

Books to Go

Nonfiction:

1185 Park Avenue by Anne Roiphe

With a rush of words, layer upon layer, acclaimed author Roiphe dissects her childhood family, depicting as well a grim view of growing up rich and Jewish on Upper Park Avenue in the 1940s and 1950s. The daughter of a wealthy, frightened, chain-smoking mother and a handsome, philandering, cold, immigrant father who rejected his past, Roiphe watched her parents savage each other daily. The tragedy of her parents' disastrous marriage repeats itself in Roiphe's own life, when she marries a man like her father, who wants her money but not her. This is not pleasurable reading; nevertheless, it is hard to put down this mesmerizing memoir.

Arc of Justice: a saga of race, civil rights and murder in the Jazz Age by Kevin Boyle

History professor Boyle has brilliantly rescued from obscurity a fascinating chapter in American history that had profound implications for the rise of the Civil Rights movement. With a novelist's craft, Boyle opens with a compelling prologue portraying the migration of African-Americans in the 1920s to the industrial cities of the North, where they sought a better life and economic opportunity. This stirring section, with echoes of Dickens's *Hard Times*, sets the stage for the ordeal of Dr. Ossian Sweet, who moves with his young family to a previously all-white Detroit neighborhood. When the local block association incites a mob to drive Sweet back to the ghetto, he gathers friends and acquaintances to defend his new home with a deadly arsenal. The resulting shooting death of a white man leads to a sensational murder trial, featuring the legendary Clarence Darrow, fresh from the Scopes Monkey trial, defending Sweet, his family and their associates. This popular history, which explores the politics of racism and the internecine battles within the nascent Civil Rights movement, grips right up to the stunning jaw-dropper of an ending.

The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother by James McBride

The Color of Water tells the remarkable story of Ruth McBride Jordan, the two good men she married, and the 12 good children she raised. Jordan, born Rachel Shilsky, a Polish Jew, immigrated to America soon after birth; as an adult she moved to New York City, leaving her family and faith behind in Virginia. Jordan met and married a black man, making her isolation even more profound. The book is a success story, a testament to one woman's true heart, solid values, and indomitable will. Ruth Jordan battled not only racism but also poverty to raise her children and, despite being sorely tested, never wavered.

The Day the World Came to Town 9/11 in Gander New Foundland by Jim DeFede

Adult/High School-Through selective interviews, this book describes events surrounding the 6595 people on board 38 planes whose transit across the Atlantic was disrupted when they were vectored to the airport in Gander, Newfoundland, on September 11, 2001. As a chronicle of the heartwarming reception these passengers received from touchdown until departure six days later, the volume resounds with tributes to the kindness and acts of

generosity on the part of local residents (population 10,000). Quick-thinking initiatives led by the mayor, constable, air-traffic controllers, and local heads of professional disaster-relief agencies organized a process for greeting deplaning passengers; checking luggage; fulfilling immigration/security requirements; and then transporting groups to churches, schools, and community centers where they were housed and fed. One account tells of volunteers from Gander's SPCA who crawled through the cargo spaces of the jetliners, locating pets and animals in cages, and bringing them food, water, and fresh bedding until they could be moved to a vacant hangar. Separate vignettes focus on the parents of a New York City firefighter who was missing, on a Texas couple returning from adopting an orphan in Kazakhstan, on a teenage cancer victim en route home following a "make-a-wish" trip to Italy, and more.

Founding Brothers by Joseph J. Ellis

In retrospect, it seems as if the American Revolution was inevitable. But was it? In *Founding Brothers*, Joseph J. Ellis reveals that many of those truths we hold to be self-evident were actually fiercely contested in the early days of the republic. Ellis focuses on six crucial moments in the life of the new nation, including a secret dinner at which the seat of the nation's capital was determined--in exchange for support of Hamilton's financial plan; Washington's precedent-setting Farewell Address; and the Hamilton and Burr duel. Most interesting, perhaps, is the debate (still dividing scholars today) over the *meaning* of the Revolution.

Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation by Cokie Roberts

News political commentator and NPR news analyst Roberts didn't intend this as a general history of women's lives in early America--she just wanted to collect some great "stories of the women who influenced the Founding Fathers." For while we know the names of at least some of these women (Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Eliza Pinckney), we know little about their roles in the Revolutionary War, the writing of the Constitution, or the politics of our early republic. In rough chronological order, Roberts introduces a variety of women, mostly wives, sisters or mothers of key men, exploring how they used their wit, wealth or connections to influence the men who made policy. As high-profile players married into each other's families, as wives died in childbirth and husbands remarried, it seems as if early America--or at least its upper crust--was indeed a very small world. Roberts's style is delightfully intimate and confiding: on the debate over Mrs. Benedict Arnold's infamy, she proclaims, "Peggy was in it from the beginning." Roberts also has an ear for juicy quotes; she recounts Aaron Burr's mother, Esther, bemoaning that when talking to a man with "mean thoughts of women," her tongue "hangs pretty loose," so she "talked him quite silent." In addition to telling wonderful stories, Roberts also presents a very readable, serviceable account of politics--male and female--in early America. If only our standard history textbooks were written with such flair!

Galileo's Daughter by Dava Sobel

Everyone knows that Galileo Galilei dropped cannonballs off the leaning tower of Pisa, developed the first reliable telescope, and was convicted by the Inquisition for holding a heretical belief--that the earth revolved around the sun. But did you know he had a daughter? In *Galileo's Daughter*, Dava Sobel tells the story of the famous scientist and his illegitimate daughter, Sister Maria Celeste. Sobel bases her book on 124 surviving letters to the scientist from the nun, whom Galileo described as "a woman of exquisite

mind, singular goodness, and tenderly attached to me." Their loving correspondence revealed much about their world: the agonies of the bubonic plague, the hardships of monastic life, even Galileo's occasional forgetfulness.

The Glass Castle: a memoir by Jeannette Walls

Starred Review. Freelance writer Walls doesn't pull her punches. She opens her memoir by describing looking out the window of her taxi, wondering if she's "overdressed for the evening" and spotting her mother on the sidewalk, "rooting through a Dumpster." Walls's parents—just two of the unforgettable characters in this excellent, unusual book—were a matched pair of eccentrics, and raising four children didn't conventionalize either of them. Her father was a self-taught man, a would-be inventor who could stay longer at a poker table than at most jobs and had "a little bit of a drinking situation," as her mother put it. With a fantastic storytelling knack, Walls describes her artist mom's great gift for rationalizing. Apartment walls so thin they heard all their neighbors? What a bonus—they'd "pick up a little Spanish without even studying." Why feed their pets? They'd be helping them "by not allowing them to become dependent." While Walls's father's version of Christmas presents—walking each child into the Arizona desert at night and letting each one claim a star—was delightful, he wasn't so dear when he stole the kids' hard-earned savings to go on a bender. The Walls children learned to support themselves, eating out of trashcans at school or painting their skin so the holes in their pants didn't show. Buck-toothed Jeannette even tried making her own braces when she heard what orthodontia cost. One by one, each child escaped to New York City. Still, it wasn't long before their parents appeared on their doorsteps. "Why not?" Mom said. "Being homeless is an adventure."

Leap of Faith: memoirs of an unexpected life by Queen Noor

Anyone who loved *The King and I* will readily warm to the love story of Queen Noor and the late King Hussein of Jordan. Born in America in 1951 as Lisa Halaby, Noor came from a wealthy, well-connected family and was part of Princeton's first co-ed class. Her father's aviation business produced a chance meeting with King Hussein in 1976, and a year or two later Noor realized the king was courting her. He was 41, she was 26. The rumor mills buzzed: was she the next Grace Kelly? Before long, the king renamed her Noor (light in Arabic), and she converted to Islam. They were married in the summer of 1978. From this point on, her story is mostly his, mainly covering his attempts to broker peace in the Middle East. There are meetings with Arafat, Saddam Hussein, American presidents and other leaders. Noor details Hussein's struggles to create Arab unity and his vision of peaceful coexistence with Israel. Her own activities developing village-based economic self-sufficiency projects and improving Jordan's medical, educational and cultural facilities take second place to her husband's struggles on the world stage. And while she occasionally acknowledges her domestic difficulties, Noor is careful not to allow personal problems to become any more than asides. Her pleasing memoir ends with the king's death after his struggle with cancer, although readers may suspect that this smart, courageous woman will remain a world presence for years to come.

Life is So Good by George Dawson

What makes a happy person, a happy life? Dawson, who learned how to read when he was 98, tells how as he describes his own remarkable odyssey across the span of the 20th century.

The Lost Painting: The Quest for a Caravaggio Masterpiece by Jonathan Harr

Harr, author of the best-selling *A Civil Action* (1995), turns from a true-life courtroom drama to the riveting story of a lost masterpiece. The Italian painter Caravaggio (1573-1610) was famous for his startling vision of the divine in ordinary lives, and infamous for his street-fighter life. An artistic genius and a fugitive killer, Caravaggio remains a compelling enigma and his mystique is enhanced by the scarcity of his works. The disappearance of one painting in particular, *The Taking of Christ*, baffled art historians for two centuries. Harr, a consummate storyteller, now traces the canvas' journey in an effortlessly educating and marvelously entertaining mix of art history and scholarly sleuthing. The search begins when a Roman graduate student, Francesca Cappelletti, manages to charm the Marchesa Mattei, an eccentric descendant of one of Caravaggio's Roman patrons, into allowing her and her to examine never-before-studied family archives. Meanwhile, Sergio Benedetti, an ambitious Italian restorer working in Dublin at the National Gallery of Ireland, believes that an old painting hanging in a Jesuit residence, a work in dire need of cleaning, is a forgotten Caravaggio. As Harr expertly tracks the converging quests of the students and the restorer, he incisively recounts Caravaggio's wild and tragic life, and offers evocative testimony to the resonance of his daring and magnificent work.

