

2024
(Alpha by Author)

Alvarez, Julia. *The Cemetery of Untold Stories: A Novel*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 2024.

I loved the author's novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. It was quite poignant and enlightening to learn about the culture of the Dominican Republic. In this recent work, readers deepen their knowledge of the DR. Noted author, Alma Cruz inherits a questionable piece of property in her homeland (she selects the sorriest of four plots, her three sisters fighting over the "better" properties). There she encloses the land and forms a cemetery, not for bodies, but for her manuscripts of untold stories—primarily for the characters, whom she feels are as deserving of an eternal home as humans. The characters come alive from DR history, one being dictator Trujillo's wife, Bienvenida. But there are lesser ones whose lives are just as interesting: Pepito, Manuel, Filomena, and more. It is a book of some complexity, so I know I shall return to it again to gain full advantage of its treasures.

Aronson, Louise. *Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine, Reimagining Life*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2019.

If this book wasn't a best-seller in 2019, it should have been. Easy to read and digest, the book explores the entire scale of one's life: birth, childhood, adulthood, middle-age, young-old, and old-old. Aronson boldly shares her experiences as a doctor who *loves* working for and with the elderly. She reveals that when people hear the word "old," they think: *wrinkled, bent over, slow moving, bald, and white hair*. When people hear the word *elder*, however, they think *respect, leader, experience, power, money, and knowledge*.

The book isn't entirely anecdotal; Aronson weaves in lots of data, lots of science, much of it contradicting the current (and for the last fifty years) "wisdom" on how to treat the elderly (mostly by isolation and medicating them as if their bodies were still younger). With the population of elders in this world only growing by the day, she calls for a new way of thinking about the old. New ways would treat the elderly as individuals, as if their lives still mattered, not just their bodies. Physicians don't mind keeping the old bodies alive; in fact, they almost insist on it. Yet they don't necessarily want to handle the rest of the old body: the brain, the emotions such as loneliness, fear, and anxiety.

I read this while a loved one of mine (an elderly) was in the hospital and now rehab. The author's words helped tide me over, so that I might make better decisions for him. Again, well worth the time. Aronson is a fine writer, an excellent physician, but most of all, a caring human being. I wish she were my doctor.

Brown, Christopher. *Tropic of Kansas*. New York: HarperCollins, 2017.

I've so enjoyed Christopher Brown's monthly newsletter in which he examines the environment in which he lives—in and around Austin, Texas. It is thoughtful, well-

researched, and often he includes strong photographs demonstrating either positive or negative aspects of the local ecology.

It is probably the mark of an excellent writer that (in this case) he can switch from one genre of writing to another. At the same time, I find this novel wanting. Much of this stance may be my fault. I don't usually read futuristic fiction. I don't care for fiction where there are too many characters to keep track of (oh, my aging brain). I find myself not caring much about any of them. However, the two main characters—a young man and his half-sister—attempt to make contact with one another after being separated.

This dystopian (I think) novel takes place when a vast region in the middle of the country is dubbed the Tropic of Kansas. This facile allusion to Henry Miller's novel also sets up the extended metaphor of wasteland. (And since I grew up in Kansas, the metaphor is not lost on me—although I could be a bit insulted.) Tania has worked for the government but now is a lone wolf. Her brother, on his own since a child, is a wunderkind of chase and escape. The entire novel is plot driven, alternating Tania's chapters with those of her brother, Sig. I tend to enjoy novels that are more character driven. Action, action, action—it gets a bit tiring without some reflection on the part of the characters. After all, the United States of America has more or less imploded. A bunch of ragtags are trying to put it back together, and yet no one seems to give much thought to what they are doing.

I may be missing the point of *Tropic of Kansas*, and my apologies to the author if I am. As I once said to my parents when being introduced to a new food, "I'm trying to like it."

Bucknell, Katherine. *Christopher Isherwood Inside Out*. New York: Farrar, 2024.

In 2016, I read Christopher Isherwood's entire oeuvre. Why? I admired his work at every level: sophisticated and lyrical vocabulary; his sometimes quirky but lyrical syntax, the variety of genres he tackled, from fiction to nonfiction (history, biography), and play/screenplay writing. My reading included about 4,500 published pages of Isherwood's journals, all edited by Bucknell. Now she has created an exquisite biography of the author.

Isherwood worked on the boundary of fiction and nonfiction. He kept diaries most of his adult life and drew on them for his published writing, creating narratives more vivid, more revealing, more entertaining than what he documented. He altered the truth in order to make the truth more compelling, and his subtle and mysterious reworking accounts, more than anything else, for the lasting appeal of his writing (5).

At first, I thought I would run into a lot of repetition, but I soon discovered that Bucknell's scholarly work had thoroughly investigated Isherwood's life from beginning to end—as a biographer should. From Isherwood's point of view, for example, he only knew his father until the man was killed in WWI, when Isherwood was little more than eleven. Bucknell fills in those blanks for readers: lets us know what a sensitive

man the father was and how, as long as he could, he nurtured Christopher's artistic personality. The hole left in Isherwood's life was one that would never be filled.

Christopher Isherwood was as openly gay as a man could be in his era (b. 1904). By his own accounting he went to bed with over 400 men (from Germany to the UK to the USA). He loved his sexual life. Even when he had a lover/partner, he often had trysts with other men. Yet “[h]e saw from the outset of his career that he must make homosexuality attractive to mainstream audiences if he was to change their view of it, and he worked to do this in all his writing in different ways” (9). I believe he succeeded. Within the glory of the Gay Liberation days of the 1970s, the man was in his sixties, yet he still continued to grow, and he was admired far and wide by younger gay men (my generation) for his pioneering life and work. He was in constant demand for teaching and speaking gigs, which he labored to keep, not only for the remuneration but for the communication it afforded him with others.

This tome is one of the most eloquent pieces of literary biography I've ever read. If readers wish to learn about one of the finest twentieth-century writers working in English prose, this book is a fine place to begin.

Canin, Ethan. *A Doubter's Almanac*. New York: Random, 2016.

This novel is about two men, a father and his son, although it implicates so many other characters: the father and *his* parents, and the son, his father and mother, as well as his siblings. Both father and son are advanced mathematicians, the father so brilliant as to teach for a time at Princeton and win a prestigious award for solving a single complex “problem.” The father is also an alcoholic, and his family bear the brunt of all his boorish sins, including the son who chooses to use his mathematical education to make a fortune on Wall Street. He makes such a fine fortune that he can afford two things: plenty of drugs and the ability to walk away from Wall Street and still have money for him and his family to live on for the rest of their lives. The former, drugs, he begins “dosing” himself in his teens, with the substance of MDMA or Ecstasy. He somehow knows how to dose himself just enough to stay engaged throughout his schooling. Only later, after he has quit, does his father confront him (takes one to know one). The last part of the novel takes place in the father's crude cabin in northern Michigan. Father is dying of liver disease, and everyone gathers to watch his bones literally break beneath his skin. A longtime acquaintance of the father leaves the son with enough (something) to euthanize the father when it comes time (ah, were it that easy for any of us). The final chapter, skillfully written and skillfully placed, takes readers back to the son and his sister's childhood, a rare and beautiful time they share with their father in a boat on the lake. It may be the most memorable episode they have with their brilliant but broken father, and it allows the characters, as most of us do, to recall only the good times they have had with a difficult parent.

Cunningham, Michael. *Day: A Novel*. New York: Random, 2024 (2023).

