

TOP 10 BOOKS OF 2000

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1. PLAINSONG, by Kent Haruf (Knopf, 301 pages). If you asked me, even once, what to read this year, I said with resounding confidence, "read *Plainsong*." I could write pages on my feelings for and about this book but to pay homage to Haruf's spare, simplistic style, I'll try to be brief. First, this is hands-down the best book I've read in the past few years. Haruf probably knew he was taking a chance writing the way he writes, but that makes it all the better. He set out to write a book in which sex and violence didn't dominate – something unusual in publishing's current climate. The great thing is, Haruf doesn't need the sex and violence to make his story sing. Rather, he shows us that life on the Colorado Plains can be just as hard and desolate as it is hopeful and fertile. As one reviewer stated: "the novel explores what it means to be part of a community, what happens when families aren't perfect, what hope may flourish even when life falls short of expectations." Haruf places his characters at their own crossroads and lets them make their own decisions. We're just lucky enough to travel along the frontier with them.

Set in Holt County, CO (where the book's two predecessors are set and just as worth reading), *Plainsong* introduces us to the McPheron brothers, two shy, bachelor farmers; Tom Guthrie, father of two and husband of a woman disappearing deeper into depression; Victoria Roubideaux, 17, unwed and pregnant; and Maggie Jones, who serves as the hub for these human spokes who try as best they can to roll with life's blunt punches. The McPherons, educated in the ways of farm life but out of their element with women, agree to take in Victoria at Maggie's request. The relationship that develops between the brothers and Victoria is never sexual. Rather it's tender and sweet, one of the most beautifully drawn examples of communal living I've read.

The only thing better than reading the book was hearing Haruf speak at Joseph-Beth Booksellers. Many at the reading questioned his simplistic style. They liked it but were looking for "more" as we are so conditioned to do. Haruf shrugged it off when they asked why Tom Guthrie didn't do more for his children, why Victoria didn't decide this or that. He answered: "I attempted to give a story about people that I thought were genuinely good people who were beset by problems, but without resorting to some of the other plot devices that people resort to sometimes. I put my characters in situations and let them act as they told me they needed to act. I'm not concerned with making best-selling characters but I believe you can find a Tom or Victoria in any city, even Cincinnati." So true. In today's dog-eat-author publishing environment, in a world of writers who write for the market instead of their own hearts, Haruf delivers a breath of fresh air to the landscape of our bookshelves - and our souls.

If you like *Plainsong*, try Haruf's earlier novels, *The Tie that Binds* and *Where You Once Belonged*. Then, go read any Larry Brown you can find. Haruf recommended and admires Brown. You won't be disappointed.

2. A BLIND MAN CAN SEE HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU, Amy Bloom (Random House, 163 pages).

While this collection has nothing to do with rural life, it tops my list for exploring the complex terrain of love in many different forms. Bloom introduces us to characters standing on the precipice of life-changing decisions or situations. The collection's title story follows a mother facing her own kind of change on the eve of her child's sex-reassignment surgery. In another story, we see how a woman with breast cancer really views her best friend and husband. Bloom, also a psychotherapist has a way of crossing emotional terrain that's as intense as it is self-revelatory. Her previous novel and her short story collection are two of my favorites. In this collection, she also covers the broad spectrum of love. She breaks it down differently and reminds us that there is no right or wrong way to love - as long as we remember to do it. In the title story, Cole, who seems to be courting Jane, the woman who just witnessed her daughter becoming her son, says: "Dum spiro, spero. That is the South Carolina motto. While I breathe, I hope." And that's exactly what Bloom's characters remind us to do.

3. WILD DECEMBERS, Edna O'Brien (Houghton Mifflin, 256 pages). Edna O'Brien, one of my favorite Irish writers, introduces us to the Emerald Isle's version of the Hatfields and the McCoys in this rich novel.

It has been said by some that she has "changed the course of Irish womanhood." So much so that her books have been banned in Ireland. O'Brien grew up Catholic but isn't afraid to question her faith, her country and its social mores, as she did in *Down by the River*, based on the true account of a young girl who is raped by father, becomes pregnant and struggles to get an abortion in Ireland where the procedure is considered not only illegal, but a mortal sin. Filled with the lush language that's O'Brien's trademark, *Wild Decembers* turns to two men sharing portions of a mountain and the historical cleavage that runs between the two families.

She offers a holy trinity of conflict -- man versus man, man versus nature and mostly, man versus himself. Joseph Brennan and his sister, Breege, live on a desolate, lonely mountain. Joseph is the last in a long line of small farmers who sees land as "fields that mean more than fields, more than life and more than death, too." This is a man who has a passionate and almost psychotic connection to his family's property - something some of us may find hard comprehending in today's transient world. Joseph's ties that bind him to his land are also the ties that destroy him.

Breege tends to her brother more like a mother than a sister until Mick Bugler comes back to claim his inheritance – and a portion of the Brennans' property. But Bugler wants more than the land ... he wants Breege, too. Joseph and Bugler try to mend the family fences but Joseph cannot give up the two things he knows so well. O'Brien's language is unique and feels classic, almost old-school, like Edith Wharton or Jane Austin. Too many good lines, but here is Breege, describing the loneliness she has felt for so long and how Bugler has erased it: "You can go years and years of normal life, all day, every day, milking, foddering, saying the given things, and then one day something opens in your, wild and marvelous, like the great rills than run down the mountain in the rain, rapid, jouncing, turning everything they touch into something living; a mossy log suddenly having the intent and slither of a crocodile." The story's outcome is tragic, at first, but ultimately hopeful, with the underlying message that a woman's strength is as strong and sturdy as the mountain she lives on.

4. GRAPES OF WRATH, John Steinbeck (Penguin Reissue, 619 pages). Each year, I read at least one classic, a work that reminds me why I wanted to be a writer in the first place. This year, it was Steinbeck's epic story of the Joad family's migration from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl to the promised land of California. At its heart, *Grapes* is a tale of ordinary people striving to preserve their dignity in the face of social and economic desperation. These are people with no material goods, nothing but each other. As Ma Joad says: "all we got is the family unbroke." The Joads search in vain for the American Dream, for greener pastures and fertile ground, for hope. Their journey takes one tragic turn after another but Ma Joad stops at nothing in her attempt to keep the "fambly" together while her son, Tom, begins to realize the unbreakable link between himself and all of mankind. (Of course, this kind of thinking was considered "communist" when the novel was first published.)

What I had forgotten since my first read of this book was that the Joad's story was based on the lives of real families who migrated to California during the Depression. People in America starved and we looked the other way – at least our government and Big Business did. Steinbeck felt this injustice passionately and felt compelled to document this black mark on our nation's history. The novel was banned for many years and sadly enough, it's still banned in some Oklahoma school district that find the portrayal of the Okies offensive and won't admit to the factual accounts of starving farmers.

This remains a novel for our times. Sadly enough, injustice and poverty are still about as American as baseball and apple pie. *Grapes* reminded me that the concept of the American Dream is actually an American Tragedy for so many. It also reminded me that we can't forget about others just because we're living in comfort. We're all in this together. In the most famous and most quoted portion of the novel, Tom Joad says it best: "Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there...I'll be in the ways guys yell when they're mad and I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the house they build ... why, I'll be there." Long live the Tom Joads of the world.

5. ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE, Robert Pirsig (Bantam Books Reissue with new foreward and author notes, 680 pages). I bought this book for Dave shortly after we added a

motorcycle to our life. We'd both heard about the book but didn't know exactly what it was about, just that it was a classic in its own right. Buying a gray and white Honda Shadow and riding it through the hills of Kentucky reminded us that it was on the shelves. Dave read it cover-to-cover during our week-long vacation in Florida and declared it one of the most important and influential books he's ever read. I read it from Thanksgiving to New Year's Eve and agreed.

This is three stories in one - the story of a father-son relationship, the story of a man's intellectual and spiritual journey, and a how-to account on how to live. The narrator (Pirsig in motorcycle clothing) and his son, Chris are bound for the outer limits of the West. Along for the ride, is the narrator's ghost, Phaedrus - his former Self before he had a nervous breakdown and 22 rounds of electroshock therapy. On the journey, the narrator hopes to put together some of the forgotten pieces of his former life - his days spent in academia where he first developed the idea of Quality (which we find out 250 pages later, is his term for the Buddha).

Pirsig puts the reader on a philosophical odyssey where you confront many a fundamental question about how to live, act and react. As the book jacket states: "the craft of motorcycle maintenance leads to an austere beautiful process for reconciling science, religion and humanism." Early in the book the narrator states: "what's new?" is an interesting eternal question but one which results only in an endless parade of trivia and fashion, the silt of tomorrow. I would like, instead to be concerned with the question, 'what is best?' And the book asks much more of you from there.

6. HORSE HEAVEN, Jane Smiley (Knopf, 561 pages). If you were ever a little girl who wanted to own a horse, ride a horse or be a horse, this book is for you. If you read spent countless hours on your bed reading every *Misty of Chincoteague* book your local library carried, Jane Smiley will take you back to that. Or, if you like to play the ponies, you'll appreciate this view of life at the track. At 560 pages, it's filled with so many characters, Smiley kindly provides a two-page list of them in the front of the book. Thank god because it takes awhile to decipher who's who as the novel's action unfolds. But, rest assured, the lives of Smiley's characters eventually intersect in amusing, unusual and touching ways that will keep you reading long into the night.

The characters, most of them, are wonderfully, fully drawn. With so many, you'll find someone you can relate to. There's Farley Jones who uses Zen to train his horses. There's Elizabeth who communicates with the animals and tells us how they're feeling. There's Krista, a struggling breeder who constantly relies on the kindness of others to keep the foals and fillies healthy. There's the little boy who suffers from his father's gambling habit. Of course, there are plenty more owners, trainers, jockeys and bettors to choose from. But the characters I loved the most were the six horses, with Mr. T and Justa Bob capturing the part of my heart that has laid dormant since reading all those *Misty* books. (I confess - I HAD to read ahead to find out Justa Bob's fate after he was sent to a shoddy farm and a rather unscrupulous man. I couldn't help it.)

This book took me back through my childhood to a time when my grandparents owned race horses (trotters and pacers). I used to go to the track with them and I, along with my sisters and brothers, stood in the winner's circle many a time, watching my grandpa shake hands with people that seemed important. I also got to hang out around the stalls and watch my grandpa's trainer, George, the first black man I ever knew, work his magic. On those evenings, I got to know my grandma's betting quirks and her motto that sometimes a racing form was useless against a "feeling." But most of all, I knew my grandparents loved their horses with a passion I was too young to understand at the time. *Horse Heaven* illuminated that kind of love and passion for me. For that, I am thankful. One of the characters says: "it's not true that anything can happen at the racetrack, only that many things can happen ... any little process that takes place in any of the horses has a greater chance of affecting one other horse, or several. It might only take a single fiber..." Can humans learn a lesson from horses? You read and be the judge.

7. IN COUNTRY, Bobbie Ann Mason, (Harper, 283 pages). *In Country* was published in 1985, the year I graduated from high school. Even though I read Mason's classic short story *Shiloh* in high school, it took me 15 more years to rediscover her in novel form. Set in Kentucky, Sam Hughes' father was killed in Vietnam before she was born. Sam lives with her Uncle Emmet, a veteran as well. She longs to know her

father and possibly gain an understanding of herself in the process. But no one wants to tell her about the war, especially Emmet who's content in his reclusiveness. Sam falls in love (the 17-year-old variety) with one of Emmet's friends, another war veteran but even he refuses to tell her much. Then, she discovers some of her father's letters which ultimately leads to a vivid, heart-wrenching confrontation with Emmet.

Mason shows us another fallout of Vietnam, the aftershock felt in a rural community and in a young girl's heart as she comes of age. Emmett sums up the impact war had on him when he says: "If you can think of something like birds, you can get outside yourself and it doesn't hurt as much. That's the whole idea. That's the whole challenge for the human race. But I can barely get to the point where I can be a Self to get out of." Heavy stuff. *In Country* reminded me that a war's casualties aren't only the dead. There are many more casualties still walking among us.

I also read Mason's memoir, *Clear Springs*, this year. In it, she examines her family roots, her relationship with her free-spirited mother as well as the impact her roots had on her as a writer. A reflective read.

8. TOMCAT IN LOVE, Tim O'Brien (Bantam Books, 347 pages). Guess I have something for the name O'Brien this year. This O'Brien, the American version, is one of my favorite writers and he doesn't disappoint with *Tomcat in Love*. O'Brien's previous novels centered around the Vietnam War. This novel, however, takes on one of the world's never-ending battles -- the battle of the sexes, the warring factions of the male and female psyche and their varying perceptions of love. To call Thomas Chippering an egomaniacal womanizer is an understatement. I had no sympathy for him for the first half of the book. This is a man who categorizes every woman he meets according to age, shoe size, personality traits, hair color and more. He didn't stand a fighting chance with me or any of the female characters in the story, but the man would have you believe he is an expert casanova, the Tom of all Cats. But, as the book moved closer to the climax, I actually found myself cheering for the middle-aged cad. Thomas' acts of revenge and his attempts to woo women are simultaneously hilarious and disturbing. Even though he constantly loses the battle, he refuses to surrender; thus, he develops an underdog appeal.

When we meet Thomas, he is mourning the demise of his marriage to Lorna Sue, his childhood sweetheart. Chippering wants her back and when he realizes he can't have her, he sets out to exact his own revenge on her as well as the man she's shacking up. Her overly-protective brother, Herbie, who is also Thomas' former best friend isn't immune from Thomas' plans either.

While he's spying, stalking and sulking over his loss, Thomas meets Mrs. Robert Kooshof who somehow falls in love with him and provides him with a little intimacy and satisfaction. Nevertheless, it's not enough to cure this tomcat's wandering ways.

Despite the book's over-the-top humor, it's a serious novel that examines the lengths people will go to when looking for love. This novel is a testament to O'Brien's genius. His funny writing is just as good as his serious stuff, not something every writer can pull off.

I highly recommend any of O'Brien's works, especially *The Things They Carried*. It's probably the most moving and compelling novel I've read about Vietnam. This isn't about the battles themselves. It's more about the personal battles and "the things each man carried" with him into the war. Incredible.

9. JIM THE BOY, Tony Earley (Little Brown & Co., 227 pages). I first discovered Earley in the now defunct *Story* magazine and in his short story collection, *Here We Are in Paradise*. Earley is considered a Southern writer but takes great care to put the southern stereotypes sometimes found in bad southern writing out to pasture. This short novel packs a delightful coming-of-age wallop. Ten-year-old Jim Glass is growing up in Aliceville, NC during the Depression with his mother and three uncles. His no-count father disappeared long ago but occupies plenty of space in Jim's heart. Over the course of a year, we follow the simple routines of Jim and his uncles - school, working the farm, playing baseball with friends. We wonder about Jim's father. We think about things like acting tough, throwing a baseball in front of Ty Cobb, making friends out of schoolyard enemies. We learn what it means to be Jim the Boy. Through it all, we hope for Jim. Hope that he finds the acceptance he longs for. Hope that somebody gives him some answers. Hope that his uncles will continue to love him and teach him life's lessons the way they

do. What I enjoyed most about the book was its brazen innocence and Earley's ability to remain in a child's mind without getting overly sappy or cute (although some critics have said this book is "too sweet"). This is an easy, feel-good read that received mixed reviews. Regardless, I believe it's worth it to be a child again - if only for 227 pages.

10. WHERE I'M CALLING FROM: NEW AND SELECTED STORIES, Raymond Carver (Vintage Books, 416 pages). If you want to write short stories as I do, you have to study Carver at some point as many consider him one of the greatest contemporary American short story writers. Each of his stories is a writing lesson in and of itself. Like any author, Carver has his critics, those who find his style overly minimalistic – thus, not true literature. Perhaps that moniker fits his early works, but the 37 stories in this collection paint a much broader picture and represent his best work from every phase of his career.

Rather than following a traditional plot, Carver masterfully sets scene upon scene through his characters and their dialogue. Many of his stories open "in media res" (in the middle of things) where we find ourselves face-to-face with experiences that seem hum-drum on the surface but culminate in something much more significant. His spare style brings out the power of his voice – which speaks for the working poor. Carver, himself a child of the working poor, once said that he wrote stories about a "submerged population, people who don't always have someone to speak for them."

In "A Small, Good Thing," it is the baker who is submerged in knuckle-deep icing in the wee hours of the morning, baking cakes for all the "happy" people who keep normal hours. The baker makes a birthday cake for a couple's son. But, their son dies on his eighth birthday and the couple forgets to pick up the cake. The baker calls them night after night, harassing them about the cake, asking them if "they've forgotten Scotty," unaware just how horrible his question is. The final scene where the distraught couple arrives at the bakery is too good to reveal, sweeter than anything the baker has made in his 30 years.

In "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," we meet two couples drinking gin and pondering the true meaning of love in a way so rich it makes you wish you were there for the conversation. In other stories, we meet a waitress who's unemployed husband wants her to lose weight. We meet a man who's placed all of his belongings – just the way they were inside the house -- on his front lawn. We meet people who are struggling with love, loneliness, finding the next paycheck along with some answers.

With Carver, we catch just a quick glimpse inside people's lives before we have to release them back into the world's pond. But, these people are so memorable, it won't be long before they resurface in your mind. I liked staying down in these depths with Carver, in the basement apartments and bedraggled walk-ups, in the efficiencies and dirty diners. These are places where people are who they are and that's just fine by me. Them's good people and that's great literature.

Runners Up

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, J.K. Rowling. I've only read the first, but vow to read them all. Wonderful stuff and the best thing to happen to kids since Beverly Cleary.

Fay, Larry Brown. One of Kent Haruf's favorite authors and now one of mine. This book was not uplifting like Haruf's. In fact it was downright depressing in spots, but his writing is so vibrant, I couldn't put it down.

Poisonwood Bible, Barbara Kingsolver. Can she produce anything that's not good? Worth the time and effort.

The Pushcart Prize 2000: Best of the Small Presses. The unsung heroes in the small presses and literary magazines converge here in an annual literary tour de force. A great place to find tomorrow's popular authors before anyone else does.

Waiting, Ha Jin. Interesting. It tested my patience, but that's the whole point.

TOP 10 BOOKS OF 2001

1. The Corrections, Jonathan Franzen

I laughed, I cried, I reread passages because they were remarkable. I reread paragraphs because they were just that darned good. At times, you feel like the whole book is a parody and mockery of contemporary literature that relies on the overused theme of dysfunctional families (is there such a thing as a functional family?). Then, you think maybe Franzen is a literary genius. I'm sticking with genius.

How to sum up this 500+ pager? There's Enid Lambert who wants to have "one last Christmas with the family." She's hell-bent on having a "nice" Christmas. Yeah, right. Not with this crew. There's her husband, Alfred, who has Parkinson's disease and is beginning to lose his mind. Their children - Gary, Chip and Denise - are not your typical Mouseketeer goody-goody types. In fact, it's hard to find anything to like about them in the first 200 pages. The words "big-time losers" come to mind often. Gary tries to convince everyone he's not depressed, Chip loses his academic job and makes a chain of ridiculous decisions that lands him in a business scam, and Denise is a reputable chef trying her hand at both food and men. Then, Enid and Alfred depart for a cruise and things get mighty funky. This book lays out raw truths about family, marriage, sibling rivalry and more. All the stuff people sometimes think but are afraid to say out loud is expressed brilliantly by Franzen. If you don't find yourself shaking your head or laughing at the Lambert family's antics, if you don't find yourself thinking of your own family, I'll have to believe that you were raised by wolves - and an apparently perfect, functional pack of wolves at that.

A very good, very well-read friend of mine thinks Franzen is a lot like Thomas Pynchon. While I see elements of Pynchon, Franzen also reminds me of James Joyce (for sense of place and cultural commentary), John Updike (for the fine art of character development and original character quirks), William Faulkner (for the ad nauseam albeit magnificent detail) and a few others. No matter the similarities in style, Franzen holds his own on every page. I plan on re-reading this book again soon.

2. Seabiscuit, An American Legend, Laura Hillenbrand

I'm a sucker for many things - men with long hair, a bag of salty potato chips, the underdog, an invitation to play hooky on a sunny day, and ... horses. Seabiscuit was two of these - an underdog and a horse. During the Depression, "The Biscuit" ran some of the fastest race paces ever recorded. He was more popular than FDR and spent more time in the news. To make his rise to fame even more compelling, Seabiscuit's jockey, trainer and owner were a trio of also-rans - men who couldn't quite find success until it came to them in the form of this knock-kneed horse. So how could I not love this book? Underdogs everywhere!!