Michelangelo & The Pope's Ceiling by Ross King

A celebrated novelist as well as a lively nonfiction writer, King casts fiction's spell as he tells the creation stories of crowning artistic achievement in this exciting account of the making of Michelangelo's magnificent Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes. Not only is King fluent in the complicated art of frescoing, a chancy technique sculptor Michelangelo (1475-1564) was loathe to undertake, he also relishes the tumultuous politics of early-sixteenth-century Rome, particularly the escapades of the irascible, syphilitic, gourmand Pope Julius II, Michelangelo's demanding patron. Everyone in Rome was terrified of this stick-wielding, bearded, warrior pope except for moody, homely, antisocial Michelangelo, and King recounts their skirmishes with as much verve as he chronicles the arduous efforts involved in creating the most famous ceiling in the world.

An Ordinary Man: an Autobiography by Paul [Rusesabagina](#)

"As his country was being torn apart by violence during the Rwandan genocide of 1994, hotel manager Paul Rusesabagina refused to succumb to the madness that surrounded him. Confronting killers with a combination of diplomacy, flattery, and deception, he risked his life every day to offer shelter in Kigali's Hotel Mille Collines to more than twelve hundred Tutsis and Hutu moderates, while homicidal mobs raged outside." "In An Ordinary Man, Rusesabagina tells the story of his life for the first time. As the son of a Hutu father and a Tutsi mother, he describes what it was like to grow up on a small farm in a country continually plagued by racial and political unrest. We learn of his extraordinary career path, which led him to become the first Rwandan general manger of a Belgian-owned luxury hotel - the Mille Collines - where he formed important relationships with some of the most powerful men in his country. Rusesabagina takes us inside the hotel for those terrible one hundred days in April 1994, an experience that became the inspiration for the film *Hotel Rwanda*. He gives a vivid account of the anguish that he and his family and friends suffered as they watched their loved ones hacked to pieces, and of the betrayal they felt as a result of the international community's

refusal to help. Finally, he explains how he and his family, unable to remain in Rwanda when the crisis was over, eventually settled in Belgium and began rebuilding their lives."

The Perfect Storm: a true story of men against the sea by Sebastian Junger

Junger, a journalist noted for his adventure stories in magazines, reconstructs here the last moments before the wreck of a swordfish boat during a fierce storm off the coast of Nova Scotia in October 1991. The Andrea Gail was a 70-foot, steel-hulled vessel that fished for swordfish using a 30-mile "longline" with thousands of hooks. Junger provides an excellent account of the fishing industry, detailing various fishing techniques; he also chronicles the rowdy lifestyle of fishermen. He recounts harrowing stories of the search and rescue efforts of other vessels caught in the same storm, including a fascinating look at "rescue swimmers." Although none survived on the Andrea Gail, Junger did extensive interviews with families and friends of the crew to put together a cohesive story that reads like a novel.

The Professor and the Madman by Simon Winchester

When the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* put out a call during the late 19th century pleading for "men of letters" to provide help with their mammoth undertaking, hundreds of responses came forth. Some helpers, like Dr. W.C. Minor, provided literally thousands of entries to the editors. But Minor, an American expatriate in England and a Civil War veteran, was actually a certified lunatic who turned in his dictionary entries from the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum. Ultimately, it's hard to say which is more remarkable: the facts of this amazingly well researched story, or the sound of author Simon Winchester's erudite prose.

Shackleton's Forgotten Men: The Untold Tragedy of an Antarctic Tragedy by Lennard Bickel

This is a dramatic story of tragedy and survival about the heroic group that was to lay supplies across the Ross Ice Shelf in preparation for the Expedition led by Shackleton. This courageous crew completed the longest sledge journey in polar history and endured near unimaginable deprivation. They accomplished most of their mission, laying the way for those who never came. This story underscores the capacity of ordinary men for endurance and noble action.

Shadow Divers: The True Adventure of Two Americans Who Risked Everything to Solve One of the Last Mysteries of World War II by Robert Kurson

This superlative journalistic narrative tells of John Chatterton and Rich Kohler, two deep-sea wreck divers who in 1991 dove to a mysterious wreck lying at the perilous depth of 230 feet, off the coast of New Jersey. Both had a philosophy of excelling and pushing themselves to the limit; both needed all their philosophy and fitness to proceed once they had identified the wreck as a WWII U-boat. The successful completion of their quest fills in a gap in WWII history-the fate of the Type IX U-boat U-869. Chatterton and Kohler's success satisfied them and a diminishing handful of U-boat survivors. While Kurson doesn't stint on technical detail, lovers of any sort of adventure tale will certainly absorb the author's excellent characterizations, and particularly his balance in describing the combat arm of the Third Reich. Felicitous cooperation between author and subject rings through every page of this rare insightful action narrative.

To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America by Tara Bahrapour

Which is better, Iran or America? Growing up in both countries, Tara Bahrapour grew accustomed to hearing this question. Both her American mother and her Iranian father, who met in the early sixties at the University of California, found much to value in both cultures. During the Islamic Revolution in 1979, when Tara was eleven, the family fled Iran with very few possessions and struggled to find a place for themselves in Oregon. As an adult, Tara became the first member of her immediate family to return to Iran. Braving the uncertain and dangerous political climate of a society still in transition, Tara discovered that enormous changes have taken place since her childhood. With tremendous graciousness and fluidity, Bahrapour's writing imparts a clear sense of both the joys and challenges of living biculturally.

Wait Till Next Year by Doris Kearns Goodwin

Doris Kearns Goodwin fell in love with baseball and the Brooklyn Dodgers when she was six and her father taught her how to record the complex symbols and lines in her scorebook. "By the time I had mastered the art of scorekeeping, a lasting bond had been forged between my father and me," she writes about the summer of '49. An exploration of her childhood and pursuit of the stories that defined her parents' lives, this tenderly written memoir has, as its foundation and narrative glue, baseball. We're treated to a history of the Brooklyn Dodgers, as well as to the bleaker events of mid-century America--McCarthyism; the Little Rock Nine (that momentous refusal of then Arkansas Governor Orville Faubus to uphold the Supreme Court ruling to desegregate the schools); the polio scare; the tyranny of the Legion of Decency; and, sadly, Brooklyn losing its Dodgers to California.

Will in the world how Shakespeare became Shakespeare by Stephen Greenblatt

A young man from the provinces--a man without wealth, connections, or university education--moves to London. In a remarkably short time he becomes the greatest playwright not just of his age but of all time. His works appeal to urban sophisticates and first-time theatergoers; he turns politics into poetry; he recklessly mingles vulgar clowning and philosophical subtlety. How is such an achievement to be explained? *Will in the World* interweaves a searching account of Elizabethan England with a vivid narrative of the playwright's life. We see Shakespeare learning his craft, starting a family, and forging a career for himself in the wildly competitive London theater world, while at the same time grappling with dangerous religious and political forces that took less-agile figures to the scaffold. Above all, we never lose sight of the great works--*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and more--that continue after four hundred years to delight and haunt audiences everywhere. The basic biographical facts of Shakespeare's life have been known for over a century, but now Stephen Greenblatt shows how this particular life history gave rise to the world's greatest writer.

Fiction:

Accordion Crimes by Annie Proulx

Proulx follows up her award-winning *The Shipping News* with another show stopper. At its heart is an accordion made by an Italian who immigrates to New Orleans with his young son in the 19th century. The man is soon killed by an anti-Italian mob, but the instrument passes from family to family, all immigrants, whether German, Mexican, Polish, or French Canadian, whose lives are heartrendingly detailed. Proulx is clear-eyed and merciless in her description of their battle to survive hardship, prejudice, disease, and the death of loved ones for the chance to fulfill the American dream.

All the Names by Jose Saramago

This tale is a Kafkaesque journey into one man's obsession amid the arid, repetitive, and cumbersome bureaucratic environment in which he works. Senhor Joseis is employed in the Central Registry (containing vital records) of Lisbon. He comes upon an incomplete record of a woman and is caught up in the idea that she deserves to be known. He searches the archives and then takes to the streets to track the woman down. This haunting, strangely moving novel is uplifting despite the tragic nature of the woman's life: Saramago's true theme here is how compassion ultimately rules human behavior.

As Hot As It Was You Ought to Thank Me by Nanci Kincaid

Kincaid's fourth novel is a deliciously intimate portrayal of the sunstruck small town of Pinetta, Fla., as seen through the eyes of Berry, a 13-year-old trying to make sense of adult indiscretions and her own sexual awakening. Berry's father, Ford, is the town's self-righteous school principal; her mother, Ruth, has a crush on the preacher; her good-looking older brother, Sowell, has his "mind... on tits"; her younger brother, Wade is a specialist in "elaborate animal funerals." When Ford mysteriously disappears in the middle of a tornado with Rennie, the town's tragic teenage wannabe starlet, Berry and her family become the subject of much gossip and attention. In her father's absence, her mother shifts her attentions to a rich, hot-tempered neighbor, and Berry develops a crush on Raymond, a smooth-talking convict in town to help clean up after the storm. When Raymond saves Berry's life by coming between her and two rattlesnakes, it's she who fearlessly volunteers to suck the poison out of his leg. Hungry for affection, Berry ultimately gets what she's after, though when she's had it, she's not sure what to make of it. Narrated with childlike honesty and dead-on Southern flavor ("Used to be we would all get in the tub like a can of worms spilled into shallow ditch water"), this is a sticky, sultry gem.

