

Books You May Enjoy

Annotations by Coralie ("Corie") Ginsburg

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Books We Love *Staff Book Reviews*

Books Reviewed by

Corie Ginsburg

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Being a Great Books leader for forty years (the last twenty-eight at Skokie Public Library) has led me to a very rewarding career. Sharing books and interests with library patrons has given me great pleasure. I love to read the new science books about physics and cosmology. When I am not doing that, I bake [Julie's Cookies](#), and keep track of my husband and three grown children.



Please note: *Although Corie has moved on to other life endeavors, her annotations live on!*

Giving up America

by Pearl Abraham

Publisher: Riverhead Books, 1998

Number of Pages: 309

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

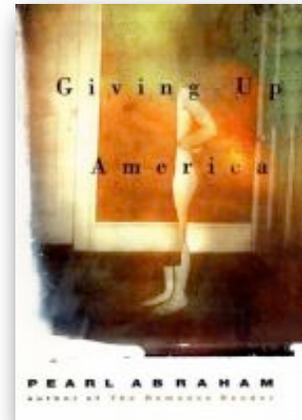
Genres:

Jewish themes

Review:

The marriage of Deena, an Israeli born Hasid, and Daniel, an American Orthodox Jew, is doomed from the start. According to the Kabala, the numbers generated by the letters in their names add up to "pain" as interpreted by her father. Sure enough after seven years, Daniel is attracted to a Miss America "wannabe" temp in his office. His passionless observance and Deena's Hasidic inclination to color and warmth bring them into conflict. As they both test and abandon their religious training they find themselves in an existential universe where one must make one's own meaning of life. They eventually divorce.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/24/2000



Crescent

by Abu-Jaber

Publisher: Norton, 2003

Number of Pages: 349

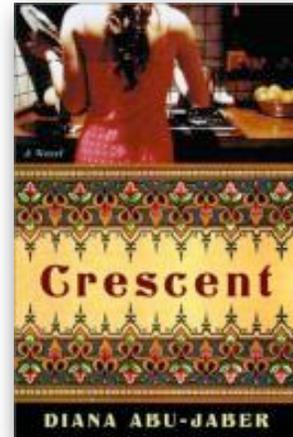
Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Literary fiction - Female authors](#)

Review:

The scent of roasted lamb, leben, tabbouleh and knaffea infuse this love story. Arab-American Sirine and Iraqi Hanif meet at the Lebanese cafe where she is an inspired chef. She cooks for homesick Middle Eastern students who find a bit of home in the exotic dishes she serves them. They are in a part of Los Angeles known as Irangeles, a place of the displaced. Food and sex animate this elemental tale. Because of the early deaths (murdered) of her aid-worker parents, she was raised by her Lebanese uncle. The plight of the suffering Middle Eastern people colors the story. America as both the villain and the savior of the world is a theme. A parallel but fantastical story is interspersed with the main text; a siren deters Abdelrahman Saladin of Aqaba just as Sirine enchants Hanif. Both ostensibly die but miraculously do not. The myth and the reality fuse and the world is set aright. Leben, a yogurt pudding, requires constant stirring to prevent curdling and dissolution, a metaphor for the situation in the middle east which must not be allowed to "curdle." A sensuous and engaging novel but a failed attempt at profundity. Allusions to the Odyssey are made at the beginning. I found it heavy-handed. She tried too hard.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 12/16/2003

What It Felt Like: Living in the American Century

by Henry Allen

Publisher: Pantheon Books, 2000

Number of Pages: 159

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

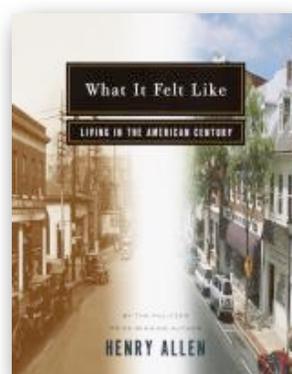
Nonfiction

Small gems (short books)

Review:

This small gem gives substance to the bare bones of history. By eliciting the sights, smells, clothing, clichés, preoccupations and enthusiasms of each decade of the century just past, the reader experiences the changing atmosphere of 100 years in America. evocative, mesmerizing and engaging.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 12/13/2000



The Doctor's Wife

by Sawako Ariyoshi

Publisher: Kodansha International, 1978

Number of Pages: 174

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

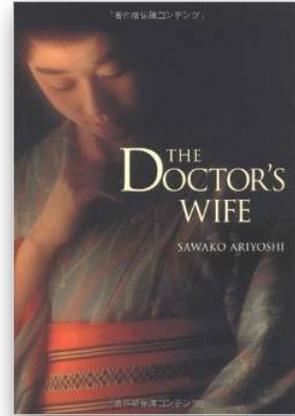
[Historical fiction](#)

[General fiction](#)

Review:

A spare, moving novel about traditional family life in Japan in the mid 1700's, *The Doctor's Wife* is based on the life of Hanoka Seishu, the physician who first developed an herbal anesthetic in 1805, thus permitting surgery long before anesthetics were used in the West. The psychological interplay among the doctor, his very special mother and his heroic wife provides insight into what might be instinctive behavior for the betterment of mankind.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 1/18/2002



An Alchemy of Mind

by Diane Ackerman

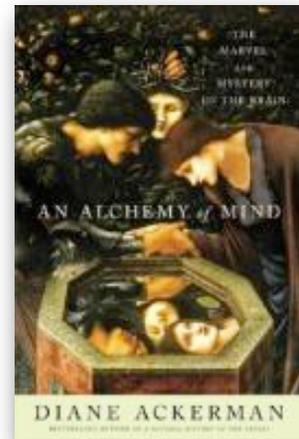
Publisher: Scribner, 2004

Number of Pages: 258

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Review:

In her customary luscious prose, The author of *The Natural History of the Senses* explores the coordinator and interpreter of those senses, the brain. With well documented scientific data and an artist's sensibility, she brings the ephemeral nature of the mind to imaginable reality. She traces its evolution and discusses its structure and function, the diseases that can impair it and its relation to consciousness, dreams, memory and emotion. Her section on language and the use of metaphor alone, make this book worth reading and even perhaps owning.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 12/16/2004

Servants of the Map

by Andrea Barrett

Publisher: W.W. Norton, 2002

Number of Pages: 267

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

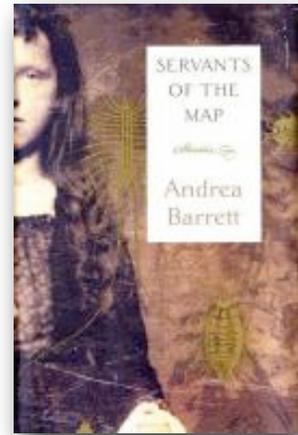
Genres:

General fiction

Review:

Six stories loosely linked by objects, relationships between characters, and their interests in biology and travel. Their lives, loves and illnesses exemplify how chance and necessity operate toward their evolution, both biological and psychological. The main characters "grew from foundation in fact" of such historical figures as Charles Darwin and Rembrandt Peale among others. The time-frame ranges between 1810 and 1905, but the stories are not presented in chronological order, which is somewhat confusing. Much of the text is in the form of letters. The beauty of the language and the skillful creation of atmosphere add to the pleasure of reading this book.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 3/20/2002



The Feast of Love

by Charles Baxter

Publisher: Vintage Books, 2000

Number of Pages: 308

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

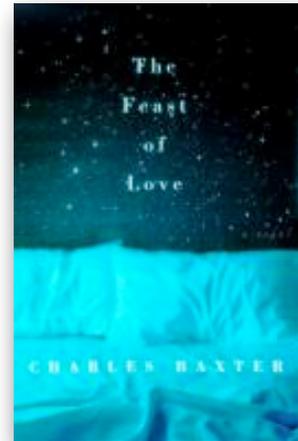
Genres:

[Literary fiction - Male authors](#)

Review(s):

Charles Baxter, author, both actually and fictionally, writes an account of the interconnected lives told to him by a cast of characters centered on one Bradley Smith, owner of a dog of the same name. This complex literary conceit reflects the cogs, wheels and gears that actuate human relations as he interprets them. The novel seems to be an update of Schnitzler's *La Ronde* which incited riots in Paris because of its racy content, Molnar's *Liliom* which depicted early 20th century sensibility toward such matters, and Rogers and Hammerstein's *Carousel* which reflected the 1940's attitudes. This telling of the same story in the 21st century includes all varieties of love: homosexual, romantic, tender, cynical, parental, filial, and love of a pet as they are experienced in our time. Truly, LOVE makes the world go around!

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 7/2/2002



City of Light

by Lauren Belfer

Publisher: Dial Press, 1999

Number of Pages: 518

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

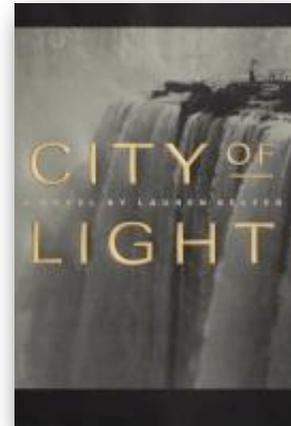
Genres:

[Historical fiction](#)

Review:

This is a fictionalized account of the dawn of the electrification of the United States at the turn of the last century and is set in Buffalo N.Y at Niagara Falls. The water- generated power was the subject of bitter struggles for political power. Robber Barons and early environmentalists provided the seed bed for the development of unionism and Black Power. Braided through this energized field is the story of Louisa Barrett, headmistress of the Macaully School for Girls and her illegitimate daughter Grace fathered by President Grover Cleveland in what amounted to the rape of an innocent. Her determination that her secret be kept and that her daughter have a good life while she watched from afar calls up images of the heartlessness of powerful men toward women and children in that society. Racism, sexism and snobbery are rampant but the first glimmerings of the liberation of women and social enlightenment are dimly apparent. Parallels to our own turn of another century are striking. As we outgrow the power grid for energy and turn to alternate sources of energy and wirelessness, the same tension between expedience and concern for the environment exists. Even our concerns with a libidinous president call up a similar time. A historical note details the actual events and people who are the basis for this book. It is Lauren Belfer's first book.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/9/2001



Ravelstein

by Saul Bellow

Publisher: Viking Press, 2000

Number of Pages: 233

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Literary fiction - Male authors](#)

Review:

A barely fictionalized account of the last days of Bellow's close friend and colleague, Allen Bloom of *The Closing of the American Mind* fame. His peccadilloes, affectations and general grossness are depicted as complementary to his towering intellect. His death from complications of AIDS is central to understanding his life. It is clear that Bellow really loved and revered him even as he drew him with all his warts. Bellow's own close brush with death is recorded via fevered dreams and hallucinations. Imagination of death, male friendship and masculine fashion are covered in depth. Of interest to academics, Bellow's fans and University of Chicago alumni.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/19/2000

Remembering

by Wendell Berry

Publisher: North Point Pr., 1988

Number of Pages: 124

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

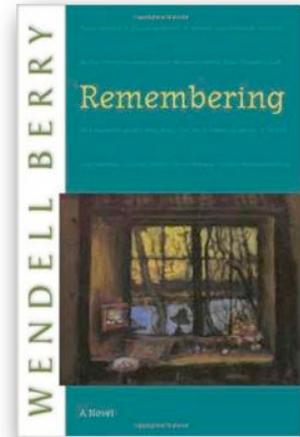
Genres:

Small gems (short books)

Review(s):

Having lost his right hand in a corn picking machine accident, farmer and journalist Andy Catlett descends into a deep depression. We encounter him wandering the streets of San Francisco where he is to speak at an agricultural convention. He hears of the "wonders of the American Food System." Through a series of remembrances of five generations of his family on the land, an encounter with an Amish farmer and an interview with the owner of an agribusiness farm, he concludes that the cost of modern food production is too great in human terms and in the degradation of the land. He returns to his long deserted home place. His musings on the plane ride home and a brief visit to Heaven when he arrives are rendered in transcendent prose. This novel is at once a diatribe against the abstract and bloodless pursuit of efficiency and profit in American agribusiness and a love story of family, place and all that that has meant in American life. Wendell Berry is a novelist, essayist and poet "in the service of common sense and responsibility to place and community."

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 7/11/2001



Inside the Kingdom

by Carmen Bin Ladin

Publisher: Warner Books, 2004

Number of Pages: 206

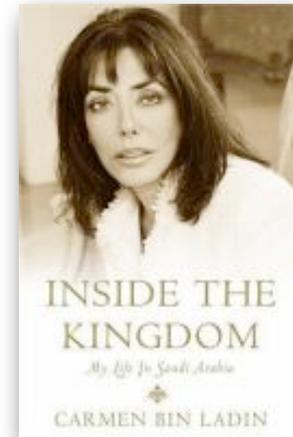
Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

Nonfiction

Review(s):

In a letter to her daughters, Wafah, Najai, and Noor, Carmen Bin Ladin recounts her parentage, her upbringing, and her romance and marriage to Yeslam Bin Ladin, half brother of Osama Bin Ladin of Al Qaeda fame. Born of a wealthy Persian (Iranian) mother and a Swiss father who deserted the family when she was 9 years old, she was brought up to be a proper, subservient, and polite young woman of loosely held Muslim faith and, as an aristocratic European, always caught between two cultures. She was in Switzerland with her daughters on September 11th, 2001, when she realized that her brother-in-law was involved and she could never go back to Saudi Arabia. Her mother had rebelled against her own restrictive background and eloped with the handsome Swiss, but when the marriage failed, concluded that her family had been right, and raised her own daughters to be obedient. Carmen, however, inherited her mothers free spirit and was not to be controlled. When Yeslam and his mother rented a floor of their home for the summer, they met. He was elegant, bronzed, and 24 years old, She was 18 and beautiful. She fell in love with his authority, his money, and his independence- he was a Muslim male, She was married in Jedda, Saudi Arabia, in a beautiful Chanel wedding gown hidden beneath a thick black cotton chador which covered her from head to toe, a foretaste of what was to come. Somehow she made peace with her fate. In the Wahabi version of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia, "A wife cannot do anything without her husband's permission. She cannot go out, cannot study, often cannot even eat at his table. Women in Saudi Arabia must live in isolation, and in the fear that they may be cast out and summarily divorced." Three daughters were born to them. As they grew, it became apparent that their lives would be circumscribed by the oppression of females practiced there. This, she could not abide, and one summer while they were on vacation in Switzerland, she filed for divorce. Had she done so in Saudi Arabia, her children would have been taken from her. While she does not regret her marriage, she is committed to freeing her girls to "be free to be who you want to be". She is aware that their situation is precarious and that the Bin Ladins may yet harass them. Photographs of her life are included.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 3/16/2005

