

(Alpha by Author)

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Adams, Henry. *The Education of Henry Adams*. USA: Seven Treasures, 2009 (1907).

Agee, James. *A Death in the Family*. New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1985 (1938).

This novel may be one of the most fluid I have ever read. In what would be considered “head-hopping” today, Agee glides the narrative smoothly by way of an omniscient third-person POV in which readers know who is thinking what at any given time. He does it so smoothly and matter-of-factly that one hardly notices it at first. But when the author spends more than three hundred pages on only a few days in the life of a turn-of-the-twentieth-century Tennessee family, he allows himself plenty of time to explore the thoughts of six-year-old Rufus, son of Jay who is killed in a freak automobile accident where he receives hardly a scratch, only the “blue” mark where his chin strikes the steering wheel and administers a life-taking concussion—at least as far the doctors of the time period believe. Readers also learn of Rufus’s mother’s interior struggle with her Catholic upbringing, how hard she is trying to believe this death is the will of God. Agee, near the end, takes readers inside the thoughts of Rufus’s uncle Andrew, who, in a walk where he holds his nephew’s hand, spews his anti-Catholic vitriol in every direction. There really is no resolution for Rufus, as there may be none for anyone who experience a death in the family.

Akhtar, Ayad. *Homeland Elegies: A Novel*. New York: Little, Brown, 2020.

This is one of the most enjoyable and yet profound contemporary novels I have read in a long time. I had to keep reminding myself that it was indeed a novel, so interwoven is the plot with events we’ve all lived through in the last twenty years. The protagonist’s parents, both physicians, move from Pakistan to Staten Island in the early 1960s. When he is still young, the family relocates in Wisconsin. Throughout, readers get a feel for what it is like to live in America if you are not white-skinned, if you speak with an accent, or in any way attempt to retain religious or cultural customs from your former country. Not pleasant, to say the least. At one point the car of the protagonist (by now a renowned playwright) breaks down in Scranton, PA. He is directed by a kindly highway patrolman (ah, good) to a mechanic who turns out to be related to the patrolman (uh oh). He is quoted a particular price for one problem, but when he picks up his car, he ascertains there is a second problem he’s not been informed about and is charged almost three times the original quote. He must phone his bank and make arrangements to raise his credit card level (and interest rate) to cover the cost. The white-skinned reader must take note. This part is NOT fiction; this sort of explicit bias happens every day to dark-skinned, “other” people in America. People who work hard, people who pay their taxes, people who try hard to color inside the lines but somehow come up short in the eyes of so-called natives (whose ancestors were immigrants). The novel is really about how this man and his father handle their American lives differently: one an elegy for Pakistan and one for the USA. It is worth every minute of the reader’s time to live vicariously through these brave souls who come to

American to build a better life. Theirs are true profiles in courage.

Amburn, Ellis. *Subterranean Kerouac: The Hidden Life of Jack Kerouac*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998.

I got what I deserved for reading this book: perpetual arousal. My God, maybe one of the most sex-laden books of literary biography I've ever read: all about one man and his friends and lovers. According to Amburn, Kerouac keeps a sex list of not only his partners but how many times they engage. It amounts to a sexual track meet of stupendous proportions (if self-reporting is accurate): sex with men, sex with women. Maybe the man had a third testicle? Enough of that.

Because Amburn turns out to be Kerouac's final editor, a young man attempting to make his mark in publishing, he stands to have one of the most tolerant and understanding viewpoints of the controversial author of *On the Road* and at least a dozen other novels. Like a number of important American authors before him, Kerouac is ahead of his time, ahead of what critics are capable of understanding. Like many writers, he must scramble for money nearly his entire life, never experiencing the adulation that is to come after his premature death, when he dies at forty-seven of alcoholism. But if anything, he remains a hero of young writers of all ages, writers who are willing to put everything on the line, to write novels the way they want to, not kowtowing to editors, publishers, or even the public. For that, yes, he is a true hero.

Amis, Martin. *Inside Story—How to Write: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 2020.

I believe this novel falls under the category of metafiction (Google: *fiction in which the author self-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions*). Martin or Mart becomes a character in his own work (à la Christopher Isherwood and others). His self-consciousness revolves around the writing of his own fiction, that of Saul Bellow, and others. As the customary disclaimer in the front matter states, "Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance . . . is entirely coincidental." But how coincidental is it when "Martin" or "Mart" spends much of the book citing characters with real names, people like his father, author Kingsley Amis, people like longtime friend Christopher Hitchens, as well as other famous (Iris Murdoch) and not-so figures?

Amis begins and ends ("Preludial" and "Postludial") the novel by addressing his readers directly, that he is about to give us tips concerning writing techniques. And he does: such advice is scattered throughout the (did I say?) novel, as if indeed, it is a how-to book and not a work of fiction. I like it. It's odd, but I like it. You can't help but believe he is digging down deep to reveal what has worked for him and speaks so authoritatively about writing (and with more than twenty-five books under his belt why shouldn't he?).

However, Amis spends the final 150 pages or so memorializing the life and death of essayist and intimate, Christopher Hitchens. They're both about the same age. Both straight, both with families. Yet they are Platonic lovers. Martin greets

Christopher and sometimes leaves him with a kiss. As his fans will know, veteran smoker Hitchens develops throat cancer, and much of this section takes place at Houston's MD Anderson Cancer Center. Amis takes readers through every painful step he witnesses in Hitch's treatment. All to no avail. The man who has always seemed to battle against life and death in equal measures finally succumbs. That is in 2011. Perhaps writing in a fictional mode about this death allows Amis to conceptualize the work differently than if it were in a nonfiction mode. It allows him to eulogize his friend without getting too sentimental about it.

And yet—true to the title's promise—Amis, I believe, does offer the writer, especially the writer of novels, some sage advice. Oh, and before I list a few nuggets along these lines, I'd like to say I detest the excessive footnotes, particularly in a work of fiction. Is it a kind of laziness by which the author cannot manage to incorporate his ideas into the main text? Or is it a way of padding an already long book and forcing readers to peruse long passages in teensy-weensy little print? Or is it a way of showing off, of augmenting an already verbose passage even more? At any rate, here are some passages about writing:

“So avoid or minimise any reference to the mechanics of making love—unless it advances our understanding of character or affective situation. All we usually need to know is how it went and what it meant. ‘Caress the detail,’ said Nabokov from the lectern. And it is excellent advice. But don't do it when you're writing about sex” (27).

Typo: “obviouly” (221).

“Never use any phrase that bears the taint of the second-hand. All credit to whoever coined *no-brainer* and (I suppose) to whoever coined *go ballistic* and *Marxism lite* and *you rock* and *eye-popping* and *jaw-dropping* and *double whammy* and all the rest of them. Never do it—not even in conversation” (391).

The end of a sentence is a weighty occasion. The end of a paragraph is even weightier (as a general guide, aim to put its best sentence last). The end of chapter is seismic but also more pliant (either put its best paragraph last, or follow your inclination to adjourn with a light touch of the gavel). The end of a novel, you'll be relieved to learn, is usually straightforward, because by then everything has been decided. And with any luck your closing words will feel preordained (394).

In his *Inside Story* Amis writes about so much more: Philip Larkin's death, 9-1-1, crises in the Middle East, his life between the early 1980s through 45's stint as president. Since the work is fiction can we believe “Mart” when he says this will be his last book?

Arenas, Reinaldo. *The Doorman*. Translated by Dolores M. Koch. New York: Grove, 1991 (1987).

The more I read of Arenas's work the more I am charmed by a skilled writer's use of magical realism. In this instance, Juan, a young Cuban immigrant is hired as doorman by a fairly exclusive residential hotel in New York City. He does his very

best to learn the names of all the occupants and their quirks and preferences. He fetches and messages for them. He does his best to learn the names of all their pets as well, a veritable Noah's Ark from the tiniest to the largest. This odd point is where one begins to sense the leap readers are to make, from reality to magic. The animals begin to speak to Juan in "human language," and at first that seems fine with Juan. But then the situation evolves into something more complicated (no spoilers). Juan is on a spiritual journey to locate a "door" that will lead him and everyone who wants into a better world. Arenas is skilled in dragging along even the most skeptical of us because he has a larger point to make.

Atwood, Margaret. *Selected Poems*. New York: Simon, 1976.

An honor to read this collection spanning a decade and six collections. Atwood's poetry, like her prose, is raw in some places and delicate in others, with many nuances in between. Glad I took the time.

Baldwin, James. *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*. New York: Vintage, 1993 (1961).

This collection, though it uses dated language like "Negro," stands as fine group of essays in which Baldwin, addressing the issues of his day, still manages to communicate with modern readers by way of his wit and wisdom. The man writes some of the most elegant and intelligent prose of the twentieth century, as he conveys what it's like to be an American, and as he describes his friendships with writers Richard Wright and Norman Mailer. In either case he stands toe to toe with each one, his understanding of human nature extending its relevance into this century.

Bell, Matt. *Appleseed*. New York: HarperCollins, 2021.

Every novel creates an environment of its own. Author Matt Bell does so in spades in this ambitious work of three worlds and how they eventually converge. Slowly you do sense the three strands coming together, especially each time that Chapman and Nathaniel come to live with the Worth family and they witness the payoff of having planted apple trees from seed decades earlier.

Bell alternates chapters by way of individual characters beginning with Chapman and Nathaniel (loosely based on Johnny "Appleseed" Chapman and brother Nathaniel Chapman). This strand is set in the 1700s and traces the two brothers as they prepare acres and acres of apple nurseries in Ohio and surrounding states, planting individual seeds rather than using grafting—to earn money in the future. Bell makes Chapman's character even more legendary by creating him as half human/half faun (a mythological character, not a *fawn*).

The other two strands—a science-fiction thread set in the latter half of this century, and a thousand years from now when the earth is experiencing a new ice age, creating an environmental plea—alternate back and forth between the Appleseed thread until the cataclysmic climax and almost languorous denouement. Readers must trust author Bell, that he knows what he is doing because at times you feel as if you're on a runaway roller coaster ride that won't end. And the fact that he releases details gradually makes the speculative and sci-fi aspects of the novel more

believable, more easily woven into its fabric (and your memory). At one point, he lists five and a half pages of what have become extinct species, and you make yourself read every one of them, to the experience the pain of what it would (will?) be like to lose that many creatures in the future.

Bell creates the novel's own vocabulary, much like Anthony Burgess does in his *A Clockwork Orange* and other works—they are endemic to that novel. Words like “rewilder” (persons attempting to rebuild the natural world); Sacrifice Zone; Volunteer Agricultural Community (VAC); advertainments; nanoswarms; macrofarms; barkspot; no-when; somewhen. Just a few. (The publisher might wish to include a glossary in the back, in a final edition.) Bell makes a good practice of recapping or summarizing backstory so readers know where they are in the sweep of things.

Perhaps because this copy is the publisher's “advance reader's edition,” (I received it as a Goodreads giveaway fulfilled by HarperCollins) it may feature more than its fair share of typographical errors, but I list the ones I found because it's a thing I do:

Typo: “hope are” (184) should be “hopes are”

Typo: “unlike t he one” (232) should be “the”

Typo: “Chapman say_,” (297) should be “says”

Typo: “Eury most not expect” (311) should be “Eury must not expect”

Typo: “if Earthtrust was a country” (362) should be “if Earthtrust is a country” to be consistent with contextual use of present tense.

Reading *Applesseed* is a big ask, not so much on the part of the author (who is excused on the basis of creative control) or the publisher but on the part of literature itself. One must approach the novel with an open mind, especially if you don't often read fantasy, sci-fi, or speculative fiction. Bell produces a phrase that might just rise up as a slogan for our earth's future: *Either we all survive, or no one does* (159). Frightening but possibly true.

Baldwin, Alec. *Nevertheless*. New York: HarperCollins, 2017.

In some ways this is an ordinary celebrity book. Baldwin writes about his acting career, his divorce from a famous actor, his new wife and family, and all his children. But Alec Baldwin also distinguishes himself by sharing how he comes to be an actor. In his preface he tells of his childhood, of wanting to be something one day and something else the next day. Acting allows him to become, in a sense, all of these things through the roles he plays. He also shares with readers about how his childhood of near destitution (his mother and five siblings living on their father's teaching salary). Most interesting, however, is his quest to find himself, to be true to his desire to balance himself on that fine tightrope of acting for its own sake (the stage, the Broadway stage) and film (its commercial and sometimes lucrative nature). He glosses long lists of books he loves, plays and films he loves, actors (male and female) whom he loves and why. He peppers his writing with pieces of classical music he admires—a sign of a truly educated person. His is a rich life of pursuing happiness and sometimes coming up short but also getting up off the floor and trying again, whether to connect with a new woman or say yes to a new play or

tackle the fields of philanthropy or politics. The man is that bright and that secure that he can make these choices and live with them. Because, in his youth, he is soooo good looking (the only reason I watched TV's *Knot's Landing*), he is sometimes approached or accosted by gay men who believe they might get lucky. To Baldwin's credit, he is secure enough in his personhood, his masculinity, that he (by his own recognizance anyway) takes these incidents in stride (informing one man, an older mentor, however, that if he ever kisses him full on the mouth again, he will break every bone in his body—yet they do remain friends). He even goes as far as to say he “loves” a certain man he's worked with and who knows? “he might be gay.” We know he isn't, but it's sweet of him to be so empathic that he might give it some consideration. That seems to be what his whole life is about: giving a role consideration before dispensing with it or forging ahead. We all should be so *considerate* in our own roles.

Brandon, Will. *The Wolf Hunt: A Tale of the Texas Badlands*. A Derrick Miles Mystery. No City: 2021.

Full disclosure moment: I am part of the Lubbock, Texas, Ad Hoc writing group of which the author speaks in book's Acknowledgements page. I mention this fact, not to tout my involvement in the enterprise but to give some context. The author brought bits and pieces of this work in its infancy to our group. Some of it, like all our writing, was rough, a work-in-progress, but always what was generated created great interest on the part of all members. *We can't wait to read more* was a common comment. What Brandon has realized here goes far beyond, in my opinion, what might have transpired in less capable hands. This book succeeds in being so many things: a pastiche of the highest order, writing “in the style” of Arthur Conan Doyle's *Hound of the Baskervilles*; a bit of a cozy mystery; and a great bit historical novel.

Setting the novel in nineteenth-century Texas but always with an eye to England, where its murder victim hails from, the author creates an admixture of American and British English diction born of a particular period. Historical details give great interest and credit to the work, in which, for example, the narrator, Doctor Hooper, uses one of the first Kodak cameras to great effect. The author's details on how the camera works not only read with authenticity but are crucial to his helping his partner, Derrick Miles, to solve the mystery.

No point in recreating the plot, if one is acquainted with Doyle's book. Readers will find its points familiar, yet with their own twists here and there. If you're a mystery junky, or if you just like well-crafted fiction, I trust you will enjoy Will Brandon's *The Wolf Hunt*. [Get a copy!](#)

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. With an introduction and Notes by Susan Ostrov Weisser. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003 (1847).

I've always been a sucker for an orphan story. I just can't seem to pass them up: Dickens. John Irving. And character Jane Eyre's story is no exception. Only the revered novel isn't just any orphan story. It begins that way, of course, with the death of both her parents, whose importance will makes itself clear later. No, it is the life this strong, young, independent woman builds for herself that is most

important. She learns early to stand up for herself, but her actions get her into trouble first with the Reed family who have been forced by a dead relative's request to take her in. Then she is hauled off to a school for poor children, where she again stands up to the authorities until she learns that cooperation will take her much farther in life. Having acquired a certain gentility, she becomes a governess for apparently a bachelor's young charge. From this point on, readers see *Jane Eyre* struggle to do what she believes is right for her against others who wish to use her for their own designs. Her story is remarkable, and it is easy to see why this novel is one of the most widely read and re-read in the world. No spoilers here.

Brottman, Mikita. *Couple Found Slain: After a Family Murder*. New York: Holt, 2021.

This true crime book prides itself in presenting a story that is different from others about murder within a family, and I do believe it is an interesting approach.

Brottman offers only a few chapters about the dysfunctional family of a young man who murders his parents and the circumstances that may lead him to do such a thing. The rest of the book concerns itself with the young man's *incarceration* in the state of Maryland's mental health and legal systems. Young Brian Bechtold, once he realizes the severity of what he has done, turns himself in to the police. He expects he will go to prison, because, of course, he has committed murder. Instead, to this day, over fifty years of age, Brian remains a resident of Clifton T. Perkins Hospital Center. His story is one of abuse by psychiatrists, other patients, and a legal system that does not give healthy support to people with mental problems. If only he were in prison, he would have far more freedom, including the freedom to rehabilitate, serve his time, and get out. But at Perkins he has become a lifer, and oddly, he may be saner than one or two of the professionals who "treat" him.

Brottman's prose is unrelentingly dead, a just-the-facts-ma'am kind of journalism, but perhaps that is what true fans of true crime expect.

Butler, Samuel. *The Way of All Flesh*. New York: Random, 1949.

I found this late nineteenth-century novel fascinating for a number of reasons. First, Butler undertakes to explore the centuries-old problem of conflict between fathers and sons. The Pontifex family is indeed a family of priests (how audacious of Butler to further his satire by borrowing the word from Roman times). But dear young Ernest Pontifex does not want to follow in his father's footsteps; and then he eventually does. For a while, anyway. Then he rebels big time, winding up in *gaol* for molesting a woman, at which time his parents disinherit him. Mr. and Mrs. Pontifex have taken the following line of thinking as they raise their children, including Ernest: **"If their wills were 'well broken' in childhood, to use an expression then much in vogue, they would acquire habits of obedience which they would not venture to break through till they were over twenty-one years old" (22).**

A number of sources advocate for the idea that Samuel Butler was gay, largely because he never married and seemed to maintain a number of close emotional relationships with men. If the subliminal crumb-droppings of this novel mean anything, Butler leaves all kinds of clues that this assertion may indeed be true (as does Maugham in his *Of Human Bondage*). Ernest's father, Theobald, says the following: **"It is an unnatural thing for a boy not to be fond of his own father. If he was fond of me I should be fond of him, but I cannot like a son who, I am sure,**

dislikes me. He shrinks out of my way whenever he sees me coming near him. He will not stay five minutes in the same room with me if he can help it" (122). Why is Ernest disposed toward this behavior? Probably because elder Pontifex beats Ernest for any number of reasons (his manipulating mother aids in this process). And which comes first, father's rejection of son, or son's rejection of father? When does the endless cycle of enmity begin? At any rate, many gay men are rejected by their fathers because they may see something in their sons that they do not like in themselves. Other clues? Ernest does not marry or marries badly (a bigamist, canceling his marriage) because he doesn't *get* women; he has no positive feeling for women (especially his mother, though he forgives her in the end); but he does maintain longstanding relationships with various men throughout his life.

Yet, the most interesting aspect of the novel may be Butler's treatment of the root of all evil, *the way of all flesh*: greed, the lust for money. Readers can locate the plot on the internet, but suffice it to say that Butler makes much (a biting satire) of the British notion of passing on wealth to one's heirs, or not doing so, which action plays a large role in this novel's satisfying climax and denouement (the elder Pontifexes get their comeuppance for their poor treatment of son Ernest).

Unlike other authors of this period, Butler writes for the most part in a manner that is simple and easy to follow, yet the novel is far from facile. Butler's is a story that continues to unfold. It echoes throughout homes in England and around the world.

Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. New York: Vintage, 1991 (1948). I read this book, in part, to see what, if any, light it might shed on the world's 2020-2021 Covid pandemic. I found some interesting parallels. The city of Oran, Algiers, 194_ of Part One seems to echo our country's actions concerning a local epidemic, the first signal of which is the estimated death of 40,000 rats: lack of clarity about what the disease is and what needs to be done. In Part Two, the gates of Oran close: **"One of the most striking consequences of the closing of the gates was, in fact, this sudden deprivation befalling people who were completely unprepared for it" (67)**. The natural impulse seems to be to shut out the rest of the world. People, indeed, do not know what is happening. *Go to work or not? Keep my children out of school? Oh, the schools have been closed.* **"The Prefect's riposte to criticisms echoed by the press—Could not the regulations be modified and made less stringent?—was somewhat unexpected" (78)**. In 2020, we demonstrate similar behavior: **"At first the fact of being cut off from the outside world was accepted with a more or less good grace, much as people would have put up with any other temporary inconvenience that interfered with only a few of their habits. But, now they had abruptly become aware that they were undergoing a sort of incarceration under that blue dome of sky, already beginning to sizzle in the fires of summer, they had a vague sensation that their whole lives were threatened by the present turn of events, and in the evening, when the cooler air revived their energy, this feeling of being locked in like criminals prompted them sometimes to foolhardy acts" (100)**. Indeed. Partying at crowded bars and restaurants? Attending large political gatherings? In Oran, the number of deaths seem to increase exponentially day by day. There is conflict about how to handle their situation: **"Cottard stared at him in a puzzled manner, and Tarrou went on to say that there were far too many**

slackers, that their plague was everybody's business, and everyone should do his duty. For instance, any able-bodied man was welcome in the sanitary squads" (157). Sounds similar to 2020: *Just wear the damn mask. Or, You can't tell me what to do, you're infringing on my freedom.* By Part III the people of Oran, Algeria realize that the plague has swallowed up "everything and everyone." There are no longer individual destinies, only a collective destiny, burying the dead, recycling coffins because enough new ones cannot be manufactured fast enough. Cemeteries are outgrown as it were. In 2020, CNN and MSNBC mount graphics each day of the number of Covid cases, the number of deaths. People of Oran become apathetic: *Que sera, sera. If I die I die.* Sound familiar in 2020? Part IV of the novel depicts the exhaustion—physical, mental, and emotional—that the people of Oran are now experiencing after months of trauma. **"Whenever any of them spoke through the mask, the muslin bulged and grew moist over the lips. This gave a sort of unreality to the conversation; it was like a colloquy of statues" (209).** No wonder everyone becomes sick of masks! We can't always understand one another, can't see other's expressions as to what they are thinking. Though protected by the mask, we are dehumanized by it as well. Part IV is highlighted with a touching moment between Dr. Rieux and his friend and patient, a Father Paneloux, after a child dies by way of an excruciating but tender description by Camus. You know more death is coming. Yes, the priest, too, dies. It is in Part IV that the plague becomes a larger thing, a metaphor for the decay potentially inherent in all humans. Part V provides a sad denouement in which the plague whimpers to an end, but not before the good doctor who has worked tirelessly experiences the loss of his wife (who is caught in another town throughout the entire epidemic) as well as a close friend. Dr. Rieux ends the novel's narrative with these thoughts: **"And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city" (308).** Whoa! What? you say. We could face more pandemics in the future? Simply, yes, especially if the *rats* shop with us.