Atonement by Ian McEwan

Set during the seemingly idyllic summer of 1935 at the country estate of the Tallis family, the first section of this thought-provoking novel ambles through one scorchingly hot day that changes the lives of almost everyone present. The catalyst is overly imaginative 13-year-old Briony, who accuses Robbie, her sister's childhood friend and their housemaid's son, of raping her cousin Lola. The young man is sent to prison and Cecilia, heartbroken, abandons her family and becomes a nursing sister in London. In the second part, McEwan vividly describes another single day, this time Robbie's experiences during the ignominious British retreat to Dunkirk early in World War II. Finally, readers meet Briony again, now a nursing student. She is aware that she might have been wrong

that day five years earlier and begins to seek atonement, having clearly ruined two lives. In a story within a story, McEwan brilliantly engages readers in a tour de force of what ifs and might have beens until they begin to wonder what actually happened.

Baker Towers by Jennifer Haigh

Starred Review Haigh's second novel, following the glowing *Mrs. Kimble* (2003), is set in Bakerton, a mining town in post-World World II Pennsylvania. Haigh's focus is the Novak family, particularly the five children being raised by their Italian mother after their Polish father drops dead. All five make attempts to escape Bakerton at one point or another; some are successful, others are not. George, a veteran of WW II, neglects his Bakerton fiancée and marries a cold socialite. Dorothy goes to the nation's capital to work, but a nervous breakdown brings her home. Brilliant, cold Joyce thinks her future lies with the military, but she is sorely disappointed. Sandy is the golden son who escapes to dubious success. And Lucy is the youngest, who finds herself in college despite the nagging feeling that she never wanted to leave home in the first place. Haigh creates a real sense of a community and brings her mining town to life through a large cast of minor characters who pass in and out of the Novaks' lives. The mines that the town is built upon cannot be forgotten either, even as their time comes, disastrously, to pass. *Baker Towers* is a novel possessing a rare, quiet power to evoke a time long past and the character of the people who lived then.

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress by Dai Sijie

Stories set in China during the Cultural Revolution usually follow a trail of human struggle and tragedy, but this little gem of a book spins magic thread out of broken dreams. This novel is the story of two whimsical young men ordered to the countryside for reeducation as a result of their parents political designation as class enemies. Assigned the revolting task of carrying buckets of excrement up a hillside for the peasant farmers, the boys design a venue of storytelling sessions and quickly earn the headman's leniency in return. When they meet the local tailor's beautiful daughter, the luminescent Little Seamstress, and discover a wealth of forbidden Western books, life on the hillside takes a brighter turn. This truly enchanting book is written with the rhythm of a fable. Dai Sijie is himself a survivor of that fateful time in China's history, yet he incorporates delightful humor into sketching his innovative cast of characters.

Beekeeper's Apprentice by Laurie R. King

The Beekeeper's Apprentice is a classic mystery novel and the first in a series featuring an unlikely pair of detectives. Mary Russell – age 15, strong-willed, brilliant and in mourning for her entire family – literally stumbles over the world's greatest detective on the moors of Sussex. Thus dramatically begins an unlikely partnership between the very Victorian Sherlock Holmes and a girl at the dawn of a modern age.

Bel Canto by Ann Patchett

Opera and terrorism make strange bedfellows, yet in this novel they complement each other nicely. At a birthday party for Japanese industrialist Mr. Hosokawa somewhere in South America, famous American soprano Roxanne Coss is just finishing her recital in the Vice President's home when armed terrorists appear, intending to take the President hostage. However, he is not there, so instead they hold the international businesspeople and diplomats at the party, releasing all the women except Roxanne. Captors and their

prisoners settle into a strange domesticity, with the opera diva captivating them all as she does her daily practicing. Soon romantic liaisons develop with the hopeless intensity found in many opera plots. Patchett balances terrorism, love, and music nicely here.

The Binding Chair: Or, A Visit from the Foot Emancipation Society by Kathryn Harrison

In poised and elegant prose, Kathryn Harrison weaves a stunning story of women, travel, and flight; of love, revenge, and fear; of the search for home and the need to escape it. Set in alluring Shanghai at the turn of the century, *The Binding Chair* intertwines the destinies of a Chinese woman determined to forget her past and a Western girl focused on the promises of the future.

Bread Givers by Anzia Yeziarska

Set on New York's Lower East Side during the 1920s, this is the moving story of a young woman's struggle to free herself from the traditional female role in an Orthodox Jewish family and society. Sara Smolinsky, the youngest daughter of a rabbi, watches as her father marries off her sisters into dire circumstances, and she vows to escape this fate. She leaves home, takes a job as an ironer, and rents a room with a door: "This door was life. It was air." Sara's rebellion and her struggle for self-fulfillment—for education, work, and a marriage based on love—resonates with a passionate intensity all can share.

Bridge of San Luis Rey by Thornton Wilder

The Bridge of San Luis Rey opens in the aftermath of an inexplicable tragedy—a tiny footbridge in Peru breaks, and five people hurtle to their deaths. For Brother Juniper, a humble monk who witnesses the catastrophe, the question is inescapable. Why those five? Suddenly, Brother Juniper is committed to discover what manner of lives they led—and whether it was divine intervention or a capricious fate that took their lives.

Charming Billy by Alice McDermott

Though this novel opens just after his pathetic, drunken death, the eponymous Billy is the center of McDermott's tale of love and redemption among a complex group of Irish American Catholics in modern New York. Billy Lynch, a likable and popular romantic doomed by alcohol and a hopeless grand passion, is mourned intensely by no fewer than 47 close friends and relatives who gather together after his funeral. Their bittersweet recollections and revelations about him and his long-gone "Irish girl" are rendered in a series of vividly drawn episodes, as seen through the clear eyes and unsentimental imagination of one of the younger relations, herself deeply affected by the vicissitudes of Billy's life. McDermott has created here an accessible narrative distinguished by strong characterizations and a marked sense of place

City of Light by Lauren Belfer

In 1901, Buffalo, New York, is thriving: a hydroelectric power station is under suspicious circumstances at the power station run by Margaret's widower, Tom, Louisa is forced to examine her own past and question not only her allegiances but also the choices she has made. Belfer poised to use the water of Niagara Falls to light the nation. Wealthy and powerful leaders accept the 36-year-old Louisa Barrett, headmistress of the Macaulay School for Girls, as an equal. But when men die examines an early skirmish between

conserving and exploiting natural resources, the sexual double standard, and prejudice at the turn of the century.

A Conspiracy of Paper by David Liss

Set in a vividly realized eighteenth-century London, detective Benjamin Weaver, a Jew, former prizefighter, and a bit of a wise guy, an inspired creation, is such an outsider he can credibly go anywhere, from a seamy tavern to raucous Exchange Alley, the Wall Street of its day, to the snuff-and-wig set of a gentleman's club. Here Weaver takes a break from tracking down thieves (his bread and butter) to investigate the death of his father, a stock trader from whom he has long been estranged. As with all great mysteries, Weaver's search takes him deep into places both new, such as London's burgeoning financial markets, and personal, such as the Jewish community, which he long ago abandoned.

Crossing to Safety by Wallace Stegner

It's deceptively simple: two bright young couples meet during the Depression and form an instant and lifelong friendship. "How do you make a book that anyone will read out of lives as quiet as these?" Larry Morgan, a successful novelist and the narrator of the story, poses that question many years after he and his wife, Sally, have befriended the vibrant, wealthy, and often troubled Sid and Charity Lang. "Where is the high life, the conspicuous waste, the violence, the kinky sex, the death wish?" It's not here. What *is* here is just as fascinating, just as compelling, as touching, and as tragic.

Crow Lake by Mary Lawson

Here is a gorgeous, slow-burning story set in the rural "badlands" of northern Ontario, where heartbreak and hardship are mirrored in the landscape. For the farming Pye family, life is a Greek tragedy where the sins of the fathers are visited on the sons, and terrible events occur—offstage. Center stage are the Morrisons, whose tragedy looks more immediate if less brutal, but is, in reality, insidious and divisive. Orphaned young, Kate Morrison was her older brother Matt's protégé, her fascination for pond life fed by his passionate interest in the natural world. Now a zoologist, she can identify organisms under a microscope but seems blind to the state of her own emotional life. And she thinks she's outgrown her siblings—Luke, Matt, and Bo—who were once her entire world. In this universal drama of family love and misunderstandings, of resentments harbored and driven underground, Lawson ratchets up the tension with heartbreaking humor and consummate control, continually overturning one's expectations right to the very end.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time by Mark Haddon

The hero of Haddon's debut novel is 15-year-old Christopher Boone, an autistic math genius who has just discovered the dead body of his neighbor's poodle, Wellington. Wellington was killed with a garden fork, and Christopher decides that, like his idol Sherlock Holmes, he's going to find the killer. Wellington's owner, Mrs. Shears, refuses to speak to Christopher about the matter, and his father tells him to stop investigating. But there is another mystery involving Christopher's mother, who died two years ago. So why does Siobhan, Christopher's social worker, react with surprise when Christopher mentions her death? And why does Christopher's father hate Mrs. Shears' estranged husband? The mystery of Wellington's death begins to unveil the answers to questions in

his own life, and Christopher, who is unable to grasp even the most basic emotions, struggles with the reality of a startling deception.

