book in two decades. He decides to take a *drug tour* in Ecuador, and his live-in girlfriend, Ava, a physician, accompanies him. According to both parties, having reached a certain impasse concerning moving their relationship forward, they consider it their "break-up trip."

Part One of six may provide the most unfamiliar background and yet a most exciting one to most Americans. Theroux spares nothing in describing the local color, and readers live vicariously through the danger he evinces. The couple are part of a tour that includes five other people. Part of the deal, under certain precautions, is to experience natural highs found among tropical flora. In this section, Theroux paints a picture of the True Ugly American by bringing alive four beauts (one born a Brit) whose snobbery and arrogance and ethnocentricity are alarmingly racist. As stuffy as the two couples are, however, they are game for trying one drug, in which they all get sick and vomit over themselves. Steadman, after a certain wrangling on price, dickers with yet another member of the group to purchase "datura," yet another drug, one that "blinds" the user yet opens up yet other avenues of *seeing*. To demonstrate its strength, Steadman stares blindly at the group and reveals each one of their peccadilloes including one man's shady corporate dealings and the fact that one husband is having an affair with the other man's wife and has been for a long time. The fifth man—a German journalist working in America, who ultimately sells Steadman his stash of datura—Steadman reveals to be the son of a Nazi and intuits the man's deep shame over the fact. If you believe at the time that this man will return to haunt Steadman, you wouldn't be wrong.

In Book Two, Steadman and Ava return to their home in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, to renew their love life and for Steadman to write a brand new book. Day after day, Steadman partakes of the drug datura and dictates his new book (essentially a fictionalization of their renewed sex life) called *The Book of Revelation* to Ava who continues her leave of absence from the hospital where she is employed. Steadman becomes so comfortable with his *blindness* (always leaving him when the drug wears off) that he attends a local party where POTUS (Clinton and wife) show up as guests of honor. Ava has begged him not to take the drug before attending but he insists. Theroux seems to be at his best in creating these public personages we think we know so well through public media. President

Clinton hones in on Steadman, keeps touching him, unctuously patronizes him, as do many of the hangers-on including many horny women. Steadman feels, intuitively that Clinton is harboring a deep secret, which the astute reader realizes will be the unveiling of his relationship with a young (yet of legal age) intern.

The remaining four parts of the book take the reader through Steadman's experiences as he goes on tour for his explosive new book, a visit to the White House, a comeuppance as he runs out of the drug and a rather miraculous (though terrible) consequence that results. The moral seems to be: Be careful what you wish for while taking a drug from the jungles of Ecuador, one you know nothing about. You may get exactly that and more.

8/20/20

70. Tammet, Daniel. *Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant*. New York: Simon, 2006.

When writers are brutally honest about their own problems or shortcomings, they can create a powerful bond with readers. Daniel Tammet does just that in this fascinating memoir about a young autistic British man who, in spite of his many problems, is able to hone in on his strengths and shape a life that overcomes many of his problems and is satisfying to boot. He understands complex mathematical concepts and learns to speak and write multiple foreign languages, even beginning his own language school. But most of all, he challenges himself to become a fuller human being. For one, at age twenty, he travels to Lithuania to do volunteer teaching (English). There he pushes himself out of his comfort zone to meet others and to make friends. He also meets another gay man and his partner who befriend Daniel—helping him to cope with this aspect of his life. Once he returns to England, after nine months, he begins to search out relationships on a fairly young Internet and meets a young man he falls in love with. From this point his life seems to soar. His story becomes known worldwide, and he has experiences most of us can only dream about. A completely unsentimental read.

8/24/20

71. Lane, Byron. *A Star Is Bored: A Novel*. New York: Holt, 2020.

Twenty-eight-year-old Charlie leaves his night job writing news copy for a Los Angeles TV station to become “personal assistant” to actor and movie star, Kathi Kannon. When one learns that author Lane once served as Carrie Fisher's PA, one wants to turn Kathi's voice into Carrie's, Gracie Gold's (Kathy's mother) into Debbie Reynolds. As with any competent fiction, however, Lane creates two great characters that only reflect that he once knew them both, not that he's out to recreate them.

And this book is full of so many unforgettable voices. Begin with Kathi's: off the bat she renames Charlie “Cockring.” From there, it's only a short step to all the other outrageous things she says while he shops with her, travels with her, sees her in and out of hospitals for . . . well, read for yourself to find out what. Cockring's head is full of voices: his father bellowing at him through the years by way of sentences in

all caps: **“WE ALL HAVE TO DO THINGS IN LIFE WE DON’T WANT TO DO!”** (66); his own fears as he speaks to his inner Siri: *“Hey, Siri, I want to impress. I want to be the best assistant. I want to rescue my failing grade”* (77); the voice of Cockring’s Therapist; the voices of all the other PAs to Hollywood stars, all with their own nicknames, who collectively write what is known as The Assistant’s Bible, chock full of information every great PA should memorize.

Cockring realizes early: **“I have to be: to accept life as it happens, to be still and rest in knowing the universe is friendly, that good things will come, that good things are already here, that ‘good things’ include tidying her house, getting her car serviced, sorting her pills, surrendering my needs to hers”** (91).

At a certain point, however, Cockring will learn this lesson a bit too well, and, like all good young protagonists, will have a crisis of identity. How that turns out will have to be the reader’s adventure. I’m not spoiling it for anybody. For laughs and tears, for good feelings and bad, you must read this book.

### September: 7 Titles

9/06/20

72. Hill, Fiona and Clifford G. Gaddy. *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin. New and Expanded*. Washington: Brookings, 2015.