The novel revolves around one day, yet the same *date*, in 2019, 2020, and 2021: April 5. Right away one might recognize these years as the before, during, and after of the COVID pandemic and US lockdown. But, of course, the novel is more complex and

more flexible than that (the disease serving more as wallpaper than plot substance). Cunningham fluidly explores the dynamics of two couples and their families. Dan and Isabel live with their two children, Nathan and Violet, and Isabel's younger gay brother, Robbie, age thirty. Only not for long, because Robbie is off to Iceland to live by himself in an (understandably) cold little cabin. The other family is comprised of Garth (brother to Dan) and Chess, and their son—not quite a family because Garth does not live with his wife and child (who now acknowledge that Garth is the son's father). Both families seem to be coming apart but readers aren't sure why (perhaps, in part, it is because of the pandemic, invisible but insidious). Cunningham explores their dynamics quietly and assuredly so that by the end readers have a good idea of what has gone on in their lives, before during and after the pandemic. The last few chapters are each mere paragraphs long, providing a soft-landing denouement. Cunningham is the best.

Dahlstrom, S. J. *Texas Grit*. Philadelphia: Paul Dry, 2014.

I wish books written with such frankness had been available when I was a boy. Dahlstrom tells the simple but interesting story of a twelve-year-old Colorado boy named Wilder who spends a week with his grandfather (called Papa). Why? Delicately revealed but not sugar-coated is the fact that his mother is being treated for cancer. While with his grandfather, Wilder learns all about ranching in the Texas panhandle. He learns more about diamond-back rattlesnakes when one appears in the blind where he and Papa have sighted a deer. Wilder learns what branding is all about, how the male calves are castrated and their testicles pan-fried as an epicurean delicacy. The author reveals so much rich information about a Texas ranch without being didactic. At the end of the week, Papa drives Wilder back to Colorado (he'd taken the bus down), an eight-hour journey that ends in the dark. But he returns to find out his mother will be all right. And . . . he has returned with his new knife stained with bovine blood as well as the skin and rattler of that snake Papa kills in the blind. A satisfying story that a child can live vicariously for the time it takes to read it!

Dahlstrom, S. J. *Wilder and Sunny*. Philadelphia: Paul Dry, 2015.

Dahlstrom writes so nicely for children. He doesn't talk down to them. In fact, he strives to expand their vocabularies, I believe. In this simple adventure in which a friend of the family, a man of seventy-two, takes twelve-year-old Wilder and his female friend Sunny on a fishing trip. The author goes into great detail about trout fishing in Colorado, incorporating words like tippet, hopper-dropper, bead head, and two-fly rig. You either get meaning by context or author explanation or looking them up. Either way you learn. The climax of the book may be when, during this camping trip, the three campers are confronted by a mother bear and two cubs. It is a realistic and dynamic depiction, rather graphic at times, but it does give Wilder and Sunny a chance to grow up in certain ways before Sunny's father locates them and saves them from further adventures. Wilder and Sunny form a bond that may last well into the future. Only time will tell.

Demmeny, Michael. *On Christopher Street: Life, Sex, and Death after Stonewall*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2023.

Christopher Street is a place, a street that is at the heart of gay life in New York City. *Christopher Street* was also a gay publication that opened up life for its gay subscribers. This book is a compendium of essays that Demmeny wrote for *CS*, or speeches he made for various organizations from the 1970s to the 1990s (mostly). Demmeny was the first openly gay editor to be hired at a major publishing house: Stonewall Editions at St. Martin's Press. During his tenure there he was responsible for publishing over one hundred titles by gay authors. **Why is this book important?** For someone my age (in 1987 Demmeny read a novel *MS* of mine and recommended to me that I should pursue the small presses), it is a good review of history that I lived through (though not in New York). For gay people under the age of forty, it is a history from which they could learn where their gay privileges today come from. Without the courageous acts of civil disobedience in 1969, there would be no Grindr, few LGBTQIA+ films or books. No marriage. Those brave people also taught us that we must remain alert and keep fighting. There are those on SCOTUS and in Congress who would still deprive our hard-won community of its rights. In some sense, unless we at last develop a more inclusive society, there will always be a Stonewall rebellion in the offing. We should be prepared to bear arms at any time.

Dufresne, John. *Johnny Too Bad: Stories*. New York: Norton, 2005.

Of the nineteen stories, I particularly enjoyed reading "Based on a True Story," "Epithalamion," "Talk Talk Talk," the title story, and "Squeeze the Feeling." The latter may be the "best." In a way, it "links" together a number of other stories in the same collection (such a popular editorial choice) by reprising several characters featured earlier. In "Squeeze" a writer lives with his female friend and Spot, his dog. Girlfriend gets pregnant and loses baby, but Spot, a supersensitive creature, comforts her (he possesses other powers). Dufresne displays his superb talents when in the space of just more than a page he takes readers on an emotional roller coaster climax. The man and woman are drinking in their car, and an officer detains them. When he learns of the miscarriage, he drops the citation. The officer then returns and shares a similar event which has occurred in his own life and has not been able to speak with anyone about it (including his wife). Dufresne creates an emotional turn of events in such a short distance, yet readers may weep because the exchange is so honest, so real—as are all the stories in this collection.

Dunne, Griffin. *The Friday Afternoon Club: A Family Memoir*. New York: Random, 2024.

There may be several big takeaways from this celebrity memoir. One, rich (celebrities) and poor (ordinary citizens) alike can suffer from alcohol and drug problems. Two, rich and poor alike may lose a family member to murder and lose, as well, the court case against the accused murderer. Three, rich or poor, family support can mean everything to an individual who's attempting to suffer through or recover from life's insurmountable problems. Dunne—actor, producer, director, and writer—writes with humor (usually on the sardonic side) and understanding about his alcoholic father

(also in the Biz and later a best-selling novelist), a difficult but caring mother with MS; his long friendship with the late Carrie Fisher (who hails from a similar background); the murder of his beloved sister, Dominique. At the same time the author portrays his mostly solid and loving relationships with relatives close and distant (his father's brother is married to author Joan Didion, yet the two brothers do not speak for years). All in all, an enjoyable memoir. I know *I* kept turning the pages.

Fiske, Robert Hartwell. *The Dictionary of Disagreeable English: A Curmudgeon's Compendium of Excruciatingly Correct Grammar*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest, 2005.

Thank god for people like Fiske, who keep track of all the ins and outs of grammar (never grammer). And can remind us that the "l" in almond is silent (AH-mend). Or that *alumnus* is a male graduate, *alumna* a female graduate, and *alumni* signify male or female graduates, while *alumnae* = female graduates only. Fiske reminds us not to confuse mendacity (being beggarly) with mendacity (untruthfulness). To peruse material is not to give it a casual reading but a thorough one. Finally, zoology is pronounced zoh-OL-ah-jee, not with a zoo sound. Handy little book to keep around, but Fiske might be reminded by linguists that the people solidify usage. Some day (soon?) there will be no *whom* in grammar books or dictionaries. *Me and my brother* will be perfectly acceptable (it already is among Z's). Some of us don't like it, but that's how usage works. A thing gets employed so much it becomes acceptable, nay, becomes de rigueur. Remember *thee* and *thou*? *Shalt not*? Gone. Simply vanished. Again, I am thankful to have such a handy little handbook, but if Fiske hasn't already had a heart attack, he's certainly set up for one if he can't loosen up a bit.