Capote, Truman. *The Complete Stories of Truman Capote.* With an introduction by Reynolds Price. New York: Random, 2004.

Sad to say that Capote published only twenty stories (as this edition seems to indicate) in his lifetime. The "weakest" stories, if there are any, seem to be his early ones when he is barely twenty and the two written during the last decade of his life. The ones in the middle are for the most part knock-outs. Especially, I'm a sucker for his "orphan" stories: "A Christmas Memory," "The Thanksgiving Visitor," and "One Christmas." In all three he develops the character Sook, and old woman, "a cousin," who cares for the boy narrating the stories. Apparently based on one of the relatives Capote lived with as a child when his parents abandoned him for a time, Sook can tear your heart out with her generosity and illiterate wisdom.

Cheever, Benjamin, Ed. *The Letters of John Cheever.* New York: Simon, 1988.

This collection of letters from the 1930s to 1982 is as much about the editor, John Cheever's eldest son, as it is about the senior writer. So many times in reading a compendium of letters, one is left alone to solve certain puzzles the letters may contain. For most letters Benjamin Cheever glosses events, dates, but most important, personalities, and by doing so he allows readers a deeper view into his father's letters, his father's life, the life of their family: John Cheever's wife, Mary; daughter Susan, Benjamin, and a second son Fred (born Federico in Italy).

Having read Cheever's journals some years ago, I again encountered his wicked wit, in which he slices humanity a new asshole but also a humane man who loves that very flawed humanity and is kind enough to portray his characters that way. For the wicked sense of humor: **"About a month ago Mary took a job teaching English at Sarah Lawrence two days a week and so she journeys out to Bronxville on Tuesday and Fridays and comes home with a briefcase full of themes written by young ladies named Nooky and Pussy" (124).** Or this, with a scintilla of rage: **"I got back to work on the book about a month ago, but was dealt some crushing financial blows three weeks later and now I'm back in the short story business. I want to write short stories like I want to fuck a chicken" (125).** And a sweet cat story: **"The cat, after your leaving him, seemed not certain of his character or his place and we changed his name to Delmore which immediately made him more vivid. The first sign of his vividness came when he dumped a load in a Kleenex box while I was suffering from a cold. During a paroxysm of sneezing I grabbed for some kleenex [sic]. I shall not overlook my own failures in this tale but when I got the cat shit off my face and the ceiling I took Delmore to the kitchen door and drop-kicked him into the clothesyard" (235).** But ultimately, as I said, Cheever loves humanity and declares as much by way of a *Time* magazine interview chronicling his career: **"My sense of literature is a sense of giving not diminishment. I know almost no pleasure greater than having a piece of fiction draw together disparate incidents so that they relate to one another and confirm that feeling that life itself is a creative process, that one thing is put purposefully upon another, that what is lost in one encounter is replenished in the next, and the we possess some power to make sense of what takes place" (240).** Now for the sex part of this profile: Editor Ben, eldest son to Cheever, discovers that his father is not bisexually bicurious in a furtive shameful sort of way but has had sexual-emotional relationships with many different men over his lifetime. Cheever's letters attest to having done the deed with (grad student of Cheever's) Allan Gurganus (about his son's age) and photographer Walker Evans about whom he tells this story: **"When I was twenty-one Walker Evans invited me to spend the night at his apartment. I said yes. I dropped my clothes (Brooks). He hung his (also Brooks) neatly in a closet. When I asked him how to do it he seemed rather put off. He had an enormous cock that showed only the most fleeting signs of life. I was ravening. I came all over the sheets, the Le Corbusier chair, the Matisse Lithograph and hit him under the chin. I gave up at around three, dressed and spent the rest of the night on a park bench near the river" (304).**

I must say that I admire John Cheever's zest for life, an enthusiasm he did not relinquish until the day he died. And even then?

Cheever, John. *The Stories of John Cheever*. New York: Knopf, 1978.

After perusing Cheever's letters, I felt inspired to read his sixty-one collected stories (almost 700 pages)—a compendium I had previously spurned because I had only read his early stories. Mistake. And I withdraw what I said in print in the past about Cheever's short stories being of less value than his novels. However, I believe his collection does present an interesting profile. His early ones, indeed, are less developed, less interesting, at least, to me. The middle ones and most of the later ones remain his meatiest stories. Cheever almost exclusively writes about life in New York City and its suburbs (Bullet Park, Shady Oaks). Most of his long list of characters are adorned with Anglo-Saxon (or Anglo-Saxon sounding) names or made-up names of that ilk for symbolic purposes; if he uses a foreign name, he has something in mind (Boulanger, the French housemaid). Among the A-S names: Pommeroy, Westcott, Hartley, Tennyson, Hollis, ad nauseam—all giving voice to his own cultural DNA or the heritage of New England. Some of the suburban stories become a bit pat. Most involve a man and a wife, who, to some degree, love one another, but one or the other is unhappy with this happy marriage—three to five loveable but often invisible children. All involve riding trains to the city, driving station wagons over narrow asphalt roads to summer vacations in Maine or the mountains. People who smoke and drink too much and really don't care.

But! These must have been the very stories that the *New Yorker* wished to publish because Cheever certainly gave them what they wanted. For a time Cheever and family live in Rome, Italy, and it is that experience that gives brilliance to some of his most interesting and creative stories. In his letters, Cheever reveals that their family brings back to the U.S. a young Italian woman who works for the Cheevers. In "Clementina," he brings this relationship to life by way of fiction, and the result is stunning. Cheever's suburban world is now seen through the eyes of a poor Italian domestic who both loves and detests what she witnesses in suburbia. Cheever really seems to occupy her point of view. Likewise, "Boy in Rome," is a lovely wandering story with a wonderful poetic refrain about "being loved enough." Cheever sees Rome with eyes that have become so jaundiced by suburban America that the story is somehow crisper than some of his domestic narratives. He's forced to observe and judge more keenly because of the environment's apparent strangeness. A lesson to all writers: get out of your own backyard if you can, and see what happens to your fiction. Anyone writing short stories could benefit from reading these gems, mostly because it may remove you from your current world, and he shows you how to do it: be a keen observer no matter the setting; write what you know; and have fun skewering human nature if you can.

Choi, Susan. *Trust Exercise: A Novel*. New York: Holt, 2019.

Boy! (or Girl!), what a ride this read is. Metafiction perhaps at its most confounding, at least for this reader. The first third of the novel seems to be a traditional high school love story gone awry, both David and Sarah soured on, yet still stuck on each other—set in a nontraditional performing arts high school. The setting is all important, as these kids are smart and are striving to become great actors—and are easily manipulated by adults they admire or wish to please. As near as I can tell, the story is set in a city like Houston (imagine primeval swamp with skyscrapers), though the name is never spelled out. Next third of the book changes

to the voice of another young woman at that high school, Karen, a superficial friend to Sarah. The author does an odd thing whereby Karen sometimes speaks in first person, and sometimes talks about herself in the third person. Must be a good reason for this. Perhaps Choi is portraying the fracturing of this (by now) woman's personality. In the third part, readers begin to realize something is off. The story strand they've been holding onto is no longer there. It turns out the first third of the book is really "fiction" that "Karen" has written about some real people whom readers now get to become acquainted with in the last third. To say more would create a spoiler, and I'm not going there. While there is much to admire about this award-winning book—its structure and its strong characterizations—it left me wondering if Choi was intent on entertaining herself or her readers. You be the judge.

Clear, James. *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*. New York: Avery, 2018.

A great book for helping a person to form good habits and break old ones. Clear says you want to make your good habits "obvious, attractive, easy, and satisfying" (253), and you want to make your bad habits "invisible, unattractive, hard, and unsatisfying" (253). Clear states all along "This is a continuous process. There is no finish line. There is no permanent solution."

By way of example, I kept forgetting to take a dosage of over-the-counter digestive at noon until I cut out the brand name and put it in my noon pill container. I kept the reminder there until I made the habit of taking it without an obvious cue. Only a small example, but I believe this book will make a good handbook for forming good habits and abolishing the bad.

Copland, Aaron. *Music and Imagination: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1951-1952*. New York: New American Library, 1952.

Embarrassingly, I was supposed to have read this book for a pass-fail ½ credit weekly class in college—over fifty years ago. I could only find three lines, in three different chapters, that I underlined. No marginal comments. I don't believe I read it with any seriousness of intent. And still I got a pass for the class.

On the other hand, I'm not sure that if I had read the book all the way through I would have understood it. Reading it now, after having long-ago earned my degree of music, having listened to serious music as the "gifted" listener Copland lifts up, having acquired a lifetime of humanities-related experiences, many of his ideas make sense. But was it perhaps too much to ask an eighteen-year-old to read such a book and formulate decent questions for a classroom discussion with a group made up of freshmen through seniors? I'm not sure.

In part, the book now, of course, seems a bit dated. Copland is commenting and writing exactly mid-twentieth century, now seventy years ago. The music he is writing about has now taken its proper place in American music history. The composing of American serious music has moved on beyond even what John Cage and other composers of his period accomplished. On the other hand, precisely because of when Copland writes this book, we now have a bit of history concerning

that period of time. He makes interesting judgments about European music juxtaposed with American. And I am able to make informed critiques of my own, for example, when Copland states that though dramatic performances have moved him to tears, seldom to music events. I can't disagree with him more. To listen to Saint Saëns's Third Symphony and Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony and not be moved to tears seems a sacrilege. Now, if it were at all possible, I would like to take that Humanities class again. Now I would have something to say.

Doty, Mark. *Atlantis: Poems*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

As always, superb poems. The collection opens up both the micro and macro views of marine or shore life. If we all saw life as comprehensively and lovingly as poets, we'd be a better people worldwide.

Dreyer, Benjamin. *Dreyer's English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style*. New York: Random, 2019.

This book about copyediting offers readers an excellent review if you think you already know the business pretty well, and, if you don't, then it's a great place to begin (Dreyer himself includes a list of fine sources). Even so, he makes something like the subjunctive mood ("mood" being a grammatical concept not always taught today) utterly clear (*If I were* vs. *If I was*)—not as rigid as, say, the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Dreyer nevertheless has his pet peeves and his absolutes:

This may be a particular peeve of mine and no one else's, but I note it, because it's my book: Name-dropping, for no better reason than to show off, underappreciated novels, obscure foreign films, or cherished indie bands by having one's characters irrelevantly reading or watching or listening to them is massively sore-thumbish. A novel is not a blog post about Your Favorite Things. If you must do this sort of thing—and, seriously, must you?—contextualize heavily" (113).

I give Dreyer another thumbs up because he has a broad (flexible and forgiving) understanding of the English language, the concept of rhetoric being one of them. A peeve of *mine* (and he articulates it well) is how people misuse the term "begging the question" in common speech (especially on MSNBC or CNN) *and* writing, mistakenly taking it to mean "raising the question":

Begging the question, as the term is traditionally understood, is a kind of logical fallacy—the original Latin is *petitio principii*, and no, I don't know these things off the top of my head; I look them up like any normal human being—in which one argues for the legitimacy of a conclusion by citing as evidence the very thing one is trying to prove in the first place. Circular reasoning, that is" (151). The greatest example from my classical rhetoric text is, "When did you stop beating your wife?" An apparent single premise actually assumes two, one of which is not possible without the other. To stop beating your wife you had to begin at some point, making the question a trap.

At the same time, Dreyer is unusually forgiving about other concepts, some of which cause *me* to grind my teeth. Even a few scientists seem to forget that "data" are plural (hee hee) for "datum." *The data clearly show ...* (not "shows"). Same with

“media.” *The media are* (not “is”) *always talking about how the media are not to blame.* Ah, so satisfying to my ear, and yet Dreyer seems to shrug it off.

Dreyer’s greatest talent may be as wordsmith. He makes this discussion of “continual” vs. “continuous” pellucid: **“Continual” means ongoing but with pause or interruption, starting and stopping, as, say, continual thunderstorms (with patches of amity). “Continuous” means ceaseless, as in a Noah-and-the-Flood-like forty days and forty nights of unrelenting rain” (179).**

He tackles “epigraph” and “epigram”; he tackles “farther” and “further,” and makes their meanings clear. Most of all, Dreyer’s book seems to demonstrate that the copyeditor, far from being captain of the grammar police, exists to take a writer’s finished manuscript and style his or her words to make the final product seem more like the original than the original. In other words, the copyeditor’s work should be invisible. Well done, it seems like magic, particularly to the author.

Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. New York: Knopf, 1988.

This book of exhaustive research concerning Wilde’s life is a pleasure to read from his family history to his imprisonment years later and his resulting exile in France. Prior to reading this book, I had always had the impression that Oscar Wilde’s life (except for prison) was one wild ride (pardon the pun). And in some ways it was. He, even after experiencing financial success, was always in want of money, primarily because he was such a spendthrift, spending or giving away money he honestly didn’t have. He cared not about what people thought of his extravagant ideas, his extravagant living. Yet Wilde faced great public disapproval of how he lived his life. His only friends were other homosexual men or those liberal enough to accept him. His downfall came in the package of one man, Lord Alfred Douglas, a much younger man, an aristocrat who both loved and used Wilde. If Wilde had never met him, he might have met his match with some other party, but I doubt it. The latter part of Wilde’s sad life was battling Douglas’s father in court. Lord Percy Douglas, Marquess of Queensberry, managed to have Wilde sent to prison for two years because he didn’t want Wilde near his son. Wilde did his prison time, and it broke him, both physically and emotionally. He never wrote anything substantial again, was always begging others for money, and suffered physical ailments that eventually brought on his premature death at forty-six. Ellmann’s distinguished book, more than thirty years old now, does great justice to the life of an extraordinary writer who lived, until he could no longer bear the speed of light, entirely ahead of his time.

Evans, Siân. *Maiden Voyages: Magnificent Ocean Liners and the women Who Traveled and Worked Aboard Them*. New York: St. Martin’s, 2020.

This is an interesting book in which Welsh author Evans focuses on thirteen women (some famous, some not) in the early twentieth century who make careers on the seas. Mostly by way of working on lines such as the White Star and Cunard, these women work as conductresses, stewardesses, and nurses, sometimes rising to supervisory positions. During an era when women are not encouraged or even allowed to work outside a domestic situation, these women serve as pioneers who earn good salaries and are able to support families back home in England, where

the man of the household, say, has been lost to war. Of course, their success is hard won, and it is only a beginning, but indeed there must be a thread that connects them to airline hostesses and to female astronauts such as Sally Ride. A quick but meaningful read.

* Flores, Dan. *The Horizontal Yellow: Nature and History in the Near Southwest*. Albuquerque: U of NM Press.

First of all, I love that Flores takes possession of this subject right away with the term, “Near Southwest”—a region stretching from eastern Louisiana and including all of Texas and New Mexico. I come over twenty years late to reading this elegantly scripted book about the area’s ecology, but the ideas he expresses here seem to gain urgency as time passes. Flores alternates sections of family history (French and Spanish) and other histories with first-hand accounts of living, say, on the Llano Estacado, as well as poetic and lyrical sections of fiction to bring alive said histories. Flores is always on the move. After advanced schooling at Texas A&M, he explores, to mention a few places, the Chihuahuan desert, the Southern Plains of Texas (Llano Estacado or Steaked Plains), Abiquiu, New Mexico—finally lighting in Montana. But the Horizontal Yellow of which he speaks is the once real, now metaphorical, wave of yellowing grasses that cover what locals call, with a certain inelegance, the South Plains. It is where he builds a primitive place to live in Yellow House Canyon, about thirty minutes from where he teaches at the local university. It is where he lives with two wolf-dog hybrids as their alpha male (a role he doesn’t particularly relish; it’s the critters’ idea). It is a place remaining in his heart as he makes his home up north, where he can establish and retain a closeness to nature that the Texas South Plains has mostly expunged from its existence. His is an admired life but one I’m not sure I could pursue myself. I adore my life in town—Internet, TV, central heat and air—a bit too much.

* García, Rodrigo. *A Farewell to Gabo and Mercedes: A Son’s Memoir of Gabriel García Márquez*. New York: HarperVia, 2021.

The son of Gabriel García Márquez writes a brief but compelling remembrance of his famous father and formidable mother. Each of the five parts begins with a brief epigraph from one of Márquez’s works. North American culture has so much to learn from our friends in South America whose profound sense of family—in spite of its many complexities—outshines our own. I found myself envying the relationship that Rodrigo has with his parents, his brother, his own children and his nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, grandparents long gone but whose influence seems eternal—no wonder Márquez could write a book as profound as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. He needed only comb his own ancestry for his complete cast of characters. I envision myself reading this book again and again.

Groom, Winston. *A Storm in Flanders. The Ypres Salient, 1914-1918: Tragedy and Triumph on the Western Front*. New York: Grove, 2002.

The author of *Forrest Gump* changes his hat to historian here. In 276 pages he does a superb job of summarizing this one battle of World War I. In some ways the war is a family squabble: **“England’s George V, Russia’s Nicholas II, and Germany’s William II were all cousins, either directly or through marriage, descendants of England’s Queen Victoria” (6)**. Mostly, Groom documents the

wastage: the millions of soldiers' lives lost on all sides, the Brits, the Belgians, the French, and the Germans. (Not to mention civilians, the Canadians, and others who aid the Allies.) The huge "puddles" caused by shelling and excessive rain. The Christmas where all fighting stops and soldiers from both sides "celebrate" together. (What? you ask.) The lack of quality leadership on all sides. One failure passes off his work to another failure of leadership. And the only people who suffer are the men in the ranks and civilians. I don't know about the Triumph Groom references in his title (except that the Allies "win"), but there is certainly a lot of Tragedy. Millions of people of one generation are never able to see their lives come to fruition, mostly through the hubris of a few men.

Guibert, Hervé. *Written in Invisible Ink: Selected Stories*. Edited and translated by Jeffrey Zuckerman. South Pasadena: semiotext(e), 2010.

Guibert's early pieces in the book seem almost pornographic, not because they portray sex graphically but because he exhibits such exuberance to shock, like a child who repeatedly shouts "fuck" to get a rise out of others. Pieces in the middle and latter parts of the book are much better, more mature. "The Trip to Brussels," for example, is nuanced and subtle, where, perhaps the book's title originates:

"The words we spoke made an apocryphal story that was perfect: faded, singed, written in visible ink, buried and unexhumable. Nothing could reconstruct these words, they were like a treasure lost in the depths: intimidating, undetectable" (189).

The story is a perfect metaphor for Guibert's life and work: written in invisible ink. Perhaps, though, instead of being "unexhumable," his work can only be understood by those who decipher its invisibility, a painful era of plague that is not entirely over and should never be forgotten.

Hall, Donald. *Without*. Boston: Houghton, 1998.

Poet Donald Hall eulogizes his late wife, poet Jane Kenyon, in this explosive yet gentle volume of poetry. From her cancer diagnosis to a year following her death, Hall takes on their ride—for the pain is shared between them—and shares it with readers. Every page is spellbinding in its pursuit of detail. The poet doesn't want to forget, nor does he wish for us to forget. In remembering Jane's life, we are perhaps recalling our own losses. Out of specificity is born the universal. Every poem in this book is exceptional (how could it be otherwise), but my personal favorite is "The Porcelain Couple."

In this poem, Hall memorializes—while leaving Jane alone—to empty out the house of his mother who has just died amid the other turmoil. The persona hurries through the house tossing some items, shipping others, finally stopping to stare at a bit of memorabilia:

and the small porcelain box
from France I found under the tree one Christmas
where a couple in relief stretch out asleep,
like a catafalque, on the pastel double bed

of the box's top, both wearing pretty nightcaps (10).

Not a word is wasted. "Couple in relief" is a solemn double entendre, a pun. "Pastel double bed" is the precise setting. A pro like Hall does not use the word "pretty" unless he means it. And like the nightcaps, it fits the line perfectly.

Haslett, Adam. *Imagine Me Gone: A Novel*. New York: Little Brown, 2016.

Having loved Haslett's previous work (I loved *Union Atlantic*), I jumped in with all limbs once again, and I was not disappointed. In this novel, an American woman meets a British man, they marry, and settle down for a time in London. All three of their children are born there but wind up being raised in New England, where the mother is from. The father is apparently normal (wife gets one big hint he is *not* just prior to the wedding, but she does not change her plans) until he is *not*—first losing his career and then sinking into a deep depression. He's a kind man, a good husband and father, but he wanders into the woods and kills himself. One no longer has to *imagine him gone*. The title become a multifaceted jewel in which each member (as the first-person POV indicates) *can* imagine such a thing for themselves.

Another great feature of the novel is that Haslett passes the narration around from family member to family member, thus lighting every corner of this household (the first person is subjective and messy, but that may be Haslett's intent). Michael is the eldest child, a brilliant person, who, in one chapter writes letters to his aunt about their transatlantic voyage from America to England, letters parodying perhaps the writing of Oscar Wilde; they are that hilarious. The facts are all there, but he is letting the reader know this is how he expresses himself best—at a sardonic slant. Celia may be the most sensible and peacemaking of the three siblings, winds up being a shrink. Alec, the youngest, finally comes out as gay. I like that his story does not take over the novel, that it is just one of five narratives, yet it is handled as sensitively and fully as the others.