When I tuned in to President Trump’s impeachment trial at the end of 2019, I was impressed with the testimony of Fiona Hill, at that time former Deputy Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European and Russian Affairs on Trump’s National Security Council. Her credentials seemed impeccable, and I told myself I would read the book she co-authors with Mr. Gaddy.

The Hill/Gaddy team paint a portrait of Russian President Vladimir Putin that is *not* personal. They do not delve much into his upbringing or family life, only as those elements may apply to his long political life. They formulate what they refer to as Putin’s six identities, by which the book is structured: **“the Statist, the History Man, the Survivalist, the Outsider, the Free Marketeer, and the (KGB) Case Officer (18).”** The man manipulates or exploits each one of these identities in order to further his own career, his own strategies, and each study is an eye-opening view into the life of the real Mr. Putin.

Mr. Putin declares himself to be a *gosudarstvennik*, **“a builder of the state, a servant of the state . . . a person who believes that Russia must be and must have a strong state”** (40). The State is of ultimate importance, *not the individual*. Hill/Gaddy claim that **“Putin continued with an analysis that echoed the language of the tsarist statist school, noting that Russia will ‘muscle up’ by ‘being open to change’ through state-sanctioned procedures and rules”** (55). The authors reinforce what President Obama once said of Putin, that Putin still maintains a nineteenth-century view of the world. He may utilize some of the tactics he learns while serving in the KGB, but his worldview is rooted in a glorified, pre-Soviet past: he aspires to be a tsar.



To summarize most of the other five areas, Putin manipulates history to strengthen his power. He is a survivalist who will do anything to get what he wants. Ultimately, his sense of strategy (over tactics, which only serve to fulfill his overarching set of goals) is one of his greatest strengths, one that Hill/Gaddy claim the West underestimates at its own peril. A man who creates a long-term strategy for the success of his State and is willing to do anything to see that it succeeds is to be watched very carefully, something that the authors indicate the West has failed to do thus far. The West must see clearly how the man views himself, and the West, while not forfeiting its own values, must develop strategies for dealing with him, ones that realistically exploit his perceived strengths and weaknesses. Until the man is taken seriously, the rest of the world cannot deal with him in a realistic manner, and such a stance is not good for that world.

9/11/20

73. Woolf, Virginia. *The Voyage Out*. With an introduction by Michael Cunningham. New York: Modern Library, 2000.

This, Woolf's first novel, seems to derive its substance from the last gasp of the Victorian Age. The protagonist, twenty-four-year-old Rachel Vinrace, travels with her aunt and uncle on a ship to the coastal town of Santa Marina *somewhere* in South America. Woolf is a master at capturing the inner life of all her characters. There isn't a one that doesn't let us know what he or she is thinking. She is a master at capturing the bourgeoisie English, who (perhaps literally) take their tea sets wherever they travel around the globe.

Rachel is a rather naïve person, and when a fellow passenger, a Mr. Dalloway, seizes an opportunity to kiss her brusquely, she is more than taken aback. Later during the Santa Marina visit, she falls in love with one of the other guests, a gentleman just a few years older. One feels, that in spite of their *love* for one another and their almost immediate engagement, that their relationship will fail. They are simply too little alike, and they are too smitten to realize it. He has no understanding of how she envisions an independent life for herself, and she doesn't seem to grasp what a misogynist he is. Then, when Rachel succumbs to a fatal illness (vague, never identified or diagnosed), her young fiancé is devastated. The denouement, the last twenty pages, explores the thoughts of the fellow passengers who have been moved (or not) by Rachel's abrupt demise.

9/15/20

74. Martin, Steve. *Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life*. New York: Scribner, 2007.

Martin's book is certainly funny but more by way of chuckles that catch me by surprise than big belly laughs. And I think that is the way Martin wants it: he's serious, serious about this master class he is giving to wannabe comics. It's fucking hard and LONELY work. It's also, by his account, rewarding, at least at first. He loves getting everything in order. Jotting down jokes. Learning magic tricks. Trying innovative things. Eventually, after a decade or so of comic clubs, he, as he says, gets control of his material. He knows how to work the audience, do this joke here, that gag there. But—the oldster's oft unheeded warning—be careful what you wish

for. Martin, an introvert, finds that fame, once he attains it, is distasteful. He's now making great money, can buy whatever he wants, and yet the huge crowds of scores of thousands are killing him: his timing, his joy, his spirit, his energy. And he leaves stand-up forever.

Martin, throughout the book, also shares a bit about his relationship to his family: a father who belittles him and forces him out of the house by age eighteen; a mother who should intercede on Steve's behalf but is afraid; a big sister he really doesn't know that well. By book's end, he tells of an emotional reconciliation he makes with all three, winding up with a father who, nearing death, tells Steve he loves him, a mother who apologizes for not interceding, a sister who corroborates that their father *did* treat Steve like shit. This is a brief, satisfying read, and I thank my ophthalmologist for recommending it to me.

9/16/20

75. Waldman, Michael. *The Fight to Vote*. New York: Simon, 2016.

I wish I had read this book when it came out during the run-up to the 2016 election—when I bought it. Even though the last chapters seem dated now, considering what the country has been through, the early chapters give an excellent historical account of how this country has ALWAYS been divided into two camps: those who would like to allow everyone to vote and those who would only have so-called *elites* vote. White (heterosexual, one assumes) male landowners comprised that group in colonial times: **“And there were men who worked as hard to restrict the vote as others did to expand it, such as John Randolph of Roanoke, who fought to deny the franchise to men without property, declaring, ‘I am an aristocrat. I love liberty. I hate equality;’”** (xi).