Freedman, Russell. *Lincoln: A Photobiography*. New York: Clarion, 1987.

A 1987 Newbery Award winner, this book informs all readers (not just children for whom it is meant) about things they might not have known concerning Abraham Lincoln. I am glad I finally read it and marveled in its unique photographs and illustrations.

Freudenberger, Nell. *The Limits*. New York: Knopf, 2024.

This novel of some scope develops several strands. Nathalie, a French biologist working in the South Pacific, sends her daughter off to New York City to live with her father and stepmother. The teen Pia does not like anyone, it seems: her mother, her father, and most assuredly her pregnant stepmother, a high school English teacher named Kate. All of whom do flip-flops to communicate with her. The only person she seems to connect with is a girl named Athyna (pronounced like the Greek figure, go figure)—a student of Kate's with whom she has a nurturing relationship. To complicate things Pia is "in love with" Raffi, a thirty-year-old Tahitian who serves as Nathalie's fixer. Of course, it is more of an inappropriate crush, and her affections have not been returned in kind. Still, she believes something is there. The narrative profiles the physical limits of the natural world but also explores the limits of human relationships. I enjoyed the author's first book, *Lucky Girls*, much more.

Ilsley, George K. *The Home Stretch: A Father, A Son, and All the Things They Never Talk About*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2020.

The commonalities I have with the author of this book and that my late father have with Ilsley's late father are eerie. But I suppose they shouldn't be. Many gay men have mothers who seduce them to become Mommy's helper when Dad ignores or rejects them. A number of gay men are called upon to be caregiver for that father late in life when he realizes he can't do life alone.

Yet the author approaches the subject with a great sense of humor (sometimes sardonic, sometimes sly) and a great deal of honesty. George's father is stubborn, irascible, rude, outspoken. He is also in his nineties and can't always remember what he said ten minutes earlier or what he did yesterday. The family live in Nova Scotia in an old house the author's father has built much earlier in time. Things must be run the way the father says. That includes keeping some old brown draperies pulled shut on the stairway to keep heat downstairs. When George's father is finally confined to a hospital and death is only a matter of days away, the first thing George does when he gets back to the family place is to rip down those draperies. Yet he can't bring himself to throw them away but instead hides them . . . just in case the old man should return.

Ilsley's last chapter is a coda of sorts. It concerns his father's last days, when George must fly from Nova Scotia to his adult home in Vancouver. Short sections touch on subjects like "seeing" his father everywhere after the man's death. There are "so many slices and scenes and memories and stories of my father" (215) that George's mind keeps bringing up. Even two years after the funeral, George claims to hear his father's voice in the night . . . and he's back in Vancouver. I do not discount this event. On the second night after my father's death, I "wake" from a dream to sense more than hear my own father say something like everything's going to be fine. I'm not a woo-woo (or even serious) religious person, but somehow I believe what has been communicated. As I said earlier, I feel a lot in common with the author, and I'm happy to have read his account.

Karnow, Stanley. *Paris in the Fifties*. With illustrations by Annette Karnow. New York: Random, 1997.

An award-winning journalist of his era (b. 1925), Karnow pens this lovingly written memoir of his time as a young man living in Paris in the 1950s. By way of these twenty-one essays, we learn French history, French cuisine, French politics. But most of all the French *way*. From history, we learn of Monsieur Guillotin, "reluctant" inventor of the most popular manner of execution for some time. From cuisine, we learn how wine is the only beverage to consume with a meal. And politics? Eh, bien. Karnow investigates all manner of the French polity. Overall, the essays are our treat, a way to enjoy a young man's decade in France, at a time, in an atmosphere that may never be repeated.

Kenney, Charles. With an introduction by Michael Beschloss. *John F. Kennedy: The Presidential Portfolio. History as Told through the Collection of the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2000. [Includes CD with speeches, dictated letters, and phone calls recorded by JFK.]

This book, no matter how much one may have read about John F. Kennedy, provides details that might be surprising—with regard to his upbringing and family line. Both of his parents are Irish immigrants who then become millionaires in the United States. There are details of his education, his military career, and his time in politics. Many pages feature original documents that JFK himself writes, speeches and the like. The CD is comprised of a series of dictations Kennedy is making to his secretary by way of a Dictaphone, as well as commentary by historian, Michael Beschloss. A chapter near the end summarizes the day in 1963 that he is assassinated. JFK's wife, Jackie, cries out: **"He's dead—they've killed him—Oh Jack, oh Jack, I love you"** (223). I was fifteen when this momentous day in history took place, but I never recall hearing of this intimacy uttered in her last minutes with her husband as they are about to roll him away. The book is full of these small surprises, and I can see myself returning to its pages to review them, lest I forget . . . lest I forget.

Maupin, Armistead. *Michael Tolliver Lives*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

This is a pleasant bookend to the seven-book (I think) series. Michael Tolliver, now in his mid-fifties, is married to a man twenty years his junior. The novel comes full circle, chronicling Michael's mother's death (and their prior reconciliation) and the near-death of Anna Madrigal, who Michael considers more his mother than the woman in Florida dying of cancer. Loose ends are also tied up with Mary Ann, who flies in to see Anna in her hospital bed. If you're really into the series, this book may seem a bit bland, but I do believe it brings a suitable finality to the series' characters who for so long have inhabited 28 Barbary Lane and environs in San Francisco, the City.

McDermott, Alice. *Absolution*. New York: Farrar, 2023.

This is a woman's book, which is in no way meant to denigrate it. In fact, I find myself reading mostly women novelists these days. This novel, set in early 1960s Vietnam, is told from the viewpoint of a "wife," not a military wife, but close to it. Her fresh, new husband is a civilian worker for the US military. Still, the narrator, Patricia, must hobnob with all the other wives. Her story seems to be the dawning of women's awareness of their "place" in society at the time: a wife is a support system for her husband. Full stop.

McDermott structures the novel in a fascinating and engrossing manner. It doesn't take long to realize that Patricia is addressing someone, a "you" (a child, a daughter of a friend) even if it took me some pages to figure out. In Part III, the daughter takes over the narration as an adult. At the very end, Patricia adds sort of a coda to the entire story. The novel seems epistolary in nature even if it is not written in the form of letters because Patricia addresses the entire story to this other person, and vice versa in Part III. It might be puzzling if it weren't for the fine clues that McDermott leaves for readers. You simply must pay attention. Her subtlety in creating difficult scenes is

magnificent. At the very end, Patricia who has experienced multiple miscarriages is “given” a small beautiful Vietnamese girl with but one scarring birthmark on her face. Patricia is overwhelmed but takes the girl to her Saigon home, to wait for her husband whom she has not told. By the same token, she has learned from a friend that they’re going home soon; her husband has failed to keep her in the loop about it, so she feels she has a leg up on him, something to balance the power between them. Then a really odd thing happens. I won’t spoil the scene, but the author manages to take readers completely off guard by what happens next, though it may be the most logical—and the best answer for all concerned.

McEwan, Ian. *Saturday*. New York: Doubleday, 2006.