The dynamic that sets the tone for this family is how everyone deals with Michael, who has difficulty establishing himself in a career, is always in debt and dependent on his family for help—a family that through the very end is willing to sacrifice everything to save him. Michael is an ultrasensitive person, feeling the hurts of the world yet a bit deaf to the needs of his family. His character is the one who determines the lives of the other four: his actions, his failures, his medical complications, his addictions. The tragic ending is both expected and not. Michael is obviously on a downward spiral, but one hopes, as do all his family, that he will pull out of the dive before it's too late.

Hazard, Shirley. *The Great Fire*. New York: Farrar, 2003.

This novel takes place all over the globe, it seems, in the period following World War II. When one first encounters the word "fire," one believes that the book may be about a single fire. The next false signal is near the end of Part One in which, in a flashback to 1942, one witnesses a plane crash: **"There was an explosion after the crash, then a great fire that, despite the rains, smouldered on overnight. The villagers struggled up in the wet, but explosions kept them off"** (52). Mere

foreshadowing. The main character, Aldred Leith, recalls, as a youth, visiting a monument to WWI in London, one of over 300 steps: **“The monument to the Great Fire” (91)**. Leith, in his thirties, falls in love with a girl of seventeen and eventually marries her, but even that relationship of love cannot save him from the author’s great fire, the war through which he has just lived:

“Even to her, he would not say outright that he was thinking of death: of the many who had died in their youth, under his eyes; of those he had killed, of whom he’d known nothing. On the red battlefield, where I’ll never go again; in the inextinguishable conflagration” (278).

Any war is comprised of fire, from fireball to friendly fire, but Hazzard transforms War from an abstraction into one single, eternal event, as she says, a conflagration.

Johnson, Denis. *Train Dreams*. New York, Picador, 2002.

This novella of 116 pages is an ode to the early twentieth century mountain West. A simple man who participates in pursuing, in 1917, a Chinese railroad laborer accused of stealing money, Robert Grainier lives into his eighties, dying in 1968. During that span of time, he may experience more change than most of his ancestors do during their eighty years. He moves through life as a single man, not much bothered about it, until one day he meets a woman he likes. Feelings are mutual, and they marry, having a daughter within a short time. When he returns from a work journey, he finds himself in the maelstrom of a tremendous fire, one that has taken his single acre of land along with his wife and child. For the rest of his life, as he returns to his acre (it will never look the same), he muddles through, dream-like, his life melding with the wild creatures surrounding him. The book is filled with sensual details which allow the reader to live vicariously through an epoch that no longer exists. A beautiful prose poem.

Jones, Robert Jr. *The Prophets*. New York: Putnam’s, 2021.

This tremendous first novel seems at once both realistic and impressionistic in its articulation. The former because Jones’s portrayal of slave life in the nineteenth-century American South stinks with human toil and sweat, both black and white: **“Mississippi only knew how to be hot and sticky” (27)**. The only relief may be the Biblical-like Yazoo River’s coolness. The novel is impressionistic in large part because it is as nonlinear as a novel can get: there are slave ancestors, the lives of a female king, whose descendants populate this hot and sweaty setting. If readers think this is only a novel about two young male slaves who have “grown up” together on the Halifax plantation (slaves call it “Empty” or “That Fucking Place”) and become lovers at a young age, may they soon discover their mistake. Single chapters are devoted to various characters within this “kingdom” of depraved corruption of Capitalism. Slaves tell their own truth. Owners live out their own truths: their indifference to pain (except their own), their greed, their ultimate unhappiness brought on by the shame and disgust they must feel (deep inside and unrecognized) at the mistreatment of fellow human beings.

In this book, sex between Samuel and Isiah isn’t sex but a stunning line of poetry that indicates what has happened: their red-and-white barn is an Edenic setting for

their love. You sense the act has taken place but it is communicated with ease and subtlety. Neither is the sex graphic, nor is it quotidian, like, say, John Cheever's *Then they rolled over and went to sleep*.

I believe I shall read this novel again and again. More than ever, white people need to wake up and see what a terrible blight slavery has been on our country's history, how its stories cripple our present and our future if we fail to deal with slavery's legacy. Jones's novel opens wide a window into our history by way of a beautiful and savage piece of art that will only unfold more as time passes.

* Kawabata, Yasunari. *The Master of Go*. Translated by Edward G. Seidensticker. New York: Vintage, 1972 (1951).

Western readers should probably read more eastern literature, myself included; it would give us a broader view of the world. Wikipedia defines the game of Go in this manner: "Go is an abstract strategy board game for two players in which the aim is to surround more territory than the opponent. The game was invented in China more than 2,500 years ago and is believed to be the oldest board game continuously played to the present day."

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_\(game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_(game)). In this book (hybrid of novel and nonfiction), the game has moved to Japan. For Kawabata the game of Go provides a wonderful extended metaphor for one man's life. Shusai, Master of Go, spends time toward the end of his life in battle with a player named Otaké, a fine player but hypochondriacal man. The game moves from venue to venue, where players may take hours to decide a play, where weeks may pass before the continuation of the game. There are end notes that help to explain the game. A brief but head-spinning read.

* Kendi, Ibram X. and Keisha N. Blain, eds. *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019*. New York: One World, 2021.

This auspicious tome opens with one distinguished author/editor and closes with another writing about the collection of essays they have amassed. Kendi begins: "Racist power constructed the Black race—and all the Black groups. *Them*. Racist power kept constructing Black America over four hundred years . . . [*we*] constructed, again and again. *Them* into *we*, defending the Black American community to defend all the individuals in the community. *Them* became *we* to allow *I* to become *me*" (xvii). One hundred scholars each represent or write about four-year increments of Black history beginning, of course, in 1619, when twenty black-skinned people arrive on the shores of Jamestown, Virginia, aboard the (how bitterly ironic) *White Lion*. There the pernicious practice of slavery begins in the United States of America. Each of the book's ten sections ends not with an essay but with a powerful poem, lending the quality of a Greek chorus to the collection, voices telling truths that prose perhaps cannot.

This collection possesses many positives: scholarship and research; eloquence the one hundred varied voices (some angry, some solemn, some patient and considered) lend to the gigantic mosaic or puzzle of lost American history. The most poignant moments of clarity may arrive when some overlooked gem of our

stinking history is thrust up in our noses . . . and we must not turn away for it is a stench African-Americans have lived with for centuries—if not in their direct memory then within the cells of their punished bodies.

Some of these elusive facts: 1) In the early 1700s there existed the term *maroon*, a runaway slave; the accompanying form, *marronage* meaning extricating oneself from slavery—which caused American slave owners no small amount of worry. 2) **“Georgia was the only colonial region that issued a ban on slavery from its inception in 1733”** (150). 3) **“While many historians describe Reconstruction as a period of ‘racial unrest’ marked by lynchings and ‘race riots,’ it was undoubtedly a war. The network of terror cells that sprang up during Reconstruction was no different from the organized militias of the American Revolution or the ragtag Confederate squads”** (235). The Civil War, in other words, has never really ended. The U.S. did not have the guts or will to return troops in the South to enforce Reconstruction policy, thus giving the South a back-door victory. 4) 1.2 million Black men and women served in WWII but came home to no hero’s welcome (307). 5) **“Ella Baker, someone who should be much better known, was critical in the organizing that emerged from the sit-ins. Her activism brought together generations of Black struggle. The 1960 surge in youth activism drew her immediate attention . . . Baker was the SCLC’s temporary executive director and one of the South’s most respected political organizers. As the NAACP director of branches in the 1940s, she had organized chapters throughout the region”** (326). 6) **“The real story was that the real estate industry and mortgage bankers were fleecing African Americans with an assist from an utterly passive federal government”** (337). 7) **“In Clarence Thomas, a forty-three-year-old African American Republican from Pinpoint, Georgia, with only two years of experience as a federal judge, Bush found the ideal candidate to help him appeal to both these constituencies [white conservatives and right-leaning Blacks]”** (361). 8) **“In 2019 alone, more than 250 people in the United States were killed in mass shootings. The overwhelming majority of the shooters were white nationalists”** (385).

Co-editor Blain states in her conclusion to *Four Hundred Souls*: **“From police violence and mass incarceration to voter suppression and unequal access to housing, the social and economic disparities that shape contemporary Black life are all legacies of slavery and colonialism”** (391). If only we could motivate our congress to realize this fact and begin to allow the country to teach history in its full ugly truthfulness (as well as the beauty of democracy when it works), only then may we continue and then finish Reconstruction, a reconstruction of Black lives that must include every last descendant of a slave in this country.

Leonnig, Carol. *Zero Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Secret Service*. New York: Random, 2021.

This book is one of the most fascinating contemporary reads to emerge in a long time. Leonnig, a distinguished *Washington Post* reporter, delves into the 155-year history of the United States Secret Service—the agency designed primarily to keep the president and family safe. She brings to light its early history: Within a period of thirty-six years, the U.S. experiences three presidential assassinations. Lincoln. Garfield. McKinley. Following Lincoln’s death, the Service is established with

minimal or feeble funding. After the third assassination, the congress still refuses to provide additional protection, not wanting the president to be treated like royalty. When Kennedy is assassinated, the congress ultimately realizes it must provide more resources for the Secret Service. And presidents must adjust their thinking. Kennedy may, in part, have contributed to his own death by not adhering to the Service's request that he not get as close to crowds as he liked. And also by not riding in an open car and by not allowing agents to stand on the rear bumper of his limo.

Leonnig explores subsequent presidencies to inform readers *in great detail* about each administration since: Ford's two close calls. Reagan's near-death attack. How the Service erodes during Bush's and Clinton's administrations. How the Service is pushed beyond its capabilities during Obama's era when threats and attempts on him rise exponentially and when two different "jumpers" leap over the White House fence, one of them actually coming within feet of the Obama family's living quarters. The author informs us of the unrest within the Service: the frequent change of leadership, the history of good old boy networks that reward relationships instead of meritorious service. She tells of the scandals that rock the service, including details of the one in Cartagena where at least ten agents become extremely drunk and involve themselves with prostitutes. Her conclusion: many problems still exist. The agency needs a complete restructuring, much more funding, and a coordinated effort to heartily renew its mission of always putting the lives of the president and family and other figures ahead of lives of agents sworn to protect them. Until these things occur, the Secret Service will remain stretched beyond its capabilities and perhaps remain a second-rate organization.

Lorca, Federico García. *Five Plays: comedies and Tragicomedies*. Translated by James Graham-Lujan and Richard L. O'Connell. New York: Penguin, 1970.

Quirky little plays tinged with Lorca's poetic touch are well worth the time.

Malouf, David. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Vintage, 2007.

Nuanced and penetrating, these stories are among the best I've ever read, each one like a poem.

* Mantel, Hilary. *Wolf Hall: A Novel. Book One of the Thomas Cromwell Trilogy*. New York: Picador, 2010.

Quite an enjoyable read, one that combines history and literature alike. I read this one aloud to my partner and was able to hear what a masterful job Mantel does with the language—quite musical. She, more than most writers, makes great use of interior monologue, by which we always know who is thinking what. This retelling of King Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, and Thomas Cromwell (among a distinguished cast of many) is worthy of all the accolades it has received (winner of England's Man Booker Prize). Can't wait to read the other two parts of this distinguished trilogy.

* Marquez, Gabriel García. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003 (1970).

Unlike fantasy, which may be built entirely on an unrecognizable or alien setting, magical realism takes the concrete world in which humans live, and the author makes things happen that could never happen, but if compellingly written, we as readers jump on the magic carpet and ride to the end of the tale. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is just one of those rides—taking us on the journey of a century in which an entire town, Macondo, is established by two determined families, all of whose male and female members go by the same name or some variation thereof. Marquez reduces the confusion of having characters with the same name by giving the full name each time it is mentioned, and of course, by associating that character with his or her own personality. The repetition is also symbolic of the longevity of these families, a couple of matriarchs who live to be well into their hundreds. And yet, the magic town of Macondo, does come to a quiet end after one hundred years of solitude. Hardly. If Marquez should mean for solitude to represent isolation, well, then yes, the family experiences, individually and collectively, one hundred years of solitude, silos separated for the most part from each other and the rest of the world, its original inhabitants having reached the location by making an arduous journey through a rugged mountain pass and being located near an, at times, impenetrable swamp. This is, indeed a magical novel, in which the author compresses a century into four hundred pages, a world so incomplete and yet so infinite that it is hard to grasp the two ideas in the same thought.

McCarter, Margaret Hill. *A Master's Degree*. With illustrations in color by W. D. Goldbeck. Chicago: McClurg, 1913.

I read this book for two reasons. One, the novel is set in a place modeled after my alma mater, Southwestern College, in Winfield, Kansas. And two, I happened to have a copy I inherited from my grandmother, inscribed with her name and the date, "1915." Some familiar spots on the landscape do appear in the book: the large "S" of sizable stones that must be whitewashed each year, the Walnut River valley, Sunrise College substituting for my SC, the actual sunset hill of one hundred feet above ground. Otherwise, the novel is an overly sentimental rendering of one young man's four years in college. The book is marred by the details McCarter leaves out: how many steps down Sunset hill to the bottom (77), how classes were conducted, where and how students lived, the topography to a greater degree (she does great watercolor washes describing spectacular sunsets). I did, however, get a feel for a certain type of student that both schools, fictional and real, seem to attract: a rough cut outlier, bright enough but unpolished, who arrives at commencement a much-changed person. One who will continue to grow and change throughout life.

Miller, Olive Beaupré, ed. With illustrations by Maud and Miska Petersham. *Tales Told in Holland*. Chicago: Book House for Children, 1926.

My paternal grandparents immigrated from the Netherlands over a hundred years ago. My father spoke only a little Dutch and visited Holland once. I, a nonspeaker, have been there twice. I've always been fascinated with the culture of this tiny country that would fit nearly two times inside the Texas Panhandle where I live, yet its rich cultural history makes it seem larger than life: *Hans Brinker; or, the Silver Skates: A Story of Life in Holland* is just one fine example. I'm not sure where my parents found this book, but it has been on our family shelves for a long time, I having absconded with it when my parents were no more. And until now, I'm not

sure I've ever read it, or had it read to me. There are little crayon marks my late sister made when she was little, and it sat on her shelf. The illustrations are quaint and in that sense make it a children's book. However, some of the tales are a bit gruesome, and some broach the blunt side of history and politics, making it a book for everyone, I should think.

One tale that has always intrigued me is "The St. Nicholas Legend," which begins like this:

"Every winter the good old bishop, St. Nicholas, comes in his ship over the sea from Spain. And who is that with him? It is his servant, a little Moor, named Black Pete[r]. They are bringing goodies and toys for the children of Holland" (88).

Why? one must ask. For a long time St. Nicholas distributes his gifts in secret until he is discovered, then he spreads his wealth openly. This may be an oddly racist story. I say oddly because it is demeaning, the tale itself employing a racist term: **"But if you want Sinterklaas to come, you must be good. And if ever you see a little black boy, be careful how you treat him. He might be Sinterklaas's darky" (90).** At the same time, the tale sets up a lesson for little white Dutch children: **"These three made fun of the Moor and laughed at his black skin. Then came good Sinterklaas with an ink well, a huge one. He said, 'Come, boys, listen here. Leave that little Moor alone. It is not his fault that he is not white like you.'" (90)** When the boys do not listen to Sinterklaas, he dips them in the ink well, **"black and deep" (90)** to teach them a lesson. But does it? Should having black skin be portrayed as a punishment, something one can't help?

This tale also connects the Netherlands with its Spanish roots, having been subjected for a time to Spain (as well as France):

*Look, yonder comes the schooner,
All the way from Spain.
There stands good St. Nicholas,
Coming back again.
Frisking up and down the deck,
See his horsie go!
How prettily the pennants
Flutter to and fro!
His servant smiles upon us—
With gifts his bags are rich—
Who's good, shall have some goodies,
Who's naughty, gets a switch!*

When I heard this story as a child—it is simply too hard to be *good* all the time—I fully expected to wake up one Christmas morning and find in my stocking (one year it was a wooden shoe) a switch. Maybe that is where my parents departed from the Old World traditions, and I am glad.

Before he retired Basil Moss was my MD for seventeen years, and I found him a kind and sensitive man, the kind of doctor whose staff would work you in if you called early in the morning with, say, a terrible cough or sore throat. Moss imbues that same kindness into his *Tales of the Wichitas*, in which a white boy in 1930s Oklahoma makes friends with a Kiowa Indian boy. Doctor Moss seems to understand the full context of the plight of American Indians, both honoring their history and customs, but more important, their feelings of being made subservient in their own country. It is a white man's successful attempt to understand and share the lives of the Indians who populated his early life.

Sad as it is to say, the edition is marred by about a dozen typos, from misspelled words to misplaced or missing quotations marks to the most egregious one of using "cane" instead of "Cain" in the phrase "raising Cain." These errors belong *not* to Doctor Moss but to the Texas Tech University Press staff, whose copyediting skills are sorely lacking at the time this book is published.

Neruda, Pablo. *Residence on Earth*. With an introduction by Jim Harrison. Translated by Donald D. Walsh. New York: New Directions, 2004.

The translator for this collection, Donald Walsh, in his Translator's Note, cites critic Amado Alonso who declares: **"Instead of the traditional procedure, which describes a reality and suggests its poetic sense between the lines, poets like Neruda describe the poetic sense and nebulously suggest to which reality it refers"** (363). Amen. Instead of moving from the concrete to the abstract or allowing metaphors to emanate from the specific, Neruda seems to dwell, in the bulk of his work, on abstractions or impressionistic articulation of ideas, and one can tend to tune out. However, of course, a number of his poems do catch hold of me for their perceptions of human nature, of the nature of power, particularly political power in mostly Spanish-speaking nations. I particularly admired "Burial in the East," "Single Gentleman," and "Ode to Federico Garcia Lorca." "General Franco in Hell" arrested my attention with its quickly shifting imagery, emphasizing in its closure the utter contempt and hatred for fascist, Franco. All in all, not my cup of spiced tea, but I feel better for having read perhaps Neruda's most notable collection.

O'Neill, Eugene. *Long Day's Journey into Night*. New Haven, Yale UP, 1956.

The "long day" of this play breaks down into four acts, each a number of hours apart on the same day. Though the period may seem long to the audience, to the characters the agony of their pain is eternal.

Act One, 8:30 a.m.: O'Neill spends a page describing the Tyrone home, c1912. He focuses on a bookshelf between two doorways: a picture of Shakespeare hanging above, books by Balzac, Zola, Stendhal, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Engels and others: Plays by Ibsen, Strindberg. Poetry by Swinburne, Wilde, Kipling and more—all having the look of having been read and reread. [Can the audience *see* these titles from their seats?] Perhaps O'Neill wishes to portray the torture some artists experience in life attempting to distill what has happened to them as they strive to create art out of their lives. Everything James Tyrone does affects his entire life: from the way he speaks to his family, sometimes "with an

actor's heartiness" (40) to how he "bows" to the neighbors driving by as he trims a hedge, bowing deep, as he would at the end of a performance. Also, O'Neill may wish to convey that not all artists are commercially successful, like James's wife Mary, whose rheumatism has ruined her once slim piano-playing fingers. Artistry is sometimes driven by a damaged childhood or devastating events that happen (like her morphine addiction).

Act Two, 12:45 p.m.: O'Neill continues to limn James as the actor, approaching life as if he's always on stage. Eldest son Jamie refers to his father James as the Beautiful Voice, scorning his father's "acting" in this context. But Mary seems to be "acting," too, as she pretends she's not under the influence of drugs; it's called denial, but it is an act nonetheless. Ironically, she accuses James of not knowing how to "act" in his home, not putting himself out to help her. Both James and Mary seem to mount the "stage" of their lives as they bicker over the past, what was or wasn't, their lost baby Eugene. All of the characters are on a stage within the story's frame, lying to one another or taking a pose that avoids confrontation and attempts to smooth things over.

Act Three, 6:30 p.m.: The "second girl" Cathleen and Mary engage in a strange conversation in which Cathleen "hears" Mary at times, but Mary is too deep into her own angst to appreciate Cathleen's pain. Then Cathleen enters a monologue about herself as a good girl and hating how the chauffeur "can't keep his dirty hands to himself" (98). Both women seem wrapped up in their own "acts," each on her own stage. Mary is now under the influence after going to town to get "medicine" (morphine) for her rheumatism. She reminisces about meeting James when he was a dashing young actor, at which point she gave up all desire either to become a nun or a concert pianist. When James and Edmund return, drunk, she says she can always tell when he's acting. He's a renowned actor, but she knows when he's acting, i.e. not being real with her. But are her perceptions that good, because of her own substance abuse?

Act Four, 12:00 Midnight: In this act, O'Neill pulls out all the stops, ramping up the "performance" of all four artists, each an "actor" in his or her own right. Not one of the men has really finished his education but ostensibly they have read many of the books on the shelves referenced in Act One. So there is sort of a justification for their citing one master after another: Baudelaire, Dowson, Swinburne, Wilde, Shakespeare, whichever writer seems to justify the views of that character. James Tyrone does everything with great drama; he can't seem to be real, although several times in this act he will become genuine, first with son Edmund (confessing how terrible his childhood was, the Faustian deal he made by accepting \$40,000 royalties each year for his play but not daring to expand his career) and then Jamie. Edmund loves the fog (the foghorn keeps sounding throughout the Act) because it may be his way of handling reality. In the fog and looking back toward his unhappy house, he cannot see the structure; the fog has obscured it. Mary hides in the "fog" of her childhood where she seems to

have been the happiest. It seems that O'Neill may use the word "consumption" instead of tuberculosis or TB because it is a metaphor for how life or certain evils (drink, drugs) "consume" each character. As James and Edmund are playing cards, James keeps referring to their "game," creating a metaphor for the "game" all the family members have played since its formation, playing their roles. Until now, perhaps. They keep stepping up to the line of truth, or perhaps stepping over it for a few minutes, but never really letting the truth register because it is too painful. As the "poet," Edmund has always been in love with death. In part, O'Neill may be attempting (and succeeding) in demonstrating the pain that artists suffer. Whether the poet, the pianist, or the actor, all reach into their bag of past pain to create their art, and yet though they may succeed, they also fail, fail by way of not resolving the pain, whether through religion, drug, or drink.