Slowly, and only through arduous struggles, did other groups gain traction over great spans of time: African-American males, white women, African-American women and other minority groups (including the young). Still, the fight to vote has wavered back and forth, according to the whims of the SCOTUS and voter suppression activities. One group rises up and gains three feet, and another group grabs power and sends progress back two feet. And tragically . . . the struggle still continues. If readers have time, they should consider devouring this informative and at times humorous book. If you're undecided about voting in 2020, perhaps its contents may sway you to get registered and do so now!

9/18/20

76. Hollander, John. *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*. New Haven: Yale, 1981.

The book is a nice, concise version of what I learned about particular rhetorical devices. Hollander does an admirable job of giving examples that also explain a particular patterns.

9/19/20

77. Carson, Anne. *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*. New York: Knopf, 1998.

I admire Carson for taking an ancient story and updating it through the use of verse. It is a fascinating narrative that deserves wide attention.

9/27/20

78. Millhauser, Steven. *The Knife Thrower and Other Stories*. New York: Vintage, 1998.

This is a collection of stories in which an image from the title story—the knife—appears in nearly all the other stories, varied though they may be in character. In “Sisterhood of Night,” a gang of teenage girls leave their homes each night and meet in a wood: **“Rumor has it that the girls are instructed to carry weapons: scissors, jackknives, needles, kitchen knives” (38)**. A character named **“Mary Warren displayed a bone-handled kitchen knife” (39)**. This rather gothic story is marked by the use of third person plural, as if the narrator is one of the girls not a citizen of the town. The girls, after all, are only after silence and invisibility, not mischief.

In “The New Automaton Theater,” Millhauser again employs the third person plural to great effect, as well as the heavy use of passive voice, creating an objectified distance between the material and the reader. He also brings into use another knife, though this time metaphorical in nature: **“That long-awaited performance was like a knife flashed in the face of our art” (107)**.

The story, “Clair de Lune,” is an ode to the moon a fifteen-year-old would write if he could write this well at fifteen. A male teen prowls through his town on a moonlit night and lauds its shadowed “blueness” multiple times. Haunting.

In “The Dream of the Consortium,” a large, multi-storied department store is repurposed. Again, a knife plays a part in the author’s imagery: **“One window showed a six-foot scale model of a thirty-four-story hotel, in which each of its more than two hundred rooms was lit up in turn, revealing in each instance an exquisitely detailed scene performed by miniature automated figures: a little man was murdering a little woman with repeated stabbings of a little bloody knife” (138)**. Again the third person plural creates a certain air, expressing perhaps the thoughts of an entire culture. The story may ultimately be a cautionary tale about the excesses of capitalism. Millhauser creates a dry, biting satire by way of a playful tone.

“Balloon Flight, 1870” is a lovely combination of history, travel, war, peace of being on a four-and-a-half hour balloon ride—escaping *from* one place *to* another. Plenty of time to daydream. One of Millhauser’s strength seems to be creating a unique point of view; this one: watching the world from thousands of feet in the air at a time when humans can only view the earth from a tall tree or a two-story dwelling.

The longest story, “Paradise Park,” is about the history of a Coney Island amusement park, in which one man, having become wealthy from other business interests, desires to fund the rebuilding of this park. The park, a multi-leveled sprawl, is a character that takes the first eight of fifty pages to be described in its entirety; one wonders if a human will appear. Then Sarabee, the owner-manager,

does build more and more elaborate parks, sometimes on top of one another, until he, at one point, goes “dark.”

If one wishes to enjoy both reading and being challenged by short stories, Millhauser is your author, and this is the book!

### October: 6 Titles

10/06/20

79. Lewis, Oscar. With a foreword by Oliver La Farge. *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. New York: Basic, 1959.

Never has an “old” book seemed so relevant. Lewis’s tome, by now, is history, but he takes five Mexican families (some of whom he has known since the 1940s) in the 1950s and makes a study of them. According to his own account, his approach is multi-faceted: 1) a holistic approach with regard to a single family 2) through the lens of one family member 3) to study a problem area in the family, and 4) another holistic method by taking in a typical day of a family.

Lewis’s process makes for a fascinating read. You feel as if you are reading a novel, that you are in the midst of each one of these families: The Martínez family living in the highland village of Azteca, the Gómez family of the Casa Grande neighborhood in Mexico City, the Gutiérrez family living on MC’s “Street of the Bakers,” the Sánchez family, “on the edge of Mexico City,” and the Castro family in the wealthiest neighborhood studied, the Lomas de Chapultepec area of Mexico City.

Lewis takes you into the various hovels that four of the families live in: earthen floors, primitive or substandard heating and cooking stoves, crowded conditions with multiple family members occupying beds or spaces on the floors. He lets us in on the daily grind of the working poor, always borrowing a few pesos from a friend, neighbor, or family member to make ends meet, and sometimes failing. The drudge of dead-end jobs or self-employment, i.e. selling off items in the street for yet a few more pesos. This all happens sixty years ago, and yet it would not be surprising to find out that many Mexicans still live the same way. No wonder they find conditions, as difficult as they are, in the United States “better” by comparison.

The final family, The Castro family, is by contrast, a representative of what Lewis calls the *nouveau riche*. David Castro, has come from poverty but has worked hard and successfully to bring his family to the “fringe” of one of the wealthier neighborhoods of MC. They have enough bedrooms for each of their four children, three boys and one girl. They have plenty of money, apparently, but David is largely in control of it. He and his wife, Isabel, have a “free union” marriage which is recognized neither by the government nor the church, but it suits David Castro’s needs: to control his wife and his four spoiled children. They have three servants, but nothing is ever done to Isabel’s satisfaction. David never gives her enough money, she claims, and yet what she does have she spends quite freely on expensive items for herself and her children. The Castro family stands in stark contrast to the other four, and yet there seem to be some similarities. All five families with the exception of one are ruled by a macho man with an iron fist. All

except one man (and Lewis suspects he may have “homosexual tendencies”) has affairs with multiple women. Children bicker and vie for their parents’ attention in various dysfunctional ways. Nutrition is poor (fried “meat” that is the dregs of what a shopper can buy). In all, however, the book still stands as an compelling study, one that should still interest Mexico’s neighbors who live along the border of the United States of America.