McEwan always places his characters in such precarious but interesting situations. In this novel, an eminent London surgeon witnesses a plane crashing at Heathrow airport—out his bedroom window—early one Saturday morning. He immediately prepares himself to leave the house; he will be needed to help clean up the carnage. At first, one thinks that this event is the inciting event of the novel. It is not, merely foreshadowing (the plane, piloted by two Russians, crashes in foam, and all survive). Later in the morning, the surgeon finds that a street has been blocked off, but he ignores the police and drives to his destination in his expensive Mercedes. There he is sideswiped by a cad and his two buddies, who try to hold him up for damages (a lopped-off side mirror), but it is the cad who has initiated the accident, and so the surgeon refuses, suffering a punch in the chest for his trouble. He notices the cad’s physical characteristics and determines that the man has (what will turn out to be) Huntington’s disease. His conference with the cad softens the young man, and they part. But one realizes, like the proverbial bad penny, the cads are to surface again. I won’t spoil the ending. I will say that McEwan turns what could have been a maudlin conclusion into one that is both realistic and satisfying literarily. No one character gets off too easily, nor does one suffer too much. A lot like real life for most of us.

McQuade, Barbara. *Attack from Within: How Disinformation Is Sabotaging America*. New York: Seven Stories, 2024.

This book combines both anecdotal and hard evidence to define disinformation (deliberate misrepresentation of facts), provides a number of ways in which authoritarians use disinformation, and finally, gives a number of steps citizens and government can take to reduce the effects of it. If readers have studied the first two ideas, the book may seem like an excellent review. The last part—ways to combat disinformation—are the most informative for me.

One way is **To Reduce Disinformation from the Supply Side**. Germany, for example, **REQUIRES “digital platforms to monitor and remove illegal content for face civil penalties” (251)**. **To Regulate Online Publishers Like Other Industries** is another. **Prohibit Anonymous Users and Bots. Require Disclosure of Funding Sources. Strengthen local journalism** by having the government provide partial funding. Local sources are less likely to disinform their friends or in a situation where it comes back on them. McQuade furnishes numerous other ways in which to combat disinformation, locally, nationally, and on digital platforms. She concedes that these

methods will not entirely make disinformation go away, but they could certainly reduce its effects. This read is well worth the time if you're at all interested in the topic. Any one of us can be duped at any time. Oh, and I really admire McQuade's prose in print. She, a former copy editor, is meticulous to get the correct subject/verb agreement, in, say, using the word "media." The media *are* responsible for content. Too many people in journalism use media as a singular noun. Wrong.

Moss, Adam. *The Work of Art: How Something Comes from Nothing*. New York: Penguin, 2024.

I chose to read this book because I've always been interested in how creative people work, and because I heard author Adam Moss speak of his book on PBS's *Amanpour and Company*. Moss, noted editor and journalist, over a period of many years, interviews forty-three artists, and he paints these portraits, so to speak, with a broad brush. He includes not only visual artists but writers, playwrights, poets, film directors, musician-composers, and some you wouldn't consider artists at all. For example, he tells the story of two restaurateurs who create a new sandwich and a couple of men who build complex sand castles and photograph the final results.

The book is a visual delight. Moss includes an abundance of visual documentation: photographs, doodles, notebooks, and more. He recreates entire conversations with his subjects, notating who is speaking by way of a script-like presentation. He uses a red font for a sentence and a thin red line extending with an arrow to the example he wishes for you to view. He divides his text into bite-sized sections labeled in bold with a subtitle concerning the text to follow. Moreover, because he has known some of these people for so long, his narrative is a personal one. You feel as if you've been let in on some great secrets. Nearly half of the pages include footnotes in a teeny tiny font that challenges readers my age, but I read each one and they all seemed pertinent.

Moss's subjects appear to have a master plan, whether it is a doodle on a napkin (such a cliché, but I can't help it) to yards of paper outlining a project. Some projects take years, maybe decades, to come to fruition. The artist or writer abandons a project, then returns, a pattern repeated many times among Moss's subjects. Or these people may produce many versions or drafts of the same work until it in some way pleases them as being "done." Many feel that a particular piece is never done; it's just time to quit and move on to something else.

Moss seems to be finishing this book during the pandemic. Many of the artists speak of how they deal with its chaos and isolation, how much is incorporated into their work or how hard they attempt to ignore the cataclysm and get on with their own work. Moss has selected a particularly apt title, because he demonstrates over and over again the sheer amount of labor—work—that goes into making art. A fine read for anyone but especially those looking for a handle on how art is made.

Moyers, Bill. *Moyers on America: A Journalist and His Time*. Edited by Julie Leininger Pycior. New York: New Press, 2004.

I wish I'd read this book twenty years ago when it first came out. The author's prescient views might have informed my future a bit. We may think that there is a lot wrong with our country now, but Moyers has us take a look at it in 1892. The People's Party **"meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political and material ruin Corruption dominates the ballot box, the [state] legislatures and the Congress and touches even the bench The newspapers are largely subsidized or muzzled, public opinion silenced The fruits of toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few"** (7). Seems as if we're reading about certain groups today. The only difference is that because of social media, "public opinion" is far from being silenced. People can say whatever they want without a shred of evidence, making "truth" even more elusive than ever.

Tom Johnson, mayor of Cleveland in the early 1900s asserts about public ownership of local transportation: **"If you don't own them, they will own you.'** It's why advocates of clean elections today argue that if anybody's going to buy Congress, it should be the people. When advised that businessman [sic] got their way in Washington because they had lobbies and consumers had none, Tom Johnson responded: **'If Congress were true to the principles of democracy it would be the people's lobby.'** What a radical contrast to the House of Representatives today!" (14). Yes, if today every Democrat contributed only \$5 a month as "dues" to the DNC, what the party couldn't accomplish on their behalf! Fall down on the job, and you can withhold your \$5!

Consider this jewel: **"Money has robbed the middle class and the working poor of representation—and as they become weaker politically, they are even more insecure in their jobs, their savings, and their future"** (61). What money? you ask. Money from corporate special interests, deep-pocketed lobbyists, that's what.

Or this one: In 2004 **"fewer than half"** of our population votes in presidential elections, and about a third **"vote in our congressional elections—compared to 80 percent a century ago"** (62). Still, only 66% turned out to vote for president in 2020, and 45% turned out in 2022 for mid-terms. Why would citizens now care less than those of a hundred years ago? Why be complacent?

Moyers ends the book with an essay on aging, which seems more pertinent than ever to Boomers, because we now make up the larger part of that demographic. His suggestion: Avoid disease and disability, maintain mental and physical function, and continue to engage with life. Amen.

Newman, Paul. *The Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Man: A Memoir*. Based on interviews and oral histories conducted by Stewart Stern. Compiled by David Rosenthal. With a foreword by Melissa Newman and an afterword by Clea Newman Soderlund. New York: Knopf, 2022.

I'm a big fan of this sensational actor, but the book leaves a lot to be desired. The man

tells you over and over again that he is separated from his own feelings, and that emotional distance is evident in his very own words. He hardly says anything about his wife, actor Joanne Woodward, and, even though he mentions going through therapy (finally), he doesn't reveal much about the process or how it might transform his life from curmudgeon to kind philanthropist. The compilers cover only a fraction of his films. All in all, disappointing.

Patchett, Ann. *The Magician's Assistant*. Orlando: Harcourt, 1997.