Parker, Hershel. *Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume I, 1819-1851*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

This biography of the author of *Moby Dick* is all consuming and likable in most respects. Once the reader gets past Melville's childhood and youth—the fact that his father is poor at handling money and dies in middle age, making it impossible for Herman to earn a formal education—the book becomes more enthralling. Keeping straight the large number of Melville's siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins becomes tedious. And anyone looking for exacting truth may be disappointed for whenever author Parker can't nail down the facts concerning Melville's early life, he uses language such as "may have been" "could have walked," "is rumored to have," "may have borrowed," "may, before this, have demonstrated," "a reasonable guess is," "may not have told," "may have been referring," or "31 August is safe enough" (450) to make conjecture. Might Parker have chosen to leave that information out if he wasn't sure?

The chapters and passages concerning the works of Melville—how he researches, how he drafts (his sister is his official copyist), and how he approaches getting published—are entirely engrossing. As a young man of twenty or so, Melville spends more than a year in the South Pacific. From this expedition he mines much material for his first three books: *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Mardi*. One thing that is difficult to believe is that the American press (with highly opinionated and not always qualified critics) question the veracity of his work. Does he really travel to those places, or does he use resource material to "pad" his work? The British press are kinder to him, but it seems that he is always struggling to pacify the whole lot of them. At the same time, he does attract enough positive attention to continue writing. One must realize that Melville, as well as and friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, never made much money during their lifetimes. Melville was always begging or borrowing or dealing to keep his family with an income. Would that the poor man had lived to see his place in literary history or to reap the monetary rewards from his brilliant labors!

Though it sold barely 3,000 copies in his lifetime, *Moby Dick* is the novel for which Melville is most remembered. Here, Parker waxes romantic about his subject (and

deservedly so): “The river of Melville’s reading had long flowed into his conscious mind (indeed, it had overflowed there in the more bookish parts of *Mardi*). Now his profounder reading not only flowed on the surface but was partly diverted into a subterranean river that flowed into the spring of original thought, a spring ready to burst out, under the pressure of the occasion and the time, into *Moby-Dick*, once the interminable voyage was over” (701).

Parker’s Volume I concludes with an extended scene in which Melville presents a copy of *Moby Dick* to Nathaniel Hawthorne so that the man can see that Melville has dedicated the tome to his dear friend and mentor. “Take it all in all, this was the happiest day of Melville’s life” (883). I plan to read Volume II, but I may give it some time!

*Perry, Bruce D. and Oprah Winfrey. *What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing*. New York: Flatiron, 2021.

As the subtitle suggests, Perry and Winfrey exchange ideas concerning childhood trauma. Her words are represented by a pale blue font, and his are in black, making the dialogue more obvious. I’ve read other books about how childhood trauma affects adults in later life, if the trauma is not dealt with in a satisfactory way. I know from my own life that this is true. But this book takes my understanding a bit farther. I now come to realize that the child is both vulnerable to trauma but, under the right circumstances (therapeutic), also resilient. Dr. Perry’s expertise in neuroscience helps expand our understanding of how the brain works. Therapy can help a traumatized child or adult, but the therapist must meet the child at his or her level of brain development. Perry tells the story of one boy whose brain is still functioning at the brainstem level, but he’s older than that chronologically. Oprah courageously shares with readers her lifelong struggle to come to terms with abuse she suffered as a young child. Both writers brought me to tears at several times throughout the book. Oprah tells a story of when she is on a movie set, and the director shoots a scene in which she must tuck in a child at night. They must do it several times, because Oprah keeps going at the situation as if she’s making the bed. The director must finally demonstrate what he means, and Oprah realizes no one ever tucked her in as a child. She had no idea how to do it. The book’s closure involves Oprah sharing with readers how she finally forgives her mother and also resolves other issues on the woman’s deathbed. We all feel the sense of relief and catharsis that Winfrey feels. She had actually been on her way back to California, when she realized she must return to her mother and end things properly. A real act of courage, which, in reading this book, may help others to do the same. When we stop asking “What’s wrong with you?” and instead ask, “What happened to you?” we, as a society, may be in a better position to help our children and adult children to cope with their lives. I don’t say this often: a must read.

Petro, Sylvester. *The Kohler Strike: Union Violence and Administrative Law*. Chicago: Regnery, 1961.

This book that I was assigned to read as a college freshman, lo, many decades ago, manifests itself much differently now. Before I retired from teaching, I belonged to AFT, American Federation of Teachers. Why? Because it offered \$1 million in liability insurance for the cost of my membership, and because it was the only

organization with any strength to fight *for* what teachers need. Having said that, now that I read Petro's account of the Kohler strike, I'm struck by a number of things concerning his writing. One, it seems like a truncated book. At certain points, I wonder why he does not offer more details about why union officials are "dragging their feet," (7) or about the "violence being committed" (15) by union members. As an attorney and law professor, Petro should allow more space to build and illustrate his case rhetorically. The 118 pages read more like a law brief or précis, in which he repeats the verb "held" or the noun "holding" ad nauseam rather than seeking variety in his prose. The book fails to become a persuasive document, largely because he's made up his mind from the beginning that the union and National Labor Relations Board are on the wrong side of the issues. That may well be true (violence on the part of national union members is never acceptable), but by eliminating any union POV, he builds a "false" case, I believe. Since Petro's thesis seems to be embedded in his subtitle—*Union Violence and Administrative Law*—I would expect to learn more about the nature of the union's violence and *how* it interacts with "administrative law," i.e. the NLRB (a government agency). If he does offer certain syllogistic reasoning, it often lacks teeth because of a dearth of evenhandedness or detail. No wonder this was a confusing or boring read to my eighteen-year-old, non-union self back in the day. The book was not done!

* Proulx, Annie. *Barkskins: A Novel*. New York: Scribner, 2016.

How does one begin to talk about such a magnificent saga of more than seven hundred pages? Start big. *Barkskins* (a name for tree choppers) features multiple generations of two French Canadian families: the Sels and the Duquets (later to become the Dukes), as well as the Indians (Mi'kmaw) with whom they intermarry. The family then embark on the timber business. Early in the novel, Proulx informs readers where she's headed (an exposé of the timber industry's evil effects), albeit in a subtle manner: **"With a pointed stone, he [young René Sel] marked the haft with his initial R. As he cut, the wildness of the world receded, the vast invisible web of filaments that connected human life to animals, trees to flesh and bones to grass shivered as each tree fell and one by one the web strands snapped"** (12). This invisible web connecting all life to the fate of trees across our vast globe is what Proulx limns for us, as well as what happens when greed and myopia control such an influential industry (for a certain period, until all the old growth trees are gone).

Proulx does a number of things to make reading this novel a pleasure (I read it aloud to my partner over a period of weeks). In terms of structure, she divides the novel into ten major parts, mostly by broad time periods of twenty-five to seventy years. Within each part she numbers continuous chapters (seventy), each with a telling chapter title—making it possible to digest the novel in small parts. Second, no matter how short appearance a character may make, Proulx creates three-dimensional people readers can relate to. Birth and death are near daily events she treats with objective indifference: **"He was no riverman. Before he could collect his season's pay, he drowned below Wolf Falls and, like countless other fathers, slipped into the past"** (277). Last, Proulx conveys verisimilitude. She has thoroughly researched relevant geography, relevant history, relevant information about the timber industry from its earliest days in Canada and New England to modern efforts to "farm" timber, i.e. plant trees for future generations. Perhaps, most of all,

Proulx makes us love trees, their forests, both extinct and living; all their possible uses besides building building building. Without stooping to didactic methods, she makes us love these leafy beasts, forces us to see how important they have always been and continue to be to the survival of the world.

*Raven, Catherine. *Fox and I: An Uncommon Friendship*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2021.

A woman lives in a blue steel-roofed house she builds in an area of western U.S. wilderness that is at least thirty minutes from any berg that might be called civilized. With a PhD in biology, the woman lives in her crude dwelling year round and teaches at nearby schools. And she lives alone. Only she isn't really. She names two cedar trees on her property Gin and Tonic. She names magpies, one of whom, in a strange scenario, will give up her life on behalf . . . well, that's a spoiler . . . you will want to discover that tale on your own.

This woman, the author, is befriended by a fox, a red fox, a species whose adult male weighs no more than six pounds, and must survive, as parable and history tell us, by their wits and cunning. She often reads to Fox (no article, a no-name unlike her other friends) on his mostly daily trips to her property about four in the afternoon. First, she reads to him from St. Ex's (Antoine Saint-Exupéry's) *The Little Prince*. And later, *Moby Dick*. He seems to be lulled or convinced that she is one of him by the way she does not talk down to him or speak baby talk. He even receives his own sections of the book in which author Raven encourages him to give voice to his point of view (he calls her Hurricane Hands for occasionally extravagant nonverbal communication).

Spoiler: Hurricane Hands loses Fox twice, once in the middle of the book when she sees a mangy dead fox, and once at the end (you know it will happen). Here is the magical portrayal of her mistaken conclusion, when, at one twilight, Fox parades his four kits, the ultimate act of trust, in front of the author:

"In the middle of all that confusion of kits, one furry orange animal was dancing on a boulder. I don't ever need to be happier than I was at that moment when I realized Fox was alive. On the hillside where he was dancing, rivulets rained down from a carnelian cliff and flowed through round-stemmed sedges, not so different from a stretch of the Wonderland Trail that I used to cross on my way to Indian Bar. Those subalpine meadows spread out in my minds' [mind's?] eye, and I remembered bending down to pull salamanders out of ice-cold brooks. When it was too dark to see Fox, even through binoculars, I sat back in my chair, and imagined him dancing all the way back to his den. I had just learned for certain that one fox was not the same as the rest" (161).

Near the end of the book, the author, who has thought so highly of Fox, makes an error by planting a little cactus near her front door where Fox usually lies when he visits. The next time he stops by he says, "Quah," his one-word vocabulary, holds up his paw, then drops it and catches a toenail on the edge of the plant, casting her a look over his back as he retreats. She transplants the cactus again, and Fox thanks her the next day by lying down. Raven tells us that if we wanted to, we could tame

or domesticate foxes within four or five generations. But we shouldn't. Instead, if each of us were to have such an uncommon friendship with just one non-domesticated animal, the world would be transformed to one where loneliness would become obsolete and the natural world would flourish.

Rimpoche, Gendun Chopel. *Good Life, Good Death*, with Gini Alhadef and Mark Magill. With a foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. New York: Riverhead, 2001.

A slim but wise tome for one who wants an introduction to Buddhism and its tenets, particularly with regard to key concepts like attachment and meditation. Rimpoche makes a strong case for making a good life, because it is also related to making for oneself a good death, an inevitability for every one of us.

Salinger, J. D. *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour an Introduction*. Boston: 1959 (1955).

Schiff, Adam. *Midnight in Washington: How We Almost Lost Our Democracy and Still Could*. New York: Random, 2021.

If one followed the two impeachment hearings of ex-president Trump, one became quite well acquainted with the rhetorical skills of Congressman Adam Schiff (D-CA), who led that trial. And one will recognize much of the material he includes in this book but also much, much more. One gets an inside view of what he experienced to reach that point where Trump needed to be impeached. He recreates important scenes on the floor in public; he recreates scenes out of view as he confers with Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other congressional leaders. Reading his account fills out one's view if you only watched it on TV, especially if your viewing was spotty. Most important, however, is the revelation of Adam Schiff's character. Into his narrative are woven personal anecdotes about family members, congressional staff members, and other personalities. These reveal a wholly human and humane person who would make a great speaker of the house or president, should he desire to run.

Shute, Nevil. *On the Beach*. New York: Morrow, 1957.

This novel, which could have worked as a cautionary tale in its publication year, 1957, can still bring shivers to one's spine. In this narrative, the worst has already happened, a vague war begun, by accident, between Russia and China, in which nuclear warfare destroys most of the northern hemisphere. Only the Australians and other South Pacific cultures survive . . . for a while. As we know, such high amounts of radiation kill immediately and keep on killing over weeks and months as its fine particles continue to float to earth. The main characters realize intellectually what will happen but continue to live as if death won't come, racing in a local grand prix, planting a garden one won't benefit from, collecting presents for one's children when one "returns" to his family in America. Shute is deft in creating what looks like denial and yet is a way for characters to cope, until the very end. At that time, little red pills of barbiturates have been distributed like penny candy, and we see each one take his or her dosage and end their lives peacefully. We are made to consider, however, what will happen to the earth itself. After a number of years, so Shute believes, the radiation will clear, the earth will be ready for inhabitation again. It shall repopulate itself with some kind of creatures. The novel has one final

lesson for those living today. Nuclear war is the ultimate global warming, the ultimate in climate change. Forever. The thought should still give us pause.

Salgo, Peter with Joe Layden. *The Heart of the Matter: The Three Key Breakthroughs to Preventing Heart Attacks*. New York: Morrow, 2004.

One shouldn't probably read a book about heart health that is over seventeen years old without searching out more recent sources to compare it with. That said, Salgo promulgates three things for preventing heart attacks: 1) Take statins like Lipitor 2) Take an Aspirin a day and 3) Take antibiotics as a preventative measure because he believes heart attacks can be caused by infections. I, as millions do, have done one and two for a long time, but no cardiologist, no doctor, has ever prescribed wholesale the ingestion of antibiotics (changing each month, as Salgo suggests, so as not to "wear out" the effects of any one drug). That seems a bit excessive to me, and I wouldn't do it (even if I could get the prescriptions) without further investigation. When I was still struggling with acne vulgaris in my twenties, my dermatologist prescribed 1000 mg per day of tetracycline. When my GP found out, he blew his stack, saying that such constant usage could cause kidney damage. I stopped, and I've been suspicious of that kind of usage ever since.

Sillitoe, Alan. *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*. New York: Penguin, 1992 (1959).

I enjoyed this mid-century collection of stories by British writer, Alan Sillitoe, because each male protagonist is a bit different, sometimes very different, from the leading bloke in one of the other eight narratives. Whether it is the sarcasm of the famed title character or one who wonders why his ex-wife has pawned a painting he thought she wanted back for sentimental reasons or the quizzical nature of a young man who narrates Eddie Buller's sad story, each character is honed from Sillitoe's astute observations of human nature.

Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. New York: Duggan, 2018.

A scholarly and erudite book, *The Road to Unfreedom* is a plea for Western peoples to wake up and smell the borscht burning on the stove. Snyder begins with two phrases: *politics of inevitability*, "a sense that the future is just more of the present," and that nothing can be done (7); the other phrase, *politics of eternity* "places one nation at the center of a cyclical story of victimhood" (8). As Snyder develops his thesis that both Europe and American could be on the way to *unfreedom*, he repeatedly weaves into the fabric of his text these two terms. Russia has already traveled down this road, accepted its role as victim, that the world is always out to get Russia. If Europe and America do not pay attention to the signs of fascism or authoritarianism present in their own countries, they, too, could wind up like Russia. For the general reader, this book can be tough reading, but I invite anyone wanting to know what might be wrong with our country to take a look at it.

Trethewey, Natasha. *Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir*. New York: HarperCollins, 2020.

The author's mother was African-American, and her father was a white Canadian. When they divorce, Natasha's mother marries a Black man, who does all he can to

diminish Natasha and her mother. The author not only relies on her memories, which she hides from herself for a long time, but also court case documents and audiotapes, as well as the testimony of others, to write a moving and affecting memoir of her mother's murder by Trethewey's stepfather. A true poet in action because every sentence is as lyrical as a line from poetry.

Wiggerman, Scott. *Presence*. San Antonio: Pecan Grove, 2011.

My favorite poems are those that work from the concrete or physical, and any metaphors that appear, arise naturally from the real. Wiggerman's best poems, I believe, are of that type. In the prescient poem, "Letter to My Father-in-Law," the persona begins with a daring description of having sex with his lover:

I rode your son real hard last night,
broke him like a wild stallion,
head pulled back nostrils wide as moons,
feral cries piercing midnight's marrow.
Both of us panting at breakneck speed,
the rank sweat of man transformed to beast,
effusive as a newly drilled oil well.
You must know about cowboys and oil.

But the poem progresses to "engaging" with his father-in-law-to-be by informing that one day when gay marriage is available in Texas (the prescient part), he will not be invited. The persona has never seen the farm when his lover grew up and ends with the taunting line, "when your son and I get down in your dirt."

*Wright, Frank Lloyd. *An Autobiography*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1998. First published by Duel, Sloan and Pearce in 1943.

I missed out on all the instruction I needed to write my high school research paper because I was in the hospital with a bad case of pneumonia. When I finally did make up the paper, I wrote it on Frank Lloyd Wright. I did not keep the graded copy, and I can only guess that I perhaps did not narrow down my topic enough, but I do recall being very enthusiastic about my research. The great architect had only been gone about six years, and my childhood fascination with him fired up my ambition. I was happy finally to read his autobiography divided into five books, each one perhaps written at the end of a particular era.

Some people talented in one area seem to be good at virtually everything they attempt, and some talented people seem to be natural writers. Frank Lloyd Wright appears to be both. He is not only architect but artist, chef, sommelier, pianist, and humanitarian. Book One is titled "Family," written in the third person, about his childhood and the family members who made it a magical one growing up in Wisconsin. One even gets a good feel for his Welsh ancestry. He begins a book-long examination of "sentiment" vs. "sentimentality." In this passage he speaks of a summer night just after his father has read to him from Poe's *The Raven*:

"Sometimes, after all had gone to bed he would hear that nocturnal rehearsal and the walking—was it evermore?—would fill a tender boyish heart with sadness until a head would bury itself in the pillow to shut it out" (50). The passage is moving but

contains no “sentimentality” (for Wright that may mean the vestiges of Romanticism).

In Book Two, “Fellowship,” Wright begins to write in first person, a young adult looking for and finding work with one of the best architectural firms in Chicago. Either a latent or inherent anti-Semitism seems to influence his thinking at this time as he works alongside others in a crowded drafting room: **“Next table to mine Jean Agnas, a clean-faced Norseman. To the right Eisendrath—apparently stupid. Jewish. Behind me to the left Ottenheimer—alert, apparently bright. Jew too. Turned around to survey the group. Isbell, Jew? Gaylord, no—not. Weydert, Jew undoubtedly. Directly behind, Weatherwax. Couldn’t make him out. In the corner Andresen—Swedish. Several more Jewish faces. Of course—I thought, because Mr. Adler [his boss] himself must be a Jew”** (96). Why the preoccupation with this issue? It may be part of his upbringing, the fact that he was born in 1867. At any rate, he does begin to build a fellowship of young architects to whom he serves as mentor.

A long section, Book Three, covers his life with at least one spouse and a second one in the wings, the building (and burning) of Taliesin I and II in Wisconsin. Wright moves fairly smoothly back and forth through time, including stints in Tokyo, where he builds the Imperial Hotel, innovating construction that will withstand the many earthquakes the region is prone to having. Once again, even though Wright is fond of Asian art and culture, a certain racist language mars the portrayal of his otherwise humanitarian point of view, using terms like **“slant and sloe eyes,”** (197) even when he may believe he’s being complimentary: **“Decorous black eyes slyly slant upon you from every direction as the little artful beings move noiselessly about, grace and refinement in every movement”** (209).

By Book Four, FLW is building Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona, once again working hard to fit his work into the landscape instead of forcing a structure upon it, always preferring “horizontal” to “vertical” buildings of his Usonian vision. One wonders if even the US wouldn’t run out of land if we built everything horizontal.

Book Five seems to be a potpourri of ideas from slamming youth who do not want to work as hard as he did in his youth, Beethoven as a metaphor, a recapitulation of his family ancestry, the introduction of his idea of “gravity heat,” in which, instead of steam registers, heated liquid is piped through concrete floors, and because heat rises, rooms are heated more efficiently. Finally, though, in spite of passages of pomposity and dense abstractions, FLW still remains an interesting figure. I’ve never had a bucket list, per se, but if I were to put one item on it, it would be to visit as many as Wright’s remaining structures as possible. They are that good, that interesting.

One sad note: this Barnes and Noble edition has (by my count) at least twenty typographical errors of varying kinds from misspelled words to words omitted, to subject-verb agreement, to using commas when periods were needed.

[To view entries in alpha order by author, see page 1.]

Date Finished

January: 4 Titles

1/07/21

Trethewey, Natasha. *Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir*. New York: HarperCollins, 2020.

The author's mother was African-American, and her father was a white Canadian. When they divorce, Natasha's mother marries a Black man, who does all he can to diminish Natasha and her mother. The author not only relies on her memories, which she hides from herself for a long time, but also court case documents and audiotapes, as well as the testimony of others, to write a moving and affecting memoir of her mother's murder by Trethewey's stepfather. A true poet in action because every sentence is as lyrical as a line from poetry.

1/25/21

Amis, Martin. *Inside Story—How to Write: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 2020.

I believe this novel falls under the category of metafiction (Google: *fiction in which the author self-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions*). Martin or Mart becomes a character in his own work (à la Christopher Isherwood and others). His self-consciousness revolves around the writing of his own fiction, that of Saul Bellow, and others. As the customary disclaimer in the front matter states, "Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance . . . is entirely coincidental." But how coincidental is it when "Martin" or "Mart" spends much of the book citing characters with real names, people like his father, author Kingsley Amis, people like longtime friend Christopher Hitchens, as well as other famous (Iris Murdoch) and not-so figures?

Amis begins and ends ("Preludial" and "Postludial") the novel by addressing his readers directly, that he is about to give us tips concerning writing techniques. And he does: such advice is scattered throughout the (did I say?) novel, as if indeed, it is a how-to book and not a work of fiction. I like it. It's odd, but I like it. You can't help but believe he is digging down deep to reveal what has worked for him and speaks so authoritatively about writing (and with more than twenty-five books under his belt why shouldn't he?).