Lives of a Biologist

by John Tyler Bonner

Publisher: Harvard University Press, 2002

Number of Pages: 210

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

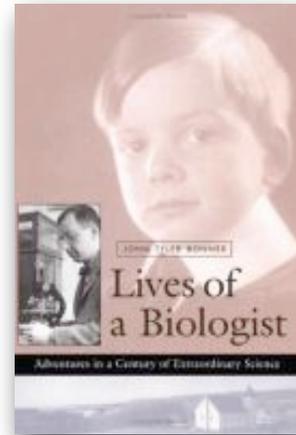
Genres:

[Nonfiction](#)

Review(s):

A delightful book by a delightful man. 82-year-old J.T. Bonner, Professor Emeritus at Princeton University has written about 70 years of passionate interest in biology, academia, and his personal life. His enthusiasm, warmth, and charm enriched his research, his teaching, and his family. As he interweaves these themes, the reader gains insight into how the time and background of one's life impinges on every aspect, public and private. His arcane specialty, the life cycles of slime-molds, has inspired inquiry into genetic and evolutionary theory. His contribution has made him famous in scientific circles and has occasioned fascinating travels. His book will interest those contemplating a life in science.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 8/26/2002



She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders

by Jennifer Finny Boylan

Publisher: Doubleday/Broadway, 2003

Number of Pages: 300

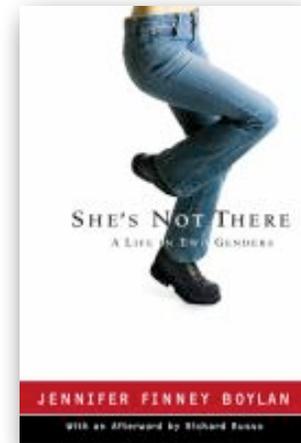
Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

Biography and Memoirs

Review(s):

Jim Boylan was (an is) an honored and revered Professor of English at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. From the age of 3 he had been aware that he was a female trapped in a male body. For thirty seven years he fought to deny that knowledge. For a time he believed that he was "rescued by love" and he married and fathered 2 sons. But it soon became apparent to him that his beloved family had only masked the underlying truth of his transgendered self. When he was 40 it had become undeniable, and he began his transformation from Jim to Jennifer by beginning the protocol known as The Benjamin Standards of Care, a prescript developed by the American Psychiatric Association and other mental health care professionals, to ensure that a patient is a proper and appropriate candidate for gender shift. The procedure involves psychological counseling, hormone therapy, voice coaching, electrolysis, and ultimately, surgery. His/her painful, joyful, and difficult journey and it's implications for family, friends, colleagues, and the world at large is recounted with clarity, humor, and grace. His/her best friend Richard Russo, fellow professor at Colby and author of Empire Falls, accompanies this tormented spirit and provides insight into the effect of such an event on the world view of those in its orbit. He also writes a stirring epilogue. Jennifer Finny Boylan continues to teach at Colby and her world hasn't ended but it has profoundly changed. This is a true account of the condition dramatized in the novel Middlesex by Jeffery Eugenides.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 12/16/2003

My Einstein

by John Brockman (editor)

Publisher: Pantheon Books, 2006

Number of Pages: 259

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

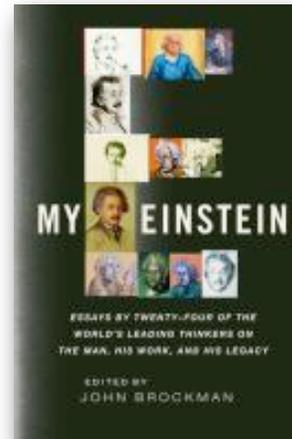
Genres:

[Biography and Memoirs](#)

Review(s):

Personal reflections by eminent scientists and philosophers on their very early attraction to physics and their impressions of Albert Einstein as an icon or a vital and rebellious young student. His influences on their lives are told in short essays that reveal the profound effect of one very special person on the development of science. the trajectory of mankind and the fate of our planet. Personal views of Einstein too, as he is seen as a child of his time and subject to error and doubt. A multidimensional view of a nodal figure.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 8/9/2007



The Professor of Light

by Marina Tamar Budhos

Publisher: G.P. Putnam, 1999

Number of Pages: 254

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

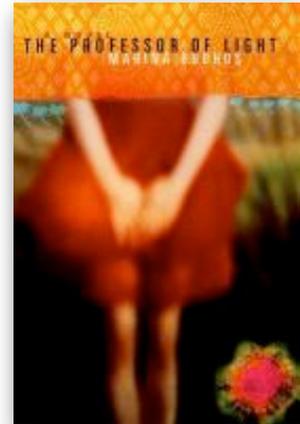
Genres:

[Literary fiction - Female authors](#)

Review:

Told through the consciousness of Meggie Singh whose very name reflects the division in her soul (or genes) that nearly destroys her. She is the loving daughter of an East Indian physics professor and an American Jewish mother. The strains of fluid imagination (father) and crisp pragmatism (mother) are analogized in Dr. Singh's quest to resolve the mystery of the dual nature of light: that it is both a wave and a particle. Recommended to those with multicultural backgrounds and the scientifically inclined.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 1/31/2001



Reflection

by Diane Chamberlain

Publisher: HarperCollins, 1996

Number of Pages: 372

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Women's fiction](#)

Review:

The Mennonite town of Reflection still suffers from a tragedy that took the lives of some of their children 20 years before. Their pain turns to hatred and cruelty when Rachel Huber, whom they mistakenly blame for the tragedy, returns to town. Reverberations of the Vietnam War and two passionate love affairs, and the application of reason and forgiveness cause the truth to be revealed and heal the wound.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 7/2/2000

The Sea of Stones

by Florence Chanock Cohen

Publisher: Pushcart, 1993

Number of Pages: 322

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

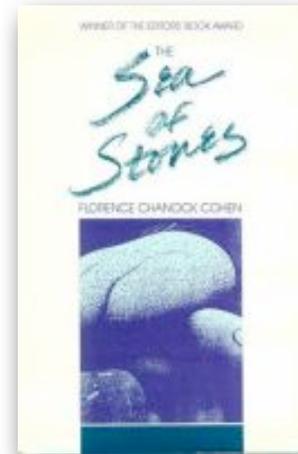
Genres:

[Jewish themes](#)

Review:

Freya Gould is recently divorced and is living comfortably in suburban Chicago while her 19-year old son, Noah, is living on a Kibbutz in Israel. When Freya learns that Noah has forged papers to join the Israeli army as a photographer at the time Israel is at war with Lebanon, she flies to Israel determined to bring him back to Pre-Med and suburbia. Along the way she befriends an Israeli-Arab woman and in Jerusalem she resumes a romance with her American lover of 20 years earlier who is now a general in Israeli Intelligence. With his help, she enters war-torn Lebanon and struggles to save her son. Written by a local author (Wilmette) this is a good book to recommend to those who like Jewish themes. It focuses on relations between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews and is sympathetic towards both sides.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/27/2000



Twilight of Love: Travels with Turgenev

by Robert Dessaix

Publisher: Shoemaker/Hoard, 2005

Number of Pages: 269

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

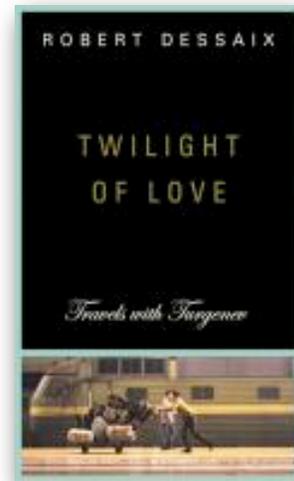
Genres:

[Biography and Memoirs](#)

[Philosophical Thought and Essays](#)

Review(s):

A chronicle of the state of love in its many aspects from the transcendental to the erotic over time (1840s-present) and place, in the context of the Australian author's obsession with the famous Russian writer Ivan Turgenev and his strange love for opera singer Paulina Viardot. He recounts his travels to the places where Turgenev lived loved and wrote: Baden Baden, Germany, France and Russia. The narrative is laced with biography (both his and Turgenev's), speculation about the relationship between the state of love and the degree of civilization in the various countries in Turgenev's time and his personal reactions to his observations. He concludes that the variety of love that Turgenev had for Paulina Viardot is impossible in our time.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 4/19/2007

The Red Tent

by Anita Diamant

Publisher: St. Martin's Press, 1997

Number of Pages: 391

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

Historical fiction

Jewish themes

Review:

This is a compilation of familiar Bible stories (Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, Joseph and His Brothers) told through the mind and words of Dinah. The early chapters deal with the conceptions and births of the brothers. "The Red Tent" is the OB/Gyn wing of the growing tribe. Dinah's life is told with intelligence, warmth and love and offers an alternative view of these stories from the perspective of the women. The play of the genes is observed in the physical and psychological traits of ensuing generations. Of particular interest to students of women's studies and the Bible.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/27/2000

City of God

by E. L. Doctorow

Publisher: Random House, 2000

Number of Pages: 272

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

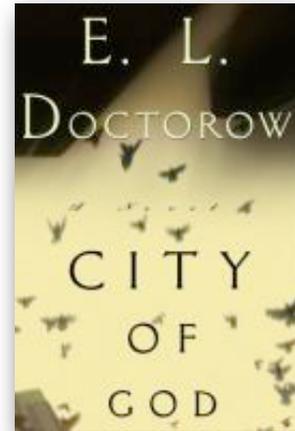
Genres:

[Literary fiction - Male authors](#)

Review:

A dense, disconnected collection of brilliantly realized vignettes of the horrors and accomplishments of the 20th Century woven on the skeleton of a plot involving a large brass cross stolen from a church and found on the roof of a synagogue. Evoking science, linguistics, popular culture, established religion, the Holocaust, the homeless and the marriage of a voluntarily defrocked priest and the widowed female Rabbi of the Synagogue of Evolutionary Judaism, the tale is illuminated in the notes of a novelist for a book he intends to write. At the heart of all this is the search for a way to apply religious values in the light of all that has been shown with a warning that the old ways do not work anymore.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 2/8/2001



Daniel Deronda

by George Eliot

Publisher: Oxford University Press, 1976

Number of Pages: 692

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

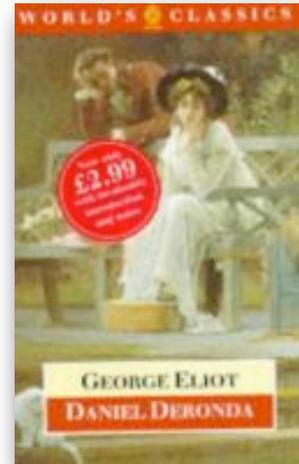
Genres:

[Literary fiction - Female authors](#)

Review:

George Eliot's final book is a masterpiece. Written in 1876, the action takes place 10 years earlier in England's stratified society. It is a two stranded tale, the first of which is of Christian wealth and privilege; the other of Jewish poverty and persecution. They are twisted together by young, beautiful Gwendolyn Grandcourt (nee Harleth) and Daniel Deronda, handsome, cultured and of uncertain parentage. The inheritance of faith, money and position drive the story in fascinating and convoluted ways. Anti-Semitism and nobility (in both senses) are treated.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 1/31/2001



Fabulous Small Jews

by Joseph Epstein

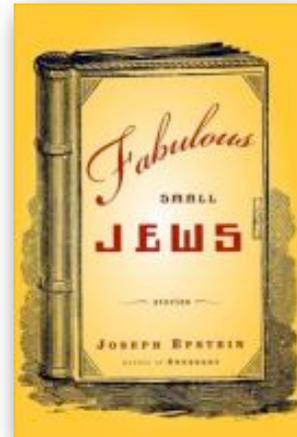
Publisher: Houghton Mifflin, 2003

Number of Pages: 340

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Review:

A worthy successor to *The Goldin Boys*, this group of 18 short stories is darker, reflecting a passing era, the slipping away of the W.W.II generation. Loneliness, alienation, disappointment, wrong choices, cynicism, betrayal, and bodily failure, occasionally ameliorated by hard won love, are depicted through the lives of unmarried men, (with the exception of one young woman whose life is impacted by a "serial marrier" and one cheating husband). The seed of each story is discernible if the reader has a broad knowledge of academia, the classical music scene, literature and local crime. This affords a small thrill of recognition and pride upon discovery, a snobbish pleasure! The locale (Chicago and suburbs) is familiar to Epstein's fans and the places named give reality to the stories although analogs surely exist in other cities. That he touches the "hot buttons" of contemporary Jewish upper middle class urban life, makes these stories irresistible. Not a pretty picture but probably a true one.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 9/15/2003

Friendship: An Expose

by Joseph Epstein

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin, 2006

Number of Pages: 251

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Philosophical Thought and Essays](#)

Review(s):

Delineating the scope, variety, and limits of the human relationship subsumed under the name of friendship, Epstein again touches on one of the charged aspects of life. Having covered envy and snobbery, he focuses on the history, psychology and personal experience of that ambiguous connection. He brings the reader into contact with the ancient and great by quoting their conversations and describing their friendships. His insightful observations that articulate the guilty and repressed emotions sometimes associated with the dark side of friendship legitimizes them. For that alone, it is worth reading!



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 8/9/2006

Fred Astaire

by Joseph Epstein

Publisher: Yale Univ. Pr., 2008

Number of Pages: 191

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Biography and Memoirs](#)

Review(s):

The inspiration for this paean to Fred Astaire can be found in Epstein's introduction. The sorry state of contemporary popular culture has prompted him to celebrate Astaire's inimitable style in his own inimitable style: hard work, integrity and meticulous attention to detail. In the darkness of the Great Depression, with W.W.II looming, escape was possible at the movies. A model of innocence and beauty provided by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers fantasies offered respite from the woes of the day. After assassinations, a lost war ,911, a world in economic chaos, and general social disintegration, there is no such refuge. The movies and now television depict the sadness and ugliness of the present. Epstein's appreciation of Astaire's "democratic aristocracy" is important because it shows us what we have lost and what we must recover.