This true tale of a horse and those that loved him is rife with history, intrigue, insights into the hard life behind the racetrack and many a heartfelt moment. Hillenbrand's energetic storytelling is capable of making you stand up and cheer like a maniac while you're following one of Seabiscuit's neck-and-neck, down-to-the-wire, full-throttle races. There were times I could almost feel the heat coming from The Biscuit's neck. She also describes the tough world of horseracing in the 1930s, from the rivalry between the east and west coast horses to the jockeys' horrible weight-loss regimens that occasionally caused an early death. I couldn't get enough of Team Seabiscuit. In this case, truth was just as powerful and strange as fiction. A movie based on Hillenbrand's book is in the works. I'll be in the first row.

3. Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage, Alice Munro

I used to think Canadians only kicked our ass in hockey. With Munro, I'm beginning to think Canadians kick our ass in writing, too! Munro is not so much worried about being overly hip or postmodern or experimental. Rather, she sticks to the fundamentals and cranks out remarkable story after story - most running more than 20 pages. If you're unsure about venturing into short story territory, Munro is a good place to start. She once said: "A story is not like a road to follow ... it's more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back

and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows...."

Indeed. In this collection, Munro excavates the minds and perceptions of her characters, putting their pasts and presents on a collision course. This is a woman who knows her characters deeply. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that she keeps a list of her characters' favorite foods, drinks, habits, kinds of people, animals etc. I also like her because she didn't put out her first collection of stories until she was 37 - meaning there's still hope for me!

4. Demonology, Rick Moody

I discovered Rick Moody a few years ago when I read "The Mansion on the Hill" in an anthology of southern fiction. You may know him from his 1994 novel, "The Ice Storm." I instantly fell in love with his simplistic, frank voice and his lengthy sentences, which suit the personalities of his working-class, regular-guy and gal characters perfectly. Moody has an uncanny ability to catch you off guard - surprise you with his choice of words (he's an "every word counts" kind of writer), scenes, details and objects. At first, you're startled he put this thing with that thing. Then, it all makes perfect sense - his characters wouldn't let him have it any other way. Besides, I enjoyed reading a book called "Demonology" while flying from Cincinnati to Seattle. There were more than a few sideways glances from the passengers next to me.

5. The Bluest Angel, Francine Prose

This satire of academia is perfect for those who suffered through graduate school (especially English or writing) or those who supported a spouse or friend who suffered in education's upper echelons. In fact, it's a hilarious read for anyone who's attended college and found the Ivory Tower elitism to be annoying, frustrating and oftentimes absurd. As one who's been to a fair share of writing workshops, the opening chapters struck a chord. Swenson, a writing teacher who can't seem to finish his own novel, is faced with another stack of stories from lackluster students. Yet, in this crew of amateurs, sits Angela Argo whom Swenson becomes obsessed with and vice versa. Actually, he mistakes his love for this young writer for his love of his own writing but you'll have to read it yourself to see which one he chooses - or which one chooses him. Prose's tongue-in-cheek take on political correctness, sexual-harassment policies and some of America's widely-held social mores is both hysterical and thought-provoking.

6. Zig-Zagging Down a Wild Trail, Bobbie Ann Mason

Last year, I read Mason's autobiography "Clear Springs." I was so excited when this collection of stories came out and I was even more excited when I discovered this Kentucky native would be reading at Joseph-Beth Booksellers. While the collection exceeded my expectations, Mason had to cancel the reading - a big disappointment. Mason's appeal is similar to Moody's - her cast of characters are regular guys and gals who are lost in this big old world. Their paths to a resolution or redemption are never straight, thus the "zig-zagging" in the title. Nor are Mason's stories clean and tidy - her endings make you think, make you scratch your head and wonder if you missed something. It's up to you to fill in the blanks and, in this case, it's makes for a more rewarding read.

7. The Yellow Wallpaper, Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Every year, I re-read a classic. This year, it was Gilman's short but powerful novella. I was introduced to Gilman's work in a Women's Literature class. First published in 1892, it continues to be a feminist treatise on oppression. A woman (who remains unnamed throughout the novella) slowly slips into insanity as she spends her days in a small bedroom that's decorated in yellow wallpaper. She's there to "convalesce," meaning she's there because her husband put her there. As the woman begins to feel increasingly trapped in her own life and marriage, the wallpaper becomes part of her prison and warped sense of reality. As she attempts to sort out her feelings, she creates a bizarre fantasy world. The final scene is chilling and disturbing, especially when you consider that this was originally published in 1892 when feminist thought was frowned on more than it is today. Unfortunately, Gilman's statements on the oppression of women - emotionally, intellectually and economically - are still relevant today. We may have come a long way, baby, but we haven't gone far enough, in my opinion. Read it and we can discuss.

8. The Vagina Monologues, Eve Ensler

First a one-woman play, now a best-selling book, this is a fast read and one that is ripe with material for a book group discussion or any group discussion for that matter. A good friend and I decided to do just that and I'm not sure which I enjoyed more - the reading of it or the discussing of it.

This is a celebration of women, of a body part that is usually whispered about in embarrassing tones. As in: "I'm having trouble 'down there.'" I'm sure we've all been privy to these kinds of conversations - and how sad for us that we don't stop to celebrate and honor our vaginas more. Aren't these the very organs that help bring life into the world?? Sheesh, why aren't we singing their praises?? Why the shame?? Ensler interviewed hundreds of women, teens and even young children to discover what they called "it," how the dressed "it," how "it" felt, what "it" thought, what "it" still had left to do before it went to the great beyond. At times gut-wrenching (as in the account of the Bosnian woman who survived a rape) and at-times laugh-out-loud funny (as in all the different nicknames women have for their vaginas, my favorite being "sugar dish"), this is one book both women and men should read, cherish and talk about.

9. Feast of Love, Charles Baxter

This novel starts out unlike others with the author himself waking up from a nightmare and going for a walk. He meets an acquaintance who happens to be one of the main characters, Bradley. Bradley convinces Baxter that he should be in the book Baxter is struggling to write, because he knows all about "the feast of love." Bradley believes Baxter needs real-life models for his characters, all sorts of people with different stories about love. And that is how you meet the rest of the cast and, in the process, learn a lot about love. Baxter does a fine job of jumping from one character's mind and distinct voice to the next. I read this in a hurry, when our dog was quite ill. I plan on re-reading it soon and savoring every morsel of the feast.

10. The Social Lives of Dogs, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas

If you sometimes find yourself thinking it'd be easier to live and work with dogs than humans, this is a must-read. A few years ago, I read "The Hidden Life of Dogs" by Thomas. (She also writes about cats.) While many scientists shun giving animals human characteristics and emotions, Thomas believes dogs have feelings too - lots of them - and they're not at all unlike human emotions. Through her own cast of canines, she teaches us how the animals in her home developed their own packs, established rank and generally learned to get along with the people who cared for them. There were times I forgot she was talking about dogs. There were times I found myself comparing one of the dogs to my sister or my co-worker or my friend. And why not? Is it not possible that we still express our animal instincts from time to time? Thomas' dogs (and cats and parrots) will capture your heart, and make you analyze your own four-footed friends as well as their two-footed companions. Honorable Mentions (and a bit of shameless promotion)

Kiss My Tiara: How to Rule the World as a Smartmouth Goddess, Susan Jane Gilman Take this one to the beach or chalet in Gatlinburg. It's a fast read, it's hilarious and it'll have you nurturing your inner smartass...um, I mean smartmouth goddess.

Fast Food Nation, Eric Schlosser

I won't go off on any sort of vegetarian rant because I am more than guilty of chowing down on a large order of fries now and again (cooked in vegetable oil, of course), but this eye-opener of a book makes me never want to frequent a drive-thru again for many, many reasons. Americans are getting fatter, fast food workers are getting poorer, and our penchant for food that comes quick and wrapped in foil is lining the pockets of a select few - at the expense of America's waistline, checkbook and culture. Ug. Fascinating stuff but you have to be able to stomach some pretty disgusting facts.

House of Sand and Fog, Andre Dubus III

This is a tale of today's immigrant experience and what happens when the social mores and morals of two cultures meet. Though the conflict can be explained in simple terms - two people want the same house - this is an absolute page-turning nail biter. The ensuing legal battle between the two main characters twists and turns along with your allegiances to them. A great book for any book group.

TOP 10 BOOKS OF 2002

1. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2001 Pulitzer Prize Winner)

by Michael Chabon

Okay, I admit it. When I was a kid, I made fun of kids who read comic books. Yep, I called them dorkwads or one of the other popular idioms of the 70s. While the dorkwads followed the travails of some geeky superhero, I was busy with important books like *Misty of Chincoteague*, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, and the Prom Night issue of *Teen Magazine*. Who had time for comics?

So it's 2002 and this friend of mine recommends this novel about two comic book writers. You're kidding, right? Yeah, yeah, so it won a Pulitzer but I remained skeptical. Especially when he handed me the 639-page paperback. Even Michael Chabon's handsome photo on the back of the book wasn't enough to persuade me that I could survive that many pages of geekdom. But my friend was so insistent that I acquiesced, reminding him that I might not like it. Who am I to snub comic book heroes and heroines?

And now I publicly admit that I was wrong. Chabon had me at the first paragraph. I fell in love with two comic book writers and the long-haired author who created them. At turns both pulp fiction and ivory tower classic literature, Chabon introduces us to the somewhat hapless comic artist Sam Klayman (Clay) and his cousin, Josef Kavalier, who smuggled himself out of Hitler's Prague via some Houdini-like hijinks. In 1940s New York City the men develop the "Escapist," a superhero rebel with a definite cause – to eradicate tyranny and injustice all over the world. It's no coincidence that the villains look like Hitler and his Nazis. Their idea, once rejected by their boss, takes off and the two rise to fame with Sammy as the lead writer and Josef as the illustrator. So much happens over the course of the novel that it'd take me three pages to share what I liked most and another six or more pages just to give you the plot outline. Really, all you need to know is that you're in for a sometimes zany but always moving journey. You'll find yourself rooting for the good guys and wanting to BING-BLAM-SPLAT the bad guys the whole way through. You'll find yourself being the Escapist as you sink into the wonderful lives of these characters who are two very different individuals that form a lovable, daring duo, yearning for truth, justice, and a better way.

Chabon also wrote the *Wonder Boys* and the short story collection *Werewolves of Their Youth* (see # 9). He recently published a young reader's book, *Summerland*, that's getting rave reviews.

2. *Child of My Heart*

by Alice McDermott

Alice McDermott has surpassed Joyce Carol Oates as one of my writing heroines. First off, she's Irish and genuinely lyrical – and not in the jokey leprechaun stereotypical way, we're talking Joyce and Yeats. Second, she does so much with so little. Every word, scene, and detail counts in a life-making or life-breaking way. It's enough to make you hold your breath while reading.

In most creative writing classes, professors attempt to teach you the importance of "compression." And as much as they try to teach us to focus on a small time frame, there aren't many writers who truly do it well. Including me. I'm more of a rambler than an economic writer which is why I admire McDermott's mastery of compression. She has such invisible control over her narrative and impeccable pacing that I forget that I'm of this earth, this sofa, this bed I'm lying on. I devoured this 240-page Christmas gift from Dave – an autographed copy, in fact – in two sittings.

Theresa is 15 years old and is the most sought-after babysitter in a small town on the east end of Long Island. Over the course of a summer week she cares for her cousin Daisy, and most of the neighboring kids, cats and dogs on the east end of Long Island. Here again, we have a character growing into her own identity while being surrounded by a tight-knit community her parents hope she becomes a famous

part of. Yet, Theresa's real community lies in the children and animals she cares for, not the adults who are supposed to be caring for them.

I read this the first time for pure enjoyment but will read it again for the literary allusions and provocative insights into sexual desire, death, and the role of fantasy and imagination in our lives.

Here's just a sampling of McDermott's brisk, powerful style. How can you not love this paragraph:

"I knew without asking that this was Petey's gift, indistinguishable as it was from a burden. Petey, who always used to ask, challenging and pleading at the same time, 'Do you like me? Do you like my family?' who had wept with his fists tight. Who would be plagued all his life by anger and affection, by gifts gone away, by the irreconcilable difference between what he got and what he longed for – by the inevitable, insufferable loss buried like a dark jewel at the heart of every act of love."

Wow.

3. *Confederacy of Dunces* (1981 Pulitzer Prize Winner)

by John Kennedy Toole

I can't take any credit for discovering this gem. It came to me by way of a friend's recommendation. By the time I finished reading it, I found out that three other friends consider this Pulitzer Prize winner one of their all-time favorite books. It's a tragedy that the author committed suicide in 1969 before the book was published. But thank the heavens for Toole's persistent mother who, after her son's death, hounded an editor to read the manuscript. And thank the heavens that the editor felt sympathy for her and promised he would read it. Otherwise, the world would be without this remarkable book and that would be another tragedy, indeed.

The book begins with a quote by Jonathan Swift: "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him."

Ignatius J. Reilly is the Don Quixote of the French Quarter in New Orleans. Sometimes heroic, sometimes pathetic, always comical, a lot of times tragic, Reilly is a fat, self-professed genius who wears a red cap and flannel shirt and suffers from bouts of flatulence. He lives with his mother and works on his manifesto about life and love, filling up one Big Chief writing tablet after another. After 30 some years, his mother forces him out the door to search for a job where upon we're introduced to a tragi-comic cast of characters, one more insane than the next. There's the stripper Lana Lee, the secretary Miss Trixie, Myrna Minkoff, Reilly's ex-girlfriend, and more.

Reilly serves time as a hotdog vendor and then moves on to the Levy Pants Company where he organizes a strike, messes up the business, and generally makes a nuisance of himself though Reilly would never see anything wrong in anything he does. Every job culminates in full-blown disaster but the path there is filled with so many fine moments.

You'll never meet another character quite like Ignatius nor would you want to. He's a true original and while his dreams are clearly impossible to achieve, you begin to wonder whose view of life is really right – his or ours.

4 *An Invisible Sign of My Own*

by Aimee Bender

If Mona Gray had been my math teacher, maybe I would've learned something because she sure knows how to make math interesting. Mona is 20 years old and new to teaching. She buys an ax for her birthday and decides it looks like the number 7 so she brings it to class to show her second-grade students how to make numbers from material objects. In Mona's lonely, mixed up world, numbers are the only thing that make sense to her and bring normalcy to her awkward life in her parent's home where her father has a strange illness that is never diagnosed. She develops her own kind of nervous tick – knocking on wood – and quits anything she begins to become successful at, including relationships and love. At its core, the

novel explores death, and the impermanence and disorder inherent in life and love. Here again, we have a character searching for her identity in the small community of children and friends she develops.

There's a fairy tale sweetness to the story but, like most good fairy tales, there's also a dark side that's unearthed in slow, unnerving ways. You like Mona but know she's six or seven bubbles off center, you worry about the children under her charge, and you worry about yourself for liking this crazy story. Bender knows how to keep her readers and characters on the outer edges of reality from the first sentence to the last, and it's so enjoyable to dip your toes into the author's wildly creative waters.

5 *Last American Man*

by Elizabeth Gilbert

I read this while we were exploring Zion National Park and Bryce Canyon, two of the most beautiful national parks I've ever been to. If you haven't been, get yourself to Utah some time soon. You won't be disappointed. You'll also be reminded how awesome the natural world is and how it deserves our respect, which is something Eustace Conway, the "last American man," has been trying to get Americans to understand since he graduated from high school in 1977.

Elizabeth Gilbert introduces us to the tireless, passionate soul of Eustace and takes us on a remarkable journey through his early days living under the stringent ruling thumb of his father to present day where he's a little more mature but not yet burned out on his crusade to change how Americans live. Talk about a Don Quixote. Here's a man who lives in a tepee, lives off the land, has hunted animals for food, has dressed in animal skins, hiked the 2,000-mile Appalachian Trail with very limited supplies and food, and rode his horse across the country in 103 days.

Eustace wants all of us to return to a simpler way of life where we respect our natural resources and actually use our hands to make food, shelter and clothing instead of buying it off a shelf. I was never a lover of Westerns or cowboys but there's something very enchanting about Mr. Conway and his frontier lifestyle. Gilbert also presents to us questions about what it means to be a man in today's world, and shows us how the men in men's lives (their fathers) can shape their sense of self. Disillusionment and unmet expectations abound in Eustace's life – just like it looms large in the lives and many men and women today. Gilbert also reveals how Conway's environmental evangelism generates a grueling modern schedule – the very thing he is fighting against.

This was one of many favorite passages:

"We seem to have stopped paying attention. Or this is what Eustace Conway perceives when he looks around America. He sees a people who have fallen out of step with the natural cycles that have defined humanity's existence and culture ... We are not alien visitors to this planet after all, but natural residents and relatives of every living entity here. Robotically existing in sterilized surroundings that numb the mind, weaken the body and atrophy the soul. But Eustace believes we can get our humanity back. When we contemplate the age of a mountain, we get it. When we observe the superb order of water and sunlight, we get it. When we are mindful of every nuance of our natural world, we finally get the picture: that we are each given only one dazzling moment of life here on Earth, and we must stand before that reality both humbled and grateful for our brief but intrinsic participation in it."

6 *You Are Not a Stranger Here*

by Adam Haslett

Here are nine short stories that are long on rich yet simple prose. Another writer who understands the power of compression. Haslett runs the emotional gamut and brings us characters who are facing major dilemmas. We meet an inventor filled with ideas yet living a desolate life without solid relationships. There's an orphaned boy who finds comfort in a classmate's violence. And there's a brother and sister who find themselves arguing over an old lover. Yeah, yeah, maybe you've had your share of hard-luck stories and characters, but there's a tenderness and sensitivity to Haslett's writing that makes these stories more compelling and original. Haslett doesn't waste time setting up the story – he throws you in it and you feel like you've been punched in the gut.

The two stories that bookend this collection feature characters who, in the winter years of their lives, begin facing the residue of regrets and transgressions from their younger years. While both stories end on a somber note, the stories themselves are filled with hope and renewal. This is Haslett's greatest talent, pulling hope out of what seems to be a desperate situation.

If you like Raymond Carver's simplistic, raw style or Chekov's ability to choose key moments of transformation and awareness, you'll enjoy this collection. And to think, he wrote all of these while still in law school.

7 The Great Gatsby

by F. Scott Fitzgerald

I haven't read this classic since high school and thought I'd give it a whirl. It's an easy read and almost simplistic on the surface but there's so much social commentary in it (and, unfortunately, so much of it still applies to today's world) that it was worth another read. As you probably know, it takes place in the 20s and highlights some of the excesses of that era via the mysterious Jay Gatsby. When we first meet Gatsby he's discussed in the hushed tones saved for the world famous. Then we watch Gatsby fall from grace as the love story between he and Daisy Buchanan unfolds. And, of course, there's the symbolism of the green light – a question that most certainly appeared on your essay exam when you first read this book in school. Ah, the green light, that special elusive something that remains just beyond our reach. Yet, we yearn for it so much that it consumes us until we come close to it and feel the burn of the consequences we may not have been prepared for. Lessons about greed, money, and love abound in the novel. And it's been dissected eight ways to Tuesday – I wouldn't dare tread into critic's waters on such a classic. Just go read it and remember why money doesn't buy happiness.

8 Empire Falls (2002 Pulitzer Prize Winner)

by Richard Russo

This man can write. And write about small town life without falling into classic stereotypes. At turns both funny and sad, you'll have to decide for yourself which characters you adore. I found myself liking Tick, the mixed-up teenager who is sensitive and a little odd but certainly compassionate. Her father Miles is sort of a bungler. He tries his best and you feel sorry for him when things don't go his way. As for his ex-wife, well, you sort of like her and feel sorry for her too. Empire Falls, Maine could be any small town – somewhere like Harlan, Kentucky or Fayetteville, Ohio. It has its wealthy widow, Mrs. Whiting, who owns everything and rules most everyone in the town, including Miles who runs the Empire Grill. And if the failing Grill isn't enough for Miles, he's also dealing with his divorce, his troubled brother and his business relationship with Mrs. Whiting. Here's a man whose expectations seem always just beyond his reach. Yet, he weathers through most of it and remains a hero to many.