However, Amis spends the final 150 pages or so memorializing the life and death of essayist and intimate, Christopher Hitchens. They're both about the same age. Both straight, both with families. Yet they are Platonic lovers. Martin greets Christopher and sometimes leaves him with a kiss. As his fans will know, veteran smoker Hitchens develops throat cancer, and much of this section takes place at Houston's MD Anderson Cancer Center. Amis takes readers through every painful step he witnesses in Hitch's treatment. All to no avail. The man who has always seemed to battle against life and death in equal measures finally succumbs. That is in 2011. Perhaps writing in a fictional mode about this death allows Amis to

conceptualize the work differently than if it were in a nonfiction mode. It allows him to eulogize his friend without getting too sentimental about it.

And yet—true to the title’s promise—Amis, I believe, does offer the writer, especially the writer of novels, some sage advice. Oh, and before I list a few nuggets along these lines, I’d like to say I detest the excessive footnotes, particularly in a work of fiction. Is it a kind of laziness by which the author cannot manage to incorporate his ideas into the main text? Or is it a way of padding an already long book and forcing readers to peruse long passages in teeny-weensy little print? Or is it a way of showing off, of augmenting an already verbose passage even more? At any rate, here are some passages about writing:

“So avoid or minimise any reference to the mechanics of making love—unless it advances our understanding of character or affective situation. All we usually need to know is how it went and what it meant. ‘Caress the detail,’ said Nabokov from the lectern. And it is excellent advice. But don’t do it when you’re writing about sex” (27).

Typo: “obviouly” (221).

“Never use any phrase that bears the taint of the second-hand. All credit to whoever coined *no-brainer* and (I suppose) to whoever coined *go ballistic* and *Marxism lite* and *you rock* and *eye-popping* and *jaw-dropping* and *double whammy* and all the rest of them. Never do it—not even in conversation” (391).

The end of a sentence is a weighty occasion. The end of a paragraph is even weightier (as a general guide, aim to put its best sentence last). The end of chapter is seismic but also more pliant (either put its best paragraph last, or follow your inclination to adjourn with a light touch of the gavel). The end of a novel, you’ll be relieved to learn, is usually straightforward, because by then everything has been decided. And with any luck your closing words will feel preordained (394).

In his *Inside Story* Amis writes about so much more: Philip Larkin’s death, 9-1-1, crises in the Middle East, his life between the early 1980s through 45’s stint as president. Since the work is fiction can we believe “Mart” when he says this will be his last book?

1/28/21

Copland, Aaron. *Music and Imagination: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1951-1952*. New York: New American Library, 1952.

Embarrassingly, I was supposed to have read this book for a pass-fail ½ credit weekly class in college—over fifty years ago. I could only find three lines, in three different chapters, that I underlined. No marginal comments. I don’t believe I read it with any seriousness of intent. And still I got a pass for the class.

On the other hand, I’m not sure that if I had read the book all the way through I would have understood it. Reading it now, after having long-ago earned my degree of music, having listened to serious music as the “gifted” listener Copland lifts up,

having acquired a lifetime of humanities-related experiences, many of his ideas make sense. But was it perhaps too much to ask an eighteen-year-old to read such a book and formulate decent questions for a classroom discussion with a group made up of freshmen through seniors? I'm not sure.

In part, the book now, of course, seems a bit dated. Copland is commenting and writing exactly mid-twentieth century, now seventy years ago. The music he is writing about has now taken its proper place in American music history. The composing of American serious music has moved on beyond even what John Cage and other composers of his period accomplished. On the other hand, precisely because of when Copland writes this book, we now have a bit of history concerning that period of time. He makes interesting judgments about European music juxtaposed with American. And I am able to make informed critiques of my own, for example, when Copland states that though dramatic performances have moved him to tears, seldom to music events. I can't disagree with him more. To listen to Saint Saëns's Third Symphony and Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony and not be moved to tears seems a sacrilege. Now, if it were at all possible, I would like to take that Humanities class again. Now I would have something to say.

1/31/21

Lorca, Federico García. *Five Plays: comedies and Tragicomedies*. Translated by James Graham-Lujan and Richard L. O'Connell. New York: Penguin, 1970.

Quirky little plays tinged with Lorca's poetic touch are well worth the time.

February: 6 Titles

2/03/21

Hall, Donald. *Without*. Boston: Houghton, 1998.

Poet Donald Hall eulogizes his late wife, poet Jane Kenyon, in this explosive yet gentle volume of poetry. From her cancer diagnosis to a year following her death, Hall takes on their ride—for the pain is shared between them—and shares it with readers. Every page is spellbinding in its pursuit of detail. The poet doesn't want to forget, nor does he wish for us to forget. In remembering Jane's life, we are perhaps recalling our own losses. Out of specificity is born the universal. Every poem in this book is exceptional (how could it be otherwise), but my personal favorite is "The Porcelain Couple."

In this poem, Hall memorializes—while leaving Jane alone—to empty out the house of his mother who has just died amid the other turmoil. The persona hurries through the house tossing some items, shipping others, finally stopping to stare at a bit of memorabilia:

and the small porcelain box
from France I found under the tree one Christmas
where a couple in relief stretch out asleep,
like a catafalque, on the pastel double bed
of the box's top, both wearing pretty nightcaps (10).

Not a word is wasted. “Couple in relief” is a solemn double entendre, a pun. “Pastel double bed” is the precise setting. A pro like Hall does not use the word “pretty” unless he means it. And like the nightcaps, it fits the line perfectly.

2/05/21

*Proulx, Annie. *Barkskins: A Novel*. New York: Scribner, 2016.

How does one begin to talk about such a magnificent saga of more than seven hundred pages? Start big. *Barkskins* (a name for tree choppers) features multiple generations of two French Canadian families: the Sels and the Duquets (later to become the Dukes), as well as the Indians (Mi'kmaw) with whom they intermarry. The family then embark on the timber business. Early in the novel, Proulx informs readers where she's headed (an exposé of the timber industry's evil effects), albeit in a subtle manner: **“With a pointed stone, he [young René Sell] marked the haft with his initial R. As he cut, the wildness of the world receded, the vast invisible web of filaments that connected human life to animals, trees to flesh and bones to grass shivered as each tree fell and one by one the web strands snapped” (12)**. This invisible web connecting all life to the fate of trees across our vast globe is what Proulx limns for us, as well as what happens when greed and myopia control such an influential industry (for a certain period, until all the old growth trees are gone).

Proulx does a number of things to make reading this novel a pleasure (I read it aloud to my partner over a period of weeks). In terms of structure, she divides the novel into ten major parts, mostly by broad time periods of twenty-five to seventy years. Within each part she numbers continuous chapters (seventy), each with a telling chapter title—making it possible to digest the novel in small parts. Second, no matter how short appearance a character may make, Proulx creates three-dimensional people readers can relate to. Birth and death are near daily events she treats with objective indifference: **“He was no riverman. Before he could collect his season's pay, he drowned below Wolf Falls and, like countless other fathers, slipped into the past” (277)**. Last, Proulx conveys verisimilitude. She has thoroughly researched relevant geography, relevant history, relevant information about the timber industry from its earliest days in Canada and New England to modern efforts to “farm” timber, i.e. plant trees for future generations. Perhaps, most of all, Proulx makes us love trees, their forests, both extinct and living; all their possible uses besides building building building. Without stooping to didactic methods, she makes us love these leafy beasts, forces us to see how important they have always been and continue to be to the survival of the world.

2/05/21

O'Neill, Eugene. *Long Day's Journey into Night*. New Haven, Yale UP, 1956.

The “long day” of this play breaks down into four acts, each a number of hours apart on the same day. Though the period may seem long to the audience, to the characters the agony of their pain is eternal.

Act One, 8:30 a.m.: O'Neill spends a page describing the Tyrone home, c1912. He focuses on a bookshelf between two doorways: a picture of Shakespeare hanging above, books by Balzac, Zola, Stendhal,

Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Engels and others: Plays by Ibsen, Strindberg. Poetry by Swinburne, Wilde, Kipling and more—all having the look of having been read and reread. [Can the audience see these titles from their seats?] Perhaps O'Neill wishes to portray the torture some artists experience in life attempting to distill what has happened to them as they strive to create art out of their lives. Everything James Tyrone does affects his entire life: from the way he speaks to his family, sometimes “with an actor’s heartiness” (40) to how he “bows” to the neighbors driving by as he trims a hedge, bowing deep, as he would at the end of a performance. Also, O'Neill may wish to convey that not all artists are commercially successful, like James’s wife Mary, whose rheumatism has ruined her once slim piano-playing fingers. Artistry is sometimes driven by a damaged childhood or devastating events that happen (like her morphine addiction).

Act Two, 12:45 p.m.: O'Neill continues to limn James as the actor, approaching life as if he’s always on stage. Eldest son Jamie refers to his father James as the Beautiful Voice, scorning his father’s “acting” in this context. But Mary seems to be “acting,” too, as she pretends she’s not under the influence of drugs; it’s called denial, but it is an act nonetheless. Ironically, she accuses James of not knowing how to “act” in his home, not putting himself out to help her. Both James and Mary seem to mount the “stage” of their lives as they bicker over the past, what was or wasn’t, their lost baby Eugene. All of the characters are on a stage within the story’s frame, lying to one another or taking a pose that avoids confrontation and attempts to smooth things over.

Act Three, 6:30 p.m.: The “second girl” Cathleen and Mary engage in a strange conversation in which Cathleen “hears” Mary at times, but Mary is too deep into her own angst to appreciate Cathleen’s pain. Then Cathleen enters a monologue about herself as a good girl and hating how the chauffeur “can’t keep his dirty hands to himself” (98). Both women seem wrapped up in their own “acts,” each on her own stage. Mary is now under the influence after going to town to get “medicine” (morphine) for her rheumatism. She reminisces about meeting James when he was a dashing young actor, at which point she gave up all desire either to become a nun or a concert pianist. When James and Edmund return, drunk, she says she can always tell when he’s acting. He’s a renowned actor, but she knows when he’s acting, i.e. not being real with her. But are her perceptions that good, because of her own substance abuse?

Act Four, 12:00 Midnight: In this act, O'Neill pulls out all the stops, ramping up the “performance” of all four artists, each an “actor” in his or her own right. Not one of the men has really finished his education but ostensibly they have read many of the books on the shelves referenced in Act One. So there is sort of a justification for their citing one master after another: Baudelaire, Dowson, Swinburne, Wilde, Shakespeare, whichever writer seems to justify the views of that character. James Tyrone does everything with great drama; he can’t seem to be real, although several times

in this act he will become genuine, first with son Edmund (confessing how terrible his childhood was, the Faustian deal he made by accepting \$40,000 royalties each year for his play but not daring to expand his career) and then Jamie. Edmund loves the fog (the foghorn keeps sounding throughout the Act) because it may be his way of handling reality. In the fog and looking back toward his unhappy house, he cannot see the structure; the fog has obscured it. Mary hides in the “fog” of her childhood where she seems to have been the happiest. It seems that O’Neill may use the word “consumption” instead of tuberculosis or TB because it is a metaphor for how life or certain evils (drink, drugs) “consume” each character. As James and Edmund are playing cards, James keeps referring to their “game,” creating a metaphor for the “game” all the family members have played since its formation, playing their roles. Until now, perhaps. They keep stepping up to the line of truth, or perhaps stepping over it for a few minutes, but never really letting the truth register because it is too painful. As the “poet,” Edmund has always been in love with death. In part, O’Neill may be attempting (and succeeding) in demonstrating the pain that artists suffer. Whether the poet, the pianist, or the actor, all reach into their bag of past pain to create their art, and yet though they may succeed, they also fail, fail by way of not resolving the pain, whether through religion, drug, or drink.

2/05/21

Wiggerman, Scott. *Presence*. San Antonio: Pecan Grove, 2011.

My favorite poems are those that work from the concrete or physical, and any metaphors that appear, arise naturally from the real. Wiggerman’s best poems, I believe, are of that type. In the prescient poem, “Letter to My Father-in-Law,” the persona begins with a daring description of having sex with his lover:

I rode your son real hard last night,
 broke him like a wild stallion,
 head pulled back nostrils wide as moons,
 feral cries piercing midnight’s marrow.
 Both of us panting at breakneck speed,
 the rank sweat of man transformed to beast,
 effusive as a newly drilled oil well.
 You must know about cowboys and oil.

But the poem progresses to “engaging” with his father-in-law-to-be by informing that one day when gay marriage is available in Texas (the prescient part), he will not be invited. The persona has never seen the farm when his lover grew up and ends with the taunting line, “when your son and I get down in your dirt.”

2/12/21

Arenas, Reinaldo. *The Doorman*. Translated by Dolores M. Koch. New York: Grove, 1991 (1987).

The more I read of Arenas’s work the more I am charmed by a skilled writer’s use of magical realism. In this instance, Juan, a young Cuban immigrant is hired as

doorman by a fairly exclusive residential hotel in New York City. He does his very best to learn the names of all the occupants and their quirks and preferences. He fetches and messages for them. He does his best to learn the names of all their pets as well, a veritable Noah's Ark from the tiniest to the largest. This odd point is where one begins to sense the leap readers are to make, from reality to magic. The animals begin to speak to Juan in "human language," and at first that seems fine with Juan. But then the situation evolves into something more complicated (no spoilers). Juan is on a spiritual journey to locate a "door" that will lead him and everyone who wants into a better world. Arenas is skilled in dragging along even the most skeptical of us because he has a larger point to make.

2/23/21

Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. New York: Knopf, 1988.

This book of exhaustive research concerning Wilde's life is a pleasure to read from his family history to his imprisonment years later and his resulting exile in France. Prior to reading this book, I had always had the impression that Oscar Wilde's life (except for prison) was one wild ride (pardon the pun). And in some ways it was. He, even after experiencing financial success, was always in want of money, primarily because he was such a spendthrift, spending or giving away money he honestly didn't have. He cared not about what people thought of his extravagant ideas, his extravagant living. Yet Wilde faced great public disapproval of how he lived his life. His only friends were other homosexual men or those liberal enough to accept him. His downfall came in the package of one man, Lord Alfred Douglas, a much younger man, an aristocrat who both loved and used Wilde. If Wilde had never met him, he might have met his match with some other party, but I doubt it. The latter part of Wilde's sad life was battling Douglas's father in court. Lord Percy Douglas, Marquess of Queensberry, managed to have Wilde sent to prison for two years because he didn't want Wilde near his son. Wilde did his prison time, and it broke him, both physically and emotionally. He never wrote anything substantial again, was always begging others for money, and suffered physical ailments that eventually brought on his premature death at forty-six. Ellmann's distinguished book, more than thirty years old now, does great justice to the life of an extraordinary writer who lived, until he could no longer bear the speed of light, entirely ahead of his time.

March: 5 Titles

3/02/21

Butler, Samuel. *The Way of All Flesh*. New York: Random, 1949.

I found this late nineteenth-century novel fascinating for a number of reasons. First, Butler undertakes to explore the centuries-old problem of conflict between fathers and sons. The Pontifex family is indeed a family of priests (how audacious of Butler to further his satire by borrowing the word from Roman times). But dear young Ernest Pontifex does not want to follow in his father's footsteps; and then he eventually does. For a while, anyway. Then he rebels big time, winding up in *gaol* for molesting a woman, at which time his parents disinherit him. Mr. and Mrs. Pontifex have taken the following line of thinking as they raise their children, including Ernest: "If their wills were 'well broken' in childhood, to use an

expression then much in vogue, they would acquire habits of obedience which they would not venture to break through till they were over twenty-one years old” (22).

A number of sources advocate for the idea that Samuel Butler was gay, largely because he never married and seemed to maintain a number of close emotional relationships with men. If the subliminal crumb-droppings of this novel mean anything, Butler leaves all kinds of clues that this assertion may indeed be true (as does Maugham in his *Of Human Bondage*). Ernest’s father, Theobald, says the following: **“It is an unnatural thing for a boy not to be fond of his own father. If he was fond of me I should be fond of him, but I cannot like a son who, I am sure, dislikes me. He shrinks out of my way whenever he sees me coming near him. He will not stay five minutes in the same room with me if he can help it”** (122). Why is Ernest disposed toward this behavior? Probably because elder Pontifex beats Ernest for any number of reasons (his manipulating mother aids in this process). And which comes first, father’s rejection of son, or son’s rejection of father? When does the endless cycle of enmity begin? At any rate, many gay men are rejected by their fathers because they may see something in their sons that they do not like in themselves. Other clues? Ernest does not marry or marries badly (a bigamist, canceling his marriage) because he doesn’t *get* women ; he has no positive feeling for women (especially his mother, though he forgives her in the end); but he does maintain longstanding relationships with various men throughout his life.

Yet, the most interesting aspect of the novel may be Butler’s treatment of the root of all evil, *the way of all flesh*: greed, the lust for money. Readers can locate the plot on the internet, but suffice it to say that Butler makes much (a biting satire) of the British notion of passing on wealth to one’s heirs, or not doing so, which action plays a large role in this novel’s satisfying climax and denouement (the elder Pontifexes get their comeuppance for their poor treatment of son Ernest).

Unlike other authors of this period, Butler writes for the most part in a manner that is simple and easy to follow, yet the novel is far from facile. Butler’s is a story that continues to unfold. It echoes throughout homes in England and around the world.

3/05/21

Dreyer, Benjamin. *Dreyer’s English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style*. New York: Random, 2019.

This book about copyediting offers readers an excellent review if you think you already know the business pretty well, and, if you don’t, then it’s a great place to begin (Dreyer himself includes a list of fine sources). Even so, he makes something like the subjunctive mood (“mood” being a grammatical concept not always taught today) utterly clear (*If I were* vs. *If I was*)—not as rigid as, say, the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Dreyer nevertheless has his pet peeves and his absolutes:

This may be a particular peeve of mine and no one else’s, but I note it, because it’s my book: Name-dropping, for no better reason than to show off, underappreciated novels, obscure foreign films, or cherished indie bands by having one’s characters irrelevantly reading or watching or listening to them is massively sore-thumbish. A novel is not a blog post about Your Favorite Things. If you must do this sort of

thing—and, seriously, must you?—contextualize heavily” (113).

I give Dreyer another thumbs up because he has a broad (flexible and forgiving) understanding of the English language, the concept of rhetoric being one of them. A peeve of *mine* (and he articulates it well) is how people misuse the term “begging the question” in common speech (especially on MSNBC or CNN) *and* writing, mistakenly taking it to mean “raising the question”:

Begging the question, as the term is traditionally understood, is a kind of logical fallacy—the original Latin is *petitio principii*, and no, I don’t know these things off the top of my head; I look them up like any normal human being—in which one argues for the legitimacy of a conclusion by citing as evidence the very thing one is trying to prove in the first place. Circular reasoning, that is” (151). The greatest example from my classical rhetoric text is, “When did you stop beating your wife?” An apparent single premise actually assumes two, one of which is not possible without the other. To stop beating your wife you had to begin at some point, making the question a trap.

At the same time, Dreyer is unusually forgiving about other concepts, some of which cause *me* to grind my teeth. Even a few scientists seem to forget that “data” are plural (hee hee) for “datum.” *The data clearly show ...* (not “shows”). Same with “media.” *The media are* (not “is”) *always talking about how the media are not to blame.* Ah, so satisfying to my ear, and yet Dreyer seems to shrug it off.

Dreyer’s greatest talent may be as wordsmith. He makes this discussion of “continual” vs. “continuous” pellucid: **“Continual” means ongoing but with pause or interruption, starting and stopping, as, say, continual thunderstorms (with patches of amity). “Continuous” means ceaseless, as in a Noah-and-the-Flood-like forty days and forty nights of unrelenting rain” (179).**

He tackles “epigraph” and “epigram”; he tackles “farther” and “further,” and makes their meanings clear. Most of all, Dreyer’s book seems to demonstrate that the copyeditor, far from being captain of the grammar police, exists to take a writer’s finished manuscript and style his or her words to make the final product seem more like the original than the original. In other words, the copyeditor’s work should be invisible. Well done, it seems like magic, particularly to the author.

3/16/21

Bell, Matt. *Appleseed*. New York: HarperCollins, 2021.

Every novel creates an environment of its own. Author Matt Bell does so in spades in this ambitious work of three worlds and how they eventually converge. Slowly you do sense the three strands coming together, especially each time that Chapman and Nathaniel come to live with the Worth family and they witness the payoff of having planted apple trees from seed decades earlier.

Bell alternates chapters by way of individual characters beginning with Chapman and Nathaniel (loosely based on Johnny “Appleseed” Chapman and brother Nathaniel Chapman). This strand is set in the 1700s and traces the two brothers as

they prepare acres and acres of apple nurseries in Ohio and surrounding states, planting individual seeds rather than using grafting—to earn money in the future. Bell makes Chapman’s character even more legendary by creating him as half human/half faun (a mythological character, not a *fawn*).

The other two strands—a science-fiction thread set in the latter half of this century, and a thousand years from now when the earth is experiencing a new ice age, creating an environmental plea—alternate back and forth between the Appleseed thread until the cataclysmic climax and almost languorous denouement. Readers must trust author Bell, that he knows what he is doing because at times you feel as if you’re on a runaway roller coaster ride that won’t end. And the fact that he releases details gradually makes the speculative and sci-fi aspects of the novel more believable, more easily woven into its fabric (and your memory). At one point, he lists five and a half pages of what have become extinct species, and you make yourself read every one of them, to the experience the pain of what it would (will?) be like to lose that many creatures in the future.

Bell creates the novel’s own vocabulary, much like Anthony Burgess does in his *A Clockwork Orange* and other works—they are endemic to that novel. Words like “rewilder” (persons attempting to rebuild the natural world); Sacrifice Zone; Volunteer Agricultural Community (VAC); advertainments; nanoswarms; macrofarms; barkspot; no-when; somewhen. Just a few. (The publisher might wish to include a glossary in the back, in a final edition.) Bell makes a good practice of recapping or summarizing backstory so readers know where they are in the sweep of things.