Dante Club by Matthew Pearl

In 1865 Boston, not many people spoke Italian. It was much more popular for people to study Latin and Greek; the classic works in these languages were common reading for students and academics. But the small circle of literati in Pearl's inventive novel is bent on translating and publishing Dante's *Divine Comedy* so that all Americans may learn of the writer's genius. As this group of scholars, poets, publishers and professors reads the manuscript, much more exciting doings are happening outside their circle. The Boston police are hot on the trail of a series of murders taking place around town. In one, a priest is buried alive, his feet set on fire; in another, a man's body is eaten by maggots. It doesn't take a rocket scientist--only a Dante expert--to realize these murders are based on Dante's *Inferno* and its account of Hell's punishments. Scholars become snoopers, and the Dante Club is soon on the scene, investigating the crimes and trying to find the killer.

The Dive from Clausen's Pier by Ann Packer

Packer's first novel is a sensitive exploration of the line between selfishness and self-preservation. Carrie Bell is 23 and has lived in Madison, Wisconsin, all her life. She is engaged to her high-school sweetheart, Mike, and all seems well--to everyone but Carrie, who is falling out of love with Mike, with Madison, with everything. On Memorial Day she numbly watches Mike dive off of Clausen's Pier and break his neck in the too-shallow water, leaving him a quadriplegic. She is stricken with grief, guilt, indecision, and fear--she wants to be supportive and faithful, but she cannot make herself love him again. After a painful summer of hospital vigils, she flees to New York City and tries on a new life, a new relationship. She cannot escape what she's left behind, though, and must eventually face those who feel she has betrayed them. There are no easy answers for Carrie, but her struggle to do what's right and her revelations about the life she wants for herself will keep readers turning page after eloquently written page.

The Drowning Tree by Carol Goodman

Goodman's third novel mixes the same elements that made her *The Lake of Dead Languages* and *The Seduction of Water* successful: academia, water, and suspense. Juno McKay is a glass artist, caught up with running a business and raising a teenaged daughter. A college reunion, which she reluctantly attends, brings up issues from the past and creates new problems when a close friend dies under mysterious circumstances. Did Christine kill herself, or was she the victim of foul play? Who would benefit from her death? Is Juno's ex-husband involved? Filled with descriptions of beautiful Hudson River scenery and references to mythology and art, this gripping novel will hold the reader's attention until the very last page.

Eat Cake by Jeanne Ray

Ruth, with a teenage daughter, a son in college, and her mother living with the family, finds her life complicated by her husband's sudden unemployment and news that her long-divorced father has been injured and needs a place to recover. Once again Ray, author of *Julie and Romeo* (2000) and *Step-Ball-Change* (2002), presents a heroine beset with sufficient problems to make her run screaming off the pages, but one also gifted with enough common sense and gumption to solve the problems she can, and cope with

the ones she can't. Ruth's first step in solving anything is to bake a cake, and oh what cakes she bakes (recipes are included). As might be expected, the hidden talents of each family member emerge, surprising unions are forged, and relative success is achieved. And, yes, cakes are prominent in the solution. While it might be said that this is a predictable and undemanding book, it is also a comforting one, and perhaps signals a new genre that might be called "domestic fantasy."

Ella Minnow Pea by Mark Dunn

Ella Minnow Pea is a girl living happily on the fictional island of Nollop off the coast of South Carolina. Nollop was named after Nevin Nollop, author of the immortal pangram,* "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." Now Ella finds herself acting to save her friends, family, and fellow citizens from the encroaching totalitarianism of the island's Council, which has banned the use of certain letters of the alphabet as they fall from a memorial statue of Nevin Nollop. As the letters progressively drop from the statue they also disappear from the novel. The result is both a hilarious and moving story of one girl's fight for freedom of expression, as well as a linguistic tour de force sure to delight word lovers everywhere. ***pangram: a sentence or phrase that includes all the letters of the alphabet**

Empire Falls by Richard Russo

In a warmhearted novel of sweeping scope, Russo animates the dead-end small town of Empire Falls, Maine, long abandoned by the logging and textile industries that provided its citizens with their livelihood. Miles Roby surveys his hometown with bemused regret from the Empire Grill, owned by a local magnate but run by him ever since he was called home from college to take care of his ailing mother. His daily parade of customers provides him with ample evidence of both the restrictions and forced intimacy of small-town life and has left him with a deep appreciation for irony. Russo shows an unerring sense of the rhythms of small-town life, balancing his irreverent, mocking humor with unending empathy for his characters and their foibles.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Safran Foer

"Jonathan Safran Foer confronts the traumas of our recent history. What he discovers is solace in that most human quality, imagination." "Meet Oskar Schell, an inventor, Francophile, tambourine player, Shakespearean actor, jeweler, and pacifist. He is nine years old. And he is on an urgent, secret search through the five boroughs of New York. His mission is to find the lock that fits a mysterious key belonging to his father, who died in the World Trade Center on 9/11." "An inspired innocent, Oskar is alternately endearing, exasperating, and hilarious as he careens from Central Park to Coney Island to Harlem on his search. Along the way he is always dreaming up inventions to keep those he loves safe from harm. As Oskar roams New York, he encounters a motley assortment of humanity who are all survivors in their own way. He befriends a 103-year-old war reporter, a tour guide who never leaves the Empire State Building, and lovers enraptured or scorned. Ultimately, Oskar ends his journey where it began, at his father's grave. But now he is accompanied by the silent stranger who has been renting the spare room of his grandmother's apartment. They are there to dig up his father's empty coffin."—

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

The world's most famous monster comes to life in this 1818 novel, a tale that combines Gothic romance and science fiction to tell of a young doctor's attempts to breath life into an artificial man. Despite the doctor's best intentions, the experiment goes horribly wrong.

The Giant's House by Elizabeth McCracken

The year is 1950, and in a small town on Cape Cod twenty-six-year-old librarian Peggy Cort feels like love and life have stood her up. Until the day James Carlson Sweatt--the "over tall" eleven-year-old boy who's the talk of the town--walks into her library and changes her life forever. Two misfits whose lonely paths cross at the circulation desk, Peggy and James are odd candidates for friendship, but nevertheless they soon find their lives entwined in ways that neither one could have predicted. In James, Peggy discovers the one person who's ever really understood her, and as he grows--six foot five at age twelve, then seven feet, then eight--so does her heart and their most singular romance. *The Giant's House* is an unforgettably tender and quirky novel about learning to welcome the unexpected miracle, and about the strength of choosing to love in a world that gives no promises, and no guarantees.

Girl in Hyacinth Blue by Susan Vreeland

As Keats describes the scenes and lives frozen in a moment of time on his Grecian urn, so Vreeland layers moments in the lives of eight people profoundly moved and changed by a Vermeer painting a thing of beauty and a joy forever. Vreeland opens with a man who suffers through his adoration of the painting because he inherited it from his Nazi father, who stole it from a deported Jewish family. She traces the work's provenance through the centuries: the farmer's wife, the Bohemian student, the loving husband with a secret and, finally, the Girl herself Vermeer's eldest daughter, who felt her "self" obliterated by the self immortalized in paint, but accepted that this was the nature of art.

Girl with a Pearl Earring by Tracy Chevalier

A fictional account of how the Dutch artist Vermeer painted his masterpiece. In this splendid novel, the girl in the painting is Griet, the 16-year-old servant of the Vermeer household. The relationship between her and Vermeer is elusive. Is she more than a model? Is she merely an assistant? Is the artist's interest exaggerated in her eyes? The details found in this book bring 17th-century Holland to life. Everyday chores are described so completely that readers will feel Griet's raw, chapped hands and smell the blood-soaked sawdust of the butcher's stall. They will never view a Dutch painting again without remembering how bone, white lead, and other materials from the apothecary shop were ground, and then mixed with linseed oil to produce the rich colors.

The Hours by Michael Cunningham

The Hours is both homage to Virginia Woolf and very much its own creature. Even as Michael Cunningham brings his literary idol back to life, he intertwines her story with those of two more contemporary women. One gray suburban London morning in 1923, Woolf awakens from a dream that will soon lead to *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the present, on a beautiful June day in Greenwich Village, 52-year-old Clarissa Vaughan is planning a party for her oldest love, a poet dying of AIDS. And in Los Angeles in 1949, Laura Brown, pregnant and unsettled, does her best to prepare for her husband's birthday, but

can't seem to stop reading Woolf. These women's lives are linked both by the 1925 novel and by the few precious moments of possibility each keeps returning to.

I Capture the Castle by Dodie Smith

A reprint of a 1948 novel on an eccentric and impoverished English family whose home is a ruined 14th century **castle**. The story is presented in the form of a diary by the family's teen daughter. By the author of *The One Hundred and One Dalmatians*.

The Ice Queen by Alice Hoffman

"Be careful what you wish for. A woman who was touched by tragedy as a child now lives a quiet life, keeping other people at a cool distance. She even believes she wants it that way. Then one day she utters an idle wish and, while standing in her house, is struck by lightning. But instead of ending her life, this cataclysmic event sparks a strange and powerful new beginning." "After the lightning strike, the chill in her spirit starts to have physical manifestations. She feels frozen from the inside out, and everything red looks as colorless as snow. Hearing of a fellow lightning-strike survivor - a man who was apparently dead for forty minutes, then simply got up and walked away - she goes in search of him. Perhaps Lazarus Jones, as he is known, can teach her to live without fear. He turns out to be her perfect opposite, a man whose breath can boil water and whose touch scorches. As an obsessive love affair begins between them, both hide their most dangerous secrets - what happened in the past that turned one to ice and the other to fire. And everyone in her fragile network of friends and family will be drawn into the conflagration of their joining."