Reviewed by: Corie Ginsburg on 11/11/2008



In A Cardboard Belt

by Joseph Epstein

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin, 2007

Number of Pages: 410

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Humor](#)

[Philosophical Thought and Essays](#)

Review(s):

A cardboard belt would surely strain and break under the force of intellect and passion contained in this book. The introduction concerns the unique nature of the author's seventieth birthday; the end of middle age. There is a theory that at seventy, one may let it all hang out, and so he has. From praising Proust to savaging (his word) Mortimer Adler, and articulating the "Perpetual Adolescence" of current American society, he gives vent to strongly held opinions. He entices the reader to try Proust one more time, to seek out Paul Valery, and to think again about W. H. Auden. Personal musings about the uses of insomnia, awe annihilating insights into the thoughts of the professor behind the lectern, and a graceful farewell to Aristides add savor to this wonderful book.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 10/16/2007



Envy: The Seven Deadly Sins

by Joseph Epstein

Publisher: Oxford University Press, 2003

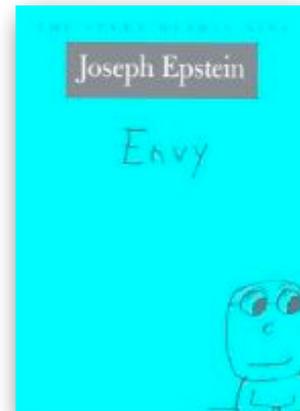
Number of Pages: 98

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Review:

The first of a projected series about the seven deadly sins by various authors, commissioned by the Oxford University Press, Joseph Epstein's small book on ENVY follows on the heels of his treatise on SNOBBERY: The American Version. His research on these maladies make him a kind of connoisseur of soul sickness. Examples from literature, observation, and introspection document their pervasiveness and the possible utility of these psychological phenomena. He differentiates between jealousy and envy which are often confused; jealousy being applied to one's own possessions and envy to that of others. Envy is felt in varying degrees causing discomfort from a twinge to a holocaust. The ability to deal with such subjects with candor and a soupcon of humor is the mark of a very special mind.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 12/16/2003



Snobbery: The American Version

by Joseph Epstein

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin, 2002

Number of Pages: 251

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

Nonfiction

Review:

In his characteristic style-serious-humorous-wry-and personal-Joseph Epstein examines the human expression of the universal biological phenomenon of "pecking order", from every conceivable angle. There is no escape! Self-revelatory as a personal essay must be, this is a personal book for the reader as well. No matter how much mental squirming one does, he finds a variety of snobbery to fit. J.E. hypothesizes that the fall of the WASP Society and the tendency toward homogenization of rank in our country, has caused snobbery to proliferate. Analyzed into upward-seeking, downward-fearing, and reverse-looking, snobs are to be found in every category of human endeavor "except perhaps podiatry." Quotations from and referrals to many famous writers and artists provide instances of snobbery in action. A glance at the "blurbs" on the back of the dust cover is well worth the reader's attention. While this is a very funny book, it is also a serious study of human relations in America, past and present.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 7/31/2002

Alexis de Tocqueville: Democracy's Guide

by Joseph Epstein

Publisher: HarperCollins, 2006

Number of Pages: 205

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

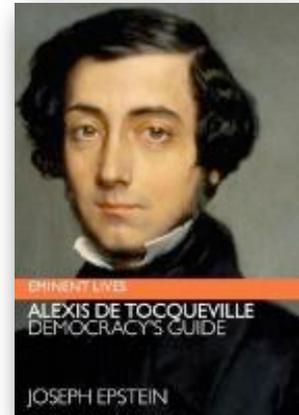
Genres:

[Nonfiction](#)

[Politics](#)

Review(s):

The editors of the Eminent Lives series chose well when they selected Joseph Epstein to write this brief biography of Alexis de Tocqueville. His research and writings about Envy, Snobbery and Friendship have served him in his task of "getting at the quality of mind" of his subject. Tocqueville was an ideal friend, loyal, generous and abiding. Born an aristocrat at the beginning of the inexorable advance of equality, he knew about envy and snobbery from both sides of the fence. While Equality was the "idee mere" from his observations of democracy in America and the revolution in France, his sympathies favored Liberty although he recognized the dynamic tension and irreconcilability between them. He wrote that democracy and equality discourage both brilliance and great crimes while fostering mediocrity and comfort. Liberty allows the means to excel but few benefit and many suffer. A spectrum of political opinions find confirmation in his books. Epstein projects a clean, sharp picture of the man and his ideas. Informed by Tocqueville's works and other biographies, this is not a digest but a distillation enlivened by Epsteinian wit.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 2/19/2007

Middlesex

by Jeffrey Eugenides

Publisher: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002

Number of Pages: 529

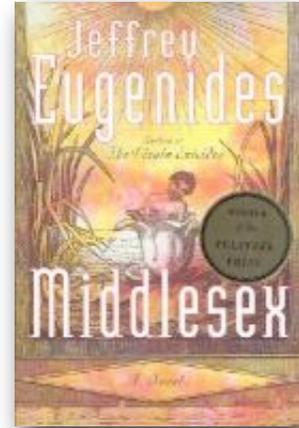
Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Family saga](#)

Review:

The journey of a gene through time and space - from a silkworm cocoonery on Mt. Olympus in Asia Minor to Detroit, Michigan, USA, comes to fruition in the body of Calliope/Cal Stephanides on January 8th, 1960. A recessive mutation that would not manifest itself until it met its twin was propelled by geography, politics, love and proximity to do just that. The wedding of Desdemona and Eleutherios (Lefty) in 1922, aboard a ship carrying them away from a war between Greece and Turkey to the home of a cousin in America, set the stage. They are brother and sister, each of whom unknowingly bears the mutated gene as does their cousin Sourmelina who gives birth to Theodora (Tessie). In the same month Desdemona gives life to Miltiades (Milton), "One mutation apiece". With the help of Artie Shaw's "Begin the Beguine," Tessie and Milton marry and beget Calliope/Cal. The connection is made. Lying on the 5th chromosome, this gene produces the hormone 5-alpha-reductase that determines one's sex. The mutation prevents this, and the result is an intersex body called a pseudohermaphrodite after the child of Hermes and Aphrodite in Greek Mythology. The ramifications of this in the life of 14 year old Calliope become apparent when she attends a girls middle school and falls in love with a fellow student. As her classmates begin to become women, she develops muscles and a mustache. Alarmed, her parents take her to Dr. Peter Luce, an authority on gender identity. The medical information about this condition is rendered in a straightforward clinical manner but the psychological aspects are played out in the depiction of her/his life as she develops into Cal. Interspersed chapters record his life looking back on this metamorphosis. This is told in the first person and includes many facts about the authors life, which may lead the reader to speculate about an autobiographical aspect to this book. The richness of the story of the family through 80 years is magnificently written in beautifully evocative language. This book won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, 2002



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 9/15/2003

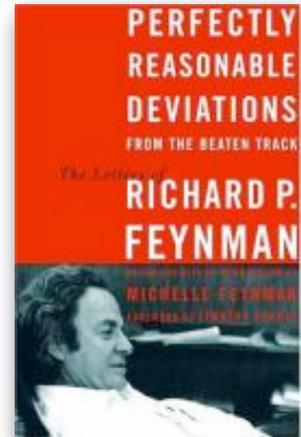
Perfectly Reasonable Deviations From the Beaten Track

by Michelle Feynman, ed.

Publisher: Basic Books, 2005

Number of Pages: 467

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)



Genres:

[Nonfiction](#)

Review(s):

Correspondence, memorabilia, and pictures, gathered and edited by the daughter of renowned and revered physicist, Richard Feynman reveal the man behind the fame. Her commentary evokes his grace, honesty, charm, and kindness. Chronicled from his graduation from MIT to his famous diagnosis of the Challenger disaster (1939-1987), a year before his death, his personality, his values and his unique genius shine from his letters. References to his boyhood and his parents shed light on the sources of his character and intelligence. A forward by Timothy Ferris, attests to his independence, integrity and enthusiasm for science.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 6/24/2005

Borrowed Finery

by Paula Fox

Publisher: Henry Holt & Company, 1999

Number of Pages: 210

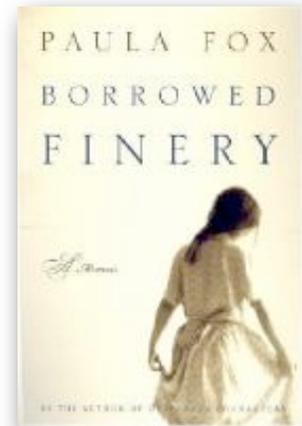
Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Biography and Memoirs](#)

Review:

Paula Fox was rescued from an orphanage where her parents had abandoned her a few days after her birth by Uncle Elwood, a gentle, loving and very poor minister who cared for his invalid mother and provided a part-time home to his irascible sister. For her first 5 years in this bleak household, she knew the only real love in her life. After her charming but alcoholic father and her cold, rejecting (possibly psychotic?) mother reappeared, she was tossed, so to speak, from pillar to post, staying for brief periods with friends and relatives, some kindly, some not. In her episodic life she attended some public grade and high schools, and oddly enough, a French-Canadian finishing school and Julliard Music School. Among her associates and relatives were some famous people who appeared suddenly and disappeared just as suddenly, such as John Wayne, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. and Jr. The theme of borrowed finery referred to the real poverty of her spirit which was embodied in her lack of clothing. Appropriate dress always appeared when she needed it for an occasion but it was never her own. Only her evident literary gifts and intelligence enabled her to survive and write this memoir of a chaotic life. Paula Fox is an award winning author of many books for children books. *Borrowed Finery* is her autobiography.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 10/23/2002

The Corrections

by Jonathan Franzen

Publisher: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001

Number of Pages: 568

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

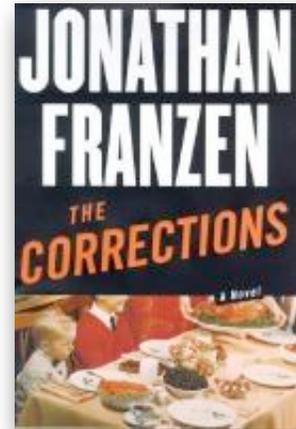
Genres:

[Family saga](#)

[Literary fiction - Male authors](#)

Review(s):

Family therapy is indicated here! With the best of intentions and the worst of methods, Enid and Alfred Lambert have reared a nestful of miserable and dysfunctional people, One of them in turn is passing the poison on to another generation. Mercifully, the other two have no children. In this scathing commentary on contemporary life, Franzen illustrates the breakdown of Western culture through this wretched family. He does it in language so perfect for this sad task that he takes the reader inside their tortured souls. His gift for expressing their internal torment is Dantesque. As in Dante, there are elements of grotesque humor, but the message is clear: We are in trouble! But in the end with the "corrections" made there is the implication that this family and by extension the world will right itself. There is even a reference to Skokie as an antidote to St. Jude, the name of the Lambert's hometown whom the author tells us is the patron saint of hopeless cases.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 3/23/2002

Hanna's Daughters

by Marianne Frederiksson

Publisher: Ballantine, 1998

Number of Pages: 345

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

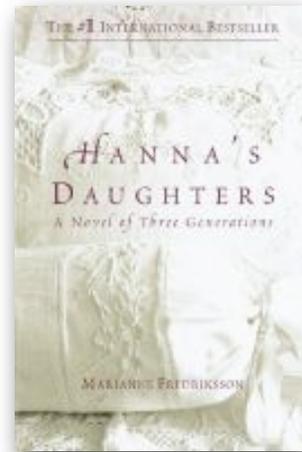
Genres:

[Historical fiction](#)

Review:

The lives of three generations of women span the history of Sweden from starving peasantry to modern affluence. They bear witness both to what is unchanging and to the erosions and accretions of 130 years in a family. The relationships of these mothers and daughters, their husbands and children illustrate the social, sexual and political attitudes of their times.

Psychological inheritance lived against these differing backgrounds create three very different women but the underlying family traits draw them together in love and understanding. Evocative description of the Swedish landscape adds to the atmosphere this lovely book. It is a translation of a Swedish best seller.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/9/2001

Memoirs of a Geisha

by Arthur Golden

Publisher: Knopf, 1997

Number of Pages: 434

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

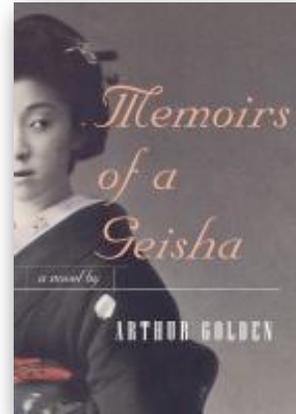
Genres:

[Literary fiction - Male authors](#)

Review:

A view into an exotic world through the eyes of an unlikely Geisha. Chiyo becomes a Geisha because of those very eyes, rare blue/gray in a population of dark eyed people. Her metamorphosis into Sayari, the premier Geisha of her generation is fraught with intrigue, suffering and self denial. Her second transformation into the mistress of her love "The Chairman", ensconced in a luxury apartment in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City is equally unlikely but possibly true. The novel is loosely based on the experience of Liza Dalby who lived for one year as a Geisha in Japan.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 4/10/2001



Snow in August

by Pete Hamill

Publisher: Little, Brown and Co., 1997

Number of Pages: 327

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

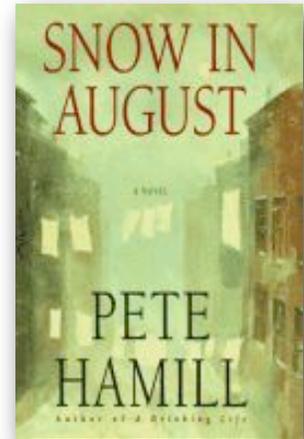
Genres:

[General fiction](#)

Review(s):

Ostensibly a coming of age novel, this book tells the story of Michael Devlin, an 11- year- old Irish Catholic altar boy and his friendship with Rabbi Hirsch, a besieged, widowed refugee from the horrors of the Holocaust. It slowly becomes a kabbalistic tale of time/space travel in a Chagall-like atmosphere. The book can be read as an imaginary tale or as a faith induced "other reality." Anti-Semitism expanded to the general battle between good and evil is shown in the lives of ordinary people.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 3/20/2002



Five Quarters of the Orange

by Joanne Harris

Publisher: William Morrow & Co, 2001

Number of Pages: 307

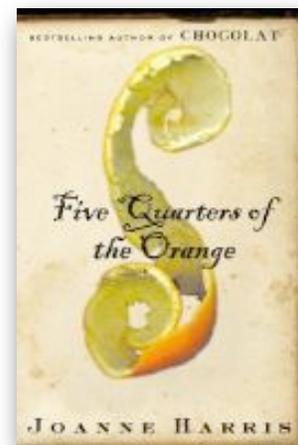
Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Historical fiction](#)

Review(s):

This is a book to be read with your taste buds. It is bitter and sweet, and sour and salty. Set in the French countryside during the waning days of the German occupation of France during WW II, it contrasts the beauty and bounty of the land to the bitterness of the plight of the inhabitants. The story is told by 65 year old Framboise Dartigen, the youngest daughter of deceased Mirabelle. Her inheritance is an album filled with recipes, thoughts, insights, newspaper clippings, herbal cures and paragraphs in a mysterious cryptic language. A widow herself, she returns after 20 years to *Les Laveuses*, the tiny village that the family fled "in the wake of that dreadful business." Mirabelle is an evil legend there and she dared not use her maiden name—Dartigen. After so many years and under her married name she is unrecognized as she and her children reclaim the family farm and rebuild the house which had burnt to the ground in the "dreadful business." Framboise(Fr:raspberry) remembers her 9th year in that place and time, which led up to the fire. The album and its mysteries are eventually decoded and lead to understanding of and sympathy with the mother she never really knew. The scent of orange precipitated the hellish migraine headaches that Mirabelle was subject to, and Framboise exploited this vulnerability to make her ill so that she could be free for her forbidden adventures. The title of the book refers to this. Her sorrow and regret are deeply felt. Descriptions of food and its preparation accompany the action in mouth-watering imagery as might be expected of the author of *Chocolat*.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 11/20/2006