10/10/20

80. Shelley, Mary. With an introduction and Notes by Karen Karbiener. *Frankenstein*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004. First published by Mary Shelley in 1831.

This novel, written when Shelley is a teenager, at times, *reads* like a first novel. One wonders why she employs the first person instead of the third. By the end she must use machinations like switching to an epistolary form so that a different party can finish the story when Doctor Frankenstein (*the* first person) dies. She does little to explain *how* Frankenstein creates his monster, or how the monster can propel himself through the world with such great speed or so easily gain access to the loved ones of Frankenstein whom the monster murders. Perhaps that is the nature of what will become science fiction. Poof. There you are, in another world.

Having spoken my piece, however, I find the novel fascinating and wonder why no one has ever tried to make a film *following the actual plot and intent of the book* (no offense to Mel Brooks), which is actually quite interesting. Young man with idyllic childhood, against his father’s wishes, sets out to create this creature. Creature murders two of Frankenstein’s loved ones. Creature-now-monster demands that Doctor Frankenstein create a woman for him so that he won’t be lonely; monster promises to go to some distant land and live forever with his woman. Frankenstein considers the request but refuses. That’s when the killing really begins, including the death of Frankenstein’s wife, Elizabeth, as well as his best friend. From that point, the doctor rather *becomes* the monster searching for his creation so that he can destroy him, but he, too, becomes a victim. In the final pages we also learn of the monster’s victimhood and develop a bit of sympathy for the figure fading “and lost in darkness and distance” (197).

10/15/20

81. Porter, Katherine Anne. With an afterword by Mark Schorer. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. New York: Signet, 1962.

This collection of three short novels, as it was sold in the 1930s, is a stunning piece of literature, especially *Noon Wine* and the title novel, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. In *Noon Wine*, what begins as a rather bucolic scene of rural life in Texas transforms into one of mayhem and psychological complexity. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* is at this moment in time particularly fascinating because it is set during the 1918 influenza pandemic. Porter, better than almost anyone I’ve ever read, portrays what it might be like for a woman to live through such a dizzying and debilitating illness, only to discover on the other side that something terrible has happened to one she loves.

10/15/20

82. Edwards, George C. With a foreword by Neal R. Peirce. *Why the Electoral College Is Bad for America*. New Haven, Yale UP, 2004.

For years the electoral college mystified me, but it seemed like a concept that *worked* because more or less the *right* candidate always won both the popular vote *and* the electoral college vote. Then came the 2000 election, a bizarre turn of events by which five people on the Supreme Court would, through their action/inaction allow the candidate with fewer popular votes to *win*. And one of those justices would tell the rest of us *to get over it*—instead of taking the time, like a reasoned person, to explain to us *why* we should get over it, *why* their decision was such a wise one. Another justice, years later, before her death, would confess that she *regretted* her vote. Nice. I hope it made *her* feel better. The electoral college is a roulette wheel that is loaded. Rigged. Like any roulette wheel, we don't really know until the last second which way the falseness is going to lie.

Author Edwards logically and factually proves his thesis as to why the electoral college ought to be drummed out of existence. Interestingly, instead of beginning with the historical context of its origins, he begins with how the electoral college works, how it among other things, cheats the voters in a particular state who vote for the “losing” candidate who may actually have more popular votes. Most important in his discussions may be the idea of *political equality* or more important the political inequity that the electoral college tends to foster. The biggest takeaway from Edwards's chapter on history is the recorded fact that the electoral college was not a well-thought-out concept that received rigorous attention from its founders. No, Philadelphia was hot that summer, and men [and I mean only men] formed the electoral college in a hurry, so that they could find cooler places in which to spend the rest of their summer vacations. At every turn, Edwards has an answer for those who would retain the electoral college, especially by noting when the proponents begin with false premises. The e.c. does *not* protect the smaller states, as some claim. It does *not* maintain cohesion and harmony among citizens. Candidates are *not* more attentive to small states with a low number of electors *nor* to large states that are entrenched in one party or another.

In the book's foreword, scholar Neal R. Peirce sums up what is most flawed about the electoral college: **“The electoral college process, Edwards reminds us, doesn't simply aggregate or reflect popular votes; it consistently distorts and often directly misrepresents the votes citizens have cast. Indeed, the unit vote actually takes votes of the minority in individual states and awards those votes, in the national count, to the candidate they opposed” (x).**

Don't worry that Edwards's tome was published in 2004; nothing much has changed concerning the institution. Author Edwards's study is prescient in that he states emphatically that what happened in 2000 with Bush v. Gore will happen again. Voilà, 2016! The United States *must* abolish the electoral college when it comes to voting for the office of the president. The time to do so has past.

[This book published by Yale University Press has, by my count, five typographical

errors derived mainly from a lack of close reading by copy editors—rather egregious for an Ivy League press, eh?]

10/22/20

83. Greenwell, Garth. *What Belongs to You*. New York: Farrar, 2016.

I read Greenwell's more recent novel, *Cleanness*, first, a few months earlier. It almost seems that that novel about a young American teacher of high school literature in Sofia, Bulgaria, could be a sequel to this one, Greenwell's first. If "R" is the same "R" in both novels, then the narrator meets "R" in this the first novel, but he is not in the picture much.

No, this is indeed a different novel. In Part I, "Mitko," the narrator meets the eponymous hustler, in a public rest room and gets entangled in his life of drugs, though not as a user himself. The narrator is charmed by the sparely built, handsome young man, so much so that he gives him money for various enterprises until he realizes he is only enabling Mitko. Mitko is sent on his way though he will make more appearances.