Perhaps because this copy is the publisher’s “advance reader’s edition,” (I received it as a Goodreads giveaway fulfilled by HarperCollins) it may feature more than its fair share of typographical errors, but I list the ones I found because it’s a thing I do:

Typo: “hope are” (184) should be “hopes are”

Typo: “unlike t he one” (232) should be “the”

Typo: “Chapman say_,” (297) should be “says”

Typo: “Eury most not expect” (311) should be “Eury must not expect”

Typo: “if Earthtrust was a country” (362) should be “if Earthtrust is a country” to be consistent with contextual use of present tense.

Reading *Appleseed* is a big ask, not so much on the part of the author (who is excused on the basis of creative control) or the publisher but on the part of literature itself. One must approach the novel with an open mind, especially if you don’t often read fantasy, sci-fi, or speculative fiction. Bell produces a phrase that might just rise up as a slogan for our earth’s future: *Either we all survive, or no one does* (159). Frightening but possibly true.

3/24/21

*Kendi, Ibram X. and Keisha N. Blain, eds. *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019*. New York: One World, 2021.

This auspicious tome opens with one distinguished author/editor and closes with

another writing about the collection of essays they have amassed. Kendi begins: **“Racist power constructed the Black race—and all the Black groups. *Them*. Racist power kept constructing Black America over four hundred years . . . [*w/e* constructed, again and again. *Them* into *we*, defending the Black American community to defend all the individuals in the community. *Them* became *we* to allow *I* to become *me*”** (xvii). One hundred scholars each represent or write about four-year increments of Black history beginning, of course, in 1619, when twenty black-skinned people arrive on the shores of Jamestown, Virginia, aboard the (how bitterly ironic) *White Lion*. There the pernicious practice of slavery begins in the United States of America. Each of the book’s ten sections ends not with an essay but with a powerful poem, lending the quality of a Greek chorus to the collection, voices telling truths that prose perhaps cannot.

This collection possesses many positives: scholarship and research; eloquence the one hundred varied voices (some angry, some solemn, some patient and considered) lend to the gigantic mosaic or puzzle of lost American history. The most poignant moments of clarity may arrive when some overlooked gem of our stinking history is thrust up in our noses . . . and we must not turn away for it is a stench African-Americans have lived with for centuries—if not in their direct memory then within the cells of their punished bodies.

Some of these elusive facts: 1) In the early 1700s there existed the term *maroon*, a runaway slave; the accompanying form, *marronage* meaning extricating oneself from slavery— which caused American slave owners no small amount of worry. 2) **“Georgia was the only colonial region that issued a ban on slavery from its inception in 1733”** (150). 3) **“While many historians describe Reconstruction as a period of ‘racial unrest’ marked by lynchings and ‘race riots,’ it was undoubtedly a war. The network of terror cells that sprang up during Reconstruction was no different from the organized militias of the American Revolution or the ragtag Confederate squads”** (235). The Civil War, in other words, has never really ended. The U.S. did not have the guts or will to return troops in the South to enforce Reconstruction policy, thus giving the South a back-door victory. 4) 1.2 million Black men and women served in WWII but came home to no hero’s welcome (307). 5) **“Ella Baker, someone who should be much better known, was critical in the organizing that emerged from the sit-ins. Her activism brought together generations of Black struggle. The 1960 surge in youth activism drew her immediate attention . . . Baker was the SCLC’s temporary executive director and one of the South’s most respected political organizers. As the NAACP director of branches in the 1940s, she had organized chapters throughout the region”** (326). 6) **“The real story was that the real estate industry and mortgage bankers were fleecing African Americans with an assist from an utterly passive federal government”** (337). 7) **“In Clarence Thomas, a forty-three-year-old African American Republican from Pinpoint, Georgia, with only two years of experience as a federal judge, Bush found the ideal candidate to help him appeal to both these constituencies [white conservatives and right-leaning Blacks]”** (361). 8) **“In 2019 alone, more than 250 people in the United States were killed in mass shootings. The overwhelming majority of the shooters were white nationalists”** (385).

Co-editor Blain states in her conclusion to *Four Hundred Souls*: **“From police violence and mass incarceration to voter suppression and unequal access to housing, the social and economic disparities that shape contemporary Black life are all legacies of slavery and colonialism”** (391). If only we could motivate our congress to realize this fact and begin to allow the country to teach history in its full ugly truthfulness (as well as the beauty of democracy when it works), only then may we continue and then finish Reconstruction, a reconstruction of Black lives that must include every last descendant of a slave in this country.

3/26/21

Jones, Robert Jr. *The Prophets*. New York: Putnam's, 2021.

This tremendous first novel seems at once both realistic and impressionistic in its articulation. The former because Jones's portrayal of slave life in the nineteenth-century American South stinks with human toil and sweat, both black and white: **“Mississippi only knew how to be hot and sticky”** (27). The only relief may be the Biblical-like Yazoo River's coolness. The novel is impressionistic in large part because it is as nonlinear as a novel can get: there are slave ancestors, the lives of a female king, whose descendants populate this hot and sweaty setting. If readers think this is only a novel about two young male slaves who have “grown up” together on the Halifax plantation (slaves call it “Empty” or “That Fucking Place”) and become lovers at a young age, may they soon discover their mistake. Single chapters are devoted to various characters within this “kingdom” of depraved corruption of Capitalism. Slaves tell their own truth. Owners live out their own truths: their indifference to pain (except their own), their greed, their ultimate unhappiness brought on by the shame and disgust they must feel (deep inside and unrecognized) at the mistreatment of fellow human beings.

In this book, sex between Samuel and Isiah isn't sex but a stunning line of poetry that indicates what has happened: their red-and-white barn is an Edenic setting for their love. You sense the act has taken place but it is communicated with ease and subtlety. Neither is the sex graphic, nor is it quotidian, like, say, John Cheever's *Then they rolled over and went to sleep*.

I believe I shall read this novel again and again. More than ever, white people need to wake up and see what a terrible blight slavery has been on our country's history, how its stories cripple our present and our future if we fail to deal with slavery's legacy. Jones's novel opens wide a window into our history by way of a beautiful and savage piece of art that will only unfold more as time passes.

April: 7 Titles

4/01/21

Sillitoe, Alan. *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*. New York: Penguin, 1992 (1959).

I enjoyed this mid-century collection of stories by British writer, Alan Sillitoe, because each male protagonist is a bit different, sometimes very different, from the leading bloke in one of the other eight narratives. Whether it is the sarcasm of the famed title character or one who wonders why his ex-wife has pawned a painting he thought she wanted back for sentimental reasons or the quizzical nature of a young

man who narrates Eddie Buller's sad story, each character is honed from Sillitoe's astute observations of human nature.

4/06/21

* Kawabata, Yasunari. *The Master of Go*. Translated by Edward G. Seidensticker. New York: Vintage, 1972 (1951).

Western readers should probably read more eastern literature, myself included; it would give us a broader view of the world. Wikipedia defines the game of Go in this manner: "Go is an abstract strategy board game for two players in which the aim is to surround more territory than the opponent. The game was invented in China more than 2,500 years ago and is believed to be the oldest board game continuously played to the present day."

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_\(game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_(game)). In this book (hybrid of novel and nonfiction), the game has moved to Japan. For Kawabata the game of Go provides a wonderful extended metaphor for one man's life. Shusai, Master of Go, spends time toward the end of his life in battle with a player named Otaké, a fine player but hypochondriacal man. The game moves from venue to venue, where players may take hours to decide a play, where weeks may pass before the continuation of the game. There are end notes that help to explain the game. A brief but head-spinning read.

4/07/21

Neruda, Pablo. *Residence on Earth*. With an introduction by Jim Harrison. Translated by Donald D. Walsh. New York: New Directions, 2004.

The translator for this collection, Donald Walsh, in his Translator's Note, cites critic Amado Alonso who declares: "**Instead of the traditional procedure, which describes a reality and suggests its poetic sense between the lines, poets like Neruda describe the poetic sense and nebulously suggest to which reality it refers**" (363). Amen. Instead of moving from the concrete to the abstract or allowing metaphors to emanate from the specific, Neruda seems to dwell, in the bulk of his work, on abstractions or impressionistic articulation of ideas, and one can tend to tune out. However, of course, a number of his poems do catch hold of me for their perceptions of human nature, of the nature of power, particularly political power in mostly Spanish-speaking nations. I particularly admired "Burial in the East," "Single Gentleman," and "Ode to Federico Garcia Lorca." "General Franco in Hell" arrested my attention with its quickly shifting imagery, emphasizing in its closure the utter contempt and hatred for fascist, Franco. All in all, not my cup of spiced tea, but I feel better for having read perhaps Neruda's most notable collection.

4/10/21

Johnson, Denis. *Train Dreams*. New York, Picador, 2002.

This novella of 116 pages is an ode to the early twentieth century mountain West. A simple man who participates in pursuing, in 1917, a Chinese railroad laborer accused of stealing money, Robert Grainier lives into his eighties, dying in 1968. During that span of time, he may experience more change than most of his ancestors do during their eighty years. He moves through life as a single man, not much bothered about it, until one day he meets a woman he likes. Feelings are mutual, and they marry, having a daughter within a short time. When he returns

from a work journey, he finds himself in the maelstrom of a tremendous fire, one that has taken his single acre of land along with his wife and child. For the rest of his life, as he returns to his acre (it will never look the same), he muddles through, dream-like, his life melding with the wild creatures surrounding him. The book is filled with sensual details which allow the reader to live vicariously through an epoch that no longer exists. A beautiful prose poem.

4/12/2

Adams, Henry. *The Education of Henry Adams*. USA: Seven Treasures, 2009 (1907).

4/18/21

Petro, Sylvester. *The Kohler Strike: Union Violence and Administrative Law*. Chicago: Regnery, 1961.

This book that I was assigned to read as a college freshman, lo, many decades ago, manifests itself much differently now. Before I retired from teaching, I belonged to AFT, American Federation of Teachers. Why? Because it offered \$1 million in liability insurance for the cost of my membership, and because it was the only organization with any strength to fight *for* what teachers need. Having said that, now that I read Petro's account of the Kohler strike, I'm struck by a number of things concerning his writing. One, it seems like a truncated book. At certain points, I wonder why he does not offer more details about why union officials are "dragging their feet," (7) or about the "violence being committed" (15) by union members. As an attorney and law professor, Petro should allow more space to build and illustrate his case rhetorically. The 118 pages read more like a law brief or précis, in which he repeats the verb "held" or the noun "holding" ad nauseam rather than seeking variety in his prose. The book fails to become a persuasive document, largely because he's made up his mind from the beginning that the union and National Labor Relations Board are on the wrong side of the issues. That may well be true (violence on the part of national union members is never acceptable), but by eliminating any union POV, he builds a "false" case, I believe. Since Petro's thesis seems to be embedded in his subtitle—*Union Violence and Administrative Law*—I would expect to learn more about the nature of the union's violence and *how* it interacts with "administrative law," i.e. the NLRB (a government agency). If he does offer certain syllogistic reasoning, it often lacks teeth because of a dearth of evenhandedness or detail. No wonder this was a confusing or boring read to my eighteen-year-old, non-union self back in the day. The book was not done!

4/29/21

Akhtar, Ayad. *Homeland Elegies: A Novel*. New York: Little, Brown, 2020.

This is one of the most enjoyable and yet profound contemporary novels I have read in a long time. I had to keep reminding myself that it was indeed a novel, so interwoven is the plot with events we've all lived through in the last twenty years. The protagonist's parents, both physicians, move from Pakistan to Staten Island in the early 1960s. When he is still young, the family relocates in Wisconsin. Throughout, readers get a feel for what it is like to live in America if you are not white-skinned, if you speak with an accent, or in any way attempt to retain religious or cultural customs from your former country. Not pleasant, to say the least. At one point the car of the protagonist (by now a renowned playwright) breaks down in

Scranton, PA. He is directed by a kindly highway patrolman (ah, good) to a mechanic who turns out to be related to the patrolman (uh oh). He is quoted a particular price for one problem, but when he picks up his car, he ascertains there is a second problem he's not been informed about and is charged almost three times the original quote. He must phone his bank and make arrangements to raise his credit card level (and interest rate) to cover the cost. The white-skinned reader must take note. This part is NOT fiction; this sort of explicit bias happens every day to dark-skinned, "other" people in America. People who work hard, people who pay their taxes, people who try hard to color inside the lines but somehow come up short in the eyes of so-called natives (whose ancestors were immigrants). The novel is really about how this man and his father handle their American lives differently: one an elegy for Pakistan and one for the USA. It is worth every minute of the reader's time to live vicariously through these brave souls who come to American to build a better life. Theirs are true profiles in courage.

May: 6 Titles

5/04/21

*Flores, Dan. *The Horizontal Yellow: Nature and History in the Near Southwest*. Albuquerque: U of NM Press.

First of all, I love that Flores takes possession of this subject right away with the term, "Near Southwest"—a region stretching from eastern Louisiana and including all of Texas and New Mexico. I come over twenty years late to reading this elegantly scripted book about the area's ecology, but the ideas he expresses here seem to gain urgency as time passes. Flores alternates sections of family history (French and Spanish) and other histories with first-hand accounts of living, say, on the Llano Estacado, as well as poetic and lyrical sections of fiction to bring alive said histories. Flores is always on the move. After advanced schooling at Texas A&M, he explores, to mention a few places, the Chihuahuan desert, the Southern Plains of Texas (Llano Estacado or Steaked Plains), Abiquiu, New Mexico—finally lighting in Montana. But the Horizontal Yellow of which he speaks is the once real, now metaphorical, wave of yellowing grasses that cover what locals call, with a certain inelegance, the South Plains. It is where he builds a primitive place to live in Yellow House Canyon, about thirty minutes from where he teaches at the local university. It is where he lives with two wolf-dog hybrids as their alpha male (a role he doesn't particularly relish; it's the critters' idea). It is a place remaining in his heart as he makes his home up north, where he can establish and retain a closeness to nature that the Texas South Plains has mostly expunged from its existence. His is an admired life but one I'm not sure I could pursue myself. I adore my life in town—Internet, TV, central heat and air—a bit too much.

5/09/21

Groom, Winston. *A Storm in Flanders. The Ypres Salient, 1914-1918: Tragedy and Triumph on the Western Front*. New York: Grove, 2002.

The author of *Forrest Gump* changes his hat to historian here. In 276 pages he does a superb job of summarizing this one battle of World War I. In some ways the war is a family squabble: **“England's George V, Russia's Nicholas II, and Germany's William II were all cousins, either directly or through marriage, descendants of England's Queen Victoria” (6)**. Mostly, Groom documents the

wastage: the millions of soldiers' lives lost on all sides, the Brits, the Belgians, the French, and the Germans. (Not to mention civilians, the Canadians, and others who aid the Allies.) The huge "puddles" caused by shelling and excessive rain. The Christmas where all fighting stops and soldiers from both sides "celebrate" together. (What? you ask.) The lack of quality leadership on all sides. One failure passes off his work to another failure of leadership. And the only people who suffer are the men in the ranks and civilians. I don't know about the Triumph Groom references in his title (except that the Allies "win"), but there is certainly a lot of Tragedy. Millions of people of one generation are never able to see their lives come to fruition, mostly through the hubris of a few men.

5/13/21

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. With an introduction and Notes by Susan Ostrov Weisser. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003 (1847).

I've always been a sucker for an orphan story. I just can't seem to pass them up: Dickens. John Irving. And character Jane Eyre's story is no exception. Only the revered novel isn't just any orphan story. It begins that way, of course, with the death of both her parents, whose importance will make itself clear later. No, it is the life this strong, young, independent woman builds for herself that is most important. She learns early to stand up for herself, but her actions get her into trouble first with the Reed family who have been forced by a dead relative's request to take her in. Then she is hauled off to a school for poor children, where she again stands up to the authorities until she learns that cooperation will take her much farther in life. Having acquired a certain gentility, she becomes a governess for apparently a bachelor's young charge. From this point on, readers see Jane Eyre struggle to do what she believes is right for her against others who wish to use her for their own designs. Her story is remarkable, and it is easy to see why this novel is one of the most widely read and re-read in the world. No spoilers here.

5/24/21

Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. New York: Vintage, 1991 (1948).

I read this book, in part, to see what, if any, light it might shed on the world's 2020-2021 Covid pandemic. I found some interesting parallels. The city of Oran, Algiers, 194_ of Part One seems to echo our country's actions concerning a local epidemic, the first signal of which is the estimated death of 40,000 rats: lack of clarity about what the disease is and what needs to be done. In Part Two, the gates of Oran close: **"One of the most striking consequences of the closing of the gates was, in fact, this sudden deprivation befalling people who were completely unprepared for it" (67)**. The natural impulse seems to be to shut out the rest of the world. People, indeed, do not know what is happening. *Go to work or not? Keep my children out of school? Oh, the schools have been closed.* **"The Prefect's riposte to criticisms echoed by the press—Could not the regulations be modified and made less stringent?—was somewhat unexpected" (78)**. In 2020, we demonstrate similar behavior: **"At first the fact of being cut off from the outside world was accepted with a more or less good grace, much as people would have put up with any other temporary inconvenience that interfered with only a few of their habits. But, now they had abruptly become aware that they were undergoing a sort of incarceration under that blue dome of sky, already beginning to sizzle in the fires of summer,**

they had a vague sensation that their whole lives were threatened by the present turn of events, and in the evening, when the cooler air revived their energy, this feeling of being locked in like criminals prompted them sometimes to foolhardy acts” (100). Indeed. Partying at crowded bars and restaurants? Attending large political gatherings? In Oran, the number of deaths seem to increase exponentially day by day. There is conflict about how to handle their situation: **“Cottard stared at him in a puzzled manner, and Tarrou went on to say that there were far too many slackers, that their plague was everybody’s business, and everyone should do his duty. For instance, any able-bodied man was welcome in the sanitary squads”** (157). Sounds similar to 2020: *Just wear the damn mask. Or, You can’t tell me what to do, you’re infringing on my freedom.* By Part III the people of Oran, Algeria realize that the plague has swallowed up “everything and everyone.” There are no longer individual destinies, only a collective destiny, burying the dead, recycling coffins because enough new ones cannot be manufactured fast enough. Cemeteries are outgrown as it were. In 2020, CNN and MSNBC mount graphics each day of the number of Covid cases, the number of deaths. People of Oran become apathetic: *Que sera, sera. If I die I die.* Sound familiar in 2020? Part IV of the novel depicts the exhaustion—physical, mental, and emotional—that the people of Oran are now experiencing after months of trauma. **“Whenever any of them spoke through the mask, the muslin bulged and grew moist over the lips. This gave a sort of unreality to the conversation; it was like a colloquy of statues”** (209). No wonder everyone becomes sick of masks! We can’t always understand one another, can’t see other’s expressions as to what they are thinking. Though protected by the mask, we are dehumanized by it as well. Part IV is highlighted with a touching moment between Dr. Rieux and his friend and patient, a Father Paneloux, after a child dies by way of an excruciating but tender description by Camus. You know more death is coming. Yes, the priest, too, dies. It is in Part IV that the plague becomes a larger thing, a metaphor for the decay potentially inherent in all humans. Part V provides a sad denouement in which the plague whimpers to an end, but not before the good doctor who has worked tirelessly experiences the loss of his wife (who is caught in another town throughout the entire epidemic) as well as a close friend. Dr. Rieux ends the novel’s narrative with these thoughts: **“And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city”** (308). Whoa! What? you say. We could face more pandemics in the future? Simply, yes, especially if the *rats* shop with us.

5/27/21

Doty, Mark. *Atlantis: Poems*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

As always, superb poems. The collection opens up both the micro and macro views of marine or shore life. If we all saw life as comprehensively and lovingly as poets, we’d be a better people worldwide.

5/29/21

Cheever, Benjamin, Ed. *The Letters of John Cheever*. New York: Simon, 1988.

This collection of letters from the 1930s to 1982 is as much about the editor, John Cheever's eldest son, as it is about the senior writer. So many times in reading a compendium of letters, one is left alone to solve certain puzzles the letters may contain. For most letters Benjamin Cheever glosses events, dates, but most important, personalities, and by doing so he allows readers a deeper view into his father's letters, his father's life, the life of their family: John Cheever's wife, Mary; daughter Susan, Benjamin, and a second son Fred (born Federico in Italy).

Having read Cheever's journals some years ago, I again encountered his wicked wit, in which he slices humanity a new asshole but also a humane man who loves that very flawed humanity and is kind enough to portray his characters that way. For the wicked sense of humor: **"About a month ago Mary took a job teaching English at Sarah Lawrence two days a week and so she journeys out to Bronxville on Tuesday and Fridays and comes home with a briefcase full of themes written by young ladies named Nooky and Pussy" (124).** Or this, with a scintilla of rage: **"I got back to work on the book about a month ago, but was dealt some crushing financial blows three weeks later and now I'm back in the short story business. I want to write short stories like I want to fuck a chicken" (125).** And a sweet cat story: **"The cat, after your leaving him, seemed not certain of his character or his place and we changed his name to Delmore which immediately made him more vivid. The first sign of his vividness came when he dumped a load in a Kleenex box while I was suffering from a cold. During a paroxysm of sneezing I grabbed for some kleenex [sic]. I shall not overlook my own failures in this tale but when I got the cat shit off my face and the ceiling I took Delmore to the kitchen door and drop-kicked him into the clothesyard" (235).** But ultimately, as I said, Cheever loves humanity and declares as much by way of a *Time* magazine interview chronicling his career: **"My sense of literature is a sense of giving not diminishment. I know almost no pleasure greater than having a piece of fiction draw together disparate incidents so that they relate to one another and confirm that feeling that life itself is a creative process, that one thing is put purposefully upon another, that what is lost in one encounter is replenished in the next, and the we possess some power to make sense of what takes place" (240).** Now for the sex part of this profile: Editor Ben, eldest son to Cheever, discovers that his father is not bisexually bicurious in a furtive shameful sort of way but has had sexual-emotional relationships with many different men over his lifetime. Cheever's letters attest to having done the deed with (grad student of Cheever's) Allan Gurganus (about his son's age) and photographer Walker Evans about whom he tells this story: **"When I was twenty-one Walker Evans invited me to spend the night at his apartment. I said yes. I dropped my clothes (Brooks). He hung his (also Brooks) neatly in a closet. When I asked him how to do it he seemed rather put off. He had an enormous cock that showed only the most fleeting signs of life. I was ravening. I came all over the sheets, the Le Corbusier chair, the Matisse Lithograph and hit him under the chin. I gave up at around three, dressed and spent the rest of the night on a park bench near the river" (304).**

I must say that I admire John Cheever's zest for life, an enthusiasm he did not

relinquish until the day he died. And even then?