Plainsong

by Kent Haruf

Publisher: Knopf, 1999

Number of Pages: 301

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

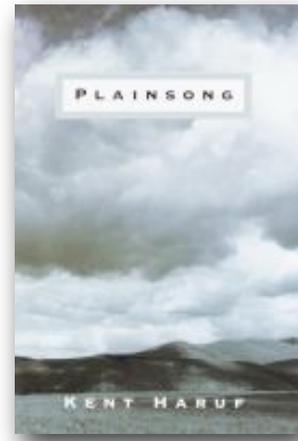
[Literary fiction - Male authors](#)

[General fiction](#)

Review(s):

A collection of severely dysfunctional families fragment and realign into more comfortable relationships. Two teachers, two young boys, two elderly brothers and a pregnant 17 year old endure pain, both physical and mental, with pragmatic grace and by doing what needs to be done, heal into a family of sorts. An unflinching look at the nitty-gritty of small town life in Holt, Colorado and a nearby beef cattle farm. Life, death and the struggle between them for both humans and animals are depicted as the norm for mortals in a serene cosmos.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/18/2000



Kaaterskill Falls

by Allegra Goodman

Publisher: Dial Press, 1998

Number of Pages: 324

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Family saga](#)

[Jewish themes](#)

Review:

Life in the apparently idyllic microcosm of Kaaterskill Falls, a summer community of Orthodox Jews, boils beneath the surface. Three families play out their tensions over issues of obedience and self-fulfillment, religion and secularity, patriarchy and feminism. This well-crafted, multi-layered novel is recommended to discussion groups, those curious or interested in orthodox religion and readers looking for an engaging story.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/27/2000



The White Bone

by Barbara Gowdy

Publisher: Henry Holt & Company, 1999

Number of Pages: 330

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

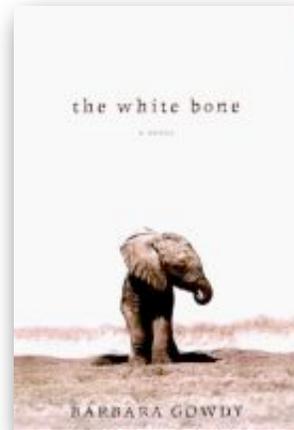
Genres:

Literary fiction - Female authors

Review(s):

The World according to MUD (cow name-She-Spurns) is the story of an orphaned elephant and is told within her subconscious. A brilliantly imagined world view in which time and space are perceived in elephantine dimensions. Analogs to human behavior from her viewpoint yield a new perspective on family, interspecies relationships, the landscape, the heavens and religion. The terrible suffering caused by their slaughter for ivory and the severe droughts they experience are rendered heartbreakingly. The author provides a map of the domain and a genealogy of the elephant families. For the imaginative and curious reader.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 1/31/2001



Journey From the Land of No

by Roya Hakakian

Publisher: Crown Publishers, 2004

Number of Pages: 233

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

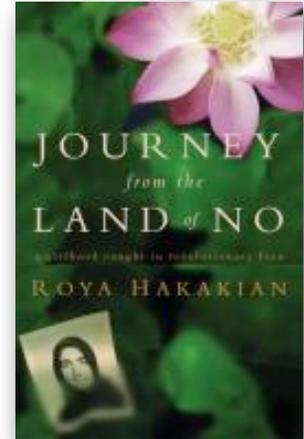
Genres:

[Biography and Memoirs](#)

Review:

Roya was 12 years old in 1979, when Shah Reza Pahlevi was deposed, and 13 when Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in Iran. That nodal year when a child becomes a young adult was heightened by the political upheaval that changed her world. The beloved only daughter of a close and loving Jewish family that had lived in Iran (Persia) for many generations, she encountered her sexuality and its repression together. The imposition of the veil, the limitations of career possibilities, the denigration of and violence against women, and the resurgence of anti-Semitism colored her free and open spirit but did not quell it. Beautifully evoked descriptions of her early life in Iran vividly reveal its culture and atmosphere. She discovered the consolations of writing as she contemplated suicide on a rainy rooftop. It saved her life and pointed to a new and fruitful one. She moved to the United States where she became an associate producer of CBS's 60 Minutes and she is currently a documentary filmmaker. She lives in Connecticut.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/20/2005



The Transit of Venus

by Shirley Hazzard

Publisher: Penguin Books, 1980

Number of Pages: 337

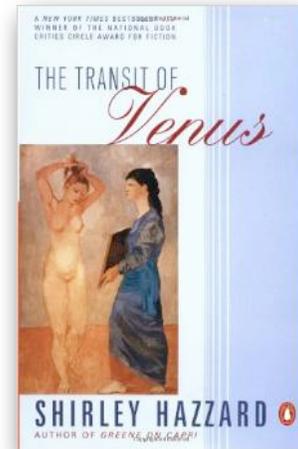
Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

Literary fiction - Female authors

Review:

The title refers to an astronomical phenomenon which occurs only every 121.5 years and is happening this year (2004) on June 8. The planet Venus passes between the earth and the sun and is seen from the earth as a black disk moving across the surface of the sun. The analogy intended in the novel refers to the "transit" of love (Venus) from one man to another against a background of brilliance. The story concerns two beautiful sisters born in Australia, orphaned in early childhood and cared for by a neurotic and resentful half-sister and whose frustration colors their lives. Caro, dark and striking, and Grace, fair and complaint, move to Britain to the home of Professor Thrale, an aged astronomer and a friend of the family, as an interim home until they can get on with their lives. Grace soon catches the eye of Professor Thrale's son Christian and they marry. Ted Tice, an impoverished young astronomy student who also finds shelter in the Thrale home, falls inexorably in love with Caro who does not return his passion. She is bright and ambitious. She passes a difficult examination and gets a job. But alas, she is sexually vulnerable and Victor, attractive and ostensibly rich, exploits this and she becomes his mistress. Her moment of truth comes many years later when he can no longer sustain the lie that his life has been. Adam Vail, an artist and a widower, appears and sweeps her off her feet and brings her to New York where they live for a number of years. At his sudden death, Ted Tice who has married but has never fallen out of love with Caro, appears and is ready to repudiate his wife and children to marry Caro who now reciprocates his true and pure love for her. Logistics make it necessary for her to board a plane for Rome after which he plans to follow, but the story ends ambiguously. Did her plane crash? Despite the banality of the story, it is beautifully written and the ambiance and atmosphere created beguile the reader.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 4/20/2004

Philosophy Made Simple

by Robert Hellenga

Publisher: Little, Brown and Co., 2006

Number of Pages: 277

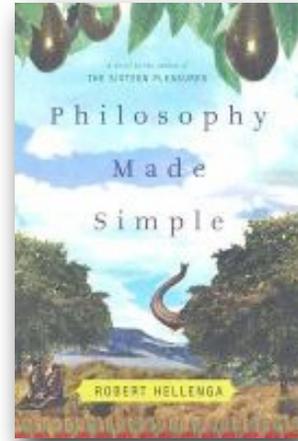
Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

General fiction

Review:

A strange little book about a 60 year old widower with a failing heart, cuckolded but still loving. The father of three audacious daughters, he is at a turning point in his life. Inspired by a book titled *Philosophy Made Simple*, written by the uncle of his daughter's Indian boyfriend, he considers the philosophies and methods of mystics and philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Kant, Shopenhauer, quantum physics, Hindu Rites, fundamentalist Christianity and much good food and drink, and applies them to his situation. He seeks to replicate and enlarge the fleeting glimpses of Ultimate Reality (Kant's *Ding an sich*, the "thing in itself") that he has experienced at nodal moments in his life. His path from avocado dealer at Chicago's South Water Market to ownership of an avocado orchard in Texas where he acquires an elephant named Norma Jean whose abstract paintings are regarded as authentic art, leads him to the consummation of late love and, for a brief moment, as he daydreams of his past, he seems to see "Things As They Really Are." Is he dying?



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 4/25/2006

Strange Beauty: Murray Gell-Mann and the Revolution in Twentieth Century Physics

by George Johnson

Publisher: Knopf, 1999

Number of Pages: 434

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

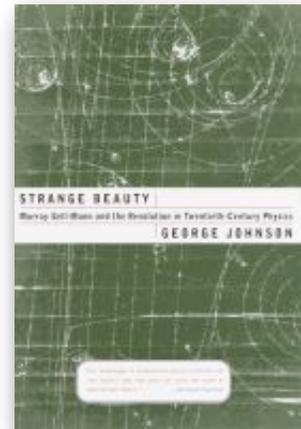
Genres:

[Biography and Memoirs](#)

Review:

Murray Gell-Mann, best known for his discovery and naming of the sub-atomic particles called Quarks is paradoxically highly respected for his work and ruefully regarded by his colleagues. By illuminating his parent's struggling lives and his own early times one comes to understand and sympathize with both. A masterful biography of a towering but flawed genius and insight into the personal repercussions of extreme intelligence, this book is recommended to those fascinated by the growing tip of science and those who work in that rarified realm.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 2/7/2001



A Walker in the City

by Alfred Kazin

Publisher: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1951

Number of Pages: 176

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

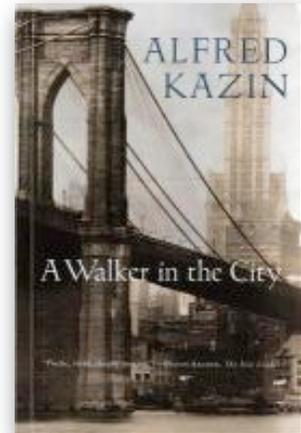
[Nonfiction](#)

[Biography and Memoirs](#)

Review:

An early impressionistic autobiographical account of the development of a famous recently deceased writer through descriptions of his many walks in New York. His constrained boyhood in Brownsville (a poor Jewish enclave) expanded as he grew older to walk in the Christian neighborhoods and ultimately to the larger world of "American" New York. His discovery of the Public Library further enlarged his world. His special ability to interpret and articulate the sights, sounds and smells of his environment portends the brilliant career he achieved. Lovely line drawings by Marvin Bileck embellish this charming book. Recommended to aspiring writers.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 2/7/2001



The Namesake

by Jhumpa Lahiri

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin, 2003

Number of Pages: 291

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

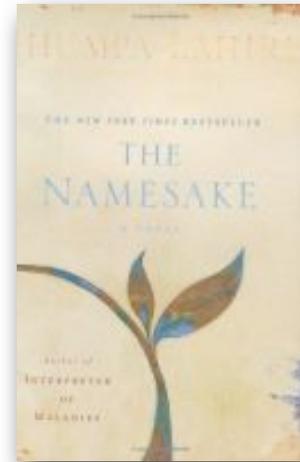
[Family saga](#)

[Literary fiction - Female authors](#)

Review(s):

The founding of the American branch of the Ganguli family took place inauspiciously on an ordinary afternoon in 1968 in her parent's house in Calcutta India, as 19-year-old Ashima Bhaduri returned from her college class to find "a man" and his parents waiting to see her. After a few perfunctory questions by his father and a selling job by her mother, it was concluded that she was to marry the man and move to Boston Massachusetts, USA where he was earning a Ph.D. in fiber optics at MIT. She had never been away from her home. It was only after the betrothal, that she learned his name. After an elaborate wedding and a long flight to the U.S., we find her in a bare-bones apartment about to give birth. The love that grows between them, born of her innocent courage and his innate kindness is never spoken but is demonstrated in acts of duty and compassion. The child of that union is Gogol, named for the famed Russian writer whose stories his father Ashoke loved, and, in a curious circumstance, saved his life. The story of the next 30 years of their life focuses on Gogol and his name. A letter, lost in transit between Calcutta and Cambridge, Massachusetts, is symbolic of the diminishing link between homeland and the new land. From his infancy to his graduation from Columbia University as an architect, his love affairs and his broken marriage, his name and his ethnicity play a strong role in his life. The events and cultural changes of these years (1968-1999), as perceived by him give a wider perspective to American readers. Beautifully expressed by the Pulitzer prize winning author, the themes of the immigrant experience, the father-son relationship, the importance of one's name, cultural differences in the expression of family love, and the homogenization of the world (his sister marries a Jewish/Chinese man), are articulated.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 12/16/2003



Departures

by Miriam Striezhoff Lewis

Publisher: XLibris , 2000

Number of Pages: 450

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

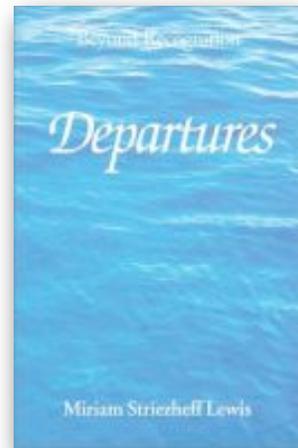
[Historical fiction](#)

Review:

"We are a part of the soil, the sky, the air our forebears breathed..." so the author distills the essence of this wonderful novel. The beautiful, intelligent eldest daughter of an increasingly affluent Jewish family in the time of Napoleon, Jeanette Ballin* seems to partake of a newly blossoming world. She does so in ways she could never imagine. Her tale takes the reader from "civilized" Europe (Paris and Vienna) to the wild Carpathian mountain country where the Greeks and the Turks contend to forge a nation and the Jews are, as usual, caught between. Her personal story of love, marriage, bigotry and betrayal is replete with domestic detail of food and clothing, which serves to bring it to life and color. A summer night complete with plaintive violin and passionate dancing and "The Marriage of Figaro" at the Theatre-Français illustrate the scope of her life and she has room in her heart for all of it. Jacob Abelscu, fur merchant of Galati (in what was to become Rumania) contributes the "soil, sky and air" and his personal history to the physical and psychological compound that reverberates down the generations. A hint in the prologue indicates that we shall learn how these components manifest in the future.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/9/2001

*The author is my cousin and Jeanette Bailin is our great grandmother. This was to be the first volume of a historically fictionalized trilogy that was to lead to us. Sadly, Miriam died shortly after this book was written. — Corie



A Sense of the Mysterious

by Alan Lightman

Publisher: Pantheon Books, 2005

Number of Pages: 208

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

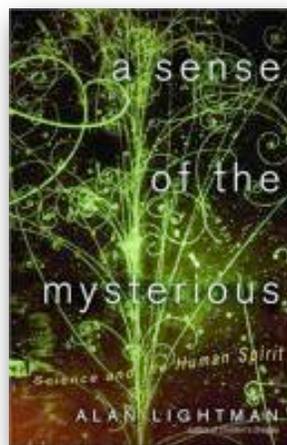
Genres:

[Nonfiction](#)

Review:

The subtitle: *Science and the Human Spirit* alludes to the dual perspective that Lightman is uniquely able to give to these subjects thought to be forever separate: Literature and Science. A research astrophysicist and a prize winning novelist, his disparate viewpoints lend a third dimension to his view of the world. In this small book of essays, he illuminates the lives and accomplishments of Albert Einstein, Richard Feynman, Edward Teller, and Vera Ruben and ruminates on the use of metaphor in science and the effect of the acceleration and ubiquity of technology on the human psyche. In his novel, *The Diagnosis* he gives life to this last idea in the person of one Bill Chalmers and prescribes observation of the serenity of Socrates in the face of death as a remedy. Please select the review of *The Diagnosis* to better understand this.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/20/2005



The Diagnosis

by Alan Lightman

Publisher: Pantheon Books, 2000

Number of Pages: 369

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

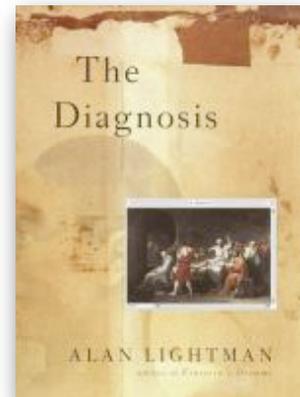
[Horror](#)

[General fiction](#)

Review:

An account of the dissolution of an ordinary middle class, middle management, loving father and husband: Bill Chalmers. On an ordinary day, on his way to work it all catches up with him. The palm pilots, cell phones, gridlock and the insistent cacophony and pressure of his life overload his circuits and he literally crashes. He has forgotten who he is and where he was going. The motto of his company is "The Maximum of Information in the Minimum of Time" While his memory returns, he experiences a creeping paralysis which ultimately engulfs him. In his efforts to return to what he believes is health he learns that his bosses (all the way to the top), the doctors, the lawyers, his wife, his son Alex, everybody is besieged and vulnerable and nobody can diagnose much less treat the malady of the Information Age. Against this, Lightman juxtaposes a fanciful story of the death of Socrates (illegally downloaded by Alex). Perhaps the perspective and serenity of Socrates in the face of execution are the remedies for the plague of our time.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 10/21/2000



Consequences

by Penelope Lively

Publisher: Viking Press, 2007

Number of Pages: 258

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

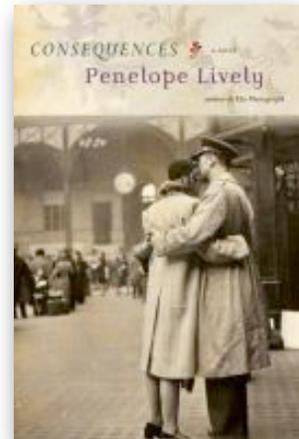
Genres:

[Family saga](#)

Review(s):

Penelope Lively speculates upon the pull of historical circumstance and the push of individual choices on the trajectories of the lives of three generations of a singular English family. Their years, between 1935 and 2000 encompass the tense time leading to W.W.II, its aftermath, the energized 50's and 60's and the disillusion and letdown that follow. The romance and beautiful marriage of Lorna and Matt are cut short by his death in the war. Love and courage echo in their progeny. Their joy is lived in an ancient cottage in Somerset, idyllic and isolated, where Matt, an artist, paints frescos on the walls which lead to its rediscovery by their granddaughter and closes the circle. Despite it's literary contrivance, this novel is compelling and thought provoking.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 9/20/2007



A House Unlocked

by Penelope Lively

Publisher: Grove Press, 2001

Number of Pages: 221

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

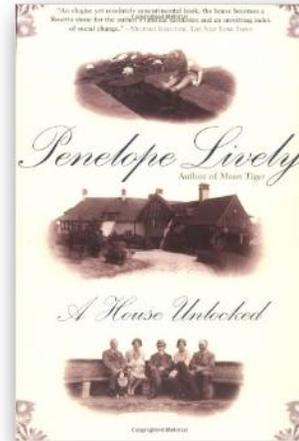
Genres:

[Biography and Memoirs](#)

Review:

A lovely book in which the author links the personal with the political and universal, by invoking the spirit of the English country house in which her family has lived for the past 75 years. By focusing on some of its furnishings and artifacts, she evokes a time and a set of social circumstances. The hall chest, the photograph album and the picnic rug conjure gracious living, servants, sexual repression, long skirts and leg-o-mutton sleeves. Other pieces call up WW II and the housing of children from London sent to the countryside to escape the Blitz. The customs of the religious and political life of the early part of the century are called to mind by the gong stand, *The Book of Common Prayer*, and the potted meat jars. Almost the whole of the 20th century is recorded in the life-styles embedded in the furnishings and equipment of times past. *Penelope Lively* is a winner of the Booker Prize for Literature.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 7/17/2002



Thinks...A Novel

by David Lodge

Publisher: Viking Press, 2001

Number of Pages: 340

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

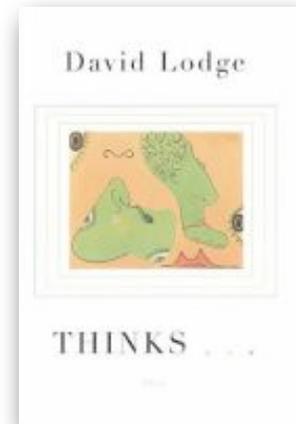
Genres:

[General fiction](#)

Review:

The study of human consciousness for application to the development of Artificial Intelligence is given "life" through the characters of Ralph Messenger, the director of the Holt Belling Center for Cognitive Science at the University of Gloucester, and Helen Reed, a novelist who is teaching a course in Creative Writing there. They each record their thoughts, his on a voice activated tape recorder, hers in writing on a computer. In alternating chapters, the reader is privy to their impressions of the same events. The subject of these streams of consciousness is sex. He is married but promiscuous and obsessed by carnality, she is a recent widow and lapsed but nostalgic Catholic. They document their attraction and subsequent affair. Love, lust, fidelity, and betrayal are expressed in their musings. As a scientist, Messenger's data is his "reality." While hers is also, her profession as a creator of "reality" colors her input. This difference adds a dimension to their research. The lesson is: it is always a mistake to suppose that you know what is going on in someone else's head. The underlying science, poetry, and philosophy give weight to this otherwise banal story and are treated seriously and with intelligence.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/20/2002



Project Girl

by Janet MacDonald

Publisher: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999

Number of Pages: 231

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Nonfiction](#)

[Biography and Memoirs](#)

Review:

The almost unbelievable tale of a young black woman's trajectory from the crime-ridden ghetto of Brooklyn's Public Housing Projects to her present status as a lawyer living and working in Paris. Her efforts to reconcile these disparate worlds wreak havoc in her life and she achieves a precarious equilibrium. Recommended for realists.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 2/7/2001



One Heart

by Jane McCafferty

Publisher: HarperCollins, 1999

Number of Pages: 291

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

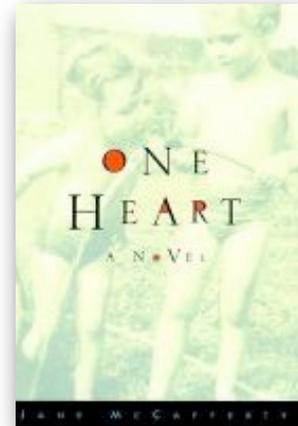
[Family saga](#)

[General fiction](#)

Review:

The links and barriers that define the relationship of sisters Gladys and Ivy are tested from childhood to old age. They are cooks at a camp/school for rich troubled children in upstate New York , and are middle aged and plump. The exploitation and favoritism of their father plays out in their reactions to James, Gladys's husband (ex) and Ivy's lover (same guy), the deaths of James's son in Vietnam, the accidental drowning of James and Gladys's 3 year old daughter Ann, and the waif Raelene who's own troubles redeem their lives. Ivy's soliloquy at Gladys's death beautifully expresses their bond.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 7/17/2000



John Adams

by David McCullough

Publisher: Simon & Schuster, 2001

Number of Pages: 656

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

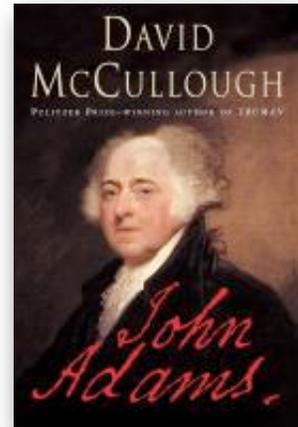
[Biography and Memoirs](#)

[History](#)

Review(s):

A moving portrait of a man who embodied the ideals of the nation that he helped to found. Sometimes misguided but always honest, John Adams' vitality, humor, and integrity are never in question. McCullough uses diaries and letters to create a sense of immediacy for the reader that makes one realize that the creation of our unique republic was not so long ago and that many of the same issues abide in our time.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 3/20/2002



After This

by Alice McDermott

Publisher: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006

Number of Pages: 279

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

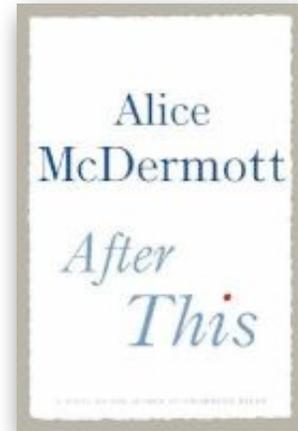
Genres:

[Family saga](#)

Review):

As a devout Catholic single woman turning 30 with an aging father, a single brother and a job in a typing pool, she prayed only for contentment. It was not to be. "This" is the life lived by Mary Keane and her family in the twenty years between 1950 and 1970. The shadow of WW II still lingered and the Vietnam war loomed. It was a watershed time. Her marriage and four children, Jacob, Michael, Annie and Claire rendered that wish moot. Assassinations, the sexual revolution and student unrest colored the landscape of the land and the ostensibly safe and peaceful suburbs of Long Island New York. The family absorbed the influence of those events. Coupled with their traditional Catholicism, the conflicting factors play out in their lives. Gentle Jacob is drafted and goes to Vietnam and his death, recalling another Jacob in his fathers experience in WW II. Charming Michael is a "dropout." Sweet Annie lies and steals and helps a teen-aged friend get an abortion, and innocent Claire becomes pregnant. Father McShane performs an emergency wedding ceremony. The political has become personal. After This can only refer to the life to come, perhaps more amenable to contentment.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 11/8/2006



Saturday

by Ian McEwan

Publisher: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2005

Number of Pages: 289

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

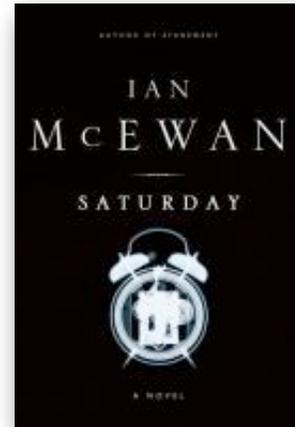
Genres:

[Literary fiction - Male authors](#)

[General fiction](#)

Review(s):

Henry Perowne, skilled neurosurgeon, awakes at 3:AM on Saturday morning, February 15, 2003, in London. Like Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, he lives a lifetime in a day. It is the day that a million people have gathered in the streets to protest England's entry into the war in Iraq. An airplane in flames is his first sight. His day unfolds with a succession of marital love, parenting, brain surgery accompanied by Bach, a visit in a nursing home with his Alzheimer ridden mother, a confrontation with a thug with Huntington's disease, a fraught racquetball game and a home invasion by the aforementioned thug, interspersed by musings about Darwin, Hobbes and Newton. His day ends in bed again with his beloved wife thinking "this is all there is". These thoughts and events are interrupted by allusions to the present state of the world. His son Theo, a Blues Musician, states the case " The bigger you think, the crappier it looks...Think small". (p35) McEwan juxtaposes life at the quotidian: science, art, family, against the Macro world of looming catastrophe: war, terrorism, and the atomic threat and comes to a nexus point where the two intersect.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 8/5/2005

Welcome to Heavenly Heights

by Risa Miller

Publisher: St. Martin's Press, 2003

Number of Pages: 230

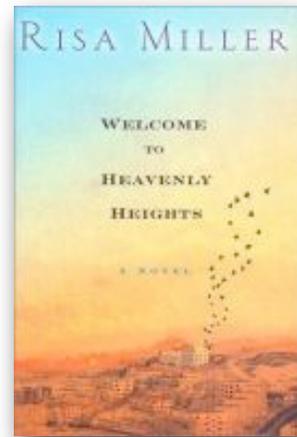
Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Jewish themes](#)

Review(s):

Tova Zissie is named for her grandma who "expired like a fish out of water" when the family came to America, has moved "home" to Heavenly Heights, a settlement on the Judean Ridge on the West Bank in Gaza. Her name means "good" and "sweet" in Hebrew, but with a twist. "Sweet" meaning never complaining and "good" meaning a feel for defense, necessary virtues for the endeavor. From a comfortable life in Baltimore, Tova, her husband Mike and their children returned to Eretz Yisreal, the Promised Land. For spiritual and economic reasons they bought an apartment in the contested settlements. The ordinary bonding and tensions among closely packed neighbors is heightened by their dangerous position, but they accept the difficulties with grace. The succession of holidays and life milestones are infused with their feelings of holiness and tradition. The motivation and mindset of the residents of Heavenly Heights helps the reader to understand their commitment and why they resist the call to leave their homes and return the land to Palestinians,



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 9/16/2005

The Ladies Auxiliary

by Tova Mirvis

Publisher: W.W. Norton, 1999

Number of Pages: 311

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

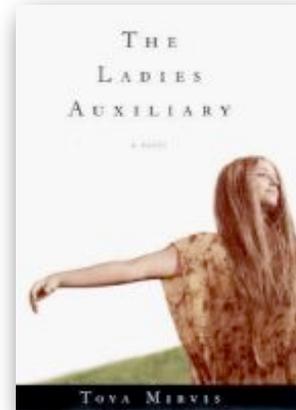
[Family saga](#)

[Jewish themes](#)

Review(s):

The arrival of Batshiva and her small daughter Ayala in the Orthodox Jewish community of Memphis, Tennessee, is as that of a bacterium in a sterile environment. For good or for ill, their presence enlivens a rigid field. The story is told by the ladies of this 'tight little island' in the first person plural to emphasize the monolithic quality of the culture. Batshiva is the young widow of the son of one of the ladies. She is a New Yorker converted to Orthodox Judaism at her marriage and she is eager to raise her daughter in the atmosphere in which her beloved Benjamin grew up and to find family and acceptance there. Her eagerness to understand and participate in time honored ritual and observance, which here have long since been calcified into rote, by interpreting them in her own artistic and imaginative way, upsets and threatens the status quo. Her presence at the Mikva though unmarried, her appeal to the restless high school girls to whom she teaches art and her chaste but somehow inappropriate wardrobe (among many other things) shake and loosen the tight bonds binding the community. Instead of being bound by tradition the ladies begin to honor it by thinking about it. One wonders if the coming of Batshiva is Divine intervention to prevent the shattering of a crystallized entity.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 6/5/2000



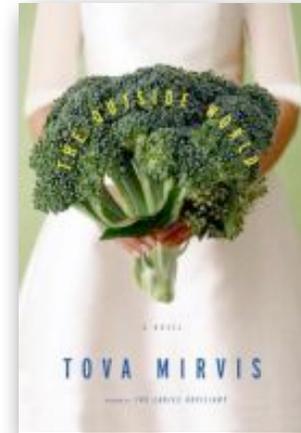
The Outside World

by Tova Mirvis

Publisher: Knopf, 2004

Number of Pages: 285

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)



Review:

Shayna and Naomi, college roommates and erstwhile best friends, grow up to be in-laws when their children marry. From a deprived and lonely childhood, at age 14, Shayna encountered the Orthodox Jewish community which embraced, fed and loved her. In her gratitude for sanctuary, she wanted only to conform and fit in. She raised her five daughters in strictest observance.