I think Richard Russo is one of those writers you either like or hate. There's really no in between. But it's enjoyable to find out which side you're on.

9 Werewolves In Their Youth

by Michael Chabon

Wonder boy Michael Chabon's second collection of stories tackles the American family

in all its tragic and often funny dysfunction. In the title story, a self-professed "King of the Retards" tries to distance himself from his next-door neighbor and only friend, who has taken their games just a little too far. In "House Hunting," a drunk real-estate agent shows a young couple through a house far too expensive for them. This second collection includes stories of people stunned to find themselves facing an unpleasant reality beyond what they'd previously imagined.

In "Green's Book," a man runs into a young girl he babysat and has to deal with his attraction to her. The opening paragraph is divine: "She was the type of girl that Green always noticed right away: too thin, dressed wrong, foul-mouthed, already drunk and laughing too loud – a shimmying funnel of dust, lightning, and uprooted houses working its way across the room."

How could you not want to read on?

10 Stupid White Men (and Bowling for Columbine, the movie)

by Michael Moore

Last year, it was “Fast Food Nation” that had me ready to free all the factory-farmed cows and chickens from their fate. This year, I can’t quite take on fixing America but I’m glad Michael Moore tries to do it in his own way. You may remember Moore from his documentary “Roger and Me” about living under the unstable shadow of General Electric. His latest book takes on George Bush and his crew in the White House. Let’s just say he’s not a big fan. But Moore has plenty of friends and enemies that helped this book reach Number One status on Amazon.com within days of its release. In this treatise, Moore tackles the President, reviews the 2000 election and gives rationale for why Gore really won, exposes the consequences of corporate greed, and more. Moore lists a variety of things America is #1 in including firearm deaths, military spending, oil consumption and things more frightening than these.

This was a gutsy book to publish while most Americans were sowing their patriotic oats. But Michael Moore doesn’t care about good PR or good timing. His viewpoint waits for no one.

While there were times I felt he was too over-the-top in his tactics, I applaud him for asking hard questions and speaking his mind. Whatever your politics, *Stupid White Men* should make you blow your stack.

Top this off with a viewing of his recently released movie, “Bowling for Columbine,” and you’ll want to move to Canada just like I did after viewing it. I laughed, I cried, I cringed. The movie focuses on America’s gun culture, our penchant for violent endings to solving problems, and also shows some hard-to-watch security camera footage from Columbine which reinforces the fact that our country is going to hell in the barrel of far too many shotguns. The interview with Charlton Heston is quintessential Moore as is the scene in Kmart’s corporate headquarters with a few corporate wanks and one of the boys who was injured in the Columbine shooting.

I love this journalist.

The Runners Up

White Fang, by Jack London

Dog Heaven, by Cynthia Rylant (a children’s book)

High Maintenance, by Jennifer Belle

The Hours, by Michael Cunningham

The First Five Pages, A Writer’s Guide to Staying Out of The Rejection Pile, by Noah T. Lukeman

TOP 10 BOOKS OF 2003

1. *Wonder When You'll Miss Me*, by *Amanda Davis*

Amanda Davis died two months prior to seeing her first novel in bookstores. The small plane that was taking her on a publicity tour crashed into a mountain 18 miles from Asheville, N.C. The literary community mourned the loss and after reading this - her only novel - I mourned too. Davis has a gentle touch - her writing is the sort that demands your attention but demands it quietly, making it all the more powerful.

Faith Duckle is fat, quiet 15-year-old when she is raped by a group of boys under the bleachers after a football game. Faith keeps the rape a secret and sheds pounds in the process but she can't seem to shed the ghost of her former self -- "the fat girl" -- when she returns to school that year. While Faith wants to forget the rape, her alter-ego "fat girl" wants revenge. Things get ugly and Faith runs away to find Charlie, her only friend who had left her hometown without telling her. Faith joins a circus where she meets a variety of misfits and miscreants. All the while, the fat girl is by Faith's side, commenting on Faith's choices and holding her back from fully healing.

Davis actually traveled with a circus so she is able to render a complete, vivid world for the reader without it seeming too over-the-top (pun intended). As a reader, there are times you like the fat girl and times you really hate her. Seems reasonable seeing as there are parts of our Selves that we love and parts we sometimes would rather not be burdened with. In an interview, Davis said: "One of the things I really became conscious of is that Faith has lost all that weight but she doesn't really feel that she owns that body. It's doing the grunt work in the circus that makes her strong; she starts to feel that this body belongs to her. I also think that owning your body is part of owning yourself and that is a really hard thing to do when you are a teenager and even a young woman. It's a really hard thing to do, period."

Interestingly enough, the book is not about surviving a rape or living the circus life. Davis' broader themes concern the boundaries that we surround ourselves with -- boundaries that protect us from changing and growing, and boundaries that just plain protect us from danger. The good news is, Faith tries again and fails better. As bleak as rape, the circus, and the fat girl might make the story sound, it is filled with remarkable hope, and beauty. Enough to make you cry. The ending is ambiguous - your life experience will bring you to your own conclusions.

2. *The Rabbit Factory*, by *Larry Brown*

I wasn't sure what the book was about when I bought it but I enjoy Larry Brown's writing enough that the plot and setting didn't matter much to me. What I like about Brown's writing is that it's character-driven and I knew, without a doubt, that I'd meet some interesting people in the book's 340 pages. In *The Rabbit Factory*, Brown presents five eccentric characters and a supporting cast of equally odd folks. From the dust jacket: "Set in Memphis and north Mississippi, *The Rabbit Factory* follows the colliding lives of, among others, Arthur, an older, socially ill-at-ease man of considerable wealth married to the much younger Helen, whose desperate need for satisfaction sweeps her into the arms of other men; Eric, who has run away from home thinking his father doesn't want him and becomes Arthur's unlikely surrogate son; Domino, an ex-con now involved in the drug trade, who runs afoul of a twisted cop; and Anjalee, a big-hearted prostitute with her own set of troubles, who crashes into the lives of the others like a one-woman hurricane."

In short, syncopated chapters, Brown switches deftly between characters and this rhythm to the novel keeps you reading well past your bedtime. Brown beautifully reveals how one small decision can quickly unravel a life. In *The Rabbit Factory*, a botched choice or missed chance is the difference between a

happy ending and a rather unpleasant one. Arthur, the older, quiet man who is married to a younger woman thinks to himself: "It seemed to him that one problem at a time ought to be enough." Indeed. There's a fine mixture of good and bad outcomes and what keeps you reading is the fact that you want to know which characters will come out on what side of life's fence.

3. Atonement

Ian McEwan

(2002 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, 2001 Booker Prize Shortlist)

When I read all the positive, glowing reviews of this book, I still wasn't interested. Then my friend and fellow book lover, Carole, said I HAD to read it. I respect Carole's opinions and tastes but remained skeptical. I read the first five pages and changed my mind immediately. It's 1935 and Briony Tallis thinks she sees their housekeeper's son, Robbie Turner, attacking her sister Cecilia. Briony is too young to correctly interpret what she sees that night and also what she reads in a racy note that was meant for Cecilia. Later that evening, her cousin Lola is sexually assaulted, and Briony makes an accusation against Robbie that she repents for the rest of her life.

The novel spans from 1935 England to a 1999 reunion of the Tallis family. In between, it explores the power of imagination, love, war, and what it takes to ask for forgiveness and risk not being forgiven. Early on, Briony thinks about becoming a novelist based on what she saw take place between Robbie and Cecilia. McEwan writes:

"She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view; her excitement was in the prospect of freedom, of being delivered from the cumbrous struggle between good and bad, heroes and villains. None of these three was bad, nor were they particularly good. She need not judge. There did not have to be a moral. She need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value. That was the only moral a story need have."

This passage is ironic coming from Briony prior to her grave accusation against Robbie. Instead of choosing freedom, she imprisons herself, her sister, and others in a terribly ugly story that they carry with them throughout the rest of their lives. It seems Briony misses her own point that "other people are as real as you." And this is only a tiny example of McEwan's brilliance.

There are two endings which some readers I know didn't enjoy - they felt as if McEwan was double-clutching and not sure how to satisfy the reader. I rather liked that about the book. Life is never so clean that one ending will satisfy everyone involved, especially when it involves atonement for past mistakes.

4. Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith

Jon Krakauer

Krakauer is my favorite outdoor writer and was the well-kept secret of readers of *Outside Magazine* for years. There, he had a cult following until he published *Into The Wild* and then *Into Thin Air*, which was on the best-seller list for weeks in 1999. Krakauer isn't afraid to ask the hard questions or challenge the staunchly-held beliefs of others. He also isn't afraid to study those who live at the outer limits -- people who take risks as easily as the rest of us take baths. In their minds, we are the strange ones for not attempting to climb the world's highest mountain without supplemental oxygen or walk into the Alaskan woods with nothing more than a five-pound sack of rice and the clothes on your back (Chris McCandless of *Into The Wild*).

So it should have been no surprise that Krakauer decided to write about Mormonism, polygamy, and the violent, extremist undercurrents that exist in the religion. But I was surprised anyhow. Here's one of my favorite outdoor writers writing about the interior beliefs and feelings of a religious group he didn't belong to. Why the Mormons? As Krakauer says in the Author's Remarks at the end of the book: "I grew up in

Corvallis, Oregon which had (and has) a robust Latter-Day Saint community. Saints were my childhood friends, coaches, teachers. I envied what seemed to be the unwavering certainty of the faith professed so enthusiastically by my closest Mormon pals; but I was often baffled by it. I've sought to comprehend the formidable power of such belief ever since."

The book's core is a terrible double murder committed by two Mormon Fundamentalist brothers, Ron and Dan Lafferty in 1984. The brothers insist they murdered their sister-in-law and her daughter because they received a revelation from God commanding them to do so. Krakauer recounts the crime in painful detail as he delves into the history of the Mormon faith, how it developed, and how its very structure of allowing its followers to have "divine revelations" that are usually relegated to priests or leaders in other religions has helped spawn the more extremist sects.

Krakauer takes readers inside isolated communities in the American West, Canada, and Mexico, where some forty-thousand Mormon Fundamentalists believe the mainstream Mormon Church went astray when it renounced polygamy. Weaving the story of the Lafferty brothers and their fanatical brethren with a clear-eyed look at Mormonism's violent past, Krakauer examines the underbelly of the most successful homegrown faith in the United States, and finds a distinctly American brand of religious extremism.

Yet Krakauer doesn't take pot shots at Mormons. He treats the religion respectfully and lays out the one aspect of Mormonism he was interested in studying - its violent past and how that affects its members in the present. The Mormons have spoken out against him but readers should be smart enough to understand that every non-fiction book has its singular angle and focus. As the saying goes: "one man's religion is another man's delusion."

5. The Ice Storm

Rick Moody

I love a good winter storm. Ice, snow, the list of school closings being read off on the radio. Even though I've long since graduated from elementary school, I admit that I still listen for my school's name and when it's called out, I smile for the kids who get the bonus day off. Now, that's the good side of a winter storm. Rick Moody's storm isn't so quixotic. The year is 1973. A freak winter storm hits an affluent Connecticut suburb, cars skid out of control, fathers and mothers swap partners, and their children experiment with sex, drugs, and even suicide. It seems as if the storm churns up all the stuff that two families, the Hoods and the Williamses, would rather keep hidden behind their manicured lawns. If you happened to see the movie adaptation of this book, Moody was ambivalent toward it. In fact, he rather didn't like his words being turned into moving pictures. It troubled him on many levels. I haven't seen the movie nor do I plan on it. The book is good enough.

This quote from Moody sums up the book and his view on human nature in general: "One day human consciousness wants to love all the children with HIV, the next day it wants to blow up thousand-year-old religious idols in the desert. To be human is to be, by turns, sacred and profane, magnificent and contemptible, light and dark, mirthful and humorless, and human consciousness can't be contained in most vessels that would house it. Heroes and villains are one in the same, they have the same shape, they are indistinguishable, they ride the same color horses, and men in black are no more likely to kill than are men in lavender; great orators smack their kids; our leaders are failed family men and women. That doesn't make them bad. All is complicated and strange."

6. The Woman Who Cut Off Her Leg at the Maidstone Grill and Other Stories

Julia Slavin

My agent recommended this collection of short stories to me. I'd never heard of Slavin but the title certainly captured my interest. Slavin's work conjures up Kafka, Gabrielle Garcia Marquez, Aimee Bender, and even a little Rick Moody who admires the heck out of Slavin's work. It's quirky, odd, and riveting -- the magical realism genre at its finest. Magical realism takes one fantastical element and asks the reader to absorb it as reality in the story (think Kafka's *Metamorphosis*). In Slavin's collection, a lonely woman sprouts teeth all over her body, and returns home one evening with rows of gold fillings glittering upon her

skin. A housewife swallows the adolescent boy who cuts her lawn. And something as innocuous as pudding spilled on the kitchen floor can be grounds for divorce.

Slavin worked for a decade as an ABC-TV producer in New York before moving to Washington, D.C. I'm glad she moved out of that land of semi-reality so she could present us with characters that are much more fascinating and interesting than anything currently on television today.

7. Motherless Brooklyn

Jonathan Letham

The narrator has Tourette's syndrome (an uncontrollable urge to shout out nonsense, touch every surface in reach, rearrange objects). Now how is the author going to keep that up for an entire book? I was intrigued. Would this character stutter endlessly and blurt out nonsense? Would it become a one-trick pony that bored the reader? No. And no.

Letham deals with it all beautifully and the Tourette's almost becomes secondary to the rest of the story. That said, some of the lines the main character Lionel Essrog, a.k.a. The Human Freakshow, blurts out are flat-out hilarious. Others are heartbreaking. Frank Minna, a third-rate, hapless neighborhood detective-thug, becomes Lionel's surrogate father and savior. Minna takes Lionel and three of his fellow orphaned friends on mysterious errands and the four grow up to be the Minna Men. One night, Frank is knifed and thrown into a dumpster, and Lionel must become a real detective.

As Lionel struggles to find Frank's killer--without letting his Tourette's get in the way--he's forced to delve into the complex web of relationships, threats, and favors that make up the Brooklyn world he thought he knew so well. The plot twists made me dizzy but in a good way. It's the kind of story I like -- funny yet tragic yet funny.

8. Lucky Girls

Nell Freudenberger

Nell Freudenberger is one lucky girl which makes the title of her debut collection all the more appropriate. Here is a young writer (under 30 years old) who was working as an editorial assistant at the *New Yorker* when she submitted a story to her employer, and that story was selected for the 2001 "Summer Fiction Issue." Unfair advantage? Some of the disgruntled, rejected-more-than-published literati think so. Then her collection of five stories (most collections have 8 to 10 stories) is published with great fanfare, and Nell is an instant critic's darling. Next, she lands one of the best agents in the biz, and a bidding war breaks out, on the basis of one short story, for a novel that Nell didn't even have an idea for yet. Beyond that, Nell is pretty. And nice. Other writers love to hate her, and I was ready to do the same until I read *Lucky Girls*. I admit I not only enjoyed the stories, I admired them.

The five stories are set in Southeast Asia and on the Indian subcontinent, and feel more like novellas. Each story is narrated by a young woman who seems to be displaced and relatively unlucky in love.

In the title story "Lucky Girls," an American woman who has been involved in a five-year affair with a married Indian man feels tied to her memories of him after he dies. In "Outside the Eastern Gate," the narrator returns to her childhood home in Delhi to visit her father and come to terms with the ghost of her mother who had abandoned the family years before. This was my favorite of the five. Here's an excerpt from that story:

"It had been a few days of gloom, and then suddenly it hit me so hard that I had to sit down on the wooden floor. I didn't cry. It was more like being outside myself watching what was happening: a piece of my mother coming alive inside me. I sat on the floor and rocked back and forth. I thought of going to bed, but what I really wanted was to be inside the bed — inside the mattress, where it was warm and dense and silent, with the stuffing packed around my arms and legs."

The other three stories are equally touching. Freudenberger's writing feels quiet yet underscored with sharp wit. And a sort of wisdom about keeping the stories messy enough that they feel real. When you

finish the story, you ask yourself “who in the heck was lucky in that one?” Which is sort of the brilliance about the whole thing - Freudenberg dishes up characters who are privileged without necessarily being happy. So the joke is sort of on them -- and on us.

9. Bad Behavior

Mary Gaitskill

On the “Peculiar and Unusual” meter, Mary Gaitskill’s scored about an 8 (with 10 being Incredibly Unusual) at least once in every story. *Secretary*, one story in this collection of nine, was recently made into a movie which some critics considered pornographic. *Secretary* didn’t feel pornographic to me but it did score points for general oddness. Gaitskill writes tales of sexual obsession, drug addiction, and flat-out strange relationships. The author’s younger days probably provided plenty of subject matter -- she ran away from her home in Lexington, Kentucky at age 16 to become a stripper. She also spent some time in mental institutions. Her fiction often explores the theme of how people seek intimacy but don’t know how to achieve it. Her characters seem far removed from the typical methods most folks use to gain intimacy.

Here’s the opening line from *Daisy’s Valentine*: “Joey felt that his romance with Daisy might ruin his life, but that didn’t stop him.” Now that’s a fantastic opening sentence. Of course you want to keep reading because there’s a chance this Joey person “might” ruin his life. It’s the car wreck you don’t want to look at but find yourself peeking at anyway, just to see if there’s any sign of life. And that’s what the entire collection feels like - an oncoming car that might not stop in time.

If you’re in the mood for something off the beaten path and for characters who look for love in all the wrong places, Gaitskill is a good choice.

10. Secret Life of Bees

Sue Monk Kidd

This was my feel-good read of the year. I took it with me on our 10-day expedition in the RV. I finished it on Day Two. It’s 1964 in South Carolina and Lily Melissa Owens lives on a peach farm with her tough, unloving father. When Lily was four years old, her mother was killed. Lily has a vague, blurry memory of that day and of picking up a gun but can’t recall all the details. People remind her it was an accident yet she’s riddled with guilt.

Lily’s only real friend is Rosaleen, the woman who cooks, cleans and acts as her surrogate mother. One day, at the height of racial unrest, Rosaleen is arrested and beaten. Lily rescues Rosaleen and they flee to the home of three bee-keeping sisters. The house is filled with female spirituality, feminist ideals, and more importantly to Lily, love. It’s here that Lily discovers the truth about her mother’s life, and, in the process, learns about herself.

Bees is as much about Lily as it is about the power of “place” to shape us, change us, and ultimately heal us. Eudora Welty wrote: “People give pain, are callous and insensitive, empty and cruel ... but place heals the hurt, soothes the outrage, fills the terrible vacuum that these human beings make.”

Other Good Reads of 2003

The Lovely Bones, Alice Sebold

July, July, Tim O’Brien

New Stories of the South, (Collection)

One Continuous Mistake - Four Noble Truths for Writers

TOP 10 BOOKS OF 2004

1. *The World Below*, Sue Miller

A few years ago, I read Miller's *While I Was Gone* and it made my top 10 list. Miller is back this time with *The World Below*, a novel that explores how the past influences the present, and how secrets simmer just below the surface of everyday life. I love Miller for her ability to let a story unfold quietly yet still make it vibrate with surprising beauty. Reading one of her books is like being the first one outside the morning after a snowfall, when everything is quiet and the untouched snow seems like it fell down just for you.

Catherine Hubbard returns to her grandmother's home in Vermont at a time when she feels disconnected from her own life. The house has been passed down to her and she contemplates staying for good, finding comfort in the simple, easy childhood she had there. But she stumbles on her grandmother's diaries and glimpses the surprising, private underworld of her grandparents' lives. It's not a dark story -- no abuse, no murders, no horrible secrets. What Catherine discovers is how her grandparents carved a love for each other out of sacrifice, a love that didn't happen immediately but grew into something powerful and sustainable over time.

The story of Catherine in the present and her grandmother, Georgia, in the past (1919) run parallel at times and intersect at others, giving the reader plenty of paths to follow.