In Part II, "Grave," the narrator is informed of his father's death and returns to the States. In a long passage, that is both expansive and yet compressed, readers learn how the almost idyllic relationship he has with his father as a boy comes to an end when he confesses to his father that he is gay. Almost every gay man in the world can identify with the sense of rejection and betrayal the narrator feels.

In "Pox," Part III, Mitko returns to inform the narrator that he has not only contracted syphilis but that the narrator and his lover, "R," both need to get tested. The disease seems to be an apt metaphor for the poison that the three of them share at this point. Mitko is surprised when the narrator indicates it's all right. It's a disease; it's treatable. "R" is much the same way when he is informed. No harm, no foul. Yet, like a bad penny, Mitko continues to return, wanting to start something up with the narrator again, but he realizes he cannot. One last time he sends Mitko on his way with enough money to buy a meal for his emaciated body and entrain his way back to his home town. In a moving final scene, the narrator entertains his mother who has never traveled outside the U.S. before. On a train trip, in a roomy but unairconditioned *first class* compartment with several others, the narrator is charmed by a young boy, who, he ultimately realizes, reminds him of Mitko: the same intelligence, the same robust fight with the world to be his own person. The powerful novel ends with the narrator at the clinic being told that they do not have the shots to treat his disease. He will have to go elsewhere for salvation.

10/30/20

84. Kendig, Robert E. *Sojourn at Stevenson College: Campus Tales from a Bygone Era*. A compendium of whimsical events that actually did occur, modestly embellished. Wilmington: Winoca, 2005.

This book is a satisfying read because the author opts to tell his story of teaching in a college town in the 1930s in a nonlinear manner. Although some characters carry over from one chapter to the next (like a meddlesome underling in the history department), each tale can more or less stand alone.

This book has its poignant moments, but it is largely about humor:

A filling station owner installs a large speaker under the seat (ew) in his customer outhouse and connects it to a microphone. **“Lady, would you move over please, we’re working down here” (46-7).**

At Stevenson College, students are a bit perturbed because the faculty are **“unnecessarily indolent” (78)** in standing for the opening and closing hymns. **“During the holidays, some of the students—we never knew who were the guilty ones—gained access to the chapel. They ran uninsulated wires through the tops of the cushions on the front pews, and under the carpeting on the floor to the loud foot pedal of the piano and thence to a substantial dry cell battery located to the rear of the instrument” (79).** Well, one can imagine that on that day, every faculty member stood for the opening and closing hymns.

Later, the meddlesome underling commandeers the visit of a literary figure from England, attempting to make his visit as English-like as possible, even to the point of faking a British accent in what is probably a mid-South state. All throughout she rudely attempts to guide the discussion away from the local department and what and how the professors teach. Finally, when the woman expresses her fascination with the spelling of British names, the Brit himself has had enough: **“This was more than Sir Reginald could stand. He sat upright in his chair and, looking directly at Mrs. Garber, he responded, ‘No, madam, I am not hyphenated. I am not even circumcised?’” (108).**

The story that may touch educators comes near the end when Kendig renders how he advises a star pupil who, upon graduating, has the opportunity either to play a professional sport or take advantage of a Rhodes Scholarship. The pupil asks Kendig what he ought to do. The esteemed professor asks him to ponder the following: **“But think about the two opportunities ahead of you and assume for a moment that either one can lead to your being famous. Then you might ask, ‘For what would I want to be famous?’” (165-6).** I won’t say which he chose.

This is one of those books published by a small press that may not be picked up because it is “too parochial or too regional” in its nature. Yet it is a book that is well edited, well-designed, and one that is both enlightening and entertaining. Kudos to publisher/editor Barbara Brannon for bringing this book to light for all of us.

### November: 9

11/02/20

85. Alexander, Michelle. With a new preface by the author. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press, 2020. First published by The New Press, in 2010.



This book should appear at some point on the syllabus of a required course in every college or university in America. Portions of it could be taught in our high schools. Adult reading groups of all stripes should read it. The book is that important. It is that good. **“In 1972, fewer than 350,000 people were being held in prisons and jails nationwide, compared with more than 2 million people today” (10)**, states Alexander.

The New Jim Crow, however, is not only about numbers. It is about an entire *philosophy* in which White people can no longer discriminate outwardly (at the end of the old Jim Crow era) so in an era of colorblindness (*“I don’t mind if she’s Black.”*), they resort to setting up a new form of discrimination through mass incarceration. How does it work? It begins with the War on Drugs, in 1980, with the Reagan administration. It gains momentum with Bush Senior and gains real traction with Bill Clinton and Bush Junior. Alexander claims that even some of Obama’s policies contribute harm (though he does speak out against mass incarceration). With this new policy young Black and Brown men are given long sentences for minor drug infractions. Then when they finally return to their homes (uneducated and no longer young), they are marked as felons, so for the rest of their lives they cannot vote, cannot get jobs, and wind up in a constant loop of being prisoner or permanent criminal—all for a minor drug offense. And how do White men who commit the same offenses fare? Much better, because, one learns, all these cases are *adjudicated* by the police, who ignore White drug crime but not Black or Brown.

An excellent writer, Michelle Alexander makes her case in not only a lawyerly manner (perfect syllogisms) with logic and facts but also with heavy but artful doses of thinking from the greatest African-American scholars: Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, and Martin Luther King, Junior. She is rough on every one of us but in the best Tough Love tradition. There is enough blame for us all but also enough room to turn this around. It won’t be easy, she declares, but by looking at the concept of Race squarely in the eye, we can do it. And I believe her.