Magician Parsifal dies suddenly in Los Angeles, and his assistant wife, Sabine, is instantly burdened with a visit from Parsifal's family of Alliance, Nebraska. The two members who fly to LA for the service are Parsifal's mother, Dot, and the magician's younger sister, Bertie. Sabine is in no mood, especially when they keep calling her husband Guy, a name he gave up long before for adopting his stage name, Parsifal. But Sabine suffers the visitors quietly, taking them to places familiar to Guy/Parsifal, including the rug factory he owns and runs. Oh, and readers learn early that Parsifal is gay and has acquired a lover/partner, Phan. Parsifal marries Sabine largely to protect their financial interests. Readers also learn that most magician's don't make a living from the work; they have to have a day job, too. Sabine herself is employed by an architecture firm, creating exquisite models for structures the firm is designing. During the short visit, Sabine becomes close to Parsifal's family members and promises to make a trip to Nebraska soon.

In the middle of January Sabine lands, after a shaky flight, in Scottsbluff. She is greeted by Dot and Bertie. Later she meets Kitty, Guy's older sister, who looks a lot like him. So do her teenage sons, one of whom is also named Guy. At first Sabine is ill at ease but after some long visits with Dot and Kitty, she learns more about her late husband, Guy/Parsifal, mainly that he had a major tussle with the law when young, and the law won. Because he was underage, he spent his time in a reformatory, not in a prison for adults. After serving his sentence, he headed for LA to begin his career as a magician.

Back in his heyday, he and Sabine had appeared on the *Johnny Carson Show*, and someone had made a VHS tape of their appearance. In fact, the family watches it almost daily. They insist that Sabine see it, too. She's never viewed a recording of their work before, so it is novel to her. Patchett does a masterful job of carefully threading together all the strands of this novel, and I won't say more because there would have to be some spoilers, and I don't want to do that, I just don't.

Patchett, Ann. *Tom Lake: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins, 2023.

I've never before read a novel whose existence depended almost entirely on another work of literature for its structure, its heart—but this one would seem to win all the awards for such a category. In the author's note Patchett says: **"I thank Thornton Wilder, who wrote the play that has been an enduring comfort, guide, and inspiration throughout my life. If this novel has a goal, it is to turn the reader back to *Our Town*, and to all of Wilder's work. Therein lies the joy"** (311). Her love and admiration

palpitate throughout, far from utilizing the play as a gimmick but giving the work its sole purpose: how one actor relates to *Our Town* for her entire life.

In high school Lara plays the role of Emily in Wilder's play. (I'll assume that everyone here at one time has read, read for, played a part in, or witnessed a production and is familiar with all its characters.) Thus begins Lara's career as an actor. Yet her career is not a typical one. Yes, she acquires an agent who gets her into Hollywood. She even auditions for some plays on Broadway. But in a summer stock production (staged at Tom Lake) in Traverse City, Michigan, she wins the part of Emily, as well as the female lead in Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love*, a role for which she is not suited. Peter Duke, a man not much older than Lara, plays Emily's father onstage. He, too, is headed for stardom, but he is more serious than Lara. He keeps detailed notebooks on the characters he plays, reviewing his scribbles up to the minute before speaking his first line. Lara depends on the fact that in some sense she *is* Emily. She bunks with Duke and falls for the handsome, charming actor. He will marry three times and end up in rehab for alcohol addiction.

Patchett weaves all of Lara's career within the fabric of her own adult family life. She has married a man she met during that run of summer stock but not until years later. They now have three adult daughters, one of whom is named Emily. The family owns and operates a cherry orchard farm, and it takes all of them to bring in the crop each year. As they toil, the daughters beg mom, Lara, to tell them all about her time with Peter Duke, her time in film. He is by now so famous that Emily, the eldest, believes somehow that Duke could be her father (which time will tell he is not).

This tightly knit novel is a joy to read aloud (which I did for my partner). When I taught tenth-grade pre-AP English, my pupils seemed to enjoy reading Wilder's play aloud each year; thus, I studied it ten years straight years, having it engrained into my being. Patchett recalling the lines (*Where's my girl? Where's my birthday girl?*) causes them to echo throughout more than the halls of the school where I taught. They resound throughout our country's schools. I once scoffed that the play was perfect for high schoolers, but what it is perfect for is to remind every adult that *Our Town* is quintessential America. It is the essence of the play's universality. One character receives a letter addressed this way: **United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the mind of God"** (45). Each of us could be that addressee!

Robison, Mary. *Why Did I Ever: A Novel*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2001.

Some books you just have to read as if you were boarding a rollercoaster. You can't figure it out necessarily; you just get on and ride until the thing comes to an end. Told in over 530 mini-chapters (even those are divided into short paragraphs or sentences) the novel is narrated by a woman who writes/doctors Hollywood scripts. In the meantime, she deals with a daughter trying (mostly not) to get off methadone. There is the Deaf Lady. There is Hollis, a male friend. First husband, second husband. A cat. It seems that this narrator really doesn't have it together, mentally, but she does her best. And if I'm right about the narrator's mental state, the author knocks this one out of the park.

Rutherford, Margaret. *Margaret Rutherford: An Autobiography as Told to Gwen Robyns*. London: Wyndham, 1972.

Recently I caught a couple of Rutherford's *Murder* films on Turner Classic Movies, in which she plays Agatha Christie's detective, Ms. Marple. And I became fascinated with the actor, how intricately and honestly she played the part, though the stories are relatively simple. Like a lot of actors/artists she suffered in her personal life early on. At age three her mother died, and an Aunt Besse raised her. It is easy to imagine her life as she was born in 1892, just a few months before my maternal grandmother was born. I usually don't care for "as told to" books because the prose does sound as if it has been dictated onto a recording and transcribed word for word. But Rutherford's spoken prose apparently is so eloquent, it doesn't seem to affect the quality of the written result. Besides, her accounts are terribly interesting.

Rutherford celebrated nearly fifty years in the acting business before, because of physical difficulties, she quit, just before her death in 1972—at age eighty. She seemed to make the most of her life no matter what. She went after and earned the career she desired. She traveled for both work and pleasure. She “adopted” adult children after she was married because she had none of her own. At age fifty-four she married fellow actor, Stringer Davis. He died a few months following her death. Perhaps some of her tips to actors are dated, but for the most part probably not. Kindness, consideration of fellow workers, and generosity never seem to go out of style. I paid entirely too much

for this used copy, but I do think it has been worth it! If only it were signed 😂!

Satow, Julie. *The Plaza: The Secret Life of America's Most Famous Hotel*. New York: Hachette, 2019.

In my opinion the best part of the book consists of the first two thirds. Those chapters concern themselves with the construction of the hotel which opens in 1907—up through World War II. By that time the hotel has acquired thirty-nine widows who are given life-time residential privileges. The last third of the book examines the 1990s, when D. Trump attempts to acquire the Plaza. But his credit is so bad others buy it out from under him. The most boring chapter may be after two billionaire gentlemen purchase the Plaza and convert a great percentage of it to huge and exclusive condos. The tedium continues when the author insists on informing readers how many buyers of these condos exhibit remorse, how much money they lose when they try to flip them. No, the most interesting portions of the book may have to do with the fascinating personalities who live and work at the Plaza throughout its more than one hundred years. If you're into that kind of history, fat-cat buyers at the turn of this century notwithstanding, then the book is for you. Each chapter is a stand-alone episode in the life of this historic architectural structure resting at the very edge of New York's Central Park, and I found that most of them piqued my interest.

Sedaris, David. *The Best of Me*. New York: Little, Brown, 2020.

Funny how authors view their own oeuvre. I've always been fond of Sedaris's work, but these selections, though engaging and humorous in places, did not really seem like his "best." His best usually contains little sentiment, yet much bawdiness and irreverence. The collection seemed too "nice." A friend of mine, however, thought the collection "vulgar," so there you go.