The title refers to something Catherine saw on a childhood fishing trip with her grandfather -- an entire Vermont town submerged after a dam was built. When she returns to the spot as an adult, she's unsure if the town ever existed. In literary terms, the town is the objective correlative in the novel - an object, a set of objects, or chain of events that evokes a particular emotion in the reader: loss of childhood innocence and the tricks our memory can play on us. Is anything that Catherine experienced as a child real, or was it all based on perception? Did she ever truly know her grandparents or did she only know what she saw above the surface. There's a heartbreakingly frustrating scene where Catherine tries to describe what she saw that day to a good friend. He responds clinically: "But that's the way memory works. We supply the picture demanded by our imagination. And slowly, over time, it becomes *what was*...Don't we sometimes want to believe things? Want it so badly that we actually feel we've experienced them?"

It's beautiful, thoughtful, and thought-provoking through and through. Besides, she gives all of us wanna-be writers hope: she was 42 years old when her first novel debuted.

2. *The Secret History*, Donna Tartt

I must have had Vermont on the brain in 2004: first the Miller book, then this one. And all the while I was hoping Howard Dean would get out of Vermont long enough to save America.

Recommended by friend and fellow bookhound Tom Baker, I started this one with a healthy dose of skepticism. When he described it to me, it didn't sound like my kind of story. After reading the first page, I dismissed my cynicism:

"The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation. He'd been dead for ten days before they found him, you know. It was one of the biggest manhunts in Vermont history - state troopers, the FBI, even an army helicopter; the college closed, the dye factory in Hampden shut down, people coming from New Hampshire, upstate New York, as far away as Boston. It is difficult to believe that Henry's modest plan could have worked so well despite these unforeseen events. We hadn't intended to hide the body where it couldn't be found...It is difficult to believe that such an uproar took place over an act for which I was partially responsible..."

Okay, then. You're reading this and thinking, hmmm, this narrator is telling me he helped kill Bunny, seemingly a friend of his, and yet I'm almost feeling sorry for him somehow because he makes himself seem almost innocent, shell-shocked, just part of the killing crowd, you know. It was a modest plan, after all.

After the first page, the story reverts back to the time prior to Bunny's death, when the narrator Richard Papen comes to Hampden College and enrolls in a classical Greek class. Here, he meets his six classmates and they begin to perform their own version of a Greek tragedy. Richard tells the story in first person and acts as more of a reporter than an actual participant, though, as you know from page one, he's most certainly an active participant in Bunny's murder.

Henry is the ringleader, the King in Tartt's tragedy, and he's attractive and mysterious and undeniably evil. Bunny is an affable rich kid, a veritable Thurston Howell III complete with navy blue blazer and cigar. Charles and Camilla are twins, twins with major jealous streaks and bizarre attachments to each other. Marion is the beauty of the group and Francis is a messed up guy who's looking to belong to something or someone. Not exactly your band of cold-blooded killers here but things go south pretty fast.

Tartt is a master at keeping things creepy without dipping into the well of blood and guts horror. In fact, the murder itself...well, you can read for yourself how that actually happens. The story has the heart of a classic tragedy and the soul of a page-turning thriller. You don't need a degree in the Classics to like this but you do need some time to read it. It's best read in big chunks instead of little nibbles.

I guess I wasn't tuned in to the maelstrom of popularity swirling around *The Secret History* in 1992. I missed the bidding war for the manuscript, the stellar reviews, and the fact that it was on the bestseller list for 13 weeks that year. I'll blame it on being a newlywed but I'm glad Tom finally turned me on to what I had been missing.

3. *Running with Scissors*, Augusten Burroughs

And then things got really, really weird. I went from a murder at a Vermont college to this memoir detailing the outlandish, hilarious, and horrific childhood of Augusten Burroughs. As I was reading *Running with Scissors*, I kept turning back to the front cover to remind myself that this was indeed a memoir and not a piece of fiction. This is one case where truth is definitely stranger than fiction.

At the ripe and impressionable age of 12, Burroughs' mother flips out and gives her son away to be raised by her wacky psychiatrist. Augusten moves into a falling-apart Victorian mansion with a family that brings new meaning to the word dysfunction. Oh, and there's also a pedophile (another patient of the psychiatrist) who lives in the backyard shed and takes a serious liking to Burroughs. Certainly not your run-of-the-mill, coming-of-age-in-the-suburbs set-up for a pre-teen.

Some of his experiences are laugh-out-loud funny but it's the uncomfortable kind of laughter that comes with being so horrified, you're not sure what you're supposed to do. I mean, how can you not laugh when Burroughs writes: "We were young. We were bored. And the old electroshock therapy machine was just under the stairs in a box next to the Hoover."

This recommendation comes with a warning: Burroughs' memoir is not for everyone. He can be David Sedaris funny but also *Silence of the Lambs* creepy. If off-color language offends you or if the mere mention of molestation makes you squeamish, I'd leave this on the shelf for someone else. If you can tough it out through the rough parts, the rest is a wonderful read.

4. *The Lucky Ones*, Rachel Cusk

Cusk was born the same year I was and her book jacket included a glowing endorsement from Amy Bloom, one of my favorite short story authors, so how could I resist? She's big in Britain but not so well-known in the States even though she is a Whitbread Award winner and the author of three other works: *Saving Agnes*, *The Temporary Country Life*, and *A Life's Work*, her memoir about motherhood.

The Lucky Ones feels more like a collection of short stories but is defined as a novel on the book jacket. If you like a structured, complete plot with a concrete beginning, middle, and end, you won't find it here. Cusk's structure reminds me of Alice Munroe's, who describes her own stories as "walking into a house and exploring the rooms in no particular pattern." I don't mind wandering around anyone's house and sneaking a peak into their medicine cabinets, so I enjoyed the way Cusk bent the rules.

On the surface, Cusk's characters don't seem lucky at all. A wrongly accused mother about to give birth in prison. A new father on holiday with a group of friends searches for his pre-Daddy self. A man dying of cancer and a mother who can't let go of obsession with decency and morality. But then you begin to understand that there are shades and degrees of lucky. Your version of disaster might be someone else's lucky. In the case of Kirsty, the imprisoned pregnant woman: "She was the only person in this prison who had something. The other women's bodies were flat and lonely - punishment brutalized them, wore them out, because there was no giving here, no life, just time being taken away. Because of the baby, Kirsty still lived in time."

While parenthood is the overarching topic, Cusk explores its dark underbelly, the feelings that most parents don't want to admit publicly. Like Martin, the new father who confesses that he "watched his wife's labor with the eerie feeling that he was seeing the agonies not of creation but of rejection." What kind of father would feel this way, you ask? Well, in this story, it's a father who is searching for any sign of the man he used to be. He eventually finds it while skiing under the stars. And in that bright moment, he "felt himself connected to a series of moments in his life, which seemed to disclose themselves deeper and deeper in him, one after the other, like a chain of lights."

Cusk's sense of humor and ability to mine the emotional depth of her characters really shines in Mrs. Daley, a freakishly nervous mother of grown children who gives Miss Manners and Heloise a run for their money when it comes to keeping up appearances.

The Times Literary Supplement (London) had this to say about *The Lucky Ones*: "Cusk is particularly good at delineating the torturous relationships between mothers and daughters...Her toddler's tantrums are excruciatingly authentic and, through the detail of family life across generations, she manages to raise important issues about selfhood and relationships, belonging and ownership, the toles and games people play as lovers, partners, children, and parents."

5. A Parchment of Leaves, Silas House and The Coal Tattoo, Silas House

Okay, I'm cheating here by listing two books but they're by the same author. Born and raised in Lily, Kentucky, House has become one of the Commonwealth's favorite writers, and his 2001 novel *Clay's Quilt* was the Kentucky Novel of the Year. He teaches at Eastern Kentucky University and Spaulding University's MFA program. This is a man who bleeds Bluegrass.

House is one of those writers I read as a study in tone, voice, and authenticity. If he were a musician, he'd have perfect pitch, impeccable rhythm, and catchier-than-hell melodies that stay with you long after you've heard them.

Both books deal with relationships: in *Parchment* it's a marriage and friendships between women; in *Tattoo* it's the relationship between two sisters. House also emphasizes place and how where we're from is intricately and inextricably embedded in the decisions we make.

Parchment is set in 1914 when Vine, a young Cherokee woman, leaves everything she knows - her family, her homeland - for an Irishman named Saul Sullivan. They live with Sullivan's family on God's Creek. Vine is viewed as an outsider by many and finds herself feeling lonely even though she's surrounded by family. Even worse, she slowly realizes that Saul's brother Aaron is obsessed with her. In the violent turn of events that ensues, Vine finds the ability to forgive others, and most important, forgive herself.

Parchment was nominated for more than twenty top national and international prizes and became a national bestseller.

The Coal Tattoo centers around the lives of two sisters who can't stand to live together but can't bear to be apart. Easter and Anneth couldn't be more different - one is quiet where the other is flashy and boisterous, one is deeply religious where the other doesn't believe in any god.

Left parentless as children, the sisters raise themselves and each other in their small Kentucky town. Easter is intent on taming Anneth who likes everything fast, loud and hard - dancing, music, drink, and men. And Anneth is intent on pleasing herself without hurting her sister too much. Which anyone who is a sister or has a sister knows is practically impossible to do.

What's amazing is how well House captures the bond between sisters, the good, the bad, and the very ugly of it. You'd think it'd be difficult for a male to grasp the sister thing like this but he does it seamlessly and exquisitely. So many times I heard myself and my sisters in the dialogue between Easter and Anneth.

House also adds a political layer into the story when the sisters' land is taken by the coal mining company through a crooked broad form deed and mineral rights agreement. House stands out as a voice for landowners' rights and as an opponent of strip mining, two issues that continue to rise up in the hills of eastern Kentucky.

Read one or both. I'm sure you'll find House's work to your liking.

6. Eventide, Kent Haruf

Haruf's sort-of-a-sequel to his critically-acclaimed *Plainson* received mixed reviews. Some said it paled in comparison; others said it was equally beautiful and well worth the read. Regardless of the reviews, I got myself an autographed copy of *Eventide* when Haruf came to Joseph-Beth Booksellers on his book tour. The man epitomizes humble and genuine. He's the favorite uncle who always has a good story to tell, the guy who walks into a room and you immediately want to hear what he has to say.

In *Eventide*, Haruf returns to Holt, Colorado where the McPherson brothers are sending Victoria Roubideaux off to college. How I loved Harold and Raymond in *Plainson*, and how I love them in *Eventide*, too. Though I have to say, there's some heartbreak to suffer through in this one - one brother dies and the other is left to find a way to fill that void. You'll meet some of the other folks populating Holt, like DJ, a lonely 11-year-old boy taking care of his grandfather. And Rose, the social worker who eventually meets up with Raymond. The new characters wake up this sleepy town and bring new life to some of the characters who are experiencing darker days.

Haruf's writing and style is simple and easy. There's no fluff here, no big blinking metaphors or overdramatic messages. But there's power in that simplicity. I admire and respect his ability to do so much with what, on the surface, seems to be so little. He's a man of few words but you danged well better pay attention to every one of them because they were selected with a tenderness and precision most writers today don't have the gift or patience for doing.

As Haruf said in an interview: "My intention is to write clear, simple, direct sentences, and to believe that if you write clearly and cleanly enough then the reader will get what you want him or her to get. Beyond that I want people to think that they have been in the presence of real people."

7. Eats, Shoots & Leaves, Lynne Truss

Even grammarians are allowed to have a superhero. Though I don't consider myself a true grammarian, I've found a heroine in Lynne Truss who fights comma crimes and semi-colon misdemeanors with the passion of Wonder Woman. If only she had a golden lasso...

Truss has made it her life's mission to help people out of a world of complete semantic and syntactical chaos which isn't easy given that, every day, you can find an errant apostrophe on some billboard or handmade restaurant sign. Case in point: No Dog's. No dog's what? What do dogs possess that they aren't

supposed to? Paws, fur, firearms, contraband, what? Oh I get it. You mean, “No Dogs.” As in “Don’t bring your dogs in my place.” Yup.

Truss reveals the sins of the grammatically-challenged with great humor. She informs us that the ellipsis (the three dots I used up there in that first paragraph) is the black hole of punctuation. She explains why the dash - the less formal cousin of the semi-colon - has fallen into favor, unfortunately, with American writers. She lashes out at the series comma crowd for taking themselves so seriously. She admits that “if you study hyphens too closely, you will surely go mad.” And how.

The grammar geek in me laughs out loud at her attitude. Here’s just a taste: “The big final rule for the comma is one that you won’t find in any books. It is quite easy to remember, however. The rule is: don’t use commas like a stupid person. I mean it. Two particular stupid uses of the comma are proliferating and need to be noted. One is the comma memorably described as the ‘yob’s comma.’ The yob’s comma, of course, has no syntactical value. It is the equivalent of a fuddled gasp for breath, as the poor writer marshals his battered thoughts. For example: The society decided not to prosecute the owners of the Windsor Safari Park, where animals, have allegedly been fed live to snakes and lions, on legal advice. The comma after animals is not only ungrammatical and intrusive, but throws the end of the sentence into complete semantic chaos.”

And, of course, there is the title of the book which is based on a joke about a panda that “eats shoots and leaves” (as in bamboo shoots) not “eats, shoots and leaves.”

Truss says it’s an exciting time for the written word but she despairs over the *laissez-faire* attitude toward punctuation and proper grammar in emails and on the internet. “Language is adapting to the ascendent medium, which happens to be the most immediate, universal and democratic medium that has ever existed. Yet, by tragic historical coincidence a period of abysmal undereducating in literacy has coincided with the new medium. People who don’t know their apostrophe from their elbow are positively invited to disseminate their writings to anyone on the planet.”

So true. And we read over the mistakes, forgive our friends of their trespassing clauses in emails or blogs because we assume they’d correct it were it ever to make it to print in a book. But what kind of an example are we setting? I couldn’t get away with that sort of laziness if I were balancing my checkbook and just happened to add a couple of commas and extra zeros to that \$100 left in my savings. Accountants would revolt the world over. I’d be in jail with Martha Stewart.

My point (and hers): respect the rules. You don’t have to be an expert but it’d be nice if we could avoid encounters with a pack of wild pandas aiming their AK-47s at us after a quick meal at the Bamboo Bistro all because someone put a comma behind the word “Eats”.

8. Oracle Night, Paul Auster

“Several months into his recovery from a near-fatal illness, novelist Sidney Orr enters a stationery shop in Brooklyn and buys a blue notebook. It is September 18, 1982, and for the next nine days Orr lives under the spell of this blank book, trapped inside a world of eerie premonitions and bewildering events that threaten to destroy his marriage and undermine his faith in reality.”

That’s the two-sentence description of *Oracle Night*, and it was enough for me to take my friend up on his recommendation to read it.

Once Sidney buys the notebooks, he begins writing a story about a man who, upon having a near-death experience, walks away from his life and begins a new one in Kansas City. Nick Bowen, Orr’s protagonist, finds work with a man who lives in an underground warehouse that’s filled with phonebooks. The man is using the phonebooks to create a catalogue of people, a census-sized who’s-who.

Sidney’s friend John, who has used the very same blue notebooks in the past, warns Sidney that things could get weird if he continues to use the books. John tells him that the blue notebooks “are very friendly, but they can also be cruel, and you have to watch that you don’t get lost in them.”

Which is what Sidney does. As he writes, it's as if he literally vanishes. And his wife begins to behave secretively. And the stationery store suddenly closes down. And so on.

And thus you have a novel within a novel to follow -- the *Oracle Night* you're actually reading and the *Oracle Night* Sidney is writing. It's great fun and it's almost like being in a ghost story what with all the creepy twists and turns. I'm not a big fan of footnotes in novels but Auster uses them to provide backstory and reveal Sidney's insecurities. I wasn't entirely satisfied by *Oracle Night's* ending but the rest of the book was like being in a funhouse with all of those crazy mirrors distorting images and reality. And I liked it enough to pick up a few of Auster's other novels.

9. The Perfect Mile, Neal Bascomb

So, it's the morning of May 1, 2004 which happens to be the day before the Flying Pig Marathon which I happen to be signed up for on a two-person relay team which happens to mean I will be running 12 miles the next day. I'm alone at the track in Fort Thomas, KY. I've got two pairs of running shoes, my orthotics, a knee brace, and a whole lot of Irish stubbornness convincing me that I'm going to step onto that track and not feel pain climbing from the outside of my knee all the way up to my hip. Two days prior, I received word that I had a meniscus tear but the doc said I could run if I wanted to. Surgery wasn't going to happen until the end of May anyway.

I take three steps on the track and start limping. Not a good sign. Maybe it's the shoes, I say to myself. I change shoes, back to the old trusty pair I had trained in, a little worn down but definitely comfortable and right for my feet. Six more strides and I'm limping. Okay, if I can make it at least once around the track without limping, surely I can make it 12 miles tomorrow. I slip on the knee brace and hobble around the loop once. At this point, I remember the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. If I'd been a horse someone would have found the shotgun to put me out of my misery. I packed up my shoes and my brace. No half-marathon for me. It about killed me to give up. It's not something I'm very good at but sometimes the body doesn't cooperate. And for good reason. Turns out the meniscus wasn't the only thing that was torn. Surgery later that month showed more damage in more areas.

While I was recovering, I figured if I couldn't run I could at least read about running so I picked up *The Perfect Mile*. My running pals thought I was crazy. "How can you read about running when you can't do it? Doesn't that drive you nuts?" Relax, people. It's not like I'm some elite gazelle setting world records out there. I'm just a regular, middle-of-the-pack runner. Which makes it all the more fun to read about the real deal, the three athletes who set out to achieve the four-minute mile.

Way back when, before steroids, Pilates classes, and recovery drinks, the four-minute mile was the holy grail. In 1952, three world-class runners - Roger Bannister from England, John Landy from Australia, and Wes Santee from the US - set out to break the barrier. Bannister was the first to set the record with a 3:58:8. Eventually, all three broke the four-minute mark but Bannister carries the "perfect mile" banner in the history books. What was most interesting about the book was how the athletes trained and what sacrifices they made to break the record. Remember, this is 1952 so these fellas weren't exactly wearing the most technologically-advanced shoes. They weren't carbing up or feeding their faces with the latest hard-body concoctions. They weren't living off endorsements or corporate sponsorships. In fact, Bannister was a medical student, Landy was starting a family, and Santee was working several jobs. Not nearly as posh a life as some of today's elite athletes have. They were three regular guys with a dream.

Reading about these three while I was nursing my little injury made me realize just how little, indeed, my injury was. And just how much training, discipline, and sacrifice it requires to become an elite athlete. Even if you prefer sitting to running, there's something in this story for you. It's a grand reminder of the strength and endurance of the human spirit.

10. The Working Poor: Invisible in America, David Shipler

“This is an absolute must-read and it is one of the best works on the multiple, systemic issues the working poor face in trying to climb out of poverty. It is an indictment of our current culture that people who are willing to work full-time jobs still struggle to keep the lights on. Lest anyone think this is a bleeding-heart treatise, Shipler has no problem pointing out when individuals are at fault. Yet, he reserves his harshest criticisms for our national policies and priorities.”

-Dave Purcell

It wouldn't be a 2004 booklist without a politically-minded recommendation. And since I haven't finished *America* yet, I asked Dave to share his favorite in this tenth spot. And it's really not a political book as much as it is a true story about a slice of the American pie we tend to ignore.

Shipler is a former foreign correspondent for The New York Times and author of the Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land*. In 1997, he wrote *A Country of Strangers: Blacks and Whites in America*. In *The Working Poor*, Shipler turns his attention to the “forgotten America” where “millions live in the shadow of prosperity, in the twilight between poverty and well-being.”

Since this is on my reading list for 2005, I'm borrowing from other reviews of the book.

From the Introduction:

“Most of the people I write about in this book do not have the luxury of rage. They are caught in exhausting struggles. Their wages do not lift them far enough from poverty to improve their lives, and their lives, in turn, hold them back. The term by which they are usually described, ‘working poor,’ should be an oxymoron. Nobody who works hard should be poor in America.”

And this from Amazon:

The Working Poor examines the “forgotten America” where “millions live in the shadow of prosperity, in the twilight between poverty and well-being.” These are citizens for whom the American Dream is out of reach despite their willingness to work hard. Struggling to simply survive, they live so close to the edge of poverty that a minor obstacle, such as a car breakdown or a temporary illness, can lead to a downward financial spiral that can prove impossible to reverse. David Shipler interviewed many such working people for this book and his profiles offer an intimate look at what it is like to be trapped in a cycle of dead-end jobs without benefits or opportunities for advancement. He shows how some negotiate a broken welfare system that is designed to help yet often does not, while others proudly refuse any sort of government assistance, even to their detriment. Still others have no idea that help is available at all.