11/05/20

86. Shikibu, Murasaki. *Tale of the Genji*. Translated by Edward Seidensticker. New York: Knopf, 1992. [Began reading aloud 7/27/20.]

I read this tome of 1,184 pages aloud to my partner for numerous evenings over three months. I believe there were several advantages to digesting the work in this manner. One, even though it is a translation, one does sense the delicacy of the Japanese royal court depicted in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, the apparent highly educated level of its men and women. I selected this book because author Jane Smiley includes it as number one in her list of 100 books found in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel*, and I was curious. Reading aloud also prevents the reader from *falling asleep* from the apparently repetitive or rhythmic nature (heavily tied to the seasons) of the narrative. Many rituals also are linked to certain days of certain months. Finally, I believe, there is a narrative tone that I, as the reader, am finally able to master to some degree, reading exposition one way, dialogue (according to

each character) in another, the poetic passages in yet another. At least I believe so.

Most scholars, including Smiley, consider this book the *first* novel. In large part that may be true. The complex narrative does sustain itself over a long period, more than fifty years, exploring the lives of two primary characters (Genji and his son) and their cohorts. However, there exist some differences. Many times *Genji* feels like a long narrative that drifts from story to story, as one wanders from room to room of the sprawling architecture of the court's many palaces. *Genji* may be the first novel but only in the same way that a Model-T Ford is one of the earliest mass-produced cars. It's a bit primitive, a suggestion of what is to come.

Shikibu does make great use of figurative language, particularly as it relates to nature, as well as the supernatural. She employs trees, flowers, bramble, snow, rain, wind to make comparisons. At the same time, she speaks, on behalf of characters who must believe in this heavily Buddhist period, of former lives now paying for past sins. They follow the Blessed One, are bothered by evil or devilish spirits who, among other things, cause characters to become ill or die. Spirits seem to be a continuation of life on Earth. They can't accept the peace of death. Furthermore, Shikibu uses foreshadowing to great effect. The savvy reader catches these and appreciates her arrow-pointing. At the same time, Shikibu has some practices that seem underdeveloped. Often, in dialogue, she does not remind the reader who is speaking. And though the omniscient narrator has for a long time been a literary convention, Shikibu herself shifts to the first person numerous times through sly, wink-and-a-nod sort of asides—most often to excuse herself for not adding more detail to a certain scene: **“There were many others [poems], but I neglected to set them down” (727)**. These instances seem clumsy compared to how that POV has been handled since the nineteenth century. She also demonstrates an odd sense of narrative pace, often extending a single scene over pages but passing over a longer era by way of a single sentence. A stylistic quirk, or lack of development?

Though *Genji* is presented as one tome, it is in reality two separate books. The eponymous character, Genji, dies at the end of chapter forty-one. The second part of the narrative is about his heirs. It seems that the first part is more complex, more alive, whereas the complexity of the second part diminishes to no more than a romance novel. But even this characteristic may be the result of serious intent on the part of Shikibu. Perhaps she wishes to portray a certain vapidness among the royals, whose voluptuous but empty lives are repeated again and again throughout the centuries by way of their own progeny. She may also be portraying a social transition. This work is more or less the view of the court, for even the royal servants have status that ordinary Japanese outside of its realm do not have. There is no mention of Samurai warriors or a military or any kind. No battles. No skirmishes that are found in the writing of male novelists, giving the book a uniquely feminine flair. One final thought: Shikibu does not seem to capture at a sophisticated level the characters' emotions. The only exception may be the emotion of *sadness*, during which times she refers to their copious tears or their weeping or crying. There seems to be little joy or the portrayal of even ordinary

emotions. Perhaps she is only portraying the culture as it appears to her, one where most royals hide their emotions from each other.

It seems that this book is much more complex and sophisticated than anything that was happening in Europe at the same time (one may disagree). The use of indirection alone is something that Jane Austen or Alcott would employ much later in time. During any other era I might not have taken the time to read this book, but given the need to do something constructive during the evenings of Covid, I think it a great gift to have done so now.

11/11/20

87. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat's Cradle*. New York: Dell, 1973.

11/14/20

88. Pascoe, Sara. *Sex Power Money*. London: Faber, 2019.

I first saw Ms. Pascoe on BBC America's *Graham Norton Show* and realized I *must* read this, her second book. In it she not only expresses her opinion on feminism but does so in a manner that is by turns hysterically funny, sobering concerning the reality for sex workers, and an honest reveal of her own life. She spends a great deal of time debating (with herself) the ins and outs and rights and wrongs of pornography. One keeps reading both because of her sharp humor and her incisive research.

**Some nuggets:**

**"With our beloved prairie voles the female has her ovulation induced by the smell of male urine. It's a sure sign there's a male nearby and so her body gets ready for mating. The exact opposite of a human female getting a whiff of urinals in a nightclub and her vagina falling off in disgust" (47).**

**"When I was at primary school there was a Tango advert where an orange blob man tapped people on the back, slapped them round the face and yelled informatively, 'You've been Tangoed.' This went whatever things went before they went viral. Crazy? Popular? It went crazy popular. The kids in my school did it all day long. We slapped and got slapped, and we loved it even though it hurt. We were unified by it for several cheek-smarting days. Then the advert got banned, orange blob man was elected President of the United States and the fun was over" (164).**

**"I don't think that paying for someone's dinner is *explicitly* transactional—buying a homeless person a sandwich doesn't mean you're expecting a hand job in the park later. Your manager pays for lunch at a meeting without expecting you to drop your trousers, your mum cooks you a roast every Sunday with no sexual undertones whatsoever—it's clear people can provide sustenance for each other without tensions and obligations. But where dating is concerned, expectations and implications could be different for the people either side of the table" (300).**

Having heaped my praise upon Ms. Pascoe's efforts, I wonder how combining humor with highly researched material concerning sex can work. Is the scientific a bit tainted by her insouciance, or is her humor, likewise, deadened a bit by the scientific? You read. You judge. I loved it!