Sharot, Tali and Cass R. Sunstein. *Look Again: The Power of Noticing What Was Always There*. New York: One Signal, 2024.

"What is thrilling on Monday becomes boring by Friday. We *habituate*, which means that we respond less and less to stimuli that repeat" (2).

This statement is the authors' thesis. What implications does it have? Just about everything. What if you eat your favorite ice cream, rocky road, every day? You eventually become habituated to it; you get tired of it. (Get used to seeing *habituate* because you'll see it on nearly every page.) Eroticism can become numbed by repetition. The more sex you have with someone, the less exciting it becomes.

The chapter on "variety" is interesting, as well. University professors take sabbaticals every few years, not only to study but to be exposed to a variety of stimuli. They may travel out of town, out of the country. The authors also address the problems of social media, how *habituation* relates to the topic. They tackle misinformation and the environment. And they address society as a whole: discrimination, tyranny (fascism), and the law. An interesting and timely book.

Shulman, Norm. *Love, Norm: Inspiration of a Jewish American Fighter Pilot*. Lubbock: TTU Press, 2022.

Psychologist Norm Shulman first meets Greg, the boy who is to become his stepson, when the boy is twelve. The book is many things: 1) a bit of Norm's family history, his Polish-Jewish roots, his adolescent difficulties with math (with which I heavily identify) 2) a bit of world Jewish history, that these long-beleaguered people have always been warriors and not given proper credit for their service, and 3) letters that Norm writes to Greg while Greg is in Air Force pilot training. The latter comprises the spine of the book. Something I, as a fallen Gentile, was not aware of was the prejudice Jewish people have been subjected to concerning their military history: people claiming falsely that Jews avoid the military. Shulman does a superior job of informing readers of the many Jewish heroes (warriors) who have fought under various flags.

David Dragunsky is a Russian Jew who, as a tank driver, takes part in some of the most decisive battles on the eastern front of WWII. According to Shulman, **"The vast majority of Jewish combat deaths, 212,000 out of a total of 270,000 occurred in this theater of war. Unfortunately, Cold War politics and propaganda prevented proper credit from being given to our Russian ally and its Jewish soldiers, but history can't be changed" (25).** Another hero of Shulman's is Greg's maternal grandmother, Opal Keith, who **"was a member of the first regiment of Navy WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) recruited at the beginning of World War II" (39).** The author continues, week after week, letter after letter, to support his son with

encouragement of this kind, reinforcing the importance of Jewish military personnel when others in flight school try to belittle or sneer at Greg's own involvement (can antisemitism still exist in this century?). Greg gets the final word in the last chapter, in which he informs the reader of his appreciation and affection for his stepfather who has helped him through a year and a half of hellish pilot training. This is a fine book combining both the academics of history and the personal nature of memoir. It is a bold testament to a people who have suffered beyond endurance in world history, as well as at the local level, and still manage to rise to the level of hero.

Stadler, Matthew. *The Sex Offender*. New York: Grove, 2000 (1994).

Stadler is a unique and gifted writer. In this 1994 novel, he relates the tale of a thirty-year-old man charged with molesting one of his pupils, a twelve-year-old boy, Dexter. I say "tale," because the man's incarceration does not happen as it would in the America we know—with jail time, a trial, and imprisonment or institutionalization or both. No, in this fanciful land (seems European in nature), the former teacher is plopped into therapy. One type is the talking kind conducted with the Doctor-General. Another is an "aversive" type in which he is to associate his love for Dexter with negative stimuli. It doesn't work, of course. And ironically, the teacher finds another young boy, Hakan, upon whom he lavishes his love. Only this time, as far as I can tell, he does not engage sexually with the youth, only emotionally. And no one ever knows of their relationship!

So many "odd" elements to the narrative. The teacher also knows magically how to perform a kind of facelift, an element that figures heavily into the novel's resolution. His therapist, Doctor-General, is experimenting with the notion of replacing a human's brain so that one's impulses become "normal." But nothing seems normal in this novel. The teacher still loves Dexter and insists that the boy loves him. However, the Doctor-General disabuses him of this notion, informing him that the boy is very unhappy (we have no idea if this is true or not, or why he is unhappy). In the end, the teacher believes he has fooled officials into thinking he is "cured" and hoping for release. Yet they proclaim he is not cured and perform a simple kind of castration on him. Snip snip, like that! And now finally, one understands the cover illustration, as the teacher dresses as a woman to attend an important function. Odd, odd, odd. But a great book because it forces us to consider a subject, that thirty years later, is still taboo. Were the Greeks and Romans "sex offenders," too, or were they, in some manner, ahead of their time? It's a notion worth considering, and this satiric look (partially) helps us to see its possibilities.

Stone, Nic. *Dear Martin: A Novel*. New York: Penguin Random, 2017.

A Black teenage boy about to matriculate at an Ivy League school faces a number of lifechanging challenges. Not only does Justyce have deep feelings for a white Jewish girl who also likes him but he becomes involved in two escalating events with police officers in his city. During one of these incidents, he and his best friend are shot by an officer. To deal with his trials and tribulations, Justyce writes letters to the late Martin Luther King as if he is a living mentor. The author handles with depth and sensitivity all that Justyce must go through to grow as a person. I like how Stone uses "news

bulletins” from local TV stations to bring readers up to date on events, as well as an interesting font to distinguish Justyce’s letters to MLK. In dialogue, Stone utilizes a playscript format, eliminating the need for quite so many “they said” situations. Not only a very moving book but a stylishly presented one, as well.

Streisand, Barbra. *My Name Is Barbra*. New York: Viking, 2023.

Wow! How do I begin?

Full disclosure: I’ve been a fan of Barbra Streisand since 1962 when I was fourteen, and, from the speaker of an AM radio, emanated this crystalline voice. It lifted me across the room like a wonderful fragrance. I thought, God, I’ve got to hear more of her. And so I did. Decades of albums later (most of which I own in one medium or another). I bought both the hardcover (\$31) and the Audible version (\$61) of this book, so you know I’m serious when I declare I’m a fan. Her work has always cost more than that of other artists, and I’ve always paid it. You get what you pay for, and her case it is great artistry.

This memoir might better be subtitled as an autobiography because it covers every minute, every inch of her life—album by album, show or concert by concert, and film by film. At first, I am a bit disconcerted, as I follow along in the hardcover, that she does not read the text word for word. Her prose is quite engaging—rich and varied. But she adds so many asides, creating more of a conversational tone in her book, that I’m grateful for the audio version, as well. It must have taken her months to make the Audible recording, and yet her voice never wavers (except by way of certain emotions); it sounds as if she recorded the 900+ pages (48+ hours) in one smooth session. This woman does nothing by half.

And perhaps that is the crux of Streisand’s book: She means to tell her own story her own way, after decades of being misrepresented and misquoted again and again. **Myth Number One:** Barbra is hard to work with. Nope. She quotes from directors, actors, and other professionals she’s collaborated with that *because* of her exacting nature, she is a joy to work with. Because she collects discerning individuals around her, she creates a fine synergy, by which the highest quality is sought after by all. Exceptions exist, like the late Ray Stark, producer, to whom Streisand is tied for her first five films. He is a lying, conniving person who cheats her in several ways, and she can’t wait to be free of him. In some ways (creativity mainly), her career does not begin until he’s nowhere near her career.