“As a culture, the United States is not quite sure about the causes of poverty, and is therefore uncertain about the solutions,” he writes. Though he details many ways in which current assistance programs could be more effective and rational, he does not believe that government alone, nor any other single variable, can solve the problem. Instead, a combination of things are required, beginning with the political will needed to create a relief system “that recognizes both the society's obligation through government and business, and the individual's obligation through labor and family.” He does propose some specific steps in the right direction such as altering the current wage structure, creating more vocational programs (in both the public and private sectors), developing a fairer way to distribute school funding, and implementing basic national health care.

As David K. Shipler makes clear in this powerful, humane study, the invisible poor are engaged in the activity most respected in American ideology—hard, honest work. But their version of the American Dream is a nightmare: low-paying, dead-end jobs; the profound failure of government to improve upon decaying housing, health care, and education; the failure of families to break the patterns of child abuse and substance abuse. Shipler exposes the interlocking problems by taking us into the sorrowful, infuriating, courageous lives of the poor—white and black, Asian and Latino, citizens and immigrants. We encounter them every day, for they do jobs essential to the American economy.

This impassioned book not only dissects the problems, but makes pointed, informed recommendations for change. It is a book that stands to make a difference.

TOP 10 BOOKS OF 2005

1. *Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini

Khaled had me at chapter one and kept me stunned until the end. Okay, I admit that there were a few times when the plot twists seemed a little too convenient but I took the bait willingly. Whenever those surprise turns came, I'd think, "Yes, of course! This has to be the way it is. It could be written no other way." I also admired the fact that Hosseini created such a remarkable book with a narrator that, at times, was incredibly unlikable.

This epic tale of two friends, of the father-son bond, of class differences, and mostly, of the betrayals that occur inside friendships takes us to Afghanistan and the United States. Amir is the wealthy son of Baba. Hassan is the son of Baba's servant and Amir's dearest friend until a brutal incident permanently changes their friendship. It is Amir who is haunted by guilt and his past, even after leaving his hometown Kabul for sunny California. When he finally has the chance to right the wrong, he...well, I can't tell you that part. The philosophical underpinnings of the story can be summed up in something Amir says on page 202: "There is only what you do and what you don't do."

And let's just say there is a lot Amir does NOT do for Hassan.

There is much to love about *The Kite Runner* and one of the things I loved best was that I instantly felt I was reading a classic. No post-modern snark here. No attempts to break all the cardinal rules of novel writing like Dave Eggers, the author I love to hate. Hosseini followed rules that some of the greats like Tolstoy and Dickens and Austen and Fitzgerald pioneered. It all felt old-fashioned. The structure, the language, the characterization, the startling plot twists. I loved it!

There is also much to respect about the author of this wonderful book. First off, it's a debut novel. Impressive. Second, it's not every writer who can create a narrator who makes objectionable decisions, and still keep the reader's attention. Third, Hosseini introduces a beautiful portrait of pre-revolutionary Afghanistan in the 1970s, of opulent architecture, rich history, and warm-hearted people racing with kites in the streets. It seemed a far cry from the city many Americans would rather not admit we're bombing the heck out of these days. (Side note – I'm not saying we shouldn't have gone after Osama after 9/11 or that the Taliban are a bunch of Care Bears, I'm just saying war is ugly, and lives and culture and history are lost in war).

Here, on page one, is a beautiful line about the past: "That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years." Indeed.

2. *Family Pictures*, Sue Miller

I've become a Sue Miller devotee. Miller has surpassed my put-me-on-a-desert-island-with-their-books authors likes Joyce Carol Oates (her early stuff), Amy Hempel, Alice McDermott, and Tolstoy ... almost. Not only did I read *Family Pictures*, I re-read it. In the same year. Maybe it was the fact that it included a big, sprawling imperfect yet lovable family that, on one hand, was nothing like my own big, sprawling, imperfect family yet, on the other hand, was *something* like them. Maybe it was the tenderness with which Miller handled Randall, the autistic son and brother, and the family's varying reactions to Randall's behavior. Maybe it was Miller's ability to take a deep dive into each character's psyche without striking an off-key, melodramatic chord that so impressed me. All I know is I kept returning to passages in this book and saying to myself "Will I ever write something that incredible?!?!".

Speaking of incredible, Lainey is the wonderful if slightly eccentric mother of the Eberhardt clan. David, the father, is affable yet realistic in the way he lays out life's lessons for his children, of which there are

six. The novel spans 40 years and we are treated to several points of view – Lainey’s, David’s, Mack’s and Nina’s. However, Nina, one of the last three daughters to be born (the “last straws” as their father calls them, which makes more sense as the story evolves) bookends the novel with her perspective on how the family survived -- or didn’t -- and how they healed their hearts. Though we never hear from him directly, the core of the family is Randall, the third child born to the Eberhardts. What we as readers are treated to is a meandering journey into the family’s collective psyche.

Miller demonstrates so clearly what it’s like to be in a family where both good and bad things happen, where there is always love but that love might never be spoken of. She also reveals how, regardless of family bonds, we are all individuals who experience “the family” in different ways.

Let me share two of my favorite paragraphs, the first comes at the very beginning of the book, the second in the last chapter. Nina is the narrator in both:

“This is the way I remember it. But I’m wrong. That’s the way it is in a family, isn’t it? The stories get passed around, polished, embellished. Liddie’s version or Mack’s version changes as it becomes my version. And when I tell them, it’s not just that the events are different but they all mean something different too. Something I want them to mean. Or need them to. And of course, there’s also the factor of time. Of how your perspective, your way of telling the story – of seeing it – changes as time passes. As you change.

“I moved finally to the corner of the room where I’d stuck up my peculiar arrangement and looked again at all the images. And as I scanned them this time, I realized I was seeing them differently; not as alternative explanations of my family’s meaning, competing with each other for dominance; but as one of the puzzles in which you are given different elements and asked to guess their connection, how they all fit together. And out of the blue I understood that the family photograph held the answer. That it was really a portrait of a kind of reckless courage, a testament to the great loving carelessness at the heart of every family’s life, even ours. That each child represented such risk, such blind daring on its parents’ parts – such possibility for anguish and pain – that each one’s existence was a kind of miracle.

3. *The Shadow of the Wind*, Carlos Ruiz Zafon

This is the kind of book you need to be in the right mood to read. It’s more classic, less mindless beach read. Like *The Kite Runner*, the style and the plotline harkens back to an era where sprawling tales required the reader to suspend their disbelief a little more than what’s needed for a typical downtrodden woman-rises-from-the-ashes Oprah pick. It has something for everyone – gothic mystery, a little horror, romance, a landscape that would rival any great Western. No matter the genre you prefer, you won’t be disappointed. And the translation to English offers up some cute and even hilarious similes (snow is “God’s dandruff”; servants obey orders with “the efficiency of a body of well-trained insects”).

My fellow bookaholics Tom Baker and Sandy Becker recommended *The Shadow of the Wind* to me within in the same month. I respect their tastes so I was more than happy to bring it along with me on our Florida vacation. Which meant I read the least beach-y type of book on this list while I was on the beach. How’s that for ironic?

Here’s a snippet from *The Washington Post* book review: “The time is the 1950s; the place, Barcelona. Daniel Sempere, the son of a widowed bookstore owner, is 10 when he discovers a novel, *The Shadow of the Wind*, by Julián Carax. The novel is rare, the author obscure, and rumors tell of a horribly disfigured man who has been burning every copy he can find of Carax’s novels. The man calls himself Lain Coubert --the name of the devil in one of Carax’s novels. As he grows up, Daniel’s fascination with the mysterious Carax links him to a blind femme fatale, Clara Barceló; another fan, a leftist jack-of-all-trades, Fermín Romero de Torres; his best friend’s sister, the delectable Beatriz Aguilar; and, as he begins investigating the life and death of Carax, a cast of characters with secrets to hide. Officially, Carax’s dead body was dumped in an alley in 1936. But discrepancies in this story surface.

“As Daniel’s quest continues, frightening parallels between his own life and Carax’s begin to emerge. The

colorful cast of characters, the plot turns and the straining for effect only give the book the feel of paraliterature or the Hollywood version of a great 19th-century novel.”

Every book lover will sigh lovingly over the passage when Daniel’s father is taking him to The Cemetery of Forgotten Books where Daniel finds the rare Carax novel: “Every book, every volume you see here, has a soul. The soul of the person who wrote it and of those who read it and lived and dreamed with it. Every time a book changes hands, every time someone runs his eyes down its pages, its spirit grows and strengthens.”

Commence sighing.

4. *Patron Saint of Liars*, Ann Patchett

This was the first book I read in 2005 and it was a good way to start off a good year of reading. Rose suddenly leaves her husband and drives from California to Habit, Kentucky to live at St. Elizabeth’s while she’s pregnant. The home for pregnant women is populated with nervous teens half her age, many of them placed there to keep their secret from their family and community. Though not blood relatives, the women find common bonds in their situations, and create a makeshift family for the months they are there. But Rose is an outcast of sorts. She spends most of her time avoiding any thought of her “condition” while the other girls talk of babies and baby things endlessly. As the other girls plot how they will keep their children once they are born, Rose knows she will give hers away. Or so she thinks. Rose befriends the quirky but compassionate Sister Angeline who has been banished to kitchen duty at St. Elizabeth’s because she has a psychic knack for knowing if the women are going to have boys or girls, easy or complicated births, healthy or – in some cases – dead babies. Son, the groundskeeper, also hangs out in the kitchen with Rose and Evangeline, and becomes a lifeline of sorts for Rose. Midway through the story, we learn that Son was in the war. He talks of how “All the guys in our company thought we would know each other forever...we thought we would build our houses in the same towns and talk at night the way we talked now.” His war memory mirrors life at St. Elizabeth’s with its group of women soldiering through pregnancy, fighting the constant enemies of fear, loneliness, and the final truth of giving their children up for adoption.

Except for Rose. She ends up keeping her baby, Cecilia. And Rose marries Son, a man she doesn’t really love. The reader first hears Rose’s point of view, then Son’s, followed by Cecelia’s as she struggles to connect with her elusive mother.

What’s interesting to me is that Rose isn’t always likeable. She comes off a little cold, but then you’re not sure if it’s coldness or pure honesty. Patchett’s Rose also looks at the less-talked-about side of pregnancy and motherhood, the side that admits the fear attached to it, the way the body becomes another body altogether, the way the mother isn’t always so sure she wants to do this thing called motherhood. Patchett peppers the story with enough humor and light that it’s incredibly readable and memorable.

If you like Anne Tyler or Barbara Kingsolver’s early works, you’ll love this one.

5. *Small Island*, Andrea Levy

Eric Bruggeman, another book-loving friend of mine, recommended this one. Eric was in the sociology program with Dave, and his recommendations, while eclectic, always seem to have political, social or cultural undertones. *Small Island* fits the political and social bill, and I learned a piece of history I was unaware of – that Jamaicans fought with their British counterparts during World War II and that their American Allies brought their racist attitudes to the British Empire.

There’s a war within a war within a war in Levy’s novel, which, very deservedly, received the Orange Prize and the Whitbread Book of the Year Award.

The year is 1948. Jamaican Gilbert Joseph serves in the Royal Air Force (RAF) and meets Queenie, a woman whose own husband has gone off to a war post in India. When Gilbert returns to his native “small island” country, he finds it too small for him. But to return to England, he has to marry Hortense Roberts

— she's got enough money for his passage. The pair move in with Queenie Bligh, Gilbert's old friend, in a ramshackle room barely big enough to fit a bed (another "small island" for Gilbert).

Queenie's husband Bernard finally turns up and is less than amused at finding black immigrants in his house. Sounds like a pretty simple man versus man versus hatred and racism plot but Levy transforms the story into something beautiful, painful, and powerful. The story unfolds from four points of view – Gilbert, Queenie, Hortense, and Bernard. What we see that each narrator can't is how truth can be subjective and that we all are guilty of rationalizing situations.

The story might start slow for you but stick with it until you find Queenie and Gilbert in the movie theater. The scene here is written with more tension and emotion than I've ever felt watching some of the footage from the civil rights confrontations in Montgomery, Alabama. And the novel keeps picking up speed from there. Best of all, there is some flat-out hysterical dialogue and internal monologue in almost every chapter.

6. *Little Children*, Tom Perrotta

Suburban angst at its finest. This is *Desperate Housewives* before there was *Desperate Housewives*. And Perrotta's desperate suburbanites are far more compelling than the tv show. Of course, Dave would tell you that nothing could be more compelling than watching Eva Longoria strut around wearing nothing more than a pout and a t-shirt the size of a handkerchief.

In this version of the secrets of suburbia, we meet Sarah, an unhappy mother and wife whose husband is addicted Internet porn. There's also Todd, a stay-at-home dad known to neighborhood housewives as the Prom King. Todd is supposed to be taking the bar exam but instead opts – unbeknownst to his wife – for football games with his guy friends and an affair with Sarah. There's also Mary Ann, who gives DH's Brie a run for her money on being uptight. And then there's Ronnie, a pedophile whose return from prison throws the neighborhood into an uproar.

As you read the book, you wonder who acts more like children, the kids or the parents. Reviews call *Little Children* "compassionate satire." And Perrotta does treat his characters with empathy. There is plenty of regret, unfulfilled desire, and broken promises to keep you reading. It's like your high school prom all over. And you find yourself empathizing with Ronnie, one of the only characters truly trying to change and better himself instead of moaning about the mistakes or missed opportunities of his past.

7. *The Bright Forever*, Lee Martin

Let's give it up for an Ohio State professor! The author of *The Bright Forever* currently teaches creative writing at The Ohio State University and I had the pleasure of taking two writing workshops with him over the past two years. Martin is a quiet, unassuming guy. If you saw him walking down the street, you'd immediately think he was a math teacher or scientist or a veteran marathoner. After meeting him, it's clear he has a runner's mind – disciplined, calculating, driven. So it's all the more pleasurable when he tosses out a humorous zinger. It both surprised and delighted me that this seemingly serious guy teaching us about the importance of place and setting could be so danged funny in class. That same delighted surprise can be felt when reading *The Bright Forever*, Martin's second novel.

Written from multiple points of view, Martin pieces together one zinger of a tragedy. On a summer evening in rural Indiana, nine-year-old Katie Mackey rides her bicycle to the library and never comes home. Martin carefully lays out the mesmerizing plot, gradually peeling back the secrets held by those involved: Henry Dees, the reclusive math tutor who sometimes lurks in the Mackeys' house; Clare Mains, the widow shunned for remarrying out of loneliness; her husband, Raymond R., whose drug binges and blackouts occupy stretches of unaccounted-for time; Katie's parents, tortured by their own pasta; and Katie's brother, 17-year-old Gilley, who seizes the chance to gain his father's approval by seeking revenge on the person who killed Katie.

Martin's novel is hard to put down. In some ways, it reminded me of *That Night*, one of my all-time favorite novels (by Alice McDermott). I'd say more but I don't want to give it all away.

8. *God's Politics, Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, Jim Wallis

Before anyone writes this off as just another screed or book-long complaint from a bleeding-heart liberal, I can assure you that Jim Wallis presents one of the more fair and balanced treatises on our current religious-political climate than many others. Regardless of which side you're on, Wallis makes you think. Wallis's arguments come from the heart and also from a social justice angle – something that sometimes gets lost in all of the rhetoric about who's right and who's wrong in our world. Wallis reminds all of us that Jesus mentions helping the poor in the bible more than he mentions anything else. "God isn't a Republican or Democrat and neither party can claim him for their very own. God Bless America is found nowhere in the Bible," Wallis explains.

Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine, offers up what he sees as the true mission of Christianity -- righting social ills and working for peace regardless of our political affiliations. As Wallis reminds us, Jesus teaches us to see the beam in our own eye, and not just the mote in our adversary's eye. Which means self-reflection. Which means listening to opposing viewpoints. Which means dialogue with others. All of which is lacking in our divided country right now.

God's Politics is a sermon worth listening to no matter your religious or political affiliation.

9. *Unfinished Season*, Ward Just

This book had been sitting on my list unread and then Kevin Boyle, a friend at work, recommended it. The opening scene of Wils Ravan, the narrator, watching his father ice skate, was so beautiful and touching, I would have been satisfied if that had been the entire novel.

Just's 14th novel could be written off as just another coming of age tale but it's so much more and written so much better. Wils is 19 and about to graduate from high school but he's telling the story forty years later so there's plenty of room for analysis and self-reflection about what happened during that summer in the 1950s. And it seems that, even as an older man, Wils still can't make sense of it. During that summer, his parents' marriage has seen better days and his father is obsessed with defeating the union organizers who are on strike at his printing factory. Wils takes a job as a copy boy at a Chicago tabloid where he's exposed to the kind of corruption and yellow journalism I learned about when I was studying journalism at Ohio U. On the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum, Wils attends debutante parties on the North Shore and meets Aurora Brule, the daughter of an eccentric psychiatrist, Jack Brule. Aurora and Wils fall in love while the past secrets that Jack has been hiding are exposed, the consequences of which are tragic. This is one time where the past coming back to haunt the characters isn't a good thing at all.

What I liked most about this story was its underlying (actually, sometimes it was pretty flagrant) focus on issues of class and power. Wils's well-to-do father is struggling against the union, and Wils is caught between the working-class world of his job and the debutante nightlife. And this is why Just's novel is so much more than a typical boy-meets-girl-and-enters-adulthood read. It's clear the men Wils meets at the tabloid live remarkably different lives than Wils's North Shore friends. And it's clear that the newspaper men, who ultimately run across the Brules and others, have no sympathy for the tragedies that happen to the privileged class.

Just was a former journalist at *The Washington Post*. And since most writers "write what they know," one has to wonder if some of Wil's experiences were actually some of Just's past.

10A. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicles*, Haruki Murakami

Two books tied for 10th best. I couldn't decide. And *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicles* will not be the book for everyone. It's a little weird, a little long, and a lot of fun. But you have to enjoy speculative, almost fantastical fiction. You have to enjoy not ever truly understanding everything about the story. You have to allow yourself to believe that Toru Okada climbs down into that dark, dried up well and crosses over to an alternate reality. Otherwise, you'll never make it past page 400.

You could say Toru Okada is having a bad week when we meet him. He has no job, his cat has disappeared, and then his wife doesn't come home from work. As he searches for his cat and his wife, he

meets folks who exemplify the word bizarre – there are two psychic sisters, an odd teenager, an old soldier who witnessed brutal torture during World War II, and a few others.

Part mystery, part meta-fiction, part post-modern drama, Murakami weaves a strange tale of loss, accountability, and history. We are taken to the bottom of the well, to Siberia, and to Japan's occupation of Manchuria in the past. So much happens, it's difficult to summarize. But if you're willing to go along for a ride that can be as dizzying as a spin on the Tilt-A-Whirl, you won't be disappointed. Just don't expect to have all the answers at the end.

10B. *Curious Dog in the Incident of the Nighttime*, Mark Haddon

I read this in two evenings. It's a quick read but that doesn't mean it's easy or light. Christopher Boone, the 15-year-old narrator, lets the reader step inside his autistic thoughts. Many of which include math problems, repetition, and detail that most other characters would never bother with. Christopher finds a dead poodle in his neighbor's yard and is falsely accused of the crime. However he decides to track down the killer, despite his father's warning not to get involved. As the mystery leads him to the secrets of his parents' broken marriage, he begins to navigate the social and emotional complexities of the world that stereotypically remain closed to an autistic person.

Christopher is an odd duck, that's for sure. But you have so much sympathy for what this kid is going through. He is so literal-minded it makes you think about how many of us talk in confusing, cryptic metaphors. I also have to love the character development – for Christopher, "4 yellow cars in a row made it a Black Day, which is a day when I don't speak to anyone and sit on my own reading books and don't eat my lunch and Take No Risks." A boy after my own heart. Little known fact about Amy – if I have a notso-fun night in a particular outfit, you will not be seeing that outfit anymore. And who doesn't make wishes every time they pass under a train trestle when a train is moving across the tracks.

Though Christopher insists, "This will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them," the novel is filled with laugh-out-loud humor.