Icebergs by Rebecca Johns

In this work, whose title is a metaphor for the sinking effect war has on everyday life, we read about lives being changed by calamitous events and wrong choices. The victims of such change include a veteran who dies as a result of radiation contracted in World War II; his wife, who suffers from loneliness and worry while he's away; and their son, who chooses the Vietnam War over his childhood sweetheart and whose later marriage to another woman is ruined by the aftereffects of that war. Other victims are a mother who becomes neurotic after her husband's death in World War II and her daughter, who displays similar symptoms when her boyfriend enters the Vietnam War. Debut novelist Johns is ambitious enough to tell a story that spans several generations, revitalizing the wartime genre. Her meticulous presentation of details will make readers feel they are actually witnessing the events, although sometimes the narrative is hurried to the extent that this is lost.

In Sunlight, in a Beautiful Garden by Kathleen Cambor

Using the 1889 flood of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, as a backdrop, this historical fiction is about ambition, power, passion, and tragedy. Up in the hills, the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club is built for the wealthy as a getaway. Below is bustling Johnstown, where the lives of the people mean nothing to the club members. Separating the two is a neglected earth dam the townspeople joke about and the club members ignore.

In the Lake of the Woods by Tim O'Brien

John and Kathy Wade are a young, idealistic couple living the American Dream until John's bid for the U.S. Senate is trashed by media reports of his involvement in the

infamous massacre at My Lai during the Vietnam War. Still very much in love but without direction for the first time in their marriage, John and Kathy flee to a remote cabin. When Kathy disappears without a trace, a massive but fruitless search ensues. Did John murder her or did she simply flee? O'Brien develops several maddeningly plausible explanations, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions in this dark but wonderful novel that should gain him a host of new fans.

Independence Day by Richard Ford

That the best-laid plans of mice and men soon go awry is a generalization made concrete in Ford's latest novel. The time is now the late 1980s, and Frank, divorced, is no longer sports writing but selling real estate. Within the time span of preparing and participating in a Fourth of July weekend, Frank tells us in excruciating detail about the Sisyphean boulders he has been forced to push uphill throughout his life: career, kids, ex-wife, current girlfriend, and the unpleasant people occupying his rental property. Frank's plan is to take his teenage son on the road over the Fourth to visit the sports halls of fame, but, more significantly, to try to get the troubled youth somewhat straightened out. Fate intervenes in the form of an accident to his son's eye; the boy, as it turns out, will recover, but this is hardly the outing Frank had planned. But, then, as pessimistic Frank says at an earlier point in the book, "In two hours I have been suspected of being a priest, a shithead, and, now, a homo. I am apparently not getting my message across."

The Inn at Lake Devine by Elinor Lipman

It was not complicated, and, as my mother pointed out, not even personal: They had a hotel; they didn't want Jews; we were Jews...It's the early 1960s and Natalie Marx is stunned when her mother inquires about vacation accommodations in Vermont and receives a response that says, "The Inn at Lake Devine is a family-owned resort, which has been in continuous operation since 1922. Our guests who feel most comfortable here, and return year after year, are Gentiles." So begins Natalie's fixation with the Inn and the family who owns it. And when Natalie finagles an invitation to join a friend on vacation there, she sets herself upon a path that will inextricably link her adult life into this peculiar family and their once-restricted hotel. The Inn at Lake Devine will enchant readers with the beguiling voice, elegant charm, and deft storytelling that have been hallmarks of Elinor Lipman's previous novels and have made her beloved by her fans. Her characters sparkle on the page and delight us with their wit and grace--even when anti-Semitism rears its head in Vermont and the tables are turned in the Catskills.

The Jane Austen Book Club by Karen Joy Fowler

Fowler, a captivating and good-hearted satirist, exuberantly pays homage to and matches wits with Jane Austen by portraying six irresistible Californians who meet once a month to discuss Austen's six novels. Coyly shifting points of view, Fowler subtly uses her characters' responses to Austen as entree into their poignant and often hilarious life stories. The book club is Jocelyn's idea, a fifty something gal who seems to prefer the company of her show dogs to men. She has known Sylvia since grade school, and even used to date Sylvia's husband, who has abruptly moved out, inspiring their beautiful, accident-prone, lesbian artist daughter, Allegra, to move back in and join the book club along with her mother. Also on board are disheveled and loquacious Bernadette; Prudie, a high-school French teacher; and Grigg, the only man. Fowler shares Austen's fascination with the power of stories, and explores the same timeless aspects of human behavior that

Austen so masterfully dramatizes, while capturing with anthropological acuity and electrifying humor the oddities of our harried world.

The Kitchen Boy by Robert Alexander

Drawing on 30 years of research and archival source documents, first novelist Alexander transforms a now-familiar and bloody era of history-the Bolshevik Revolution and the Romanov massacre-into a suspenseful and richly layered account of a family in deadly peril. The story is told from the viewpoint of a surviving witness, the kitchen boy who worked in the house where the Romanovs were imprisoned in 1918. Now an ailing grandfather, Misha records his experiences on tape so that his American granddaughter will know his real history. Tsar Nicholas and his wife, Alexandra, are portrayed as loving but achingly flawed people whose poor judgments lead inexorably to the family's destruction. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, come off as comic book villains. Because the fate of two Romanov children, Alexei and Marie, is still not known (their bodies were missing from the family's gravesite when it was exhumed in 1991), Alexander's version of what might have befallen them packs a wallop that is surprising but consistent with his story.

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

This beautifully written first novel presents a glimpse of life in Afghanistan before the Russian invasion and introduces richly drawn, memorable characters. Quiet, intellectual Amir craves the attention of his father, a wealthy Kabul businessman. Kind and self-confident Hassan is the son of Amir's father's servant. The motherless boys play together daily, and when Amir wins the annual kite contest, Hassan offers to track down the opponent's runaway kite as a prize. When he finds it, the neighborhood bullies trap and rape him, as Amir stands by too terrified to help. Their lives and their friendship are forever changed, and the memory of his cowardice haunts Amir as he grows into manhood. Hassan and his father return to the village of their ancestors, and later Amir and his father flee to Los Angeles to avoid political persecution. When Amir receives word of his former friend's death under the Taliban, he returns to Kabul to learn the fate of Hassan's son.

The Lake of Darkness by Ruth Rendell

Martin is a quiet bachelor with a comfortable life, free of worry and distractions. When he unexpectedly comes into a small fortune, he decides to use his newfound wealth to help out those in need. Finn also leads a quiet life, and comes into a little money of his own. Normally, their paths would never have crossed. But Martin's ideas about who should benefit from his charitable impulses yield some unexpected results, and soon the good intentions of the one become fatally entangled with the mercenary nature of the other. In *The Lake of Darkness*, Ruth Rendell takes the old adage that no good deed goes unpunished to a startling, haunting conclusion.

The Last Frontier by Howard Fast

The Last Frontier was Howard Fast's first bestseller, and rightfully belongs on any short-list of best books. In some of the most beautiful and moving language used by any American writer, Fast tells the story of how 300 Cheyenne Indians -- starving on their Oklahoma reservation -- packed up in 1878 and started a 1,000-mile trek back to the happy hunting grounds of their beloved Wyoming. Hounded by the U.S. cavalry,

outnumbered and outgunned, they fought their way north inch by bloody inch. Although "novelized," the characters and events Fast portrays are real. He reportedly conducted extensive research before the writing process began, and then crafted one of the most heart wrenching stories to come out of the American West.

Life of Pi by Yann Martel

Pi Patel, a young man from India, tells how he was shipwrecked and stranded in a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger for 227 days. This outlandish story is only the core of a deceptively complex three-part novel about, ultimately, memory as a narrative and about how we choose truths. Unlike other authors who use shifting chronologies and unreliable narrators, Martel frequently achieves something deeper than technical gimmickry. Pi, regardless of what actually happened to him, earns our trust as a narrator and a character, and makes good, in his way, on the promise in the last sentence of part one--that is, just before the tiger saga--"This story has a happy ending." If Martel's strange, touching novel seems a fable without quite a moral, or a parable without quite a metaphor, it still succeeds on its own terms.

The Lost Mother by Mary McGarry Morris

"They said it was bad for everyone, but nobody else the boy knew had to live in the woods." Thus begins the harrowing story of 12-year-old Thomas and eight-year-old Margaret in Morris's powerful sixth novel. Reduced to living in a tent in Vermont during the Depression, the children and their father, Henry Talcott, a butcher who must travel daily seeking work, are barely surviving their abandonment by the children's reluctant mother. The shattered family aches with the desire to bring home beautiful, troubled Irene while Henry crumbles into a "whipped man... worn down and grim," and Thomas takes on the role of caretaker. Henry's longtime friend Gladys shows the family rare kindness, but a longstanding animosity between her crotchety father and Henry makes it impossible for the Talcotts to accept her charity. In typical Morris fashion, the author paints a brutal landscape and authentic characters with delicacy and precision: from the chaotic household of Irene's alcoholic sister to the creepy relationship between a sick boy and his dotting mother, who wants to adopt Thomas and Margaret. Never one to shy away from the messy and bleak, Morris unflinchingly illuminates the bitter existence of neglected children and their inspiring resilience, once again proving herself a storyteller of great compassion, insight and depth.

Love by Toni Morrison

The first page of Toni Morrison's novel *Love* is a soft introduction to a narrator who pulls you in with her version of a tale of the ocean-side community of Up Beach, a once popular ocean resort. Morrison introduces an enclave of people who react to one man--Bill Cosey--and to each other as they tell of his affect on generations of characters living in the seaside community. One clear truth here, told time and again, is how folks love and hate each other and the myriad ways it's manifested; these versions of humanity are seen in almost every line. Monsters and ghosts creep into young girls' dreams and around corners and then return to staid ladies' lives as they age and remember friendships and cold battles. Readers will experience in this smooth, sharp-eyed gem another instance of the Toni Morrison craftsmanship: she enters your mind, hangs a tale or two there, and leaves just as quietly as she came.