Naomi's participation in Judaism was a more flexible Modern Orthodoxy. Their friendship paled. When Shayna's eldest daughter Tzippy, an old maid by community standards at 22, intelligent and restless, went to Israel to escape the matchmakers, she met Naomi's son Bryan/Baruch who was studying there in response to his perception of his parents lack of commitment to Orthodox piety. He called it hypocrisy. She, questioning her constricted lifestyle. He, seeking authenticity in study and rigorous compliance. Each rebelled against their upbringing. Their youth, their hormones and their memories of each other in childhood bring them together.

Though the enterprise of Tzippy's father, a balance is restored and the families come together at an impromptu Passover Seder. The difficulties of accommodating religion and modernity within Orthodoxy are addressed with sympathy, humor and warmth.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 6/24/2005

The View From Castle Rock

by Alice Munro

Publisher: Knopf, 2006

Number of Pages: 349

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Family saga](#)

[Historical fiction](#)

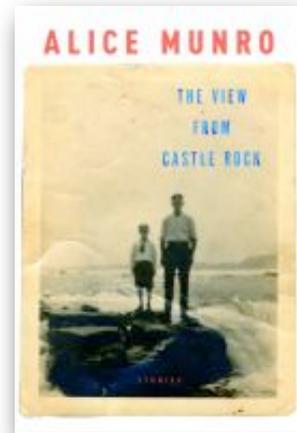
[Literary fiction - Female authors](#)

[Biography and Memoirs](#)

Review(s):

A fictionalized account of the life of this prolific author is enriched by the imaginatively reconstructed lives of her paternal fore-bearers. Beginning at the end of the seventeenth century with one William Laidlaw of Far-Hope, Ettric Valley, Scotland, a cold remote place characterized by the Minister of the Parish as having "no advantages," his name, his feats and personality resonate through the generations. Gravestones, journals, letters and family legends of this lineage of writers leap to life under her pen. A moment when a boy is taken to Edinburgh's Castle Rock and told that he can see America from its height, seeds the migration of the family to Canada. The voyage is wonderfully told. Fear, brutality, kindness and warmth mold the lives that follow, but nature, nurture, time and place are the determining factors in their influence. The second half of the book focuses on Alice Munro herself. Echoes of her antecedents are apparent in her values and responses to life. Although the stories (and she emphasizes that they are stories) are told in the first person, she remains unnamed. The development of her love for books, nature and poetry, a stint as a "hired girl" that enlightened her about class differences, and a fortuitous escape from an encounter in a hayloft, her relationships with her parents, an early failed marriage, a later happy one, and a breast cancer scare have shaped this beloved and acclaimed writer and provided material for her many books.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 1/15/2007



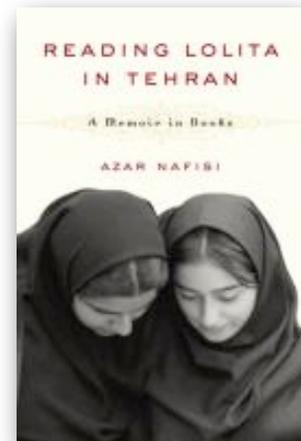
Reading Lolita in Tehran

by Azar Nafisi

Publisher: Random House, 2003

Number of Pages: 347

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)



Review:

This is a book about the value of literature, imagination and freedom to mental, emotional and even political health. After resigning from Tehran University for refusing to wear the veil, Professor Nafisi invited seven of her students to her home to discuss books that she chose for them. The group was made up of young women from a variety of backgrounds: religious, conservative, secular and progressive. Several of them had spent time in jail for defying the repressive rules of the Islamic Republic. Every Thursday morning for two years this disparate company met in her living room to talk about books ranging from *1001 Nights*, to *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Madam Bovary* and *Pride and Prejudice* to *Huckleberry Finn* and others. Encountering these fictional characters and environments had a profound effect on all the participants. In a society where women can be jailed, stoned or even killed for wearing nail polish, permitting a bit of skin or hair to show from under scarf or long black gown, or being seen with a man who is neither husband or brother, these images were very unsettling. She describes two pictures of the group, one as they appear to the outside world in their black robes and head scarves, their expressions withdrawn and blank, and another in her apartment, the bright colors of their clothing individualizing them and their faces alight. Who ever thought that a book club could save your life! Though non-fiction, her descriptions of ambience of the city, the seasons, the university, the Iraq-Iran War make it read like a novel.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 7/5/2003

The Vendor of Sweets

by R.K Narayan

Publisher: Viking Press, 1967

Number of Pages: 181

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

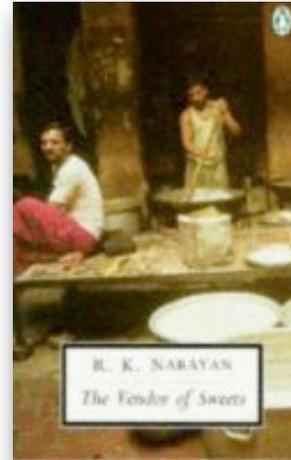
Genres:

[General fiction](#)

Review(s):

This is the author's 10th novel set in the fictional town of Malgudi, an enchanting place in which Jagan, a candy maker, tries to live an ethical life inspired by Gandhi, surrounded by corner-cutting competitors, a spoiled son, and a "maybe" daughter-in-law. Mali, the much indulged son, has been to America and has brought back to India a contraption for writing stories automatically, in which he expects his father to invest the family fortune. He feels that "his country is a little backward. Except for the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* these old stories, there is no modern writing. We will produce more stories than any other nation in the world." His misplaced and innocent patriotism causes a rift between father and son which 60-year-old Jagan resolves by returning to his Gandhian principles and leaving the scene to solve itself. He retreats to the forest. The intergenerational conflict, the naive acceptance of American values by Mali, and Jagan's bewilderment and paradoxical wisdom deepen this ostensibly simple story.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 8/26/2002



The River Midnight

by Lillian Nattel

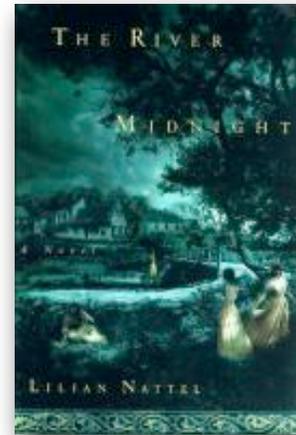
Publisher: Scribner, 1999

Number of Pages: 398

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Review:

In the year between the 20th day of the Hebrew month of Tevet, 5654 and the 16th day of Kislev, 5655, corresponding to December 29th, 1893 to December 24th, 1894, many things happened in the schetl of Blaszkka, a tiny village in Russian-occupied Poland. These events mainly concerned four women, who in their youth were known as *Vilda hayas*, wild creatures, the men they married, or didn't, the children they bore, or didn't, and their transcendent bond of friendship and kinship. Accounts of these same events are related from the perspective of each of these characters with reference to ancestors and prediction for the future. From "short Friday in December" to Purim and Passover in the Spring, to the ripening of the wild raspberries and blueberries in the woods in the summer, to the closing of the Gates of Heaven at Yom Kippur, the lives of Hanna-Leah, Faygela, Alta-Fruma. and Zisa-Sara revolved around Misha, the midwife who knew everyone's secrets and had a few of her own. Holidays, market days, weddings, births, and deaths are recounted in an atmosphere best depicted by the artist *Marc Chagall* and the stories of *Sholem Aleichem*. Instead of *Our Town* by *Thornton Wilder*, we have "Our Schetl" by Lillian Nattel. Of particular interest to those whose families connect to the schetls of eastern Europe.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 3/29/2003

I Take Thee, Serenity

by Daisy Newman

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin, 1975

Number of Pages: 314

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

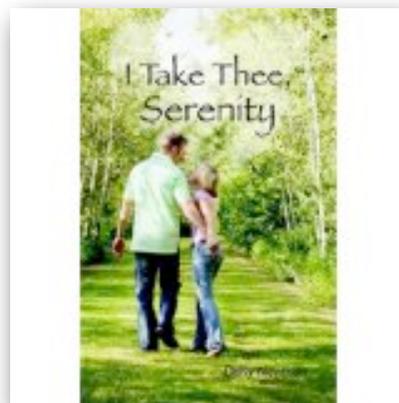
Genres:

Women's fiction

Review:

A view into the Quaker sensibility through the metamorphosis of "Rennie" (Serenity) Ross a 19-year-old spoiled suburbanite. She instinctively follows her name into a life changing experience and finds family, love and true serenity expressed in her beautiful, meaningful wedding.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 7/3/2000



Botany of Desire

by Michael Pollan

Publisher: Random House, 2001

Number of Pages: 245

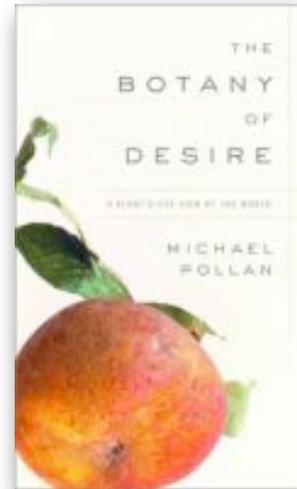
Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

Nonfiction

Review(s):

This well named author (Pollan/pollen) has written a beautiful book about what everyone has seen but few have thought about in this way before: biographies of Apples (sweetness), Tulips (beauty), Marijuana (intoxication), and Potatoes (nourishment and control), from the point of view of the plants. Their survival and well-being depend on their appeal and usefulness to Man; therefore it is to their advantage to evolve to gratify the desires of humans so that they will be cultivated. Not consciously, but nevertheless in response to man's needs and wishes, plants have done just that. Fulfilling the need for sweetness in the diet of the settlers of the American West, John Chapman (Johnny Appleseed) distributed apple seeds. Thus the Apple was brought to a new territory in which to prosper. Since apple trees do not "breed true," grafting is necessary to produce the most desirable trees and only man can do that. The reciprocal relationship helps both to flourish. The same mutuality obtains in the case of the Tulip in the service of Beauty, in this case almost to the ruin of a nation. Tulipomania all but toppled the financial markets of the Netherlands but the tulips benefited. The cultivation and hybridization of Marijuana has had legal and societal consequences for both the plants and their growers. A disease of Potatoes caused famine in Ireland, because the relationship between the farmers and the plants was flawed. They were grown in monoculture on the same land for many years and so became vulnerable to the rot that killed them and, consequently, the humans that relied on them. Pollan poses the question: in the relationship between Man and Nature, which is the subject and which the object?



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 8/26/2002

Time of Our Singing

by Richard Powers

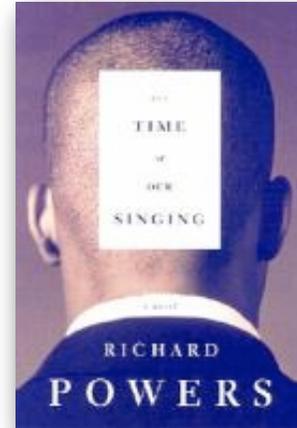
Publisher: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003

Number of Pages: 631

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Review:

In a framework of a literal and literary demonstration of Einstein's theory of general relativity, Powers recounts the life of the mixed race family of Dalia Daley, black, a doctor's daughter, vocally gifted and tenderly raised, and David Strom, Holocaust refugee, Jew, Ph.D. physicist, and white. Their chance meeting at Marian Anderson's historic concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 and their "freighted" marriage begins a saga that includes race relations, music, quantum physics and the atomic bomb. Their three children, Jonah, a light complected, supremely talented singer, Joseph, slightly darker, a pianist, his brother's accompanist, and narrator of the novel, and Ruth, a black and angry civil rights activist, symbolize the range of possibilities and horrors that beset those who belong nowhere in mid-century America. As they are hybrid, so is the novel. It is half fiction and half documentary. David, "Da" as he is called by his family, does research into the nature of time at Columbia University. According to Einstein, (who figures importantly in this tale), time is internally consistent within a closed system. In this book, each segment has it's own timeframe. In theory (with literary license) and in this story they double back on one another producing a multidimensional view. A recurring theme is a quotation from Dowland's ancient music *Time Stands Still*: "Bird and Fish can fall in love/ but where will they build their nest?" This is a very complex book, but for those interested in music, both theory and performance, theoretical physics, and the history of race in the U.S., it is very much worth the considerable time required to read it.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 3/12/2003

Genome: The Autobiography of a Species in 23 Chapters

by Matt Ridley

Publisher: HarperCollins, 1999

Number of Pages: 344

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

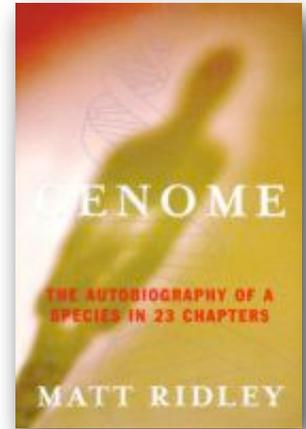
Genres:

Nonfiction

Review:

By illuminating one gene, significant to human nature, on each of the 23 chromosomes that each of us carry, Matt Ridley clarifies the arcane subject of the human genome. Not a scientist himself but a science writer, he brings a broad knowledge of the human condition from history and literature to bear on a subject that will have profound effect on every aspect of our lives. He writes in a conversational style making a forbidding subject accessible. The concluding chapter puts age old questions into a new context.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 1/22/2001



Everyman

by Philip Roth

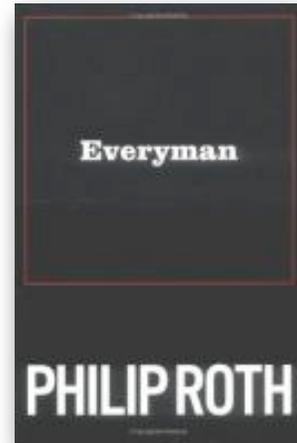
Publisher: Houghton Mifflin, 2006

Number of Pages: 182

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

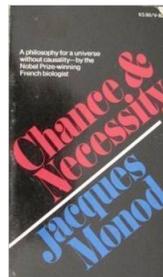
Review(s):

In the moving first scene, Roth encapsulates the life and death of the Everyman named in the title. This brilliant writer recounts the large and small facets of his life with precision and clarity recalling the diamonds he carried as young boy for his fathers jewelry store. He marveled at their imperishability. The "good reliable" boy becomes a "reasonable, kindly, amicable, moderate and industrious" man, but early shocking encounters with death, an unreliable body, an ungovernable libido, and an artistic and sensuous nature propel him into "the man he does not want to be." Despite the love he received and bestowed, he could not escape the fate of everyman: an imperfect life arbitrarily ended. Genetic endowment and environment, chance and necessity call the shots*. The flesh is not imperishable.