11/14/20

89. Doty, Mark. *Turtle, Swan & Bethlehem in Broad Daylight: Two Volumes of Poetry by Mark Doty*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 2000.

Doty transforms the personal into the universal like no one I know. He takes the historical and brings it alive. He takes the concrete, and in the flip of a word or phrase christens it metaphorical with skilled legerdemain. Because of this touch, his poems never age (if a poem can do such a thing), the subject matter and treatment always remaining fresh.

11/20/20

90. Lodge, David. *The Art of Fiction: Illustrated from Classic and Modern Texts*. New York: Viking, 1993.

Lodge offers a very good review of traditional elements of writing fiction, most notably the novel, from the beginning to the ending and everything in between. As promised by the subtitle, he takes elements such as point of view, weather, repetition, magical realism, to name just a few, and uses extensive example from British and American literature.

11/23/20-11/26/20

- 91.-92. Orton, Joe. X2 With an introduction by John Lahr. *Head to Toe: A Novel and Up Against It: A Screenplay for the Beatles*. New York: Da Capo, 1998.

Just as well that the Beatles didn't option this play. It doesn't approach the brilliance of Orton's stage plays. As it is, in part, based on *Head to Toe*, well, if you start with bad material . . .

11/28/20

93. Bigsby, C. W. E. *Contemporary Writers: Joe Orton*. London: Methuen, 1982.

This British scholar compresses (seventy-five pages) yet illumines Orton's short but expansive oeuvre. He reduces Orton's work to what he calls "anarchic farce." Through his several plays and one novel Orton lampoons that which he detests about mid-twentieth-century British society: its ossified moral system, its laws, its strictures against freedom including sexual freedom. Through his own sense of narcissism, he develops characters who are objectified, unreal but give the appearance of verisimilitude through their parodying of expected behaviors. Yet there are always the one or two characters who, like a bowler, intends to mow down all the others by bowling a strike. For anyone who admires farce yet doesn't know quite how to approach writing it, the reading of Orton (including his diaries) is quite a schooling, and Bigsby's short study points readers in the right direction.

### December: 7

94. Gordon, Mary. *Good Boys and Dead Girls and Other Essays*. New York: Penguin, 1992. First published by Viking in 1992.

Mary Gordon publishes these twenty-eight essays at a time that is solidly mid-career. She is an opinionated essayist, probably one of its requirements, as long the writer can substantiate or document what she is purporting. And I believe Gordon does so. Whether writing about other writers and their work, or The (Catholic) Church and related topics (abortion, women in art, what her family think of her books), or those that take the shape of personal journals. She, for example, as a fellow Catholic, astutely evaluates Flannery O'Connor:

**“She seems to belong to another age, but then in what age could one place her? Certainly she is a kind of Puritan, but of a very particular variety. Her interest lay not in the damnation of her characters but in their redemption. She has the formality and the reasonableness of a neoclassicist, the social acuity of a Victorian. But the darkness of her conclusions about the world, a darkness illuminated only be her belief in mystery and in mysterious salvation, personally expressed in a passionate, traditional Catholicism, creates both her appeal for modern readers and their problems with her” (38).**

She also asserts that Ford Madox Ford is a feminist, a “womanly man” who loves women.

Gordon, though a staunch Catholic, keeps her thinking about abortion logical:

**“Most commonly abortion is compared to murder; but one has no doubt that the victim of a murder is an independent person, and it is hard to believe that one created a murder victim in one’s own body when one thought one was doing something entirely different. And it is probably never true that the victim of a murder could not survive unless he were fed by the blood and protected by the body of the murderer, or that it would be precisely the refusal of this protection that would constitute the murderous act. To compare abortion to murder is at best naïve. And yet there is no other human act to which it comes closer” (131).**

Gordon’s most lively work probably lands in the midst of her Roman Catholic faith. Her family detest her fiction because her sexual acts are too real, and yet she has a much more nimble mind when it comes to thinking about her faith, and, in fact, the entire Gospel of Mark, which she ends this collection with.

95. Langella, Frank. *Dropped Names: Famous Men and Women as I Knew Them*. New York: Harper, 2013.

In Langella’s “Cast of Characters”—notable people he has known throughout his long acting career—he lists them in the order of their “disappearance” from the earth. The first personality is Marilyn Monroe, whom he “meets” in a fortuitous incident as a kid in which he exchanges waves with the woman as she enters a

limousine. Further in to the book Langella describes his relationship with John F. Kennedy. This episode also begins his relationship with Paul and Bunny Mellon and their daughter whom he has met first by way of his youthful thespian activities in summer stock. Many of his acquaintances, like these, wash back and forth over one another until he ends his book by way of his long friendship with Bunny Mellon who lives to be 103.

Langella is at turns generous and blunt about the talents of these people. With Rita Hayworth he can't possibly heap the praise high enough. By his account, Bette Davis is an arrogant bitch. Raul Julia is a prince, almost a brother to Frank. Paul Newman is a so-so actor who can't quite reach down deep enough in to himself to grab the stuff of which great acting is made.

The book is also one of confession. Langella, throughout his life, though retaining threads of friendship with hundreds of people, manages to let other relationships fall off. In a stunning chapter, one learns of Elizabeth Taylor's deep insecurities, about living out her life alone. He tells of his own arrogance when he treats British actor Deborah Kerr dismissively over a long period of time—until it is too late.