June: 3 Titles

6/18/21

Haslett, Adam. *Imagine Me Gone: A Novel*. New York: Little Brown, 2016.

Having loved Haslett's previous work (I loved *Union Atlantic*), I jumped in with all limbs once again, and I was not disappointed. In this novel, an American woman meets a British man, they marry, and settle down for a time in London. All three of their children are born there but wind up being raised in New England, where the mother is from. The father is apparently normal (wife gets one big hint he is *not* just prior to the wedding, but she does not change her plans) until he is *not*—first losing his career and then sinking into a deep depression. He's a kind man, a good husband and father, but he wanders into the woods and kills himself. One no longer has to *imagine him gone*. The title become a multifaceted jewel in which each member (as the first-person POV indicates) *can* imagine such a thing for themselves.

Another great feature of the novel is that Haslett passes the narration around from family member to family member, thus lighting every corner of this household (the first person is subjective and messy, but that may be Haslett's intent). Michael is the eldest child, a brilliant person, who, in one chapter writes letters to his aunt about their transatlantic voyage from America to England, letters parodying perhaps the writing of Oscar Wilde; they are that hilarious. The facts are all there, but he is letting the reader know this is how he expresses himself best—at a sardonic slant. Celia may be the most sensible and peacemaking of the three siblings, winds up being a shrink. Alec, the youngest, finally comes out as gay. I like that his story does not take over the novel, that it is just one of five narratives, yet it is handled as sensitively and fully as the others.

The dynamic that sets the tone for this family is how everyone deals with Michael, who has difficulty establishing himself in a career, is always in debt and dependent on his family for help—a family that through the very end is willing to sacrifice everything to save him. Michael is an ultrasensitive person, feeling the hurts of the world yet a bit deaf to the needs of his family. His character is the one who determines the lives of the other four: his actions, his failures, his medical complications, his addictions. The tragic ending is both expected and not. Michael is obviously on a downward spiral, but one hopes, as do all his family, that he will pull out of the dive before it's too late.

6/21/21

Moss, Basil. *Tales of the Wichitas*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1997.

Before he retired Basil Moss was my MD for seventeen years, and I found him a kind and sensitive man, the kind of doctor whose staff would work you in if you called early in the morning with, say, a terrible cough or sore throat. Moss imbues that same kindness into his *Tales of the Wichitas*, in which a white boy in 1930s Oklahoma makes friends with a Kiowa Indian boy. Doctor Moss seems to understand the full context of the plight of American Indians, both honoring their

history and customs, but more important, their feelings of being made subservient in their own country. It is a white man's successful attempt to understand and share the lives of the Indians who populated his early life.

Sad as it is to say, the edition is marred by about a dozen typos, from misspelled words to misplaced or missing quotations marks to the most egregious one of using "cane" instead of "Cain" in the phrase "raising Cain." These errors belong *not* to Doctor Moss but to the Texas Tech University Press staff, whose copyediting skills are sorely lacking at the time this book is published.

6/28/21

Miller, Olive Beaupré, ed. With illustrations by Maud and Miska Petersham. *Tales Told in Holland*. Chicago: Book House for Children, 1926.

My paternal grandparents immigrated from the Netherlands over a hundred years ago. My father spoke only a little Dutch and visited Holland once. I, a nonspeaker, have been there twice. I've always been fascinated with the culture of this tiny country that would fit nearly two times inside the Texas Panhandle where I live, yet its rich cultural history makes it seem larger than life: *Hans Brinker; or, the Silver Skates: A Story of Life in Holland* is just one fine example. I'm not sure where my parents found this book, but it has been on our family shelves for a long time, I having absconded with it when my parents were no more. And until now, I'm not sure I've ever read it, or had it read to me. There are little crayon marks my late sister made when she was little, and it sat on her shelf. The illustrations are quaint and in that sense make it a children's book. However, some of the tales are a bit gruesome, and some broach the blunt side of history and politics, making it a book for everyone, I should think.

One tale that has always intrigued me is "The St. Nicholas Legend," which begins like this:

"Every winter the good old bishop, St. Nicholas, comes in his ship over the sea from Spain. And who is that with him? It is his servant, a little Moor, named Black Pete[r]. They are bringing goodies and toys for the children of Holland" (88).

Why? one must ask. For a long time St. Nicholas distributes his gifts in secret until he is discovered, then he spreads his wealth openly. This may be an oddly racist story. I say oddly because it is demeaning, the tale itself employing a racist term: **"But if you want Sinterklaas to come, you must be good. And if ever you see a little black boy, be careful how you treat him. He might be Sinterklaas's darky" (90).** At the same time, the tale sets up a lesson for little white Dutch children: **"These three made fun of the Moor and laughed at his black skin. Then came good Sinterklaas with an ink well, a huge one. He said, 'Come, boys, listen here. Leave that little Moor alone. It is not his fault that he is not white like you.'" (90)** When the boys do not listen to Sinterklaas, he dips them in the ink well, **"black and deep" (90)** to teach them a lesson. But does it? Should having black skin be portrayed as a punishment, something one can't help?

This tale also connects the Netherlands with its Spanish roots, having been subjected for a time to Spain (as well as France):

*Look, yonder comes the schooner,
 All the way from Spain.
 There stands good St. Nicholas,
 Coming back again.
 Frisking up and down the deck,
 See his horsie go!
 How prettily the pennants
 Flutter to and fro!
 His servant smiles upon us—
 With gifts his bags are rich—
 Who's good, shall have some goodies,
 Who's naughty, gets a switch!*

When I heard this story as a child—it is simply too hard to be *good* all the time—I fully expected to wake up one Christmas morning and find in my stocking (one year it was a wooden shoe) a switch. Maybe that is where my parents departed from the Old World traditions, and I am glad.

July: 4 Titles

7/04/21

Atwood, Margaret. *Selected Poems*. New York: Simon, 1976.

An honor to read this collection spanning a decade and six collections. Atwood's poetry, like her prose, is raw in some places and delicate in others, with many nuances in between. Glad I took the time.

7/07/21

*Wright, Frank Lloyd. *An Autobiography*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1998. First published by Duel, Sloan and Pearce in 1943.

I missed out on all the instruction I needed to write my high school research paper because I was in the hospital with a bad case of pneumonia. When I finally did make up the paper, I wrote it on Frank Lloyd Wright. I did not keep the graded copy, and I can only guess that I perhaps did not narrow down my topic enough, but I do recall being very enthusiastic about my research. The great architect had only been gone about six years, and my childhood fascination with him fired up my ambition. I was happy finally to read his autobiography divided into five books, each one perhaps written at the end of a particular era.

Some people talented in one area seem to be good at virtually everything they attempt, and some talented people seem to be natural writers. Frank Lloyd Wright appears to be both. He is not only architect but artist, chef, sommelier, pianist, and humanitarian. Book One is titled "Family," written in the third person, about his childhood and the family members who made it a magical one growing up in Wisconsin. One even gets a good feel for his Welsh ancestry. He begins a book-long examination of "sentiment" vs. "sentimentality." In this passage he speaks of a

summer night just after his father has read to him from Poe's *The Raven*: **"Sometimes, after all had gone to bed he would hear that nocturnal rehearsal and the walking—was it evermore?—would fill a tender boyish heart with sadness until a head would bury itself in the pillow to shut it out" (50).** The passage is moving but contains no "sentimentality" (for Wright that may mean the vestiges of Romanticism).

In Book Two, "Fellowship," Wright begins to write in first person, a young adult looking for and finding work with one of the best architectural firms in Chicago. Either a latent or inherent anti-Semitism seems to influence his thinking at this time as he works alongside others in a crowded drafting room: **"Next table to mine Jean Agnas, a clean-faced Norseman. To the right Eisendrath—apparently stupid. Jewish. Behind me to the left Ottenheimer—alert, apparently bright. Jew too. Turned around to survey the group. Isbell, Jew? Gaylord, no—not. Weydert, Jew undoubtedly. Directly behind, Weatherwax. Couldn't make him out. In the corner Andresen—Swedish. Several more Jewish faces. Of course—I thought, because Mr. Adler [his boss] himself must be a Jew" (96).** Why the preoccupation with this issue? It may be part of his upbringing, the fact that he was born in 1867. At any rate, he does begin to build a fellowship of young architects to whom he serves as mentor.

A long section, Book Three, covers his life with at least one spouse and a second one in the wings, the building (and burning) of Taliesin I and II in Wisconsin. Wright moves fairly smoothly back and forth through time, including stints in Tokyo, where he builds the Imperial Hotel, innovating construction that will withstand the many earthquakes the region is prone to having. Once again, even though Wright is fond of Asian art and culture, a certain racist language mars the portrayal of his otherwise humanitarian point of view, using terms like **"slant and sloe eyes," (197)** even when he may believe he's being complimentary: **"Decorous black eyes slyly slant upon you from every direction as the little artful beings move noiselessly about, grace and refinement in every movement" (209).**

By Book Four, FLW is building Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona, once again working hard to fit his work into the landscape instead of forcing a structure upon it, always preferring "horizontal" to "vertical" buildings of his Usonian vision. One wonders if even the US wouldn't run out of land if we built everything horizontal.

Book Five seems to be a potpourri of ideas from slamming youth who do not want to work as hard as he did in his youth, Beethoven as a metaphor, a recapitulation of his family ancestry, the introduction of his idea of "gravity heat," in which, instead of steam registers, heated liquid is piped through concrete floors, and because heat rises, rooms are heated more efficiently. Finally, though, in spite of passages of pomposity and dense abstractions, FLW still remains an interesting figure. I've never had a bucket list, per se, but if I were to put one item on it, it would be to visit as many as Wright's remaining structures as possible. They are that good, that interesting.

One sad note: this Barnes and Noble edition has (by my count) at least twenty

typographical errors of varying kinds from misspelled words to words omitted, to subject-verb agreement, to using commas when periods were needed.

7/17/21

Capote, Truman. *The Complete Stories of Truman Capote*. With an introduction by Reynolds Price. New York: Random, 2004.

Sad to say that Capote published only twenty stories (as this edition seems to indicate) in his lifetime. The “weakest” stories, if there are any, seem to be his early ones when he is barely twenty and the two written during the last decade of his life. The ones in the middle are for the most part knock-outs. Especially, I’m a sucker for his “orphan” stories: “A Christmas Memory,” “The Thanksgiving Visitor,” and “One Christmas.” In all three he develops the character Sook, an old woman, “a cousin,” who cares for the boy narrating the stories. Apparently based on one of the relatives Capote lived with as a child when his parents abandoned him for a time, Sook can tear your heart out with her generosity and illiterate wisdom.

7/30/21

*Raven, Catherine. *Fox and I: An Uncommon Friendship*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2021.

A woman lives in a blue steel-roofed house she builds in an area of western U.S. wilderness that is at least thirty minutes from any place that might be called civilized. With a PhD in biology, the woman lives in her crude dwelling year round and teaches at nearby schools. And she lives alone. Only she isn’t really. She names two cedar trees on her property Gin and Tonic. She names magpies, one of whom, in a strange scenario, will give up her life on behalf . . . well, that’s a spoiler . . . you will want to discover that tale on your own.

This woman, the author, is befriended by a fox, a red fox, a species whose adult male weighs no more than six pounds, and must survive, as parable and history tell us, by their wits and cunning. She often reads to Fox (no article, a no-name unlike her other friends) on his mostly daily trips to her property about four in the afternoon. First, she reads to him from St. Ex’s (Antoine Saint-Exupéry’s) *The Little Prince*. And later, *Moby Dick*. He seems to be lulled or convinced that she is one of him by the way she does not talk down to him or speak baby talk. He even receives his own sections of the book in which author Raven encourages him to give voice to his point of view (he calls her Hurricane Hands for occasionally extravagant nonverbal communication).

Spoiler: Hurricane Hands loses Fox twice, once in the middle of the book when she sees a mangy dead fox, and once at the end (you know it will happen). Here is the magical portrayal of her mistaken conclusion, when, at one twilight, Fox parades his four kits, the ultimate act of trust, in front of the author:

“In the middle of all that confusion of kits, one furry orange animal was dancing on a boulder. I don’t ever need to be happier than I was at that moment when I realized Fox was alive. On the hillside where he was dancing, rivulets rained down from a carnelian cliff and flowed through round-stemmed sedges, not so different from a stretch of the Wonderland Trail that I used to cross on my way to Indian

Bar. Those subalpine meadows spread out in my minds' [mind's?] eye, and I remembered bending down to pull salamanders out of ice-cold brooks. When it was too dark to see Fox, even through binoculars, I sat back in my chair, and imagined him dancing all the way back to his den. I had just learned for certain that one fox was not the same as the rest" (161).

Near the end of the book, the author, who has thought so highly of Fox, makes an error by planting a little cactus near her front door where Fox usually lies when he visits. The next time he stops by he says, "Quah," his one-word vocabulary, holds up his paw, then drops it and catches a toenail on the edge of the plant, casting her a look over his back as he retreats. She transplants the cactus again, and Fox thanks her the next day by lying down. Raven tells us that if we wanted to, we could tame or domesticate foxes within four or five generations. But we shouldn't. Instead, if each of us were to have such an uncommon friendship with just one non-domesticated animal, the world would be transformed to one where loneliness would become obsolete and the natural world would flourish.

August: 4 Titles

8/13/21

Parker, Hershel. *Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume I, 1819-1851*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

This biography of the author of *Moby Dick* is all consuming and likable in most respects. Once the reader gets past Melville's childhood and youth—the fact that his father is poor at handling money and dies in middle age, making it impossible for Herman to earn a formal education—the book becomes more enthralling. Keeping straight the large number of Melville's siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins becomes tedious. And anyone looking for exacting truth may be disappointed for whenever author Parker can't nail down the facts concerning Melville's early life, he uses language such as "may have been" "could have walked," "is rumored to have," "may have borrowed," "may, before this, have demonstrated," "a reasonable guess is," "may not have told," "may have been referring," or "31 August is safe enough" (450) to make conjecture. Might Parker have chosen to leave that information out if he wasn't sure?

The chapters and passages concerning the works of Melville—how he researches, how he drafts (his sister is his official copyist), and how he approaches getting published—are entirely engrossing. As a young man of twenty or so, Melville spends more than a year in the South Pacific. From this expedition he mines much material for his first three books: *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Mardi*. One thing that is difficult to believe is that the American press (with highly opinionated and not always qualified critics) question the veracity of his work. Does he really travel to those places, or does he use resource material to "pad" his work? The British press are kinder to him, but it seems that he is always struggling to pacify the whole lot of them. At the same time, he does attract enough positive attention to continue writing. One must realize that Melville, as well as and friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, never made much money during their lifetimes. Melville was always begging or borrowing or dealing to keep his family with an income. Would that the poor man

had lived to see his place in literary history or to reap the monetary rewards from his brilliant labors!

Though it sold barely 3,000 copies in his lifetime, *Moby Dick* is the novel for which Melville is most remembered. Here, Parker waxes romantic about his subject (and deservedly so): **“The river of Melville’s reading had long flowed into his conscious mind (indeed, it had overflowed there in the more bookish parts of *Mardi*). Now his profounder reading not only flowed on the surface but was partly diverted into a subterranean river that flowed into the spring of original thought, a spring ready to burst out, under the pressure of the occasion and the time, into *Moby-Dick*, once the interminable voyage was over” (701).**

Parker’s Volume I concludes with an extended scene in which Melville presents a copy of *Moby Dick* to Nathaniel Hawthorne so that the man can see that Melville has dedicated the tome to his dear friend and mentor. **“Take it all in all, this was the happiest day of Melville’s life” (883).** I plan to read Volume II, but I may give it some time!

8/16/21

Cheever, John. *The Stories of John Cheever*. New York: Knopf, 1978.

After perusing Cheever’s letters, I felt inspired to read his sixty-one collected stories (almost 700 pages)—a compendium I had previously spurned because I had only read his early stories. Mistake. And I withdraw what I said in print in the past about Cheever’s short stories being of less value than his novels. However, I believe his collection does present an interesting profile. His early ones, indeed, are less developed, less interesting, at least, to me. The middle ones and most of the later ones remain his meatiest stories. Cheever almost exclusively writes about life in New York City and its suburbs (Bullet Park, Shady Oaks). Most of his long list of characters are adorned with Anglo-Saxon (or Anglo-Saxon sounding) names or made-up names of that ilk for symbolic purposes; if he uses a foreign name, he has something in mind (Boulanger, the French housemaid). Among the A-S names: Pommeroy, Westcott, Hartley, Tennyson, Hollis, ad nauseam—all giving voice to his own cultural DNA or the heritage of New England. Some of the suburban stories become a bit pat. Most involve a man and a wife, who, to some degree, love one another, but one or the other is unhappy with this happy marriage—three to five loveable but often invisible children. All involve riding trains to the city, driving station wagons over narrow asphalt roads to summer vacations in Maine or the mountains. People who smoke and drink too much and really don’t care.

But! These must have been the very stories that the *New Yorker* wished to publish because Cheever certainly gave them what they wanted. For a time Cheever and family live in Rome, Italy, and it is that experience that gives brilliance to some of his most interesting and creative stories. In his letters, Cheever reveals that their family brings back to the U.S. a young Italian woman who works for the Cheevers. In “Clementina,” he brings this relationship to life by way of fiction, and the result is stunning. Cheever’s suburban world is now seen through the eyes of a poor Italian domestic who both loves and detests what she witnesses in suburbia. Cheever really seems to occupy her point of view. Likewise, “Boy in Rome,” is a

lovely wandering story with a wonderful poetic refrain about “being loved enough.” Cheever sees Rome with eyes that have become so jaundiced by suburban America that the story is somehow crisper than some of his domestic narratives. He’s forced to observe and judge more keenly because of the environment’s apparent strangeness. A lesson to all writers: get out of your own backyard if you can, and see what happens to your fiction. Anyone writing short stories could benefit from reading these gems, mostly because it may remove you from your current world, and he shows you how to do it: be a keen observer no matter the setting; write what you know; and have fun skewering human nature if you can.

8/20/21

Brottman, Mikita. *Couple Found Slain: After a Family Murder*. New York: Holt, 2021.

This true crime book prides itself in presenting a story that is different from others about murder within a family, and I do believe it is an interesting approach. Brottman offers only a few chapters about the dysfunctional family of a young man who murders his parents and the circumstances that may lead him to do such a thing. The rest of the book concerns itself with the young man’s *incarceration* in the state of Maryland’s mental health and legal systems. Young Brian Bechtold, once he realizes the severity of what he has done, turns himself in to the police. He expects he will go to prison, because, of course, he has committed murder. Instead, to this day, over fifty years of age, Brian remains a resident of Clifton T. Perkins Hospital Center. His story is one of abuse by psychiatrists, other patients, and a legal system that does not give healthy support to people with mental problems. If only he were in prison, he would have far more freedom, including the freedom to rehabilitate, serve his time, and get out. But at Perkins he has become a lifer, and oddly, he may be saner than one or two of the professionals who “treat” him. Brottman’s prose is unrelentingly dead, a just-the-facts-ma’am kind of journalism, but perhaps that is what true fans of true crime expect.

8/31/21

* Marquez, Gabriel García. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003 (1970).

Unlike fantasy, which may be built entirely on an unrecognizable or alien setting, magical realism takes the concrete world in which humans live, and the author makes things happen that could never happen, but if compellingly written, we as readers jump on the magic carpet and ride to the end of the tale. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is just one of those rides—taking us on the journey of a century in which an entire town, Macondo, is established by two determined families, all of whose male and female members go by the same name or some variation thereof. Marquez reduces the confusion of having characters with the same name by giving the full name each time it is mentioned, and of course, by associating that character with his or her own personality. The repetition is also symbolic of the longevity of these families, a couple of matriarchs who live to be well into their hundreds. And yet, the magic town of Macondo, does come to a quiet end after one hundred years of solitude. Hardly. If Marquez should mean for solitude to represent isolation, well, then yes, the family experiences, individually and collectively, one hundred years of solitude, silos separated for the most part from each other and the rest of the world, its original inhabitants having reached the location by making an arduous

journey through a rugged mountain pass and being located near an, at times, impenetrable swamp. This is, indeed a magical novel, in which the author compresses a century into four hundred pages, a world so incomplete and yet so infinite that it is hard to grasp the two ideas in the same thought.

September: 6 Titles

9/01/21

Leonig, Carol. *Zero Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Secret Service*. New York: Random, 2021.

This book is one of the most fascinating contemporary reads to emerge in a long time. Leonig, a distinguished *Washington Post* reporter, delves into the 155-year history of the United States Secret Service—the agency designed primarily to keep the president and family safe. She brings to light its early history: Within a period of thirty-six years, the U.S. experiences three presidential assassinations. Lincoln. Garfield. McKinley. Following Lincoln's death, the Service is established with minimal or feeble funding. After the third assassination, the congress still refuses to provide additional protection, not wanting the president to be treated like royalty. When Kennedy is assassinated, the congress ultimately realizes it must provide more resources for the Secret Service. And presidents must adjust their thinking. Kennedy may, in part, have contributed to his own death by not adhering to the Service's request that he not get as close to crowds as he liked. And also by not riding in an open car and by not allowing agents to stand on the rear bumper of his limo.