The Lucky Gourd Shop by Joanna Catherine Scott

When the adoptive mother of three Korean children writes away to discover their past, she has no way of knowing that the real truth of how they became orphans is too complex and too full of hardship to ever come to light. It is the birth mother whose story is told in this moving novel. Mi Sook is abandoned once by her parents outside the gourd shop and then several more times by a succession of the shop's owners who never bring her to their homes. Instead, she is raised, in a fashion, in the shop. As a result, she forms few meaningful attachments as she grows. She picks poorly (a husband)...he has a terrible secret past that stays buried until his death. When Mi Sook is finally told her husband's secret life, it sets in motion a series of events that doom her and her children to very different fates.

The Mark of the Angel by Nancy Huston

The Mark of the Angel, tells the story of Saffie, a young German girl who takes a job as a housekeeper in 1957 Paris. Her employer, a brilliant young flautist named Raphael, falls hard for her, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that he finds her "impassive" and "impenetrable." Hard-eyed Saffie seems to sleepwalk through life, and as if in a dream, she and Raphael marry and have a son, Emil. When Raphael sends her off to have his flute repaired one day, he little suspects what he's setting in motion. In András, the instrument maker, Saffie finds a damaged twin. Both are victims of the horrible experiment of Hitler's war: German Saffie has endured not only rape and torture but also the knowledge of her own family's Nazi sympathies. Hungarian Jew András has lost his family and his country. And they covertly embark on a five-year affair, during which their love comes to be sorely tested by the Algerian war for independence from France.

Memory Keeper's Daughter by Kim Edwards

Edwards's touching, wise novel opens in 1964, when the medical profession was substantially less enlightened about mental retardation than it is now. Because a blizzard prevents an obstetrician from reaching Norah Henry, Dr. David Henry, with the help of his office nurse Caroline Gill, must attend his own wife's delivery. Norah has fraternal twins: a healthy, normal boy, and a girl with Down's syndrome. In an effort to spare his wife the burden of a child doomed to a problem-ridden life and an early death, Henry tells her that their daughter died at birth and gives her to Caroline, instructing her to leave the newborn at a state home for the retarded. But Gill is appalled by conditions in the institution. A nurturer, she keeps the baby, moves away, and raises her progressively, fighting vigorously to give the child an opportunity for a full and happy life. The novel unflinchingly traces the impact of these two irrevocable decisions on both households.

Middle Age: A Romance by Joyce Carol Oates

Oates returns to some familiar themes--death, identity, deception--in this story set in the financially affluent, yet emotionally bankrupt town of Salthill-on-Hudson, a fictional Manhattan suburb. When tony Salthill's resident philosopher-sculptor-recluse, Adam Berendt, dies trying to save a child from drowning, his death both unites and divides his closest friends, people who, it turns out, knew him not at all and know themselves even less. And just who was Adam Berendt? An enigma wrapped in a riddle, he's a rich man who lived like a pauper, a sexual magnet who rejected all advances. Adam's identity, like those of his friends, is ambiguous. In eulogizing Adam, what they don't know, they make up; and these imagined lives, Adam's as well as their own, seem more satisfying than the

lives they really lead. Oates's characters are people in transition, as, in fact, middle age itself is transitory: not quite young, not yet old. People we meet as married couples separate or divorce. Single women and men eventually find mates. Many start out in one place and end up in another. Few caught in the throes of middle age would categorize it as "romantic," yet what makes Oates' characters romantic is how well they fare on their journeys of personal reinvention and whether they, and the reader, enjoy the trip. These are people who Oates knows well but doesn't much like, and she brings the full weight of her caustic wit and irony to bear on a subject that intimidates and enervates but, ultimately, liberates.

Moghul Buffet by Cheryl Benard

Both a wickedly funny cross-cultural comedy of errors and an edgy murder mystery, Benard's lively debut begins with the disappearance of timid, pudgy U.S. businessman Micky Malone in Peshawar, an ultraconservative, crime-ridden Pakistani backwater on the Afghan border. As other corpses pile, dogged but inept Detective Iqbal stumbles from suspect to suspect. Bernard choreographs a series of comic misunderstandings, training withering irony on a range of characters. Benard nimbly swings from farce to social satire, describing with devastating wit and fiery feminist passion Pakistani sexism, censorship, corruption and human rights abuses.

Moon Pearl by Ruthann Lum McCunn

In China in the 1830s, three young girls pledge never to be wives or nuns, the conventional paths open to them, but to live independently. McCunn's colorful novel follows the adventures of Shadow, Rooster and Mei Ju, who meet in a traditional "girls' house," where female adolescents sleep and work together and are trained to become obedient wives. Shadow, the luckiest of the three, comes from a loving family. Under her mother's guidance, she learned to embroider, and her older brother secretly taught her to read, a skill forbidden to women. When Shadow then instructs her friends a sharp-tongued, rebellious Rooster, whose family is very poor, and Mei Ju, a timid girl with a talent for silk making changes their way of looking at the world. Together, the three vow to chart their own lives. Setting up house in the village rain shelter, they plait their hair rather than wear wifely buns and learn to bargain with wily peddlers. Though they are ostracized at first, various selfless acts and sacrifices finally win them grudging acceptance. Though it's recounted with the artful simplicity of a folktale, the novel is anchored in fact: women in 19th-century China's Pearl River district, dubbed "self-combers" for their work in the silk industry, did struggle to achieve independence, living together in "spinster houses".

Mourning Ruby by Helen Dunmore

When Rebecca, the narrator of most of Dunmore's fine, almost unbearably sad eighth novel shares a flat with Joe in London, she begins to enjoy the pleasures of friendship and family for the first time in her life: she was abandoned as a baby and adopted by a couple remarkably unsuitable for parenting. Joe, a historian interested in Stalin, introduces her to simple pleasures and shows her that loneliness need not be permanent. And it's through Joe that she meets Adam, a neonatologist who becomes her husband and the father of their daughter, Ruby ("For the first time, I was tied to someone by blood"). Given the book's title, Ruby's death is no surprise (though it's still heartbreaking without being melodramatic), and Dunmore plumbs the consequences of loss: How does one mourn,

and then accept, the unacceptable? Numbed by Ruby's death, Rebecca drifts away from Adam, finding diversion in a job as an assistant to a hotelier, Mr. Damiano; Adam buries himself in his work with premature babies. Ambitiously, Dunmore complements this tragic narrative with two other stories, one autobiographical, told by Mr. Damiano, about growing up in a circus where his parents were trapeze artists, and one told by Joe, a work of fiction set during WWI about a man and a woman who could be his and Rebecca's ancestors. Rebecca's own story isn't told linearly, so these narrative asides aren't as distracting as they sound. And they are critical to the author's main theme: that narrative is a key to understanding and to acceptance. This is that rare novel, an intensely emotional, fiercely intelligent story, fiction with the power to offer redemption.

Mr. Emerson's Wife by Amy Belding Brown

The line between historical and fictional is murky in this nineteenth-century tale of love among the Transcendentalists. Lydia is a strong, independent woman in her thirties, sworn to remain single. Then she meets the brilliant Ralph Waldo Emerson and is swept off her feet by his promises of a new kind of egalitarian marriage. Once married though, Lydia discovers her husband's secret obsession with his dead wife. Lonely and disillusioned, Lydia falls in love with her husband's dashing young protege, the manly and odd Henry David Thoreau. As a romance novel, this is an excellent, engaging story. Readers will feel sympathy and affection for all of the characters. However, since this is a first-person narrative, the lack of a historical note explaining what in the novel is fact, what is conjecture, and what is fiction dulls the overall impression. Still, a good book-club or beach read, for it is a substantive page-turner.

My Antonia by Willa Cather

No romantic novel ever written in America . . . is one half so beautiful as "My Antonia," H. L. Mencken. Widely recognized as Willa Cather's greatest novel, "My Antonia" is a soulful and rich portrait of a pioneer woman's simple yet heroic life. The spirited daughter of Bohemian immigrants, Antonia must adapt to a hard existence on the desolate prairies of the Midwest. Enduring childhood poverty, teenage seduction, and family tragedy, she eventually becomes a wife and mother on a Nebraska farm. A fictional record of how women helped forge the communities that formed a nation, "My Antonia" is also a hauntingly eloquent celebration of the strength, courage, and spirit of America's early pioneers.

My Sister's Keeper by Jodi Picoult

Imagine that you were conceived to be the donor of bone marrow and platelets for your older sister, who has a rare form of cancer. Imagine what it would be like to grow up in a family where everyone is constantly aware of one child's deadly illness, so that all decisions must be filtered through what will work for her treatment or her most recent medical emergency. How can a 12-year-old decide against donating a kidney to her older sister? By having this story narrated by each character in turn, Picoult shows readers the dilemmas facing everyone involved: from Anna, the child who sues her parents for medical emancipation; to Sara, the mother who loves all three of her children but must devote continual attention to the daughter with cancer; and to Jesse, the son who has abandoned hope of ever being noticed by his parents. Picoult's timely and compelling novel will appeal to anyone who has thought about the morality of medical decision making and any parent who must balance the needs of different children.

Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri

THE NAMESAKE follows the Ganguli family through its journey from Calcutta to Cambridge to the Boston suburbs. Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli arrive in America at the end of the 1960s, shortly after their arranged marriage in Calcutta, in order for Ashoke to finish his engineering degree at MIT. Ashoke is forward-thinking, ready to enter into American culture if not fully at least with an open mind. His young bride is far less malleable. Isolated, desperately missing her large family back in India, she will never be at peace with this new world.