This was one time I didn't mind the author breaking some of the typical plot structure conventions. It only added to the story's flavor.

Some others to consider:

The classic I read this year: *Little Women*

Best Short Story Collection: *Dog of the Marriage*, Amy Hempel

Cheesy Beach Read: *Eleven on Top*, Janet Evanovich

Biggest Clunker: *My Sister's Keeper*, Jodi Picoult (don't get me started on this one!)

TOP 10 BOOKS OF 2006

1. *Straight Man*, Richard Russo

I was introduced to the Wonderful World of Russo through his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Empire Falls*. From there, I moved on to *Nobody's Fool*, and have *Mohawk* in my reading bullpen right now. But Russo's *Straight Man* might end up being my favorite of his, and certainly is my favorite read of the year. It's one of those rarest of rare novels – one that makes you laugh loud and laugh often.

Maybe it's the fact that my husband is in academia right now, and the novel is the story of academic politics in a rural Pennsylvania college town. Maybe it's because I could turn to Dave and read to him some hilarious scene, and he'd confirm that "yep, that's the way it works" in the ivory tower. Or maybe it's nothing more than the daffy-looking duck on the book cover. Ducks fall into the penguin category for me. They're goofy, scatter-brained, the Lucille Balls of the animal kingdom, and I wanted to know how the duck factored into this straight man's punchline. Because, obviously, when the title of the novel is "Straight Man," someone or some duck is getting a pie in the face.

That someone is William Henry Devereaux, Jr., the reluctant chairman of West Central Pennsylvania State University's English department. Here's a character with more than a few problems on his hands. The entire English department is at war, professors are nervously awaiting tenure in this underfunded college, Henry is having a mid-life crisis, and he can't seem to pee regularly anymore. In the course of a single uproarious week, Devereaux has his nose skewered by an angry colleague's spiral notebook, imagines his wife having an affair with the dean, wonders if a young adjunct is trying to seduce him, wonders if a needy student is stalking him, and then threatens (jokingly but is taken seriously by everyone else) to execute the goose on local television if his department doesn't receive their budget demands. The thing is, Hank causes most of his own problems and absurdity, which makes him all the more comical.

Russo's charm is that, by page one, he gives us characters (better described by one reviewer as lovable losers) whom we feel we've known forever. There's no warming up to them. They arrive fully baked and ready for a pleasurable devouring. They're real people with real problems – no matter how petty or outlandish you judge these problems to be - in real settings. In fact, there were times I compared a few of the characters to people I've worked with before. They're just that familiar. But in a good way. As Russo himself said in an interview: "In general, I think people like having their experience of life validated; they like to think they count and they're glad you've noticed them, even if you get things wrong."

I like Russo, too, because he takes his time. His tone and pace match the lazy-town locales he selects. No first-world worries on these pages, no plots with au pairs sleeping on the job or characters who debate about which wine best accompanies the *foi gras* (duck liver pun intended, even though I'm firmly against the practice of eating the stuff).

And this story is not all guffaws and giggles. The secondary thread about Hank's relationships with his father, his wife, and his daughter make for touching – even semi-dark – reading. But I've always argued that the best writing is tragi-comic. Russo strikes the perfect balance. In a 2004 Commencement Address at Colby College, the author said: "Indeed, the inability to laugh, at the world and at ourselves, is a sign, at least to my way of thinking, of mental illness."

I'm so glad Russo has the gift to keep us all sane.

2A. *Wish You Were Here*, Stewart O'Nan

2B. *Everyday People*, Stewart O'Nan

O'Nan was my discovery of 2006. His name had been on my list for awhile but I kept ignoring it, saying I'd get to the guy who was selected by [Granta](#) as one of America's Best Young Novelists when I had time to read a...well... "young" author. Color me envious of his early success. Or color me skeptical of anyone touted as the next best thing since Dave Eggers or David Foster Wallace or Jonathan Safran Foer, all of whom write postmodern meta-fiction that makes me want to set libraries on fire just for carrying their books.

Dave can attest to the Wallace Incident of 1996 whereupon I threw his 1,000-plus page [Infinite Jest](#) across the room in a fit of disgust after just 50 pages. We didn't need a repeat of that petulant scene. So, being noncommittal about it, I checked O'Nan's *Wish You Were Here* out of the library, just in case I needed to return it unfinished and *then* set the library on fire.*

I started and finished *Wish You Were Here* on the Oregon Trail and liked it so much, I picked up *Everyday People* at Powell's Books in Portland for the trip home.

Wish You Were Here is an appropriate vacation read since it takes place at the Maxwell family's summer vacation cottage in Chautauqua, NY. Emily Maxwell gathers her family there one time before she sells the place. Her husband, Henry, has been dead a year now, and she's ready to let the lakeside retreat go (sort of). Arlene, her stoic, overly practical sister-in-law isn't so game on selling. Daughter Meg, a recovering alcoholic recently separated from her husband, brings her children from Detroit along with her past struggles to understand her mother. Emily's son, Ken, who has quit his job and mortgaged his future to pursue photography, is accompanied by his children and his wife, Lisa, who looks forward to the day the home and these family vacations are ancient history.

Chapter by chapter, the eight characters (including the children) take turns unloading memories and emotional baggage, as well as, for some of them, regret that the cottage (and their past) are slipping away. The result is a novel where you side with one character for a couple of chapters and then turn your empathy toward another.

O'Nan's descriptions of place and action are masterful in their simplicity, yet he plumbs the depths of each character's heart to uncover the family turmoil left after Henry's wake – everyone searching for their new role in a family without a father. When my dad passed away, a wise friend told me that my family would be fundamentally changed by the loss, not in a terrible way but in a way that each family member would experience differently. O'Nan brings this reality to bear in his story without melodrama and without making the reading too melancholy (he is of Irish descent so it would be easy to get maudlin, it's in his DNA, after all).

After leaving the tranquil, white middle class setting of upstate New York in *Wish You Were Here*, I headed to the black working class community of East Liberty, Pennsylvania in O'Nan's *Everyday People*, which I purchased at the best bookstore ever, Powell's Books, in Portland, OR. Here's a writer who writes as authentically about well-off white people as he writes about a block-full of neighbors who are dodging gunfire and struggling to pay the bills.

Like *Wish You Were Here*, *Everyday People* takes places over the course of a week, and O'Nan reminds us that a lot happens behind closed doors in seven day's time. At the center of the novel is Chris "Crest" Tolbert, an 18-year-old graffiti artist left paralyzed and haunted by the loss of his best friend after a recent accident on a highway overpass. Also in the Tolbert home is Chris's brother Eugene, an ex-con who is trying to stay straight, their hard-working mother, and his father, Harold, who must choose between his love for his family and his newfound love for a gay man down the block. From there, O'Nan opens doors throughout the neighborhood to reveal the lives of a dozen friends and family, and how these lives intersect, for better and worse.

Again, the chapters are written from each character's point of view, an incredible feat, considering each voice is so real and fully drawn. Never do you get the feeling O'Nan cheated a character or left him or her half-rendered. O'Nan could have easily compromised his characters by relying on negative stereotypes reinforced (wrongly) by the media – the gangsta teens, the welfare moms, the nearly homeless. Instead, he chooses to show real characters dealing with real issues – how to move through loss and love and make the right choices – no matter your color of skin, no matter your zip code.

If you enjoyed the movie, "Crash", you'll love *Everyday People*.

***Note:** All aforementioned comments about me setting libraries on fire are merely for dramatic effect. No need to alert Homeland Security.

3. *Beloved*, Toni Morrison

Early in the year, the *New York Times* 'Book Review' editor sent out a short letter to a few hundred prominent writers, critics, editors and other literati, asking them to identify "the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years." *Beloved* was #1 on the list. It started a firestorm among...well...among anyone paying attention to such lists. So, I thought it was high time to re-read it. I first cracked *Beloved*'s cover in a Women's Literature course at Ohio U in 1988. I think I enjoyed it more in the re-reading than I did in class. If you haven't read it, you should. If you don't know the plot, find out what it's about. If you're in a predominantly female book group, this will make a great choice for 2007. If you're a fan of Oprah, you know she loves this one. If you're a mother, pick it up. If you like ghost stories, it's for you. If you need to remind yourself how awful slavery was (and still is in the idea of anyone wielding absolute power over anyone else), check it out of the library. If you've already read it, it'll do you some good to return to it. 'Nuff said.

4. *After This*, Alice McDermott

Alice McDermott is one of the authors who dominates my list any year she produces a novel. She made it with *Charming Billy* and with *Child of My Heart*. Had I been making lists when I read *That Night, At Weddings and Wakes*, and *A Bigamist's Daughter* she would have made it then, too. It's safe to say that she takes up prime real estate on my bookshelves.

Consider these lines:

Despite the heat, there was a white pillbox pinned to the back of her head. She wore a floral shirtwaist dress and the flesh beneath her arm moved like a pink hammock filled with something heavy.

"Who," he asked with his finger in the air, "who do you think you'll have on your side when your mother and I are gone? Who do you think you'll be able to turn to when you're as old as I am and there's something you need – a buck or two, a piece of advice, maybe just someone you can ask, Remember when? Your friends? Your Little League team?" Their father waved his broad hand. "They'll be scattered to the four winds." He paused, as if waiting for them to speak. And then he said, "Your family, that's who you'll have. If you're lucky. Your two sisters. Each other. That's who you'll have."

I've said before that no one establishes physical and emotional place as well as McDermott. If you only read these lines, you might guess that the novel is set in the post-war 50s (pillbox hat, shirtwaist dress), and there's a strong father who knows how to lay down a guilt trip, which may lead you to guess we're dealing with another one of McDermott's Irish Catholic families here. You'd be correct on both accounts.

In *After This*, we meet the Keanes as the world is changing from the innocent 50s to the social and political upheavals of the 60s and 70s. The Keane children fare differently during these decades: quiet Jacob heads to Vietnam as his brother Michael and sister Annie take detours through the sexual revolution. Clare, the youngest, finds herself caring for her aging parents and hanging on to innocent (and heartbreaking) ideal that nothing about her family has to change even when the rest of the world is. Parents John and Mary Keane continue to rely on their Catholic faith to stabilize their marriage as the family encounters tragic loss, innocent mistakes (Clare gets pregnant), and regret over missed opportunities. And then there is Pauline, Mary's long-suffering, peevish friend whom most of the family tolerates at best.

As she reveals the interior of the Keane's family dynamic, the title rings in the reader's mind – what will they do *after this*, how will they manager after this thing that has happened? And isn't that one of the most universal of all questions we ask about people after they've encountered a windfall or a downfall? What comes after this?

Each chapter could be a complete story – or the starting point of another novel – in and of itself. She takes the small moments in life – a trip to the world's fair, a picnic on the beach, a Sunday morning mass – and makes them mammoth. It's like the world stops and sighs and says "Yes, that's it. I get it now." The book begins with a woman exiting church and ends with a woman entering church, a symbol for the faith that embraces and encloses the family. Here's the thing about Alice: the power is in the quietude, in the

unwritten and unsaid. She bravely lets you fill in the blanks. I hope there is much much more from McDermott after this.

5. *Thread of Grace*, Mary Doria Russel

Recommended by Sandy Becker, a co-worker and avid reader with impeccable taste, I decided this would be a great book to read and discuss with my mom and sisters. Sandy's recommendation didn't let any of us down, and we all learned about a forgotten piece of World War II in the process.

It's been awhile since I've read a novel where I needed to refer to the list of characters constantly. Not because Russel doesn't do her job in making the characters distinct, but because there are so many people and plots to follow. War is complicated so it only stands to reason that the storyline would be equally complex. Action-packed from page one, the reader is treated to harrowing escapes, ambushes, disguised getaways, and heroic rescues.

Set in Italy during the final days of World War II, Russel tells the story of the network of Italian citizens who saved the lives of 43,000 Jews. We begin following 14-year-old Claudette Blum and her father as they trek with thousands of other Jewish refugees over the Alps to Italy, where they hope to find safety. The Blums soon discover that Italy is anything but peaceful. With the help of local Italians, they all go into hiding to survive. From here, the spotlight shifts to Renzo Leoni, a WWI veteran with a bad knee and an even worse drinking problem. Renzo is both hero and fool, tragic and comic, Don Quixote and Groucho Marx. He drives the story and dons many disguises to save the day for others while also saving himself, a Jew and a leader of Italy's partisans. Through Renzo, we meet a German defector who spent time as a "doctor" (read: monster and murderer) in the concentration camps, and is now seeking absolution. We meet a sympathizing priest, a few protective Italian mothers who fight the good fight, and plenty of Nazis who make us cringe.

In Shakespearan fashion, everyone is connected to everyone and, eventually, there's a big scene where the truth is revealed for all characters. There's a lot to learn here and a lot of ethical questions to consider. If you had been there, would your door have opened to the Jewish refugees, even if it put you in harm's way? Would you have gone with the partisans or followed Italy's then-crumbling party line? It's tempting to think we would have all done the right thing – that we would have become the thread of grace.

6. *East of the Mountains*, David Guterson

One of the first books I read for the year, it seemed appropriate that several months later we vacationed in the very area of Oregon where the story takes place. The premise is simple: Ben Givens has been diagnosed with terminal cancer and takes one last journey through the Cascade Range before he commits suicide. After receiving his diagnosis, this retired heart surgeon decides to take matters into his own hands and end his life on his own terms. He'll make it appear as though he died accidentally on his quail-hunting trip. So, he leaves a vague note about his trip for his daughter, and sets out with his two dogs for one last hunt. Mishaps and detours ensue, and Ben gets farther away from his goal. He meets a drifter who offers him advice and marijuana. He befriends a young couple that sends him into a reverie about he and his late wife. His dogs have a wicked encounter with a pack of wolfhounds, which forces Ben to leave the woods to find help for one of his injured dogs. And then he finds himself helping someone else in a run-down apple-picking camp.

Guterson gets away with a generous use of the flashback, something most writers are taught to use sparingly. But, in the case of Ben, it works. Who wouldn't be reflecting on their life at the very moment they're contemplating ending it? Regardless of your stance on assisted suicide in the face of terminal illness, you'll find yourself pulling for Ben, empathizing with him, and understanding why he wants to end his life (to save his family from the indignities and pain that awaits him, to save himself from the fear he's already experiencing) and why he can't. You'll also find yourself questioning whether you believe Ben was all that serious about his plan in the first place.

Symbolism and metaphor abound in this story, and it'd be a provocative selection for reading groups. Some may find it entirely cliché. Others may look beyond that and focus on the more interesting question – is it ever right to play god, especially in the face of terminal cancer? One reviewer pointed out that Christian

theology holds that, at the second coming, Christ will arrive from the east. Here, east is a symbol of the second coming of hope, and that life is as mysterious as the faith we have in it.

7. *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion

I read this two months after my dad passed away. It was my futile attempt to find some answers to the aforementioned question the Keane family struggles with: “what do we do after this?” (See #5). This isn’t a self-help book or a step-by-step approach to grieving. It’s more of a philosophical, stream-of-conscious portrait of the year in the life of a widow. Didion is not afraid to tell readers she talks out loud to a husband who isn’t there, that she expects him to walk back in the door and sit down for dinner, that she wonders if she can magically reverse the sequence of events the day he had a massive heart attack at home and bring him back to life. Didion reminds us that magical thinking isn’t child’s play. Adults are fully capable of suspending reality and opting for fantasy to get them through the day.

Didion also digs into the myth that there is magical moment when you’re supposed to dust yourself off and “move on.” Grief has a mind of its own. I’ve decided grief is like a faucet. On most days, you can turn it on and off as needed, and it respects your wishes. But then there are those days when it leaks or drips, when it bursts at the most inconvenient time, or when it needs to be rigged with a towel or rubberband or wrench to catch the mess.

Sad stuff aside, at its center, the book is a love story. I thought many times of my own mom and dad. Like Didion and Dunne, my parents were almost never apart during their 40-plus years together. Their lives revolved around each other. How, then, do you all of the sudden, revolve alone? Didion makes it clear that it’s not easy. In her own story of life without her other half, she also reveals one of the truisms of our society: at a time when we most desperately need people, we find ourselves alone in our grief, left to figure it out on our own because even the most supportive friends and family aren’t able to truly understand our experience.

You’d think this kind of topic would have a limited audience but Didion’s book hung on the best-seller list for quite awhile. Perhaps it’s because she touches on a subject so universal, yet so incredibly private and personal, that every reader was hoping she’d provide the magical answer they’d been searching for as well.

8. *Novel*, George Singleton

Every year, there’s a book on my list with the “not for everyone” disclaimer. *Novel* would be it. I read an article about Singleton in *Poets & Writers* magazine. He seemed like a funny guy and the reporter seemed to think he wrote even funnier novels. An English professor Dave plays basketball with also mentioned he knew Singleton and was a fan of his work. All signs were pointing to Singleton being the [Charles Bukowski](#) for the 2000s. (For those unfamiliar with Bukowski, he was a hard-drinking-former-postal-worker-turned-writer who makes George Carlin sound like devout – and sober – priest.)

Might as well begin at the beginning so I picked up his first novel, sardonically titled *Novel*. Set in the town of Gruel, South Carolina, a man named Novel (his brother’s name is James; his sister’s is Joyce), decides to write his autobiography. As he struggles to recount his life story, he finds himself the star of a decades-old town secret. From there, we’ve got lots of Southern-fried craziness (exploitation of stereotypes for dramatic effect abound), lots of drinking, lots of art forgery, and plenty of scenes in pool rooms and motels to remind you we’re nowhere near a coastal, cosmopolitan city.

More than anything, this is a sarcastic send-up of the memoir, which, to be a blockbuster today, features dysfunctional families, nightmarish childhoods, bizarre people, and nearly unbelievable memories. Maybe *Novel* is where [James Frey](#), who lied to the world in *A Million Little Pieces*, got some of his ideas.

The thing that makes *Novel* my not-for-everyone selection of the year is that you won’t find a traditional plot here. Nor will you find many likeable characters – laughable, sure, but not really likeable. And you may only understand half of what’s going on beneath the gags. You have to leave your Serious Literary Reader Card in your wallet and remind yourself that it’s okay for a farce to be wrapped in a novel’s clothing. It’s like one of those stories told by someone who is laughing out loud the entire time they’re telling it while you’re not even able to muster up a chuckle. And then that person notices your non-response and says, “Trust me, you *had*

to be there. It was hysterical." *Novel* is that kind of book. I got a decent laugh from it but can see just as many readers asking, "Am I there yet?"

9. *Memory of Running*, Ron McLarty

If you liked [A Confederacy of Dunces](#), you'll find *The Memory of Running* a familiar, yet easier, read. Our hero here, Smithson Ide, is almost a little too sweet and likeable to compare to Dunces's Ignatius Reilly. However, similarities abound. Smithson is middle-aged, significantly overweight, and going nowhere in a dead-end job just like Ignatius. Yet, unlike Ignatius, Smithson is actually called to act after his parents die in a car crash and that his mentally-ill sister Bethany has also perished in California. Smithson retrieves his old Raleigh bicycle in the garage of his parents' East Coast home and begins a cross-country journey to reclaim his sister's body. Remember here that Smithson weighs nearly 300 pounds so this is a great advertisement for a Raleigh bike's durability.

From there, chapters move from past to present as Smithson simultaneously moves across the country and the landscape of his childhood memories. We learn of his sister's descent into madness and how he tried to protect her from herself and others. Smithy also bumps (okay, sometimes he even runs over them) into bizarre characters with stories stranger than his own.

Smithy is equal parts Ignatius, [Holden Caulfield](#), and even Huck Finn. At turns funny and heartbreaking, you can't help but hope Smithy reaches his destination in some satisfying way. The good news is, this is McLarty's debut effort. He's no spring chicken though. You may know McLarty as an award-winning actor who's appeared regularly on *The Practice*, *Law & Order*, and *Sex and the City*. I'm hoping his sophomore stint is as equally warm and charming.

10. *Death of a Salesman (audio)*, Arthur Miller

Arthur Miller described this as "the tragedy of a man who gave his life, or sold it, in pursuit of the American Dream." As relevant today as it was nearly 60 years ago, *Salesman* remains one of the classics in American theater, and, while thoroughly depressing, it was a treat to listen to this play during my daily commute. I even admit to sitting in the parking lot with the car idling to compose myself after listening to the end ... three times.