Myth Number Two: Barbra loves to perform. For the first time, I learn that every time she must appear before a live crowd to sing, the experience frightens her to death. She loves performing in the studio, making albums. She is deeply emersed when appearing in or directing a film. Yet, later in her career, she does “conquer her fears,” a line of dialog I borrow from her concert in New York’s Central Park (1967). Over time, she learns to trust her audience, to include them as a collective partner.

Myth Number Three: Barbra is a cold b——. You should read all the adoring notes, letters, and reviews that people write. You should hear of the friendships she develops

with other actors, directors, musicians, artists, and professionals close to her. Marty, her agent (manager?), at ninety-something, is still with her. Renata, her personal assistant-housekeeper-chef-chauffeur has remained with her for over sixty years. You don't retain that kind of loyalty by being unkind.

Then there is the personal. Barbra confesses (we've always guessed) how the loss of her father at an early age affects her entire life. She describes the rocky but loving relationship with a mother who, it turns out, is so jealous of her own daughter's success that she often turns a cold shoulder to Barbra—even skipping an important performance in Las Vegas to play the slots with her friends. Barbra shares the details of the romances in her life (those whom she loved and those who loved her): Omar Shariff, Marlon Brando, and others not so well known. An entire chapter she devotes to her husband of twenty-five years: (hello, gorgeous) James Brolin.

Though she may have had an editor to help her shape the book (what published writer doesn't?), Streisand's prose, both conversational and formal at times, is her own. After all, the woman has written screenplay treatments, screenplays, and another book besides. Like everything else she does, Streisand approaches this book with love and exacting detail. If you like her at all, or if you are curious, pony up and either read or listen to the book (or both, as I did). You won't be disappointed.

Oh, and as a bonus, whenever Barbra Streisand explains how a certain album is developed, she includes sound snippets from the tracks to demonstrate what she is talking about. **Sublime. Sublime. Sublime.** It's like sitting in on the best master class ever!

Strout, Elizabeth. *Olive, Again: A Novel*. New York: Random, 2019.

I love Elizabeth Strout's writing. It reads so simply; the pages just fly by. But one must not mistake this ease of reading for a lack of complexity. Her characters only *seem* to step out of real life and onto the page with little effort. I fell in love with Olive in *Olive Kitteridge*: She blurts out what she thinks, no matter whom it may offend or hurt. Even so, she's had two loving husbands, both of whom have died on her.

In *Olive, Again* I fall in love all over *again*. "Olive" and I are now in the same age range. Strout writes effectively in a charming way about being old. (As I say to my friends, "I didn't mind getting old, but I hate *being* old.") As a retired school teacher from the region (Maine), Olive continually runs into (grown) people who were once her pupils. Some of them she doesn't like and vice versa. Others she has a soft spot for. After Olive experiences a heart attack, her son arranges for her to receive home healthcare until she can manage by herself. One of the helpers is a former student who has, to Olive, an offensive bumper sticker on her car—one promoting an orange-haired man who becomes president. Yet, in the end, she asks this woman to tell Olive her story, and once again, in her own gruff manner, she accepts this woman, political views and all.

Olive's son has been thoughtful enough to put her name on a wait list at a local facility featuring a variety of settings for seniors, so she doesn't have long to wait when she

makes the decision to move there. She abhors the idea but realizes she can no longer manage the house she shared with her second husband (besides, it was formerly *his* house and she's never felt at home there). At the facility, Olive finds herself alone in most situations; she just has no patience for people who don't think like her, and she often tells them so in one way or another. After some time, however, she does make friends with someone she names Mousy Pants. Mousy Pants turns out to be an Isabelle, who shares her life story with Olive, and they realize they have a great deal in common: adult children who care for them but live at some distance, for one. They go so far, after a health scare, to exchange door keys. On alternating nights, one stops by to wave good night and see that everything is all right. Olive is relieved to find out that she's not the only resident using what she calls *poopy pants* (adult diapers). On the next to the last page, eighty-five-year-old Olive comes to this realization:

She was going to die. It seemed extraordinary to her, amazing. She had never really believed it before.

But it was almost over, after all, her life. It swelled behind her like a sardine fishing net, all sorts of useless seaweed and broken bits of shells and the tiny, shining fish—all those hundreds of students she had taught, the girls and boys in high school she had passed in the corridor when she was a high school girl herself (many—most—would be dead by now), the billion streaks of emotion she'd had as she'd looked at sunrises, sunsets, the different hands of waitresses who had placed before her cups of coffee—All of it gone, or about to go (288).

Strout's novels are all award winners in one way or another; it is not hard to see why. And *Olive, Again* is no exception!

Swisher, Kara. *Burn Book: A Tech Love Story*. New York: Simon, 2024.

I'm not a techie, but since the age of thirty-seven (1985), I have assimilated much knowledge (as much as I could retain) about smartphones, computers, laptops, printers, scanners, cameras, smart thermostats, GPS on my Camry, smart doorbells that announce by camera . . . whew. But Kara Swisher has made it her life to know about and report on the digital world creating all these products—with expertise and chutzpah. She has no fear of calling out the Bigs of this world. No fear of changing jobs when she wears one out. I first became acquainted with her work when I listened to her now-defunct *New York Times* podcast, *Sway*. There she would interview these Titans of the digital (under)world, and sometimes their fannies would get a bit warm roasting over her rotisserie of questions (and snappy patter of complaints).

Swisher's book is no different, as she has no problem slicing up the likes of Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, and to some degree (although she liked him), the late Steve Jobs. It is easy to grok (digital word meaning to understand, which she uses throughout) why the digital world of Silicon Valley both loved, hated, and feared her all at once.

Swisher also speaks of her brush with ill health: a mild stroke. She mentions her marriages to two different women, her children with each one (never married a man to have children). Her love of children and family life. Near the end of the book, she

makes this definitive statement that might be a clarion call for all of us who use digital devices (EVERYONE):

The dire situation had been aggravated by elected officials who, a quarter century into the Internet age, had managed to pass exactly zero legislation to protect anyone. Democratic institutions that we hold dear had crumbled in the face of what this digital engagement has wrought: no privacy protections, no updated antitrust laws, no algorithmic transparency requirement, no focus on addiction and mental impact. It is breathtaking to think that there are no significant guidelines governing these areas. However flawed, there are laws for everything *but* tech companies” (284).

Amen. We can only hope that Congress passes some of those laws . . . and soon.

Tan, Amy. *Saving Fish from Drowning*. New York: Random, 2005.

I love Amy Tan’s writing, and this book is no exception. From her memoir, readers may know that she made a trip to Asia at one time, and I believe this book could have been inspired by what she witnessed there. The plot: A woman in San Francisco dies, and her ghost (yes!) begins to tell the story of how she was to have accompanied twelve other people on a trip to Myanmar (formerly Burma). The group decides to go in spite of her death, and she “accompanies” them (otherwise how would she relate their experiences, right?)—unbeknownst to them. And their adventures are great. One couple fall in love. Other members quarrel. But the biggest event is that they are duped into taking a trip deep into the jungle and there become captives of a certain tribe. This isn’t as bad as it sounds. They are treated very kindly by the tribe, but when the group members believe it is time to leave, the tribe has other plans. Seems that they believe one of their members (a young man) is the reincarnation of a former leader. The novel has all the Dickensian intricacies. And the denouement by which all the loose ends are tied together is not to be missed. I read this aloud to my partner, and we both enjoyed it immensely.

Towles, Amor. *Table for Two: Fictions*. New York: Viking, 2024.