Leonig explores subsequent presidencies to inform readers *in great detail* about each administration since: Ford's two close calls. Reagan's near-death attack. How the Service erodes during Bush's and Clinton's administrations. How the Service is pushed beyond its capabilities during Obama's era when threats and attempts on him rise exponentially and when two different "jumpers" leap over the White House fence, one of them actually coming within feet of the Obama family's living quarters. The author informs us of the unrest within the Service: the frequent change of leadership, the history of good old boy networks that reward relationships instead of meritorious service. She tells of the scandals that rock the service, including details of the one in Cartagena where at least ten agents become extremely drunk and involve themselves with prostitutes. Her conclusion: many problems still exist. The agency needs a complete restructuring, much more funding, and a coordinated effort to heartily renew its mission of always putting the lives of the president and family and other figures ahead of lives of agents sworn to protect them. Until these things occur, the Secret Service will remain stretched beyond its capabilities and perhaps remain a second-rate organization.

9/05/21

Guibert, Hervé. *Written in Invisible Ink: Selected Stories*. Edited and translated by Jeffrey Zuckerman. South Pasadena: semiotext(e), 2010.

Guibert's early pieces in the book seem almost pornographic, not because they portray sex graphically but because he exhibits such exuberance to shock, like a child who repeatedly shouts "fuck" to get a rise out of others. Pieces in the middle and latter parts of the book are much better, more mature. "The Trip to Brussels,"

for example, is nuanced and subtle, where, perhaps the book's title originates:

“The words we spoke made an apocryphal story that was perfect: faded, singed, written in visible ink, buried and unexhumable. Nothing could reconstruct these words, they were like a treasure lost in the depths: intimidating, undetectable” (189).

The story is a perfect metaphor for Guibert's life and work: written in invisible ink. Perhaps, though, instead of being “unexhumable,” his work can only be understood by those who decipher its invisibility, a painful era of plague that is not entirely over and should never be forgotten.

9/09/21

* García, Rodrigo. *A Farewell to Gabo and Mercedes: A Son's Memoir of Gabriel García Márquez*. New York: HarperVia, 2021.

The son of Gabriel García Márquez writes a brief but compelling remembrance of his famous father and formidable mother. Each of the five parts begins with a brief epigraph from one of Márquez's works. North American culture has so much to learn from our friends in South America whose profound sense of family—in spite of its many complexities—outshines our own. I found myself envying the relationship that Rodrigo has with his parents, his brother, his own children and his nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, grandparents long gone but whose influence seems eternal—no wonder Márquez could write a book as profound as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. He needed only comb his own ancestry for his complete cast of characters. I envision myself reading this book again and again.

9/20/21

Amburn, Ellis. *Subterranean Kerouac: The Hidden Life of Jack Kerouac*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998.

I got what I deserved for reading this book: perpetual arousal. My God, maybe one of the most sex-laden books of literary biography I've ever read: all about one man and his friends and lovers. According to Amburn, Kerouac keeps a sex list of not only his partners but how many times they engage. It amounts to a sexual track meet of stupendous proportions (if self-reporting is accurate): sex with men, sex with women. Maybe the man had a third testicle? Enough of that.

Because Amburn turns out to be Kerouac's final editor, a young man attempting to make his mark in publishing, he stands to have one of the most tolerant and understanding viewpoints of the controversial author of *On the Road* and at least a dozen other novels. Like a number of important American authors before him, Kerouac is ahead of his time, ahead of what critics are capable of understanding. Like many writers, he must scramble for money nearly his entire life, never experiencing the adulation that is to come after his premature death, when he dies at forty-seven of alcoholism. But if anything, he remains a hero of young writers of all ages, writers who are willing to put everything on the line, to write novels the way they want to, not kowtowing to editors, publishers, or even the public. For that, yes, he is a true hero.

9/20/21

Hazzard, Shirley. *The Great Fire*. New York: Farrar, 2003.

This novel takes place all over the globe, it seems, in the period following World War II. When one first encounters the word “fire,” one believes that the book may be about a single fire. The next false signal is near the end of Part One in which, in a flashback to 1942, one witnesses a plane crash: **“There was an explosion after the crash, then a great fire that, despite the rains, smouldered on overnight. The villagers struggled up in the wet, but explosions kept them off” (52)**. Mere foreshadowing. The main character, Aldred Leith, recalls, as a youth, visiting a monument to WWI in London, one of over 300 steps: **“The monument to the Great Fire” (91)**. Leith, in his thirties, falls in love with a girl of seventeen and eventually marries her, but even that relationship of love cannot save him from the author’s great fire, the war through which he has just lived:

“Even to her, he would not say outright that he was thinking of death: of the many who had died in their youth, under his eyes; of those he had killed, of whom he’d known nothing. On the red battlefield, where I’ll never go again; in the inextinguishable conflagration” (278).

Any war is comprised of fire, from fireball to friendly fire, but Hazzard transforms War from an abstraction into one single, eternal event, as she says, a conflagration.

9/25/21

Baldwin, Alec. *Nevertheless*. New York: HarperCollins, 2017.

In some ways this is an ordinary celebrity book. Baldwin writes about his acting career, his divorce from a famous actor, his new wife and family, and all his children. But Alec Baldwin also distinguishes himself by sharing how he comes to be an actor. In his preface he tells of his childhood, of wanting to be something one day and something else the next day. Acting allows him to become, in a sense, all of these things through the roles he plays. He also shares with readers about how his childhood of near destitution (his mother and five siblings living on their father’s teaching salary). Most interesting, however, is his quest to find himself, to be true to his desire to balance himself on that fine tightrope of acting for its own sake (the stage, the Broadway stage) and film (its commercial and sometimes lucrative nature). He glosses long lists of books he loves, plays and films he loves, actors (male and female) whom he loves and why. He peppers his writing with pieces of classical music he admires—a sign of a truly educated person. His is a rich life of pursuing happiness and sometimes coming up short but also getting up off the floor and trying again, whether to connect with a new woman or say yes to a new play or tackle the fields of philanthropy or politics. The man is that bright and that secure that he can make these choices and live with them. Because, in his youth, he is soooo good looking (the only reason I watched TV’s *Knot’s Landing*), he is sometimes approached or accosted by gay men who believe they might get lucky. To Baldwin’s credit, he is secure enough in his personhood, his masculinity, that he (by his own recognizance anyway) takes these incidents in stride (informing one man, an older mentor, however, that if he ever kisses him full on the mouth again, he will break every bone in his body—yet they do remain friends). He even goes as far as to say he “loves” a certain man he’s worked with and who knows? “he might

be gay.” We know he isn’t, but it’s sweet of him to be so empathic that he might give it some consideration. That seems to be what his whole life is about: giving a role consideration before dispensing with it or forging ahead. We all should be so *considerate* in our own roles.

October: 5 Titles

10/01/21

Salgo, Peter with Joe Layden. *The Heart of the Matter: The Three Key Breakthroughs to Preventing Heart Attacks*. New York: Morrow, 2004.

One shouldn’t probably read a book about heart health that is over seventeen years old without searching out more recent sources to compare it with. That said, Salgo promulgates three things for preventing heart attacks: 1) Take statins like Lipitor 2) Take an Aspirin a day and 3) Take antibiotics as a preventative measure because he believes heart attacks can be caused by infections. I, as millions do, have done one and two for a long time, but no cardiologist, no doctor, has ever prescribed wholesale the ingestion of antibiotics (changing each month, as Salgo suggests, so as not to “wear out” the effects of any one drug). That seems a bit excessive to me, and I wouldn’t do it (even if I could get the prescriptions) without further investigation. When I was still struggling with acne vulgaris in my twenties, my dermatologist prescribed 1000 mg per day of tetracycline. When my GP found out, he blew his stack, saying that such constant usage could cause kidney damage. I stopped, and I’ve been suspicious of that kind of usage ever since.

10/04/21

Brandon, Will. *The Wolf Hunt: A Tale of the Texas Badlands*. A Derrick Miles Mystery. No City: 2021.

Full disclosure moment: I am part of the Lubbock, Texas, Ad Hoc writing group of which the author speaks in book’s Acknowledgements page. I mention this fact, not to tout my involvement in the enterprise but to give some context. The author brought bits and pieces of this work in its infancy to our group. Some of it, like all our writing, was rough, a work-in-progress, but always what was generated created great interest on the part of all members. *We can’t wait to read more* was a common comment. What Brandon has realized here goes far beyond, in my opinion, what might have transpired in less capable hands. This book succeeds in being so many things: a pastiche of the highest order, writing “in the style” of Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Hound of the Baskervilles*; a bit of a cozy mystery; and a great bit historical novel.

Setting the novel in nineteenth-century Texas but always with an eye to England, where its murder victim hails from, the author creates an admixture of American and British English diction born of a particular period. Historical details give great interest and credit to the work, in which, for example, the narrator, Doctor Hooper, uses one of the first Kodak cameras to great effect. The author’s details on how the camera works not only read with authenticity but are crucial to his helping his partner, Derrick Miles, to solve the mystery.

No point in recreating the plot, if one is acquainted with Doyle’s book. Readers will

find its points familiar, yet with their own twists here and there. If you're a mystery junky, or if you just like well-crafted fiction, I trust you will enjoy Will Brandon's *The Wolf Hunt*. [Get a copy!](#)

10/14/21

Shute, Nevil. *On the Beach*. New York: Morrow, 1957.

This novel, which could have worked as a cautionary tale in its publication year, 1957, can still bring shivers to one's spine. In this narrative, the worst has already happened, a vague war begun, by accident, between Russia and China, in which nuclear warfare destroys most of the northern hemisphere. Only the Australians and other South Pacific cultures survive . . . for a while. As we know, such high amounts of radiation kill immediately and keep on killing over weeks and months as its fine particles continue to float to earth. The main characters realize intellectually what will happen but continue to live as if death won't come, racing in a local grand prix, planting a garden one won't benefit from, collecting presents for one's children when one "returns" to his family in America. Shute is deft in creating what looks like denial and yet is a way for characters to cope, until the very end. At that time, little red pills of barbiturates have been distributed like penny candy, and we see each one take his or her dosage and end their lives peacefully. We are made to consider, however, what will happen to the earth itself. After a number of years, so Shute believes, the radiation will clear, the earth will be ready for inhabitation again. It shall repopulate itself with some kind of creatures. The novel has one final lesson for those living today. Nuclear war is the ultimate global warming, the ultimate in climate change. Forever. The thought should still give us pause.

10/21/21

Snyder, Timothy. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. New York: Duggan, 2018.

A scholarly and erudite book, *The Road to Unfreedom* is a plea for Western peoples to wake up and smell the borscht burning on the stove. Snyder begins with two phrases: *politics of inevitability*, "a sense that the future is just more of the present," and that nothing can be done (7); the other phrase, *politics of eternity* "places one nation at the center of a cyclical story of victimhood" (8). As Snyder develops his thesis that both Europe and America could be on the way to *unfreedom*, he repeatedly weaves into the fabric of his text these two terms. Russia has already traveled down this road, accepted its role as victim, that the world is always out to get Russia. If Europe and America do not pay attention to the signs of fascism or authoritarianism present in their own countries, they, too, could wind up like Russia. For the general reader, this book can be tough reading, but I invite anyone wanting to know what might be wrong with our country to take a look at it.

10/31/21

Evans, Siân. *Maiden Voyages: Magnificent Ocean Liners and the women Who Traveled and Worked Aboard Them*. New York: St. Martin's, 2020.

This is an interesting book in which Welsh author Evans focuses on thirteen women (some famous, some not) in the early twentieth century who make careers on the seas. Mostly by way of working on lines such as the White Star and Cunard, these women work as conductresses, stewardesses, and nurses, sometimes rising to

supervisory positions. During an era when women are not encouraged or even allowed to work outside a domestic situation, these women serve as pioneers who earn good salaries and are able to support families back home in England, where the man of the household, say, has been lost to war. Of course, their success is hard won, and it is only a beginning, but indeed there must be a thread that connects them to airline hostesses and to female astronauts such as Sally Ride. A quick but meaningful read.

November: 4 Titles

11/05/21

* Mantel, Hilary. *Wolf Hall: A Novel. Book One of the Thomas Cromwell Trilogy*. New York: Picador, 2010.

Quite an enjoyable read, one that combines history and literature alike. I read this one aloud to my partner and was able to hear what a masterful job Mantel does with the language—quite musical. She, more than most writers, makes great use of interior monologue, by which we always know who is thinking what. This retelling of King Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, and Thomas Cromwell (among a distinguished cast of many) is worthy of all the accolades it has received (winner of England's Man Booker Prize). Can't wait to read the other two parts of this distinguished trilogy.

11/08/21

McCarter, Margaret Hill. *A Master's Degree*. With illustrations in color by W. D. Goldbeck. Chicago: McClurg, 1913.

I read this book for two reasons. One, the novel is set in a place modeled after my alma mater, Southwestern College, in Winfield, Kansas. And two, I happened to have a copy I inherited from my grandmother, inscribed with her name and the date, "1915." Some familiar spots on the landscape do appear in the book: the large "S" of sizable stones that must be whitewashed each year, the Walnut River valley, Sunrise College substituting for my SC, the actual sunset hill of one hundred feet above ground. Otherwise, the novel is an overly sentimental rendering of one young man's four years in college. The book is marred by the details McCarter leaves out: how many steps down Sunset hill to the bottom (77), how classes were conducted, where and how students lived, the topography to a greater degree (she does great watercolor washes describing spectacular sunsets). I did, however, get a feel for a certain type of student that both schools, fictional and real, seem to attract: a rough cut outlier, bright enough but unpolished, who arrives at commencement a much-changed person. One who will continue to grow and change throughout life.

11/22/21

Malouf, David. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Vintage, 2007.

Nuanced and penetrating, these stories are among the best I've ever read, each one like a poem.

11/27/21

Schiff, Adam. *Midnight in Washington: How We Almost Lost Our Democracy and Still Could*. New York: Random, 2021.

If one followed the two impeachment hearings of ex-president Trump, one became quite well acquainted with the rhetorical skills of Congressman Adam Schiff (D-CA), who led that trial. And one will recognize much of the material he includes in this book but also much, much more. One gets an inside view of what he experienced to reach that point where Trump needed to be impeached. He recreates important scenes on the floor in public; he recreates scenes out of view as he confers with Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other congressional leaders. Reading his account fills out one's view if you only watched it on TV, especially if your viewing was spotty. Most important, however, is the revelation of Adam Schiff's character. Into his narrative are woven personal anecdotes about family members, congressional staff members, and other personalities. These reveal a wholly human and humane person who would make a great speaker of the house or president, should he desire to run.

December: 7 Titles

12/01/21

Clear, James. *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*. New York: Avery, 2018.

A great book for helping a person to form good habits and break old ones. Clear says you want to make your good habits “obvious, attractive, easy, and satisfying” (253), and you want to make your bad habits “invisible, unattractive, hard, and unsatisfying” (253). Clear states all along “This is a continuous process. There is no finish line. There is no permanent solution.”

By way of example, I kept forgetting to take a dosage of over-the-counter digestive at noon until I cut out the brand name and put it in my noon pill container. I kept the reminder there until I made the habit of taking it without an obvious cue. Only a small example, but I believe this book will make a good handbook for forming good habits and abolishing the bad.

12/06/21

Agee, James. *A Death in the Family*. New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1985 (1938).

This novel may be one of the most fluid I have ever read. In what would be considered “head-hopping” today, Agee glides the narrative smoothly by way of an omniscient third-person POV in which readers know who is thinking what at any given time. He does it so smoothly and matter-of-factly that one hardly notices it at first. But when the author spends more than three hundred pages on only a few days in the life of a turn-of-the-twentieth-century Tennessee family, he allows himself plenty of time to explore the thoughts of six-year-old Rufus, son of Jay who is killed in a freak automobile accident where he receives hardly a scratch, only the “blue” mark where his chin strikes the steering wheel and administers a life-taking concussion—at least as far the doctors of the time period believe. Readers also learn of Rufus's mother's interior struggle with her Catholic upbringing, how hard she is trying to believe this death is the will of God. Agee, near the end, takes readers inside the thoughts of Rufus's uncle Andrew, who, in a walk where he holds his nephew's hand, spews his anti-Catholic vitriol in every direction. There really is no resolution for Rufus, as there may be none for anyone who experience a death in

the family.

12/09/21

Rimpoche, Gendun Chopel. *Good Life, Good Death*, with Gini Alhadef and Mark Magill. With a foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. New York: Riverhead, 2001.

A slim but wise tome for one who wants an introduction to Buddhism and its tenets, particularly with regard to key concepts like attachment and meditation. Rimpoche makes a strong case for making a good life, because it is also related to making for oneself a good death, an inevitability for every one of us.

12/13/21

Salinger, J. D. *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour an Introduction*. Boston: 1959 (1955).

12/20/21

Baldwin, James. *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*. New York: Vintage, 1993 (1961).

This collection, though it uses dated language like “Negro,” stands as fine group of essays in which Baldwin, addressing the issues of his day, still manages to communicate with modern readers by way of his wit and wisdom. The man writes some of the most elegant and intelligent prose of the twentieth century, as he conveys what it’s like to be an American, and as he describes his friendships with writers Richard Wright and Norman Mailer. In either case he stands toe to toe with each one, his understanding of human nature extending its relevance into this century.

12/22/21

Choi, Susan. *Trust Exercise: A Novel*. New York: Holt, 2019.

Boy! (or Girl!), what a ride this read is. Metafiction perhaps at its most confounding, at least for this reader. The first third of the novel seems to be a traditional high school love story gone awry, both David and Sarah soured on, yet still stuck on each other—set in a nontraditional performing arts high school. The setting is all important, as these kids are smart and are striving to become great actors—and are easily manipulated by adults they admire or wish to please. As near as I can tell, the story is set in a city like Houston (imagine primeval swamp with skyscrapers), though the name is never spelled out. Next third of the book changes to the voice of another young woman at that high school, Karen, a superficial friend to Sarah. The author does an odd thing whereby Karen sometimes speaks in first person, and sometimes talks about herself in the third person. Must be a good reason for this. Perhaps Choi is portraying the fracturing of this (by now) woman’s personality. In the third part, readers begin to realize something is off. The story strand they’ve been holding onto is no longer there. It turns out the first third of the book is really “fiction” that “Karen” has written about some real people whom readers now get to become acquainted with in the last third. To say more would create a spoiler, and I’m not going there. While there is much to admire about this award-winning book—its structure and its strong characterizations—it left me wondering if Choi was intent on entertaining herself or her readers. You be the

judge.

12/23/21

*Perry, Bruce D. and Oprah Winfrey. *What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing*. New York: Flatiron, 2021.

As the subtitle suggests, Perry and Winfrey exchange ideas concerning childhood trauma. Her words are represented by a pale blue font, and his are in black, making the dialogue more obvious. I've read other books about how childhood trauma affects adults in later life, if the trauma is not dealt with in a satisfactory way. I know from my own life that this is true. But this book takes my understanding a bit farther. I now come to realize that the child is both vulnerable to trauma but, under the right circumstances (therapeutic), also resilient. Dr. Perry's expertise in neuroscience helps expand our understanding of how the brain works. Therapy can help a traumatized child or adult, but the therapist must meet the child at his or her level of brain development. Perry tells the story of one boy whose brain is still functioning at the brainstem level, but he's older than that chronologically. Oprah courageously shares with readers her lifelong struggle to come to terms with abuse she suffered as a young child. Both writers brought me to tears at several times throughout the book. Oprah tells a story of when she is on a movie set, and the director shoots a scene in which she must tuck in a child at night. They must do it several times, because Oprah keeps going at the situation as if she's making the bed. The director must finally demonstrate what he means, and Oprah realizes no one ever tucked her in as a child. She had no idea how to do it. The book's closure involves Oprah sharing with readers how she finally forgives her mother and also resolves other issues on the woman's deathbed. We all feel the sense of relief and catharsis that Winfrey feels. She had actually been on her way back to California, when she realized she must return to her mother and end things properly. A real act of courage, which, in reading this book, may help others to do the same. When we stop asking "What's wrong with you?" and instead ask, "What happened to you?" we, as a society, may be in a better position to help our children and adult children to cope with their lives. I don't say this often: a must read.

Templates for Bibliographic Entries:

Basic:

Last Name, First Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

Basic with Introduction or Other Component(s):

Last Name, First Name. With an introduction by First Name, Last Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

Basic with Introduction (or other component) and book is a later reprint:

Last Name, First Name. With an introduction by First Name, Last Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication. First published by Publ Co in year.

Translation from Foreign Language:

Last Name, First Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. Translated by Name of translator(s). City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

Translation from Foreign Language with Other Component:

Last Name, First Name. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. Translated by First Name, Last Name and with Other Component by First Name, Last Name. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

***Running List of Books Read Aloud since 2020 (in order read)**

2020

1. Eisen, Cliff and Dominic McHugh, eds. *The Letters of Cole Porter*.
2. Langella, Frank. *Dropped Names: Famous Men and Women as I Knew Them*.
3. Shikibu, Murasaki. *Tale of the Genji*.

2021

4. Proulx, Annie. *Barkskins: A Novel* 2/5/21
5. Kendi, Ibram X. and Keisha N. Blain, eds. *Four Hundred Souls* 3/24/21
6. Kawabata, Yasunari. *The Master of Go* 4/6/21
7. Flores, Dan. *The Horizontal Yellow* 5/04/21
8. Wright, Frank Lloyd. *An Autobiography* 7/7/21
9. Raven, Catherine. *Fox and I* 7/30/21
10. Marquez, Gabriel García. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* 8/31/21
11. García, Rodrigo. *A Farewell to Gabo and Mercedes* 9/9/21
12. Mantel, Hilary. *Wolf Hall* 11/5/21
13. Perry/Winfrey. *What Happened to You?* 12/23/21