It's not like I didn't know what I was getting into. Most Americans are familiar with Willy Loman and his pursuit to be "well-liked." Most know he fails miserably and even in his final act in life, he desperately tries to prove his version of the American Dream a reality. It's a heartbreaker, this play. The material is not an uplifting-pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps tale of success. In stark contrast, Willy Loman is the poster child for what happens when the American Dream goes Nightmare.

Many think Miller was attempting to debunk the idea that the American Dream can ever be reality. Certainly, his character Willy was unable to see through his own illusions of the Dream. Willy's tragic flaw, of course, is in failing to question whether the dream (and his theory of being well-liked) is valid.

But when you've got no other reality to cling to, when you're living on borrowed pennies like Willy was, when you can't make ends meet and you don't want your kids to think you're a failure, is it so wrong to dream big? Is it so wrong to have delusions of grandeur? Isn't it human nature to want to be as successful as those rich folks across the street? Wasn't the American Dream created to be the benchmark of success?

There are plenty of Willys in the world who want to be well-liked or want to be seen as livin' the Dream. It's unfortunate that the Dream, in reality, is an unobtainable slice of America for so many. I'll end here, lest we get into a rousing political and ethical debate on the plight of America's working class.

Other Audio

The Mysteries of Glass, Sue Gee

The Thirteenth Tale, Diane Setterfield

For Your Consideration:

The classic I revisited: *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov

The Pulitzer I re-read: ***A Thousand Acres***, Jane Smiley
Best Short Story Collection: ***Music Through The Floor***, Eric Puchner
Easy Cheesy Read: ***Family Tree***, Carole Cadwalladr
Best Non-Fiction: ***Marley & Me***, John Grogan
Biggest Clunker: ***Black Swan Green***, David Mitchell (I bought into the hype and shouldn't have)

TOP 10 BOOKS OF 2007 - 2008

1. **Unaccustomed Earth**, Jhumpa Lahiri

I know, I know. You hate reading short stories blah, blah, blah. Get over it and read this collection. Maybe you read Lahiri's *The Namesake* and liked it. If you did, you'll like her short stories even more. I have a theory: some authors are better at the short form than the long form. Lahiri is a short form superstar. As Lahiri herself has said "Everything's a story, no matter how long or short." So, set aside your aversion to short stories or long stories and just read stories, whether they're 100 or 10,000 words. The good news for you novel snobs is that the eight stories in this collection are longer and more emotionally complex than anything Lahiri has written. You'll feel like you're getting the dramatic impact and story arc of a novel in each of the stories which deal with universal themes -- family, relationships, and, of course, home and hope. There is a trilogy of linked stories at the backend of the book that follow Hema and Kaushik -- not so much childhood friends but two people brought together by their parents' circumstances -- that are both beautiful and bittersweet. Lahiri wrote one of the stories in the trilogy ten years ago and never did anything with it until this collection. I love stuff like that -- there's comfort knowing a Pulitzer Prize winning author struggles with her rough drafts for years. At least it's a comfort to someone like me who spends three to four years on a short story.

My two favorites? The title story about Ruma, a young mother in Seattle who is visited by her widowed father. Ruma, thinking her father is lonely, is considering asking him to come live with her and her husband and son. Ironically, it is Ruma that is lonely. Little does she know that her father has befriended a Bengali woman and has taken up traveling with her throughout Europe. Lahiri is a pro at creating a father who is emotionally distant yet so lovable, and the scenes where Rumi's father is tending to his daughter's garden brought tears to my eyes.

My second favorite is "A Choice of Accommodations," the story of a husband's attempt to turn a friend's wedding into a romantic getaway weekend. It's a reversal of stereotypical roles here -- the wife is the hard-working doctor absorbed in her work and in herself with no time for romance. The husband is longing to create a romantic weekend, knowing his wife is slipping away from him. Yet, they're going to the wedding of a friend the husband had a crush on years ago. At the reception, he drinks to embarrassment and returns to his wife who left the reception early. The final scenes between the couple are equal parts tense, heartbreaking, and hopeful. The writing here is so exquisite and lush, I found myself reading paragraphs two or three times just because they were so impressive in their beauty. Lahiri's lyrical qualities make you feel like you're reading a classic yet the prose is so natural that it never feels old-fashioned in the "Tale of Two Cities" or "Wuthering Heights" sense. From a sense of place perspective, Lahiri focuses on a specific generation of Bengalis who immigrated to the United States in the 60s or 70s. In an interview in *Bookforum*, Lahiri offered her opinion of the terrain she covers as a writer: "Some bits and pieces are taken from my own parents and other parents that I knew growing up. And sometimes they're totally invented. The thing I took for granted when I was growing up is that I was living in a world within a world. It was a tight world, but I knew a lot of people and was privy to the whole spectrum of types and personalities and characters. To me they don't represent immigrants or anyone specific. They just represent the human condition."

2. **Mudbound**, Hillary Jordan (Awarded the 2006 Bellwether Prize for Fiction)

This story stuck with me long after I finished it, sort of like mud sticks to your shoes. I couldn't get rid of the scenes and the characters from Jordan's debut novel. Yes, this is her first. I can't even imagine what she has left in the creative tank after writing this but I'm looking forward to reading whatever she puts on the shelves.

City girl Laura McAllen marries country boy Henry in 1946 and Henry moves them to a dilapidated Mississippi Delta farmhouse. With the help of Florence Jackson – the black wife of one of the McAllen's sharecroppers – Laura does her best to make a ramshackle shed a home for her husband, their two daughters and her hateful, racist father-in-law, Pappy.

In the midst of their family struggles, two young men return from World War II to work the land. Jamie McAllen, Laura's brother-in-law, is charming and handsome but haunted by the war. Florence's son, Ronsel Jackson, comes home a war hero but quickly finds out that prejudice runs as heavy as the rains that frequently flood the Delta and his hero status is meaningless in the Jim Crow south. An unlikely friendship develops between the two young men and it is this friendship that rankles the town's KKK men, including Pappy. It is also this friendship that brings the novel to its sorrow-filled conclusion.

While the story starts out slow, sort of like slow-moving mud, it kicks in high gear near the end. I read the last 75 pages in one sitting. I think I would've kept reading even if the house had been on fire. This should be required reading for anyone who doesn't believe that the Jim Crow South was a brutal, awful place and a terrible mark on the history of our country. For those who think the scars of racism are gone just because we've elected a black president, I suggest you read *Mudbound*. Laws and civil rights and all sorts of social structures and cultural advances might make us all feel that racism no longer exists but Jordan makes it clear that you can't wipe away the color of your skin and all the history that goes with it, just like you can't clean away a mudslide.

p.s. The Bellwether Prize for Fiction is awarded biennially to a first literary novel that addresses issues of social injustice.

3. Then We Came to the End, Joshua Ferris

Okay, so my number two pick was mucho serious-o. After a read like that, it was time for something a little lighter. And we happened to be going on vacation to Boulder, Colorado so I needed a good read for the plane. My good friend Carole Singleton had recommended *Then We Came to the End* for its thighslapping, hooting-and-hollering qualities about a year ago. Trouble was, it's about working in an advertising and marketing agency. At the time she had recommended it, I was working mucho overtime-o and didn't want to go home and read about something similar to the work I was doing all day. It's the same reason I don't watch *The Office* – too close to reality for me. So, I had shelved the idea until the Boulder vacation came around. I started reading on the plane and was laughing so hard, the guy next to me rolled his eyes and put on his headphones. That'll teach the airlines to give me the middle seat. I kept nudging Dave and declaring that the book was hilarious, that I had worked with someone similar to every one of the characters at some point in my career. And I had worked with even worse specimens of the ad agency world than the characters that Ferris had drawn. (*MaryBeth B., if you're reading this and you read this book, shades of our days in Walgreens' ad department will return to you in full post-traumatic force*). Anyhow, the first few chapters are mucho hilarious-o but the story gives way to tragedy in the timehonored tradition of Greek myths – mix a little comedy with your heartbreak and throw in a few flaws that lead to the main character's downfall etc. etc. It's the stuff of your high school English course on *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

Ferris, who did his time in ad agencies, writes what he knows and he does it in a rarely used point of view – the collective “we.” Anyone who gets sucked into agency life knows that the culture becomes more about the collective than the individual. You find yourself talking about work in the “we” vernacular as in, “we're working on this big project” or “we all think he should be fired.” His spot-on take of the advertising world – and of our lives in cubicles – is cringe-worthy mainly because it's so real.

Here's a paragraph from the opening chapter: "We were fractious and overpaid. Our mornings lacked promise. At least those of us who smoked had something to look forward to at ten-fifteen. Most of us liked most everyone, a few of us hated specific individuals, one or two people loved everyone and everything. Those who loved everyone were unanimously reviled. We loved free bagels in the morning. They happened all too infrequently."

Sadly, what happens in the book is what's happening more frequently than free bagels in the morning

these days. Ferris' fictional agency is losing clients and people are losing their jobs. Subsequently, no one trusts anyone as everyone waits for his or her last call to the boss's office. No real work gets done under these circumstances because the only real work is to gossip and speculate on who's going to be turned out on the street next. If you've been through a layoff, you know that's how we do when the worry meter is running at full speed.

Many of the characters remain unlikable from page one to the end but there are a few that gain your empathy, like Chris Yop. He's the 40-something ad guy who just wants his office chair, which, in variously comical and tragic twists and turns, gets stolen, hidden, returned, and switched with other office chairs – all while Yop has been downsized and should no longer be working at the agency but shows up every day and hides out in empty rooms. Yop can't give up his "life" even though the agency has given up on him.

There's also Tom Mota, the stereotypical crazy advertising person that exists in every agency. Tom finally "gets got" and then the remaining workers are left to wonder if Tom will come back toting a gun to get his revenge. Tom's professional life is about as tragic as his personal life, a theme that runs through most of the major characters in the story, including Lynn Mason, the supervisor who is battling cancer. Ferris gives us a break from the "we" point of view in one chapter, told from Lynn's perspective. It's the point in the story where you begin to see that while Ferris is intent on keeping us entertained, he's also pointing out what we tend to forget or tend to ignore when we're immersed in our cubicles and riding the hamster wheel of projects – people have lives, real lives, with real problems. All cleverness and snarkiness aside, Ferris brings sympathy to the table and reminds us that there humanity exists between the cubicle walls.

4. Lush Life, Richard Price

Let me get the disclaimers out there: in general, I don't read mysteries. I don't read crime thrillers either. I'm not one for action-packed movies or car chases. I like my fiction straight-up and literary. You can play around with structure and add post-modern twists all you like but if it's still in the literary category, I'll give it a go. I avoid the Mystery and Science Fiction aisles of the book store. Not because I'm too snobbish to read them, just because I don't intend to write them so I stick with the stuff I need to study.

So then book devourer and friend Erik Brueggerman ruins that streak by telling me *Lush Life* is the "best book he's read in a long fucking time". On top of it, he sends me an advance copy of the book followed by his DVD player upon which Dave and I are supposed to insert DVDs of *The Wire*. This is followed up by friend and book lover Sandy Becker pleading with me to read *Lush Life*, which is followed up by more pressure from other friends to watch *The Wire*, a series that Price wrote some episodes for.

Soon enough, I'm reading *Lush Life*, watching *The Wire* like it's the last television I'll ever be able to see, and reading about the writers who created *The Wire*. I'm ingesting so many crime plotlines and so much cop drama that I start dreaming about solving my own mysteries on the mean streets of Akron. In one dream I think I even showed someone my police badge. (As a side note, this is precisely the reason I cannot read or watch anything in the horror genre. No one wants me dreaming about monsters.)

Price's novel is set in 2002 in the lower east side of Manhattan. It reminded me a lot of where we lived in Chicago. You've got your gentrifying area filled with well-meaning white folk who want to clean up the community, your Chinese immigrants and Latinos, and your African Americans who either occupy the projects or grew up in the neighborhood and want to keep ownership of it. And then you've got the NYPD trying to keep the peace in the melting pot. Working at a restaurant in the area is Eric Cash, a 30-something failed actor, and bartender and wanna-be writer Ike Marcus. One night, the two get schnoekered up with another East Village scenester, Steven Boulware. There's a fatal run-in with some young muggers. Ike gets shot, Steven passes out from drinking, and Eric Cash survives the ordeal. Eric gives the police a sketchy account of what happens and the police are suspicious. Matty Clark and Yolanda Bello, two veteran detectives interrogate Cash to exhaustion, ultimately accusing him of killing Ike. Meanwhile, Ike's father, Billy Marcus, is caught between grief and anger as he searches for real answers to his son's death.

It isn't until the middle of the book that you get the truth about the case, which I won't reveal here. Regardless of the turn the story takes, Price stays on the task of revealing to us what it's like to live in today's urban landscape. Which is to say, no walk in the park.

Price's knack for believable and brilliant dialogue keeps the story moving. I felt like I was reading a manuscript for a movie or television show, which makes sense given his history with *The Wire*. Fans of crime stories and mysteries will dig this but it's for any reader who digs a cinematic feel in their fiction.

5. Mountains Beyond Mountains, Tracy Kidder

This book comes highly recommended by friend and book fiend Janet Callif as well as Dave who read it while we were in the mountains surrounding Boulder, Colorado. It's one of the rare times that Dave asked for more time to read. Usually the book is in the other hand and it's me who is asking if we can leave a few minutes later because I have to finish a chapter. By the last page, Dave had a new-found hero in Dr. Paul Farmer.

Farmer is on my hero list, too. He provides health care for the poorest of the poor in Haiti and is an expert on infectious diseases including TB and HIV. But he doesn't have that Mother Theresa or Dali Lama quality about him. In fact, he comes across several times in the story as an asshole, a charming asshole, but an asshole all the same. Thing is, he has every right to be an asshole. He was educated at Harvard, he received a MacArthur genius grant, he sees the waste in our health care system, and he chooses to live in Haiti where they have less than zero resources yet Farmer finds ways to help improve people's health on about one-tenth of one percent of what it would cost us in the States. Truly amazing work. Tracy Kidder (who also wrote *House* if you're looking for another good read) immerses himself in Farmer's world, trying to keep up with Farmer's relentless work ethic which can include walking a grueling 15 miles to treat one patient. While Kidder is nearly fainting from the effort, Farmer is singing to himself and saying, "it's all in day's work."

Farmer's philosophy is to take the road less traveled and the unconventional path to get results. People either think he's crazy or a genius. I went with genius though I did find myself saying, "this dude is certifiable," especially when he sleeps about three hours a night, eats relatively nothing, and still finds the energy to haul ass up a mountain to help a man with HIV.

Reading about Farmer's day will exhaust you and make you feel guilty for saying you're tired after a day at the office. But that's not Farmer's intent. He doesn't want you to feel guilty – actually, he does want you to feel guilty but it's about other things. He wants you to understand why he does what he does and, as he explains it, "it's just what he wants to do." He tells us that no one else has to choose his life but maybe we should consider how we're contributing to society overall. As Farmer says, "the only real nation is humanity."

One review states: "At the heart of this book is the example of a life based on hope, and on an understanding of the truth of the Haitian proverb "Beyond mountains there are mountains": as you solve one problem, another problem presents itself, and so you go on and try to solve that one too." The book is inspiring on many levels, especially since Farmer came from humble background but it's a cautionary tale in how we've let our sisters and brothers around the globe waste away in poverty. Farmer shows his readers that the resources to help Haiti and eradicate TB and other infectious diseases around the world exist. We simply choose to ignore some of the hard choices that would need to be made to improve overall health throughout the world. Shortly after I read this, I traveled to Guatemala on a Gift of Sight mission where our team gave free eye exams and glasses to more than 26,000 people. The poverty I encountered was nothing compared to the poverty in Haiti, which was confirmed by one of the eye doctors who had been to Haiti on a mission. "People in Haiti would cry over this kind of abundance," she said as we looked at kids in torn, dirty clothes picking through a garbage dump. Why read this book, you ask? Many reasons – to remind yourself how fortunate you are, to maybe ask yourself what you're doing to help those who need help, and to realize that one person truly can make a difference in the lives of others. Hope, hope, and hope. This story is nothing but the big "H" word.

6. Mohawk, Richard Russo

There's no way I could say one of my themes for my year and for my reading life was "Home" without including the master of creating a sense of place, Richard Russo. I know there are some Russo naysayers out there but, to them, I say, skip my sixth pick and move to number seven. If you didn't like *Empire Falls* or *Bridge of Sighs*, you won't cotton up to Mohawk either.

Sure, there are the great place-creators like Faulkner and Updike and McCarthy but I'll put Russo up against any of them. All signs point to McCarthy as the greatest writer known to mankind for his ability to define place and the impact the place has on his characters but I find McCarthy grueling to read. He's long-winded and he gives more details about a horse or a body in the cadaver stage than I ever need to know. Yes, I've just committed literary sacrilege by criticizing McCarthy but to each his own. You say McCarthy, I say Russo, let's call the whole thing off.

This was my second visit to Mohawk, New York, a wrong side of the tracks town where the leather tannery is a ghost of its former self as are the people who live there. The story runs through three generations and two families, the Grouses and the Gaffneys. Former high school football star Dallas Younger and his ex-wife Anne are the parents of Randall, a smart kid in a town where being smart is more burden than blessing. There's Wild Bill Gaffney, a kid who got messed up early on and now, as an adult, plays the role of crazy local. There's Harry, owner of the Mohawk Grill, who cares for Wild Bill when no one else will, the reasons of which are revealed later in the story. There's Dan, confined to a wheelchair and struggling to stay connected to his wife Diana. The couple's friendship with Anne and Dallas goes way back, as does most of the family history in the town. Then there's patriarch Mather Grouse, retired from the factory and bitter about what Mohawk is becoming. And Rory Gaffney, who hates Mather and vice versa. A series of events bring Mather and young Randall together in tender ways – the two outcasts, one young, one old, mirroring each other's lives.

While the families are different, their troubles are similar. And most of their troubles stem from Mohawk itself. Some want to leave it, some can't imagine ever living elsewhere, some recognize what the declining Mohawk is doing to their lives, others refuse to see it. In Randall, there is hope that he will escape the all-too-familiar fate of kids that grow up in small towns with limited opportunities. It's clear the tannery won't be an option for him but if not the tannery, then what?

Even though Mohawk was published in 1986, the characters could walk out of a place like Akron or Youngstown or Toledo or Detroit today. As Annie Proulx, another master of place, says of Russo's work: "After the last sentence is read, the reader continues to see Russo's tender, messed-up people coming out of doorways, lurching through life. And keeps on seeing them because they are as real as we are." For me, that's the mark of superior fiction.

7. The Monsters of Templeton, Lauren Groff

Fans of humorous, slightly quirky and outrageous tales will enjoy Groff's debut novel. I liked it but I also like Lorrie Moore, Aimee Bender, and others who some believe are an "acquired taste." Thing is, Groff demands that you suspend disbelief immediately and you must do so at a higher level than you do with most fiction. Groff dips her toe into magic realism but doesn't take a full bath in the literary genre. Willie Upton returns home to Templeton (modeled after Cooperstown, NY) after a botched affair with her archaeology professor. She thinks she may be pregnant and when she reconnects with her mother, her mother brings a skeleton out of their family closet – Willie's father, thought to be a mystery, is alive and well and living in Templeton. Her mother, who is running short on sanity, refuses to tell Willie who the man is. At the same time, a prehistoric monster dies in Glimmerglass Lake and rises to the surface. This is where the story veers into magic realism.

You have to accept that there was a monster in the lake just like kids believe monsters live under their beds. The town is both shocked and saddened at the loss of their beloved monster and it sets off a chain of events that tears at the fabric of the town. While Willie investigates her family tree, she also reconnects with a former high school flame as well as the Running Bobs, a group of older men who have been running through Upton every morning since Willie was a child. Willie takes us on the journey as she rattles more skeletons in other family closets and finally discovers

who her father is. Along the way, she also discovers a lot about herself and we're treated to old photographs of Templeton's cast of characters, diary entries, letters and a handy family tree that is constantly revised as Willie begins connecting the roots and branches.

Fast paced, funny, and tender, Groff's debut received rave reviews and lots of good press. It was one of Powell's Books most frequently recommended reads of the year. Readers who want a serious story told in linear fashion probably won't enjoy this but my easily-distracted brain enjoyed all the twists and turns.

8. Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, Barbara Kingsolver

I consider this my most controversial pick. I almost went with *A Thousand Splendid Suns* but figured everyone and their sister has already read that because everyone has already read or seen *The Kite Runner*. Truth is, I even complained about a chapter in this book where Kingsolver takes vegetarians to task for being "snooty eaters." But I love Kingsolver's story-telling and it's as strong in her non-fiction works like this as it is in her novels.

Kingsolver and her family return to a farm in Virginia where they eat local, grow their own food, and barter with other farmers to fill in the gaps on their pantry shelves. The chapters are peppered with commentary about the U.S. food industry, specifically factory farming, the plight of today's farming community, and the increase of processed foods in the American diet which is ultimately responsible for our expanding waistlines.

Many may find the commentary too preachy but I found it eye-opening, so much so that I'm now more conscious of where my fruits and vegetables come from and what season it is when I'm eating them. For example, year-round blueberries? Really? Blueberries are not in season *all the time* but given that they're always in the grocery store, we tend to ignore that fact.

So not only did Kingsolver's family agree to eat only those fruits and vegetables that were grown locally, they also had to be in season. For a family coming from Arizona, this meant giving up precious items like oranges and much more. I could never take it that far. When I came home from Guatemala after two weeks, I nearly cried when I ate my first Granny Smith apple. I'm not sure I'd have the willpower to go "cold banana" like that. They also gave up processed foods like, say, potato chips. If this were me, I'd be planting potatoes and I'd be damned sure some of them ended up in their delicious chip form. I mean, no chips? That's serious, hard-core stuff.

Nor could I take on the monumental task of planning out crops to ensure that you had enough to can or freeze for the winter, and enough to put on the table come spring.

If Americans were asked to live like Kingsolver's family for a month, we'd probably experience a Civil War. Most of us would starve to death from the lack of proper farming skills. And most of us wouldn't even know how to tend to a garden or slaughter a fatted calf or chicken, which Kingsolver's family does. Which is where the vegetarian thing comes in. Kingsolver did some time as a veg-head but, as a biologist, she realized she was ignoring a whole portion of the food chain and she was uncomfortable about it. So she decided that if she raised animals humanely, she could eat them. The family raises chickens and turkeys and barter for beef with farmers nearby. She values the ritual of the "harvest" because of what she learns from it: "We reconnect with the purpose for which our animals were bred. We dispense with all the delusions about who put the 'live' in livestock and who must take it away...my animals had a good life and death is the natural end."

Fair enough. I believe Kingsolver is doing the right thing for herself and her family. She raises it, they eat it. There's no horrible factory farming conditions, the animals are raised and killed with compassion. That's all great and good but the percentage of people able to live the Kingsolver way is ever-so minimal. Here's where I could get on my soapbox about factory farming and the fact that turkeys, for example, can't even stand up because they're so fat and jacked up on steroids, all so we can enjoy an extra juicy turkey breast.

Alrighty then, this is not the forum for preaching. Arguments about vegetarianism aside, Kingsolver drives

home the fact that we need to be more aware of what we put on our dining tables and into our mouths. Maybe take a moment to thank our local farmers by purchasing their produce at farmer's markets. And maybe sacrifice that Twinkie for a Honeycrisp apple, in season, of course. If you're at all interested in nutrition, eating locally, or the farming life, pick this up.

9. All The Way Home, David Giffels

With all this talk of home, it only stands to reason that I would find a hometown hero for the list. Lo and behold, native Akronite David Giffels released his memoir *All The Way Home* which actually received a mention on Oprah's website. Giffels worked for the *Akron Beacon Journal* and lives in our neighborhood just a few blocks away. To see the house today you would never know that it was a money pit, nightmare, trainwreck of a place when they bought it.

With their infant son, Giffels and his wife begin their search for the perfect house in Akron. But, like most searches for the perfect house, nothing pans out. Until they spy a structure that might be a house, most likely in need of condemning. Giffels has lived in Akron all his life and has witnessed the crumbling factories around him. While many want to tear down anything that looks "used", Giffels can see the beauty behind the rust and the chipped paint and the cracking plaster. He's a restoration madman. So they purchase a house that is still, unbelievably, occupied by an old, reclusive woman who puts up with the holes in the roof and the critters that have taken up residence in the attic.

With some help from family, friends, and a crew of workers who look more like roadies for Led Zeppelin, the Giffels transform the decaying mansion into a comfortable home for their family. You'll find yourself intrigued by the older woman they purchased the home from and then laughing out loud as Giffels' attempts to use an electric guitar to scare away the squirrels.

Equally hilarious and poignant, Giffels takes readers beyond the story of restoring a house and gives us a glimpse into his own coming of age where he worries about being a good father and providing for his family. He also admits to his own weaknesses – while he can fix up just about anything, he can't control a stubborn streak that has him working on the house shortly after his wife's miscarriage. We find out how this family makes a house a "home" and the personal struggles that come with it.

10. Matrimony, Joshua Henkin

If this novel were a food, it'd be in the comfort category. Smooth, warm, fulfilling, maybe a little fattening but who cares because it tasted good going down. It's 1986 and fiction writer wanna-be Julian Wainwright meets friend Carter Heinz at Graymont College in Massachusetts. They also meet Mia Mendelsohn with whom Julian falls immediately in love. Their relationship and their friendship with Carter carries them through college and the next fifteen years together as they approach middle age and begin to grow up and grow apart from each other.

Julian and Carter drift apart as their class differences become more apparent. Carter and his wife Pilar disappear from Julian and Mia's life just when the couple needs friends the most. Julian continues to struggle with failed manuscripts and literary dreams, which are also disappearing. The central conflict is between Julian and Mia, and what will happen to their relationship. Secondary to this is Julian's attempt to reconcile with Carter.

Several reviews of the book mention that, as a character, Julian is never fully realized on the page but I chalk this up to literary snobbery. It's a relationship, people. Relationships and marriages are messy and sometimes inexplicable. And sometimes, characters that are so well-drawn become stereotypes. I liked Julian just the way he was.

Also read in 2008:

A Thousand Splendid Suns, Khaled Housseini
Starting Out In Evening, Brian Morton
Light on Snow, Anita Shreve (audio)
Devil in the White City, Erik Larson (audio)
The Godmother, Carrie Adams

The Translation of Dr. Appelles, David Treuer
The Gravedigger's Daughter, Joyce Carol Oates
Away, Amy Bloom
No One Belongs Here More Than You, Miranda July

And then there were the dog books whereupon they either featured a dog or the dog was the narrator or a dog had some minor role in the plot:

Darkest Evening of the Year, Dean Koontz
Art of Racing in the Rain, Garth Stein
Dogs of Babel, Carolyn Parkhurst
A Three Dog Life, Abigail Thomas

TOP 10 BOOKS OF 2009

1. The Sweet Hereafter, Russell Banks

This slim novel packs an emotional punch as four main characters try to piece together what happened when a school bus careened off a snowy road and killed several children, forever changing the communal fabric of a small, working class town in Upstate New York. What I love about stories told from multiple viewpoints, is that we, as readers, have the freedom to choose the character we identify with the most and the character we believe in the most. Each of the four characters here – the bus driver, the widowed father who loses two children in the accident, the lawyer who attempts to pit the parents who lost their children against the town, and the beauty queen cheerleader crippled in the accident – will do more than tug at your heartstrings. They'll make you think the next time you try to place blame on someone when the unthinkable happens, or when there's an accident and it's unclear what happened.

Each character has details the others don't and each character grapples with much more than the accident in their daily lives. In the case of this story, it seems that no one is to blame for the accident directly, yet everyone is to blame for something behind the closed doors of their homes. The final scene at the town's annual demolition derby is so well-drawn, you'll feel like you're sitting on the bleachers beside Dolores Discroll (the bus driver) and her husband Abbott. Ultimately, this book is about how a community comes together or is torn apart when tragedy strikes. It reminds us that we are all linked, no matter how loosely we think those links may be.

I tend to go to Richard Russo for a sense of place but Banks may be one of my new heroes in this regard. I have more than a few of his books on my reading list for 2010.

2. More of This World or Maybe Another, Barb Johnson

A special thanks to fellow bibliophile Erik Brueggemann who never steers me in the wrong direction on a book recommendation. Erik liked this book so much he mailed me a copy of it. This might be one of the best short story collections I read not just this year, but this decade. So thanks for that, Erik! Johnson was a carpenter for more than 20 years before deciding to trade in her hammer for a pen. I love that she published her debut collection in her 40s (it gives me hope!) but I also love her for writing down to the bone. These stories are raw and will turn you inside out.

Set in New Orleans, the stories follow the same characters and narrow in on significant, life-altering moments – moments that are either murky endings or clear beginnings for the characters. Delia and her laundromat, The Bubble, act as the hub of this struggling community. The rest of the stories are the spokes in a lives-on-the-margin wheel of misfortune, hope, family, love, and redemption. You'll root for Pudge and Dooley and Luis who battle terrible odds and try to straighten out their lives, and you'll hope that Delia will accept the love of her partner. You'll feel each character's pain when things go way down south and you'll stand up and cheer when things work out. You can sense Johnson's love for her characters, so much so that it made me wonder how much she was drawing from her own experience or the experiences of those she has loved deeply. The language is simple yet powerful in its authenticity. And the smallest actions are heavy with meaning. If you're not a fan of short stories, give this a try. You'll come to love these underdog characters as much as Johnson seems to. Think of each story as the shortest novel you've ever read.

3. Olive Kitteridge, Elizabeth Strout

This was my number one pick of the year until I read the two books above. Considered a “novel in stories”, it may appeal to those who don’t enjoy the short story form. More than likely, it will appeal to those who like messy, imperfect main characters with oversized Achilles’ heels. Olive isn’t the most likeable of women. In fact, when she was a teacher, students didn’t like her very much and her son finds her so overbearing and suffocating that he moves across the country to escape her. Olive unapologetically thinks, says, and does many of the things that some of us wish we could think, say, or do in certain situations. She doesn’t win friends this way but at least she doesn’t hold back. And that’s what makes her empathetic.

The thirteen linked stories cover about 30 years in a small coastal town in Maine, where Olive loses more times than she wins. She’s a crank, she’s a bungler, and some of her actions are appalling if you’re reading this in a gendered way. If Olive were a man, you wouldn’t think twice about it but because she’s a woman who’s supposed to act a certain way, you find her challenging. And that is Strout’s most brilliant stroke.

Like my Number One and Number Two selections, Olive Kitteridge magnifies ordinary life and points out the extraordinary things that people face behind closed doors or, sometimes in the case of those who Olive meets along the way, in front of the whole town. While the stories have their downer moments, there’s enough humor and hope threaded through the narrative to keep this from being overly melancholy or melodramatic.

4. The Senator’s Wife, Sue Miller

Have I mentioned how much I love Sue Miller? If you check some of my previous Top 10 Lists, Miller appears about as frequently as Richard Russo. Love. Her. In this story, Miller’s two characters are living parallel lives. Meri is at the beginning of her life, newly married and entering pregnancy and motherhood. Delia is at the dead-end of her marriage with her philandering husband, a former senator whose health deteriorates as the story unfolds. Meri and her husband rent out a wing of Delia’s house and the two women become friends. Eventually, their relationships collide and while the climax seems inevitable, Miller makes it surprising in the way it plays out. It will be up to you to decide whether or not you like these couples in the end. If nothing else, you will question their choices. The writing is soft and beautiful, very Miller-esque in its psychological dissection of each character. I’m glad she’s a writer but, in another life, Miller probably would’ve made a great therapist.

5. A Gate At The Stairs, Lorrie Moore

I know you’re shocked. Lorrie Moore at Number Five? How can this be when I love her even more than Sue Miller, Richard Russo, Joyce Carole Oates, Amy Bloom, Alice McDermott, and Stewart O’Nan combined? Sheesh, you think you know someone’s tastes and then there’s Lorrie Moore relegated to the middle of the list! Here’s the thing: I adore her writing so much that I was almost afraid to read this book, the first book she’s put out in 11 years. After waiting all this time, I wondered if I was setting myself up for disappointment by expecting too much out of her. I thought maybe she wouldn’t live up to the hype, which, if you pay attention to reviews, is at an all-time high. Jonathan Lethem’s review in the New York Times noted that he only knows of one person who doesn’t enjoy Moore’s writing, on the grounds that it is “too punny.” Moore can do no wrong in the eyes of other writers, including me. She is a super genius when it comes to original metaphor and description. Here’s a small sample: “The woman of the house opened the door. She was pale and compact, no sags or pouches, linen skin tight across the bone. The hollows of her cheeks were powdered darkly, as if with the pollen of a tiger lily. Her hair was cropped short and dyed the fashionable bright auburn of a ladybug...her leggings mahogany, her sweater rust-colored, and her lips maroonish brown. She looked like a highly controlled oxidation experiment.”

Linen skin? Pollen of a tiger lily? Not your average description by any stretch. And because of this talent Moore is simultaneously envied and adored by other writers. When I heard her book was coming out, I placed my order in advance (oh yes, I fork out the extra duckets for Moore in hardback), and then it laid on my nightstand, waiting. When I finally had enough courage to crack the spine, I read the first chapter. Twice. Once as a reader. And then once as a writer in awe of her originality. I turned to Dave and said, “god, I hate her for being so good but I love her for being so good.”

She’s not only good, she’s downright funny. And in this book, she captures the coming-of-age-in-the-Midwest angst perfectly. Tassie Keltjin is 20 years old and wondering if there’s anything more to life than

she's already experienced. Life seems so...well...ho-hum. Until she meets a couple that needs a nanny. They're planning to adopt a child and they need help. The couple is odd and mysterious from the get-go, clearly hiding something but Tassie doesn't discover what until she's embroiled in their lives. At Tassie's own home, her mother dives in and out of depression, her father is a boutique farmer of potatoes stuck among the real farmers of the small town of Troy, and her brother is going off to the military. Being in college allows her to escape from her family life but only slightly so and after a series of bad-luck events, she finds herself recovering under the shelter of her family, only to encounter bad luck again. Besides the first chapter, there are two standout scenes – one where a heartbroken Tassie dons a hawk suit to help her father scare mice and other vermin out of their hiding places, and the other near the end of the story when Tassie realizes how much she loves her brother.

So why isn't this number one or even two? Because Moore might be one of those acquired-taste kind of writers. My beer to your wine. My veggie burger to your steak. I know there are plenty of people reading this list that won't enjoy Moore's absurd sense of humor or jokey, wink-wink storytelling. And for you, my loyal list readers, I pushed her down to number five. Take the risk if you so choose but don't come a-crying to me if you don't like it. If you want a taste of Moore before diving into this, read one of her short story collections: Like Life, Birds of America, or Self Help. In my humble opinion, she's better at the short form than the long novel but you'll know after a few pages of any of her works if she's your kind of writer.

6. Run, Ann Patchett

Race, class, politics, family at its dysfunctionally functional best. Patchett strikes every chord in less than 300 pages. The beginning chapter's eerie quality draws you into the Sullivan family's current drama. Then, as Teddy and Tip – the two black adopted sons of former mayor Bernard Doyle – leave a lecture with their father, Tip is nearly struck by a car. A woman pushes Tip out of the way and is struck in the process, leaving her young daughter Kenya to pick up her hat and gloves strewn across the snow-covered street. From there, the Sullivan's past family skeletons begin to rattle and secrets unthaw as we learn that Kenya and her mother might be more than strangers to the Sullivans. Kenya is a gifted runner, as one of the Doyle boys used to be but running is both literal and figurative here. Each character is running toward or away from something and it all comes together for each family member quite nicely – or at the very least, realistically, in the end. Patchett touches on race and class differences but the themes never feel overwrought or overplayed. At its heart, the story is about the meaning of family and the responsibilities that come along with it. This is more of a 10k sort of book, not something you want to read at the fast-pace of a 5k. Spend some time with the Doyle family and you'll end up not wanting to leave them at the finish line.

7. Songs for the Missing, Stewart O'Nan and The Double Bind, Chris Bohjalian

Really, I'm not cheating. These two are neck and neck for number seven. While their plots are dissimilar, their themes run along the same tracks. In *Songs for the Missing*, a teenage girl disappears from a small town near Cleveland, and her family sets out on a heartbreaking journey to find her without losing themselves or their family in the process. In *The Double Bind*, a teenage girl is severely injured in a beating and essentially disappears from society and the person she once was.

That's the major boildown. There's far, far more to both of these books. Part thriller, part mystery, part literary fiction, pick your poison and settle down in your favorite reading chair for some good old-fashioned storytelling. You'll find yourself wanting to skip to the last chapter to see what happens – is Kim still alive and living somewhere outside of Cleveland? Is Laurel Estabrook really discovering the secrets and connections she thinks she's uncovered? But the stories are so good, you won't want to ruin the end, especially in the case of *The Double Bind*.

8. The Help, Kathryn Stockett

My good friend and fellow book lover Sandy Becker recommended this to me early in the year but it took me until November to get around to reading it. I'm glad I did. As much as the idea of reading about black maids in Civil Rights era Mississippi sounded depressing, *The Help* is anything but. Sure, the undertone of sadness and disgust that the south was still segregated and racist as little as forty years ago runs like the muddy Mississippi through every chapter, but the strong women Stockett introduces us to keeps the story afloat. Skeeter Phalen is just home from college and reuniting with her high-brow, racist friends who treat their "help" poorly. Skeeter befriends two of the maids, compassionate Aibileen who is wise beyond her years and scrappy Minny who knows she should keep her mouth shut but can't. Skeeter proposes a risky

project and the two maids join her, reluctantly at first and then willing to risk their own livelihoods – and possibly their lives – to see the project through to the end. Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minny take turns telling a story that is sure to be a big hit in book groups everywhere.

9. The Dubliners, James Joyce

This year's classic read comes from Ireland, naturally. I visited the Writers Museum in Dublin where they pay homage to Joyce, Yeats, and plenty of others. Walking around the crammed streets of Dublin made me wonder what the grand city was like back in Joyce's day at the turn of the 20th century. It's safe to say that Joyce was not a fan of the Catholic Church or of Ireland's politics. He found both constrictive and rigid, and his characters experience religion, family, and relationships in the same way. This was a book group selection for me. Some enjoyed it, some found Joyce's melancholy tone dreadfully hopeless. I was in Camp Enjoyment. The writing stands strong today and Joyce encapsulates the Irish mentality of the times in sparse, sharp stories. Besides, you shouldn't be allowed to get through a college English or creative writing course without reading 'The Dead'. If I ever get to teach, it will be on the required reading list.

10. That Old Cape Magic, Richard Russo

I won't apologize for my predictability. I like what I like. And I happen to like Richard Russo a hell of a lot. In fact, I plan on re-reading *Empire Falls* this year. If *Bridge of Sighs* wasn't your bag, this Russo novel just might be the ticket, especially if you're heading off for a weekend getaway. *Cape* is much shorter and the story moves as fast as a surprise summer breeze. Griffin has had his father's ashes in the trunk of his car for nearly a year and he has the opportunity to take the ashes to the place where his family vacationed when he was a child. His marriage is teetering on the cusp of disaster, and after a wreck of a weekend, Griffin still has his father's ashes but has lost a great deal more. Flash forward a year, and Griffin now has two sets of ashes in the trunk – his mother's along with his father's – as he returns to the Cape for his daughter's wedding where his wife has brought a date as has Griffin. The family collides in true Russo-Shakespearean fashion. There's a laugh-out-loud scene at the "leftover people" wedding table followed by several other slapstick moments that make you want to grab Griffin by the lapels and shake some sense into him. But there are plenty of heart-warming and heartbreaking scenes where the past and present collide and where memories play tricks on the characters' sense of identity. If you've endured family strife, an identity crisis, or have been relegated to the table of misfits at any wedding, you'll find a good laugh in these pages.

Non-Fiction Pick

Annie's Ghosts: A Journey Into A Family Secret, Steve Luxenberg

Other Good Reads

This Is When I Leave You, Jonathan Tropper

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Society, Mary Ann Shaffer

The Cellist of Sarajevo, Steven Galloway

Deep End of the Ocean, Jacquelyn Mitchard

Ghost at the Table, Suzanne Berne

The Diary, Eileen Goudge

Shelter Me, Juliette Day

Prince of Frogtown, Rick Bragg

Rules for Saying Goodbye, Katherine Taylor