Niagara Falls All Over Again by Elizabeth McCracken

McCracken's story about a pair of vaudeville comedians explores a symbiotic relationship in vigorous, expressive prose. Narrator Mose Sharp relates his life from childhood in Des Moines, Iowa, to old age in Hollywood in a distinctive, mordantly humorous voice. Pierced with remorse at the accidental death of his beloved sister, Hattie, 16-year-old Mose runs away from his gentle father and five remaining sisters to join the vaudeville circuit that he and Hattie had dreamed about. Later, down on his luck, he's taken under the wing of a plump comic, Rocky Carter, and they go on to become the famous team of Carter and Sharp. Though Mose is cast as a stern professor, and Rocky as the fat and hapless fall guy, in real life Rocky takes all the credit and a larger share of their income, and Mose is endlessly forgiving of Rocky's self-destructive behavior. As years pass, Mose finds a wife, fathers children and grows rich, but his troubled partnership with Rocky remains the core of his existence.

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency by Alexander McCall Smith

This first novel in Alexander McCall Smith's widely acclaimed The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency series tells the story of the delightfully cunning and enormously engaging Precious Ramotswe, who is drawn to her profession to "help people with problems in their lives." Immediately upon setting up shop in a small storefront in Gaborone, she is hired to track down a missing husband, uncover a con man, and follow a wayward daughter. But the case that tugs at her heart, and lands her in danger, is a missing eleven-year-old boy, who may have been snatched by witchdoctors.

Old School by Tobias Wolff

The protagonist of Tobias Wolff's shrewdly—and at times devastatingly—observed first novel is a boy at an elite prep school in 1960. He is an outsider who has learned to mimic the negligent manner of his more privileged classmates. Like many of them, he wants more than anything on earth to become a writer. But to do that he must first learn to tell the truth about himself. The agency of revelation is the school literary contest, whose winner will be awarded an audience with the most legendary writer of his time. As the fever of competition infects the boy and his classmates, fraying alliances, exposing weaknesses, *Old School* explores the ensuing deceptions and betrayals with an unblinking eye and a bottomless store of empathy.

On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon by Kaye Gibbons

An elderly lady sits in her parlor, contemplating the events that shaped her life. Born in the 1830s, Emma Garnet Tate Lowell is the eldest daughter of a poor but aristocratic Southern belle and a rich, opinionated, abusive father. The Tate household is held

together by Clarisse, a free black woman, who knew Mr. Tate "when." Tate attempts to control and dominate his wife and children with brute force and harsh words. However, Emma's mother and older brother conspire to nurture Emma's native curiosity and love of learning, until fate brings a Northerner, Quincey Lowell, fresh out of medical school, to Emma's doorstep. At age 17, she marries him and takes Clarisse with her. A new household; three children with a liberal, generous, loving husband; the Civil War; death; and good deeds and bad all pass through her thoughts in a death bed recollection/confession of a life abundantly lived.

One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Tells the story of the Buendia family, set against the background of the evolution and eventual decadence of a small South American town

One Thousand White Women by Jim Fergus

An American western with a most unusual twist, this is an imaginative fictional account of the participation of May Dodd and others in the controversial "Brides for Indians" program, a clandestine U.S. government-sponsored program intended to instruct "savages" in the ways of civilization and to assimilate the Indians into white culture through the offspring of these unions. May's personal journals, loaded with humor and intelligent reflection, describe the adventures of some very colorful white brides (including one black one), their marriages to Cheyenne warriors, and the natural abundance of life on the prairie before the final press of the white man's civilization.

A Passionate Man by Joanna Trollope

Archie Logan had it all. His wife still drew his attention the way she did the day they met. His children were well behaved, and much loved. He enjoyed his work, and his comfortable, if not spectacular, home. But now, his beloved father--for decades a lonely widower--has begun keeping company with a most unusual woman. And everyone seems to adore her...except Archie, whose feelings on the subject force him to confront issues that shed new light on his "perfect" life.

Peace Like a River by Leif Enger

To the list of great American child narrators that includes Huck Finn and Scout Finch, let us now add Reuben "Rube" Land, the asthmatic 11-year-old boy at the center of Leif Enger's remarkable first novel, *Peace Like a River*. Rube recalls the events of his childhood, in small-town Minnesota circa 1962, in a voice that perfectly captures the poetic, verbal stoicism of the northern Great Plains. "Here's what I saw," Rube warns his readers. "Here's how it went. Make of it what you will." And Rube sees plenty.

The Persia Café by Melany Neilson

The subject matter of this debut novel is reminiscent of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* or Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*. A town in Mississippi is rocked to its core in 1961 when a young black man is found murdered, washed up on the river's shore. Fannie Leary, the white owner of the town's only cafe, discovers the body, but when she brings the sheriff back to the scene, it has disappeared. Fannie struggles to reconcile the expectation that she keep silent with what she feels she owes to Mattie, her black cook and cousin of the murdered boy. The story comes out, the FBI comes to investigate, and the white community whose balance she has disrupted shuns Fannie.

This is a powerful story of the toll of racism, of the relationships between people of different races, and of events from our past that come back to haunt us.

Plain Truth by Jodi Picoult

Moving seamlessly from psychological drama to courtroom suspense, *Plain Truth* is a fascinating portrait of Amish life rarely witnessed by those outside the faith. When a young Amish teen hides a pregnancy, gives birth in secret and then flatly denies it all when the baby's body is found, urban defense attorney Ellie Hathaway decided to defend her. But she finds herself caught in a clash of cultures with a people whose channels of justice are markedly different from her own...and discovers a place where circumstances are not always what they seem.

PlainSong by Kent Haruf

Two bachelor farmer brothers, a pregnant high school girl, two young brothers, and two devoted high school teachers: this is the interesting group of people, some related by blood but most not, featured in the award-winning Haruf's touching novel. Set in the plains of Colorado, east of Denver, the novel comprises several story lines that flow into one. Tom Guthrie, a high school history teacher, is having problems with his wife and with an unruly student at school, problems that affect his young sons, Ike and Bob, as well. Meanwhile, the pregnant Victoria Roubideaux has been abandoned by her family. With the assistance of another teacher, Maggie Jones, she finds refuge with the McPherson brothers, who seem to know more about cows than people. Lyrical and well crafted, the tight narrative about how families can be made between folks who are not necessarily blood relatives makes for enjoyable reading.

Prodigal Summer by Barbara Kingsolver

Kingsolver's lyrical prose and superb storytelling are perfectly matched by her gentle narration with its core strength and emotional fluency. She tells the story of three worlds within a small Appalachian community: that of Deanna Wolfe, a Park Service employee who lives alone on the mountain; of Lusa Landowski, who came from the city to live on a farm out of love and must now come to understand her relationship to the land and the family that has tended it for generations; and of two neighbors, one feuding and one a free spirit, who forge a path toward learning about each other. These stories, separate and yet interwoven by the community in which all--even the reclusive Deanna--live, also have at their center the interconnectedness of the human world and the natural one.

Red Square by Martin Cruz Smith

A lot has happened to Arkady Renko and to his country since he found three bodies frozen in the middle of Gorky Park more than 11 years ago. There was exile in Siberia, then working on a fishing boat in the Arctic ("*Polar Star*"), and now, just prior to the 1991 attempted coup, he finds himself reestablished as an investigator with the Moscow police and struggling to contain a flourishing underworld in the newly democratic Soviet Union. It's not long before Arkady runs afoul of his superiors, who may be democratized but are still bureaucrats at heart. A seemingly straightforward murder investigation leads Arkady first to corruption in high places, then to official censure, and finally to Munich, where he is reunited with Irina, the lover who got him in all that trouble back in the early 1980s. Just as cynical as ever but even more world weary, Arkady lands in an all-too-familiar position--caught in the middle, this time between continuing his investigation

into what now appears to be an art-smuggling racket and winning Irina back from her current lover, Max, who happens to be the brains behind the smuggling scheme. To some extent, Smith is merely replaying “*Gorky Park*” here--same tune, different lyrics--but, even so, it remains an alluring melody. Daily life in ever-changing Russia is once again masterfully evoked, and, after three novels, the character of Arkady has achieved an almost archetypal resonance: a hybrid of Chandler's Philip Marlowe and Dostoevsky's Underground Man, this chain-smoking insomniac with a taste for misery, a perverse love of deprivation, a desperate need to undermine authority, and an unflagging belief in the resuscitative power of love calls out to that beaten down, trod-upon side of ourselves, but also to our not-yet-stifled romantic souls. Misery and romance--an irresistible combination.

The River Midnight by Lillian Nattel

Like the mythical Polish shtetl of Blaszkia in which it is set, *The River Midnight* is boisterous, tangled with secrets, and startlingly generous. Told more as nine interwoven stories, Lillian Nattel's debut novel portrays Jewish village life in the 19th century as both dense and wondrous, something akin to Gabriel García Márquez's Macondo--with similar touches of magic realism. The novel uses a roughly nine-month period in 1894 as its framework, each chapter recounting many of the same events through the eyes of successive characters. Along the way we encounter the pettiness, charity, gossip, and customs that sustain the village, making its cramped life both full and frustrating.

Second Hand by Michael Zadoorian

How can one capture the spirit of this wondrous book in so few words? Richard is an ordinary individual of limited means and low expectations. The self-deprecatory manner in which he describes himself and his life is sympathetic and often hilarious. He owns a secondhand store in Detroit and revels in the junk he sells and with which he adorns his apartment. Although his mother and sister disapprove, he has found his niche and takes comfort in the myriad estate sales and Salvation Armies he frequents. When his mother dies, Richard and his sister empty the family home, which gives Richard insight into his late father. Simultaneously, he falls in love with Theresa, a junk goddess who comes to the relationship with a passion for her work--and for Richard's. The book contains marvelous observations about secondhand items and life in general.