Reviewed by: Corie Ginsburg on 6/15/2006

**Chance and Necessity* by Jacques Monod



Plot Against America

by Philip Roth

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin, 2004

Number of Pages: 391

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Coming of Age](#)

[Historical fiction](#)

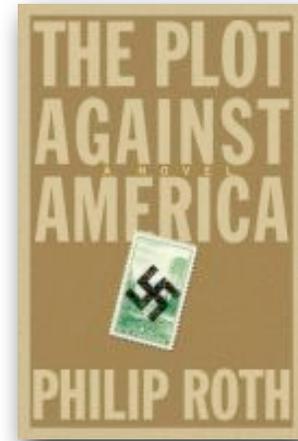
[Jewish themes](#)

[Literary fiction - Male authors](#)

Review(s):

Starting from the premise that Charles A. Lindbergh, Nazi sympathizer and isolationist, has defeated Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election, Roth creates an alternate universe in which the consequences that flow from it impact the country and his family. Interweaving fact and fantasy, this novel so mesmerizes the reader that the boundaries blur, and one is in the United States in the 1940s. The characters are so well drawn because they are modeled on Roth's own family. In fact, the narrator is named "Philip" and the family name is "Roth". The projects initiated by President Lindbergh to insulate young Jewish boys against their parents fears of anti-Semitism and to disperse Jewish families from their neighborhoods to the countryside in order either to assimilate them into the general population or to make them more vulnerable to the anti-Semitism that was being fueled by the administration, caused unbearable psychological, physical and financial damage. The family, their neighbors, and the Jewish community were all but destroyed. Roth's use of the names of prominent figures of the time adds to the credibility of the story. He does, at the end of the penultimate chapter, set the record straight about the real history of that time but then adds a horrendous last chapter to seal the fate of the Jewish people in the United States of America. A cautionary tale?

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 3/2/2005



Midnight's Children

by Salman Rushdi

Publisher: Knopf, 1981

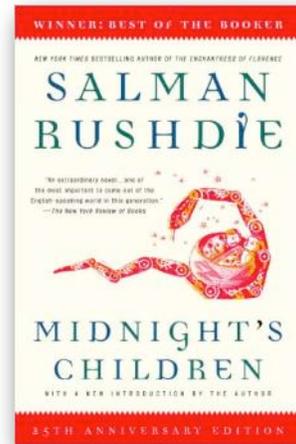
Number of Pages: 533

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Review(s):

Winner of the Booker of Bookers, Britain's most prestigious literary prize, this book is a monumental, multilayered novel which superimposes the life of a family on the first 31 years of the life of India since independence. Saleem Sinai, born at midnight of the new year of 1947, embodies and preserves memories of that time and place. He, like India, is a hybrid, bearing the physical and psychological imprint of both India and the RAJ, the British rule over India from 1757 until 1947. Fictional and factual, funny and deadly serious, this book encompasses the cycle of fortune of the particular and the universal. A difficult masterpiece.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 1/24/2003



Lying Awake

by Mark Salzman

Publisher: Knopf, 2000

Number of Pages: 181

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

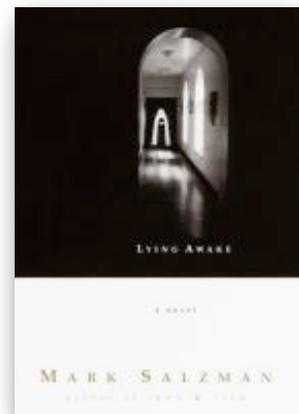
[Gentle Reads](#)

[General fiction](#)

Review:

Inspired by renowned neurologist Oliver Sacks, Mark Salzman has written a strange and enigmatic book. Sister John of the Cross, a Carmelite nun in a small convent tucked into a crevasse in modern life surrounded by a freeway, Chinatown, the police academy and Dodger's stadium in the center of Los Angeles, is an inspiration to the sisters. Her books of poetry born of spiritual visions bring revenue to the order and light to the world. Said visions, always accompanied by severe headaches turn out to be caused by a small benign brain tumor. This discovery shakes her faith and calls into question her vocation. Her dilemma: whether to have the tumor removed and with it her visions, is agonizing. The question arises; what caused the tumor? Does it matter? The evocation of cloistered life is beautifully rendered.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 11/13/2000



The Tale of the Unknown Island

by José Saramago

Publisher: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1999

Number of Pages: 51

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

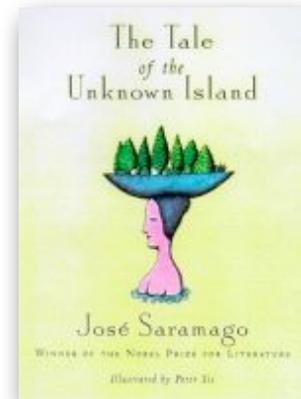
[Literary fiction - Male authors](#)

[Small gems \(short books\)](#)

Review(s):

A parable about a man who asks a king for a boat resonates into profound philosophical realms in 51 pages. Persistence, courage and vision prepare the way for love. This tiny jewel won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/18/2000



The Evolution of Jane

by Cathleen Schine

Publisher: Houghton Mifflin, 1998

Number of Pages: 256

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

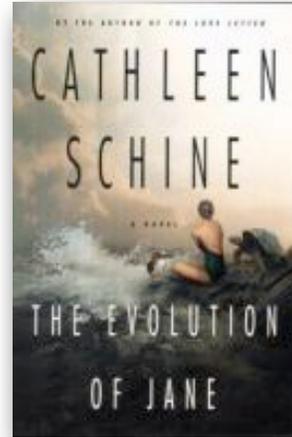
Genres:

[Literary fiction - Female authors](#)

Review(s):

A trip to the Galpagos to recover from a recent divorce brings Jane Barlow Schwartz back into contact with her childhood best friend and first cousin Martha who had abruptly broken with her years before. The quest to find the reason for the estrangement and discussions of the evolution of species in a limited environment are the framework of this novel...a failed attempt to link Darwinian theory to the evolutionary value of friendship.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 1/31/2001



Austerlitz

by W.G. Sebald

Publisher: Random House, 2001

Number of Pages: 298

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Historical fiction](#)

[Jewish themes](#)

Review:

An enigmatic novel which seems to be an embellished autobiography, *Austerlitz* is the story of a man's life from the age of four and a half to about sixty. Torn from his roots by the Holocaust, his quest to reconnect to his origin is told to an unnamed stranger in a series of conversations occasioned by their chance meetings over thirty years in public places, mostly railway stations. Repressed childhood memories are awakened by the telling. Eventually he finds a family friend who tells him of his parent's fate. This long sought knowledge does not restore his identity or bring him peace. He remains a lost soul whose spirit is as dead as theirs. Another casualty. This melancholy tale captures the reader in a net of architectural description, natural and political history, and haunting photographs that make this book hard to forget.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 4/25/2002



Dressing Up For the Carnival

by Carol Shields

Publisher: Viking Press, 2000

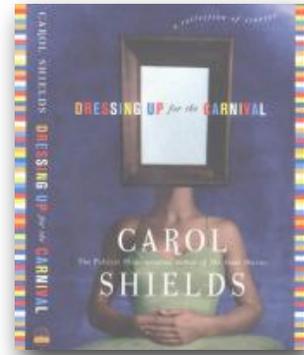
Number of Pages: 210

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Review(s):

In 22 very short stories, Carol Shields distills the essence of identity. The components that define our sense of self are teased apart and dissected by addition or subtraction, and the results are both felt and observed. Clothing or its absence, weather conditions, the esteem or disapprobation of others, age, food, custom, accident, and individual quirks of mind interact to ignite recognition in the reader. The pleasure of this encounter is acute! These stories glow with her genius for the evocation of life on the page. Carol Shields won the Pulitzer Prize in 1995 for *The Stone Diaries* and has left a rich legacy of literature. She died in 2003.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 4/20/2004



Unless

by Carol Shields

Publisher: HarperCollins, 2002

Number of Pages: 213

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

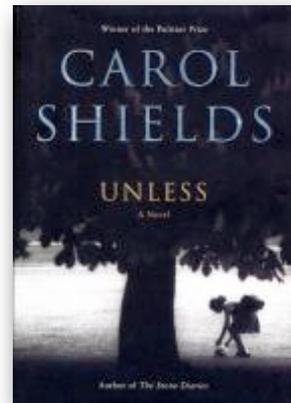
Genres:

[General fiction](#)

Review(s):

A year in the life of Reta Summers of Orangetown, Ontario, Canada who is not quite married to Dr. Tom Winters. She is the devoted mother of three daughters, the eldest of whom, Norah, sits on a street corner begging, with a sign around her neck which says GOODNESS. Reta is an inspired homemaker, diligent cook, faithful friend, adoring "spouse" compassionate "daughter-in-law," translator of a renowned French writer, and a novelist herself. A model woman with a heartache! An aging (44) hippie and a bitter feminist, she writes letters in which she vents her anger at a world that does not fully acknowledge women. "Goodness But Not Greatness" for women is her theme. The definition of "goodness" and its reconciliation with "greatness" is the task. The plight of Norah and the fate of the fictional couple in the book she is writing, a sequel to *My Thyme is Up*, influence each other in Reta's first person narration. The book is divided into many short chapters headed by adverbs or prepositions which link together vignettes of the many aspects of her life. This book won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 7/17/2002



Off Keck Road

by Mona Simpson

Publisher: Random House, 2000

Number of Pages: 167

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

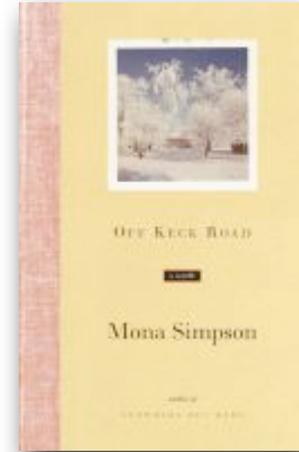
[Coming of Age](#)

[General fiction](#)

Review:

After exploring *Anywhere But Here*, Mona Simpson checks out "here" in this novella, which encompasses 50 years (1950-present) in the lives of three women and the town of Green Bay, Wisconsin. She has exchanged space for time. The "action" is static yet it moves erratically back and forth through time. It concerns one Bea Maxwell, attractive, smart, dutiful daughter of a respected doctor and Hazel, a conventional, self-sacrificing but paradoxically demanding mother, Bea's friend June, a divorced mother, and Shelly, a polio-crippled, 6 foot tall, good and bright young woman. The story turns upon the unmarried state of these women, the reasons for it, and their reactions to it as they grow older. Simpson implies that life can be meaningful and satisfying outside the norm of "marriage, children and houses"- indeed, more authentic. The ambience and evolution of the town are described in poetic and evocative language. A quiet book about growth and change and chance.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 1/18/2002



Galileo's Daughter

by Dava Sobel

Publisher: Walker & Co., 1999

Number of Pages: 420

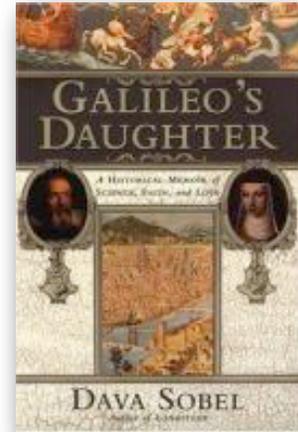
Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Biography and Memoirs](#)

Review:

A moving and sympathetic distillation of the life and times of the Father of Modern Science humanized and made "real" by the letters (translated by the author) of his devoted and loving daughter. The warmth, charm and intelligence shared by Galileo Galilei and Suor Maria Celeste are present and palpable in this meticulously researched and beautifully executed biography. A timeline from 1543 to 1999 documents the flowering of science culminating in the "Galileo" spacecraft, which has just observed the Medicean "stars" which Galileo had discovered and named for his patrons, the Medici almost 400 years ago! Recommended to those interested in science, biography and Italian history.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 2/7/2001

The Planets

by Dava Sobel

Publisher: Viking/Penguin, 2005

Number of Pages: 231

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

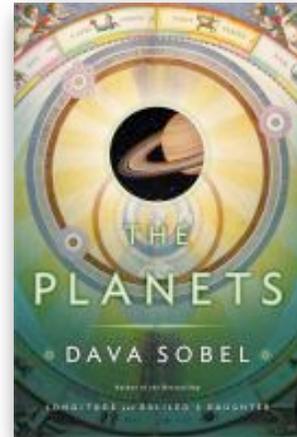
Genres:

Nonfiction

Review(s):

At a time when biblical and scientific descriptions of origins are at odds, Dava Sobel reconciles them in lucid images which paraphrase quotations from Genesis. Her subject is the origin of the Solar System, not the Species; it is less controversial! She ruminates on the "uncanny coincidence that permits a total solar eclipse"(p25) when the relatively tiny moon completely blocks the light of the gigantic sun. The exactly complimentary measures of size and distance permit it . She describes but does not interpret. She juxtaposes the insights of astronomy with the ancient Greek myths that poetically describe the sun and its planets. She notes that early seafarers depended on celestial observation to find their way and extrapolates to religion. The voyages of discovery led to the mapping of the world which allowed Darwin's trip on the Beagle which led to the mapping of the Human Genome. Information about where we are and what we are come from the Heavens! Her synthesis of scientific observation and human imagination enrich both and provide the reader with a fascinating and enlightening experience.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 1/19/2006



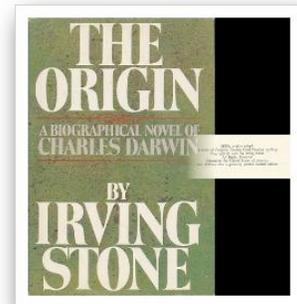
The Origin: A Biographical Novel of Charles Darwin

by Irving Stone

Publisher: Doubleday, 1980

Number of Pages: 743

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)



Genres:

[Coming of Age](#)

[Historical fiction](#)

Review:

A detailed and spectacular account of the life of "One who stood on the shoulders of giants and saw farther than anyone had seen before him". Charles Darwin changed the world by observing it with an honest and unprejudiced eye and a pure heart. His insights have had repercussions in theology, politics and psychology as well as biology, botany and science in general. His work was the first step that, 150 years later, led to the mapping of the Human Genome. Meticulous and exhaustive research has made this fictionalized biography a reliable and accessible way into the life of a good man and a great scientist.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 12/13/2000

The Makioka Sisters

by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki

Publisher: Perigee Books, 1981

Number of Pages: 530

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Family saga](#)

[Historical fiction](#)

Review:

A rare view of an upper class Japanese family just prior to WWII. The lives of the four Makioka sisters are depicted day to day and seemingly nothing much happens. The focus of the novel is on finding a suitable husband for Yokiko, the third sister. The declining standards for that "office" reflect the decay of the aristocracy under the stress of impending war. Very slowly, day by day the material, social and moral character of the society breaks down and with it the fortunes of the Makioka family. The birth and death of an illegitimate child to the youngest sister marks the nadir of the novel. Beautiful moments such as a firefly hunt and the loveliness and delicacy of the Japanese culture are lovingly rendered.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 1/22/2001



Night of Many Dreams

by Gail Tsukiyama

Publisher: St. Martin's Press, 1998

Number of Pages: 275

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

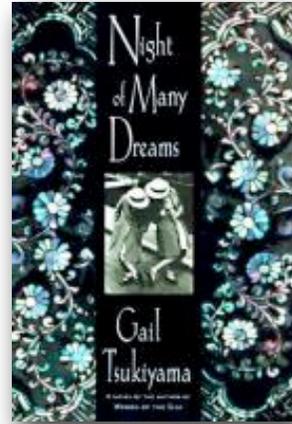
[Historical fiction](#)

[Literary fiction - Female authors](#)

Review:

Tsukiyama's Chinese mother, Japanese father and American birth give her a broad background upon which to paint the experience of an Asian in the West. She is the author of *The Samurai's Garden* and *Women of the Silk*. This is a very different book. It is a modern coming of age novel. The story traces the lives of Joan and Emma Lew of Hong Kong from 1940 to 1965 during which time Japan invaded Hong Kong forcing the family to move to Macao. This experience broadens their worldview and has consequences as their lives unfold. Joan's fascination with American movies determines her life. The family includes traditional Ma-jongg playing Ma-mee, the modern unmarried businesswoman Auntie Go, the old fashioned cook and caretaker Foon, the absent but loving father and eventually Emma's American husband, of Chinese and Portuguese parentage, and their small daughter Emily. It is a story of the homogenization of the world and the strains on the lives of those who live it.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 5/9/2001



The Samurai's Garden

by Gail Tsukiyama

Publisher: St. Martin's Press, 1995

Number of Pages: 221

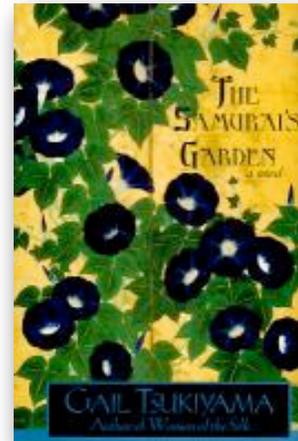
Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Literary fiction - Female authors](#)

Review:

Beautifully rendered account of love transcending ignorance, superficiality and a misguided sense of honor. The 20 year old son of a Japanese father and a Chinese mother is sent to his grandfathers summer house in Japan to recover from tuberculosis. It is the caretaker's (Matsu) story experienced by Stephen-san that is the core of the novel. In the wake of an epidemic of Leprosy (Hansen's disease), suicide, banishment and secrecy destroy many lives but Matsu's love for Sachi redeems hers. The story is set at the time of the Japanese invasion of China, the breakup of the marriage of Stephen's parents and the ending of a bittersweet romance with a local girl because he is the "enemy." Those who enjoyed *Shogun* and *Memoirs of a Geisha* will enjoy this.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 1/31/2001

Back When We Were Grownups

by Anne Tyler

Publisher: Knopf, 2001

Number of Pages: 274

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Family saga](#)

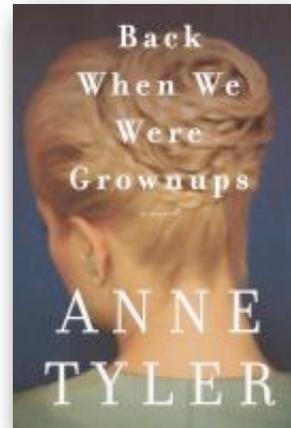
[Gentle Reads](#)

[Literary fiction - Female authors](#)

Review:

An impulsive turn off the main track of her life takes 19-year-old Rebecca into a whole new milieu in which she is called "Beck." She has always thought of herself as quiet and studious, but in her new life she is required to be the warm, ever cheerful wife, mother, and hub of a large boisterous family of four young daughters and 99- year-old uncle "Poppy." Her beloved husband dies after only six years, leaving her also in charge of the family business which is conducting parties for the weddings, birthdays, wakes, and family occasions of strangers at the Open Arms, an aging Victorian "mansion" which is also their home. Thirty years later, she questions that choice and tries to fit herself into the road not taken. She finds the man she jilted who still loves her and learns the truth of Poppy's wise statement that "there is no true life. Your true life is the one you end up with, whatever it may be. You just do the best you can with what you've got."

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 7/11/2001



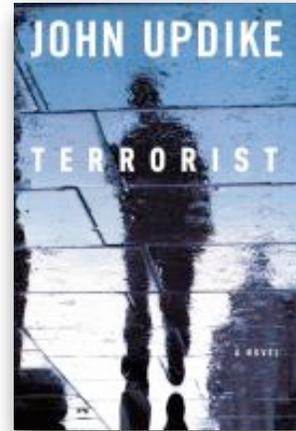
Terrorist

by John Updike

Publisher: Knopf, 2006

Number of Pages: 310

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)



Review(s):

John Updyke has created a hybrid young man whose mother is an auburn haired, green eyed, Irish American and whose father is Egyptian, darkly handsome and gone, to embody the conflicting tensions among elements of the modern world that have led to impending catastrophe: the corrupted American Dream and the dark and troubled Middle East. Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, 18 years old, is about to graduate from high school when he is noticed by guidance counselor Jack (Jacob) Levy for his good grades, "unblinking gravity" and general dignity, as distinguished from his classmates. Levy tries to steer him toward college which he disdains as the path to the spiritually empty American way. His black friend Joryleen entices his repressed sexuality and his religious teacher Shaikh Rashid appeals to his father-hungry heart and his desire to follow the Straight Path prescribed in the Qur'an. He carries his God as "close as the vein in his neck". He thinks "these devils seek to take away my God". The circumstances of his life and the genetic potential of his body make him vulnerable to the enticements of martyrdom in the service of Islam: a quick painless death and eternity in Paradise. The rendering of his internal dialogue during the time leading up to the moment of his suicide/martyrdom is breathtaking. The last words in the novel are "These devils have taken away my God". Whether for better or worse is for the reader to decide. A masterful subplot links the tragedy of 9/11 to its projected follow-up.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 7/10/2006

The Haj

by Leon Uris

Publisher: Doubleday, 1984

Number of Pages: 566

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

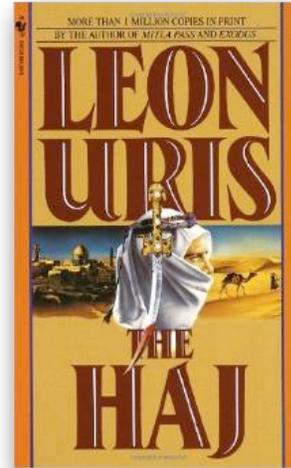
Genres:

[Historical fiction](#)

Review):

Told in the voice of young Ishmael, son of Haj Ibrahim al Soukori al Wahabi, Muktar of Tahba, *The Haj* is the story of the troubled and difficult birth of the modern state of Israel and the beginnings of the tragic and dangerous refugee camps of the displaced Palestinians. The fictional history of his family juxtaposed against this background brings into relief the suffering of both the Arabs and the Jews and their seemingly fated relationship. Only the fraught friendship between Haj Ibrahim and Gideon Ashe, a leader of the Jewish movement, forms a tenuous bridge. It is ultimately broken. This is a dark and terrible account of the horrors that still confront the world in 2002. Controversial in 1984 when it was published, subsequent events have borne out some of Uris' analysis and prophecy. Not for the faint of heart, but relevant to our time.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 10/15/2002



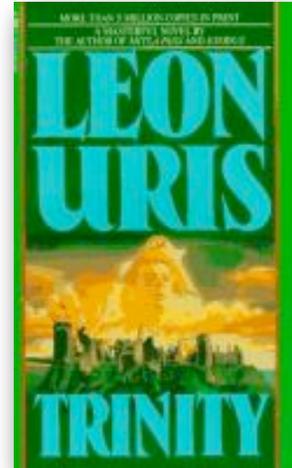
Trinity

by Leon Uris

Publisher: Doubleday, 1976

Number of Pages: 815

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)



Review:

"There is no present or future—only the past, happening over and over again—now"—Eugene O'Neill, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. This quotation appears at the beginning of this magnificent novel and it is paraphrased in the last sentence of the epilogue. The saga between is related by Seamus O'Neill, a character created by Uris in the mold of Eugene O'Neill, and "lived" by Conor Larkin. Their lifelong (1885-1914) friendship encompasses the time of Ireland's privation and persecution at the hands of Victorian England and its struggle for peace and equality between the Protestant North and the Catholic South. The combatants were London, Ulster, and Dublin: The Trinity. In the South, poverty bred ignorance and superstition and caused misery in the lives of the Larkin family. The loving relationship between Finola and Thomas, the parents, was destroyed by an ignorant and vengeful priest. Liam, the second son, had to leave the family and the land he loved because it could not support him, and Brigid, the only daughter is heartbroken because the love of her life had no means to earn a living and left, only to have his life ruined by the greed and prejudice of the Northerners. The youngest, Dary, puny and frail, becomes a priest, promised to the Church by his devout mother at his birth in exchange for his life. Conor, the eldest son, beautiful, intelligent, poetic and self-educated, is the ultimate freedom fighter. He too is defeated in his quest for liberty but only after a heroic and dramatic act of vengeance. Uris infuses this bitter story with warmth, romance, and color, thus engaging the reader. The sad parenthesis that encloses this tale has been the experience of many peoples and nations and is relevant to the present world. Although Uris's book was written in 1976, Eugene O'Neill's *NOW* is timely in the 21st century.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 8/23/2004

Evidence of Things Unseen

by Mariann Wiggins

Publisher: Simon & Schuster, 2003

Number of Pages: 381

Check the availability of this title at

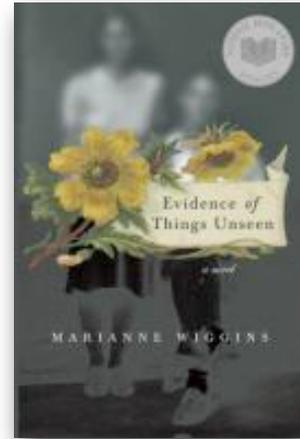
Genres:

Historical fiction

Literary fiction - Female authors

Review:

A strange, poetic book about the material world, cosmic unity, and the commonplace during the time between World Wars I and II which witnessed the uncovering of previously unseen things. The phosphorescence of sea water, the light trails of the Persied meteors, the glow of Uranium, the spontaneous light of fireflies and some sea creatures, all forms of energy, had always fascinated Pvt. First Class Foster (Fos) but he "never knew he had a latent genius like a fuse." Though he's minimally educated, his intellect and instinct lead him to the love of his life, Opal, and the son he found, Lightfoot, an abandoned infant. The story of their life winds through and is impacted by the discovery of energy sources that were then unrealized. In the thirty years between 1916 and 1946, we have gone from horsepower through electric power to atomic power - from the building of the Tennessee Valley Authority Dam, to the Rural Electrification Project, to the Oak Ridge branch of the Manhattan Project which developed the Atomic Bomb which ended W.W.II. This is a powerful book about power (energy) and human powerlessness. The toxicity of the glow of radium which led to X-rays and killed its discoverer, Mme. Curie, Fos's hero, and caused Opal's swollen ankles, sterility, and ultimate death was unknown. The truly cosmic power of the splitting of the atom was unknown. The people most affected did not know the nature of their enemy. Man has unleashed the power of things unseen to his benefit and perhaps to his demise.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 9/15/2003

The Professor and the Madman

by Simon Winchester

Publisher: HarperCollins, 1998

Number of Pages: 242

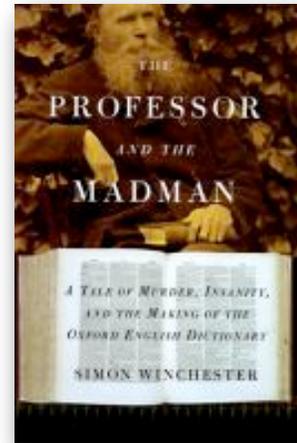
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Genres:

Nonfiction

Review:

A curious blend of dry scholarship and a Dickensian story of murder, insanity, the genesis of the Oxford English Dictionary, the American Civil War, and an unlikely friendship. The Professor, Dr James Murray ended his formal education at age 14 but continued to educate himself to the point that Oxford university awarded him a degree on the strength of his work on the OED. The Madman, Dr. William Minor, a Yale educated physician, traumatized Civil War surgeon and convicted murderer. After along association by mail, their first meeting is told in a very dramatic fashion and turns out to be not the way it really happened. Not biography though essentially true, not fiction though facts are altered, this book is catalogued in the 400s (language). Of particular interest to linguists, librarians and history buffs. Soon to be a motion picture with Dustin Hoffman (Minor) and Helen Bonham-Carter as the wife of the murdered man.



Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 2/7/2001

Revolutionary Road

by Richard Yates

Publisher: Little, Brown and Co., 1961

Number of Pages: 337

Check the availability of this title at [Skokie Public Library](#)

Genres:

[Literary fiction - Male authors](#)

[General fiction](#)

Review(s):

This is a 40 year old analog to *American Beauty* set at the dawn of the computer age with WWII 10 years in the past, the sexual revolution and the "sixties" on the horizon. The same conflicting drives for self fulfillment and conformity (marriage, children, suburbia) act on April and John Wheeler as on the characters played by Kevin Spacey and Annette Bening in the movie. The action of the novel is set in 1955, the year of *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*. *The Feminine Mystique* is 8 years in the future so the problems that plague April still 'have no name'. The marriages of these prototypes predictably end in disaster. It is interesting to note how technological and societal changes in the time between, impinge on essentially the same story. Of particular interest to those who lived those days and to social historians.

Reviewed by: [Corie Ginsburg](#) on 6/19/2000