These six lengthy stories and one novella stand as jewels in Towles’s already glittering list of works: *A Gentleman in Moscow* being my favorite. These works exhibit the same inventiveness and wit. My favorite story, perhaps, is “The Ballad of Timothy Touchett.” Touchett is a young writer who moves to NYC at the turn of this century. He finds work, toiling for a Mr. Pennybrook, a “purveyor of used and rare editions.” Pennybrook is much more, as Touchett soon finds out. Because of Timothy’s ability to mimic handwritings, he is lured into “signing” editions, which Pennybrook then pawns off as the real thing, providing Timothy with what seems like a hefty bonus to a young man attempting to live in the city (\$50 per signature). Of course, readers can imagine where this sort of behavior leads, but it’s how they arrive at that point: what Touchett must experience before experiencing his comeuppance. The author’s approach seems a bit Dickensian but also somewhat like metafiction, in which he turns to his readership and reveals perhaps his own points of view.

In the novella, *Eve in Hollywood*, set in 1938, one Evelyn Ross takes a train to Chicago, but instead of meeting her parents who have driven in from Indiana, she then boards one to Los Angeles. Ross is beautiful save for one thing: she bears a long scar across her face, which turns some away. Perhaps because of the scar, she has learned to bear rejection and doesn't worry about such behavior. She marches to her own drum. Towles has lifted this character from his first novel, a curious idea but one I admire (sometimes writers are just not finished with a character), and takes her on this noir-like voyage of mayhem and murder. Enough said. If you're a fan at all of Towles's work, you will enjoy this delightful collection of "Fictions," as he forms his book's subtitle.

Wescott, Glenway. *Apartment in Athens*. New York: Harper, 1945.

During the latter part of World War II, Germans occupy Athens, and a Nazi officer is "assigned" to live with a couple and their two children. The officer expropriates the couple's bedroom, and they must sleep on cots in the kitchen. His every wish is their command, so to speak. Life becomes unbearable, but at one point the officer must go to Germany. When he returns to Greece, he is a changed man. **Spoiler alert:** his wife and two grown sons have both been killed. Though still gruff, the Nazi is softened a bit. The father is drawn into a conversation with the Nazi, and the father says something that the officer deems traitorous. He is sent off to prison where he is killed. Mired in his misery, the Nazi commits suicide, and the mother thinks there will now be peace in their apartment. But she is soon disabused of such an idea when she is falsely accused of murdering the German. Even though that situation is resolved in her favor, she then sacrifices her young son to the underground. This book was a \$4 find in a used bookstore, the owners not realizing this has rare book status with the Library of Congress!

Wright, Lawrence. *God Save Texas: A Journey into the Soul of the Lone Star State*. New York: Knopf, 2018.

I enjoyed reading this compendium of essays about contemporary Texas written by a noted journalist a few months older than I. I could picture myself where I was in my life at the same timeframe he was talking about: the JFK assassination, for instance. (I was a high school sophomore; he was a junior.) That discussion takes place in Chapter Seven titled, "Dallas."

In Chapter Six, "Turn the Radio On," Wright asserts there are two Texas. One is AM Texas, the other FM Texas. Of course, FM Texas is located in the large metropolitan areas: Houston, DFW, San Antonio, and more recently, Austin (whose population was only 250,000 people in the early 1970s). These radio stations serve as ready metaphors. FM Texas is made of smooth-sounding music of different varieties from classical to jazz to reggae and others. AM Texas is all country, except for the talk radio stations that are largely fundamentalist and conservative in nature. The city-dwellers (many transplants from the North and East) are moderate to liberal in their political leanings, the AM group more conservative, in fact, voted largely for Trump. In this chapter Wright also tackles the subject of guns:

“In the spring of 2016, I signed up to take a class at Central Texas Gun Works that would qualify me to carry a weapon. There were about thirty people in the class, including six women. Most of the day was spent learning the Texas general firearms laws, which are more nuanced and confusing than I expected. One can’t carry a gun in amusement parks, hospitals, sporting events, school buses, bars, a polling place, a court, a correctional facility, or ‘within 1000 feet of a correctional facility designated as a place of execution on a day execution if proper notice is posted.’ Private businesses, such as supermarkets, can ban guns from their premises; Whole Foods has done so, but Kroger has not” (155).

Even though Wright’s writing is fascinating and his facts interesting, and even though the book was published in 2018, parts of it (especially about Texas politics) can seem dated. Not the writer’s fault—just that because of rapid change the material has not aged well.

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.

Basic with Two or More Authors:

Last Name, First Name, 2nd, First and Last Names. *Title and Subtitle in Italics*. City of Publication, Short Publ Name, year of publication.

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* 5/19/20
2. Langella, Frank. *Dropped Names: Famous Men and Women as I Knew...* 7/25/20
3. Shikibu, Murasaki. *Tale of the Genji* 7/27/20 - 11/05/20

2021

4. Proulx, Annie. *Barkskins: A Novel* 2/05/21
5. Kendi, Ibram X. and Keisha N. Blain, eds. *Four Hundred Souls* 3/24/21
6. Kawabata, Yasunari. *The Master of Go* 4/06/21
7. Flores, Dan. *The Horizontal Yellow* 5/04/21
8. Wright, Frank Lloyd. *An Autobiography* 7/07/21
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* 11/05/21
13. Perry/Winfrey. *What Happened to You?* 12/23/21

2022

14. Cummins, Jeanine. *American Dirt* 2/01/22
15. Sedgwick, John. *From the River to the Sea* 2/24/22
16. McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian: Or The Evening Redness in the West* 3/30/22
17. Highsmith, Patricia. *Ripley's Game* 4/26/22
18. Doty, Mark. *What Is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life* 5/19/22
19. Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate* 7/14/22
20. Snyder, George. *On Wings of Affection*. 7/28/22
21. Sedaris, David. *A Carnival of Snackery: Diaries (2003-2020)* 9/01/22
22. Patchett, Ann. *The Dutch House* 9/21/22
23. Wharton, Edith. *The Custom of the Country* 10/31/22
24. Cather, Willa. *The Professor's House* 11/11/22
25. Rodgers, Mary. *Shy* 12/31/22

2023

26. Irving, John. *The Last Chairlift* 4/07/23
27. Toibin, Colm. *The Magician* 6/04/23
28. Garmus, Bonnie. *Lessons in Chemistry* 8/02/23
29. Kingsolver, Barbara. *Demon Copperhead* 9/20/23
30. McQuiston, Casey. *Red, White and Royal Blue* 10/19/23
31. McBride, James. *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store* 11/30/23

2024

32. Streisand, Barbra. *My Name Is Barbra* 1/25/24
33. Newman, Paul. *The Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Man: A Memoir* 2/16/24
34. Satow, Julie. *The Plaza: The Secret Life of America's Most Famous Hotel* 5/02/24
35. McDermott, Alice. *Absolution* 5/30/24
36. Tan, Amy. *Saving Fish from Drowning* 7/17/24
37. Dunne, Griffin. *The Friday Afternoon Club* 8/16/24
38. Patchett, Ann. *Tom Lake* 9/xx/24
39. Maupin, Armistead. *Michael Tolliver Lives* 10/09/24

2025

40. Pyncheon, Thomas. *Mason and Dixon* x/xx/25

Author	Running List of Possible “My Book World” Posts—2024 Leftovers Title	Date Posted
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Running List of Possible “My Book World” Posts—2025