The Secret River by Kate Grenville

Grenville, author of the Orange Award winner *The Idea of Perfection* (2002), tells a story rooted in her family's Australian past. In the early 1800s, William Thornhill is sentenced to death for stealing a shipload of expensive woods. Offered an alternative, he chooses transportation to New South Wales, Australia. Six sections describe Thornhill's progress from convict laborer to landowner, conveying the broader history of Australian colonization through the experience of one convict family. Grenville embodies in her characters the cruelties elicited by the clash of British and native Australian cultures and the savagery with which these differences played out. Plotting and characterization are so skillful that the book's tragic climax seems inevitable. Grenville writes lyrically, especially in her description of the Australian landscape, while her gift for the telling phrase--one that conveys a paragraph of description in a few words--enlivens an essentially dark narrative

Snow lower and the Secret Fan by LisaSee

See's engrossing novel set in remote 19th-century China details the deeply affecting story of lifelong, intimate friends (laotong, or "old sames") Lily and Snow Flower, their imprisonment by rigid codes of conduct for women and their betrayal by pride and love. While granting immediacy to Lily's voice, See (*Flower Net*) adroitly transmits historical background in graceful prose. Her in-depth research into women's ceremonies and duties in China's rural interior brings fascinating revelations about arranged marriages, women's inferior status in both their natal and married homes, and the Confucian proverbs and myriad superstitions that informed daily life. Beginning with a detailed and heartbreaking description of Lily and her sisters' foot binding ("Only through pain will you have beauty. Only through suffering will you have peace"), the story widens to a vivid portrait of family and village life. Most impressive is See's incorporation of nu shu, a secret written phonetic code among women—here between Lily and Snow Flower—that dates back 1,000 years in the southwestern Hunan province ("My writing is soaked with the tears of my heart./ An invisible rebellion that no man can see"). As both a suspenseful and poignant story and an absorbing historical chronicle, this novel has bestseller potential and should become a reading group favorite as well.

The Snowfly: a novel by Joseph Heywood

Upon picking up this book, the reader's first reaction might be to toss it aside. A novel about trout fishing? But wait! *The Snowfly* is as much about fishing as *Moby Dick* is about whaling. In other words, it is a framework upon which to build an exciting story. The hero, Bowie Rhodes, is a fisherman whose job as a reporter brings him to such locales as Moscow, Vietnam, Canada, and northern Michigan in the course of the book. Running parallel is the plot of the snowfly, which hatches every seven to ten years, never in the same river twice. It attracts huge trout that risk exposure to rise for the hatch. No one has ever seen the snowfly; it exists only in myth--and in a lost manuscript. Heywood (*The Berkut*) neatly ties together Rhodes's job as a UPI reporter and his search for this manuscript--a search that turns out to be more than he bargained for.

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini

Afghan-American novelist Hosseini follows up his bestselling *The Kite Runner* with another searing epic of Afghanistan in turmoil. The story covers three decades of anti-Soviet jihad, civil war and Taliban tyranny through the lives of two women. Mariam is the scorned illegitimate daughter of a wealthy businessman, forced at age 15 into marrying the 40-year-old Rasheed, who grows increasingly brutal as she fails to produce a child. Eighteen later, Rasheed takes another wife, 14-year-old Laila, a smart and spirited girl whose only other options, after her parents are killed by rocket fire, are prostitution or starvation. Against a backdrop of unending war, Mariam and Laila become allies in an asymmetrical battle with Rasheed, whose violent misogyny—"There was no cursing, no screaming, no pleading, no surprised yelps, only the systematic business of beating and being beaten"—is endorsed by custom and law. Hosseini gives a forceful but nuanced portrait of a patriarchal despotism where women are agonizingly dependent on fathers, husbands and especially sons, the bearing of male children being their sole path to social status. His tale is a powerful, harrowing depiction of Afghanistan, but also a lyrical evocation of the lives and enduring hopes of its resilient characters.

Three Junes by Julia Glass

This strong and memorable debut novel draws the reader deeply into the lives of several central characters during three separate Junes spanning ten years. At the story's onset, Scotsman Paul McLeod, the father of three grown sons, is newly widowed and on a group tour of the Greek islands as he reminisces about how he met and married his deceased wife and created their family. Next, we see the world through the eyes of Paul's eldest son, Fenno, a gay man transplanted to New York City and owner of a small bookstore, who learns lessons about love and loss that allow him to grow in unexpected ways. And finally there is Fern, an artist and book designer whom Paul met on his trip to Greece several years earlier. She is now a young widow, pregnant and also living in New York City, who must make sense of her own past and present to be able to move forward in her life. In this novel, expectations and revelations collide in startling ways.

Time Traveler's Wife by Audrey Niffenegger

On the surface, Henry and Clare Detamble are a normal couple living in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. Henry works at the Newberry Library and Clare creates abstract paper art, but the cruel reality is that Henry is a prisoner of time. It sweeps him back and forth at its leisure, from the present to the past, with no regard for where he is or what he is doing. It drops him naked and vulnerable into another decade, wearing an age-appropriate face. In fact, it's not unusual for Henry to run into the other Henry and help him out of a jam. Sound unusual? Imagine Clare Detamble's astonishment at seeing Henry dropped stark naked into her parents' meadow when she was only six. Though, of course, until she came of age, Henry was always the perfect gentleman and gave young Clare nothing but his friendship as he dropped in and out of her life. It's no wonder that the film rights to this hip and urban love story have been acquired.

Travels with My Aunt by Graham Greene

Greene's fine sense of humor is displayed in this warm and far-reaching comic novel, *Travels with My Aunt*, a bestseller when it appeared originally. At his mother's funeral, Henry Pulling, a stuffy, retired bank manager with an interest in dahlias, meets his Aunt Augusta. The indomitable Aunt Augusta pulls Henry along on a whirlwind adventure traveling with an old lover, Wordsworth; Curran, the founder of a doggies' church; O'Toole, the C.I.A. man obsessed by statistics and his counter-culture daughter; and old Mr. Visconti, who has been wanted by Interpol for twenty years. Henry describes their activities with shock and bewilderment, and finally with the tenderness, of a fellow traveler going their way.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith

Francie Nolan, avid reader, penny-candy connoisseur, and adroit observer of human nature, has much to ponder in colorful, turn-of-the-century Brooklyn. She grows up with a sweet, tragic father, a severely realistic mother, and an aunt who gives her love too freely--to men, and to a brother who will always be the favored child. Francie learns early the meaning of hunger and the value of a penny. Like the Tree of Heaven that grows out of cement or through cellar gratings, resourceful Francie struggles against all odds to survive and thrive. Betty Smith's poignant, honest novel created a big stir when it was first published over 50 years ago. Her frank writing about life's squalor was alarming to

some of the more genteel society, but the book's humor and pathos ensured its place in the realm of classics--and in the hearts of readers, young and old.

The Virgin Blue by Tracy Chevalier Meet Ella Turner and Isabelle du Moulin - two women born centuries apart, yet bound by a fateful family legacy. When Ella and her husband move to a small town in France, Ella hopes to brush up on her French, qualify to practice as a midwife, and start a family of her own. Village life turns out to be less idyllic than she expected, however, and a peculiar dream of the color blue propels her on a quest to uncover her family's French ancestry. As the novel unfolds - alternating between Ella's story and that of Isabelle du Moulin four hundred years earlier-a common thread emerges that unexpectedly links the two women.

Water for Elephants by Sara Gruen

Life is good for Jacob Jankowski. He's about to graduate from veterinary school and about to bed the girl of his dreams. Then his parents are killed in a car crash, leaving him in the middle of the Great Depression with no home, no family, and no career. Almost by accident, Jacob joins the circus. There he falls in love with the beautiful performer Marlena, who is married to the circus psychotic animal trainer. He also meets the other love of his life, Rosie the elephant. This lushly romantic novel travels back and forth in time between Jacob's present day in a nursing home and his adventures in the surprisingly harsh world of 1930s circuses. The ending of both stories is a little too cheerful to be believed, but just like a circus, the magic of the story and the writing convince you to suspend your disbelief. The book is partially based on real circus stories and illustrated with historical circus photographs.

When We Were Orphans by Kazuo Ishiguro

Born in early-twentieth-century Shanghai, Banks was orphaned at the age of nine after the separate disappearances of his parents. Now, more than twenty years later, he is a celebrated figure in London society; yet the investigative expertise that has garnered him fame has done little to illuminate the circumstances of his parents' alleged kidnappings. Banks travels to the seething, labyrinthine city of his memory in hopes of solving the mystery of his own, painful past, only to find that war is ravaging Shanghai beyond recognition-and that his own recollections are proving as difficult to trust as the people around him.

Winter of our Discontent by John Steinbeck

Published the year before Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize in 1962, *The Winter of Our Discontent* has often been undeservedly scorned by critics as his most lackluster effort. Set in the summer in a fictional New England town, this timeless story tells the tale of Ethan Allen Hawley, descendant of a well-to-do family, who now finds himself working as a shop clerk in the very store he once owned. Father, husband, and man of impeccable integrity, Hawley struggles to maintain his pride while providing for his family's needs. A critique of the temptation, greed, corruption, and relaxed morality that has come to mark too much of modern American life, *Winter* pits the quest for wealth and status against the virtues of a meritorious life. Steinbeck's novel, acute in its characterizations of the human condition, is an unforgettable testament to the conflicting dualities that shape us all. As he declared in his speech at the Nobel Prize banquet, "Man himself has become our greatest hazard and our only hope."