If readers are to learn anything from Langella's book it may be that no matter what road we take in life, we owe a debt of gratitude to those who have helped us along the way; it behooves us to help the sick and needy; and it pays to be kind and polite to nearly everyone, saving the stinging but measured remark for the few who may deserve it. The book is now over a decade old, but the content is timeless.

96. Doty, Mark. *Deep Lane: Poems*. New York: Norton, 2015.

One of my favorite poems from this collection may be "The King of Fire Island." *Hard by our fence in tea-dance light / he seemed the very model of his kind: / a buck in velvet at the garden rim, / bronze lightly shagged, split thumbs...* As a gay man myself, I'm thinking, Oh, boy, oh, boy. Literally, boyz, I'm thinking. But Doty's first important image, one of a deer, is fraught with tempting language in regard to the other wildlife found on the island: "tea-dance," "model," "buck," and "bronze." These all could evoke a gay man's thoughts of debauchery. Then the persona chastises himself for his own salaciousness: *... We were objects of his regal, / mild regard. / Did I really say tea? / Measure the afternoon by a bar event?* Even Doty's use of a cliché—*in the thick of buzzing bodies, intent / in quick talk, though their subtle eyes / won't miss a trick*—because it is also a pun, elevates his usage. Almost as if the deer and the persona are one, they are sharing the same environment but with more in common than one might think. This poem of 131 lines is one of my favorite kind of poems, one that both compresses and expands, the magic of creating a long story of depth, made short—kind of.

97. Obama, Barack. *A Promised Land*. New York: Crown, 2020.

Having read President Obama's 1995 memoir *Dreams from My Father* a number of years ago, I pre-ordered this book and anxiously awaited its arrival from Amazon on November 17, 2020. *Dreams* had revealed to me a skilled and sensitive writer.

The scene in which Mr. Obama kneels at his father's grave in Kenya is deeply moving and serves as the striking climax. It remains fresh in my memory.

*A Promised Land* is a title that resonates in a global way. However, Mr. Obama transmogrifies it a bit to reveal how the United States of America has functioned as a promised land for him, for his life. The book seems to possess a unique structure. The former president limns in this the first volume of his long-awaited memoir his political life. Yet he does not hesitate to return readers by way of carefully selected flashbacks to his humble beginnings: we learn things about his family that we perhaps did not know before, the boldly liberal nature of his Kansas-born grandparents who flee to Hawaii to live a freer life; their daughter who marries a Kenyan man and gives birth to Barack Hussein Obama.

At the same time, this memoir develops a strand of history focused as readers would expect to see through the eyes of the person to whom it happened, the one who witnessed first-hand his several political campaigns, his earthy language in dealing with staff who have displeased him or fallen short of their expected performance. In spite of the subjectivity of such a view, one senses that Mr. Obama is being fair, that not many can argue with his point of view, his memory, his own fact-checking.

But finally, this book is silver-lined with personal and moving vignettes the president experiences throughout his first term: campaign events, public and private; White House anecdotes (he gives an inviting description of the contemporary White House); the relationships he develops with everyday WH employees, the large majority of whom are African-American, one essentially declaring, "You're one of us." At the same time, though he avoids making too much of the issue, Mr. Obama sets the record straight on the political evils he must endure: Donald Trump's birtherism campaign; the media's daily tearing at his flesh even though he is far more transparent and open than the previous administration's leader; obstructionist Republicans who wish to thwart the President's agenda, not because they so much disagree with him ideologically (which they do) but because they object so blatantly to *him*. Mr. Obama very elegantly portrays their vitriol without saying what I have no problem stating: Republicans regularly respond with a latent but powerful sense of White person's entitlement, racism, and bigotry that have laced our American life since before its formation. That the man continues to rule with great dignity is a tribute to his stature as an adult who wishes to build on our democracy, not destroy it.

Mr. Obama relates the night at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, in which he takes stand-up potshots at a seated and furious Donald Trump. I think Mr. Obama must later realize how much this *roasting* inspires DT to run for president. Finally, skillfully building toward the narrative arc's fine climax, Mr. Obama relates the fulsome scenario by which Osama bin Laden is assassinated and buried at sea. Though at times the reading is a slog, because the former prez wishes to be thorough and exact (a quality I appreciate), the book is well worth the time. And that infamous date, May 2, 2011, is where the first half of this memoir ends.

98. Coetzee, J. M. *Diary of a Bad Year*. New York: Viking, 2007.

Coetzee relates the story of an aging author dying of cancer who hires an attractive young woman in his building to do typing for him. In the evenings the woman relates to her boyfriend what the developing book is like. She also engages in dialogue with the author concerning his *strong opinions* (also the title of the book). At some point the boyfriend becomes the author's accountant and devises a failproof plan to cheat the author out of his estate at the time of his death.

What makes this simple plot compelling is Coetzee's structure: the top third of each page is assigned to fragments from the fictional author's essays. A middle portion of the page, usually quite slim, is a continuing dialog between the author and the typist, where he discovers she isn't only pretty but smart as well. The bottom section of each page portrays the relationship between the typist and her boyfriend. At least, in theory, one may read all three parts separately, from front to back because Coetzee presents them as three distinct but interrelated stories. However, I mostly read the book conventionally, attempting to keep each of the threads separately yet trying, at the same time, to see how the three threads related to one another.

This novel is a fascinating read mostly because of the structure. If Coetzee had given the book a more traditional approach with alternating chapters or sections, it might have been a different book indeed, though I cannot predict how. Such is the alchemy of fine writing by a fine author.

99. Doty, Mark. *Sweet Machine: Poems*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.

Great collection. Especially liked the title poem.

100. Doty, Mark. *My Alexandria*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993.

A perfect collection of poems. In the next to the last poem, the death of a dog seems to function as a climax for the entire book.

Subtotal: 100