

NCJW/Cleveland Book Club
2001-2002

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Klay by Michael Chabon - The novel follows the lives of the title characters, a Czech artist named Joe Kavalier and a Brooklyn-born writer named Sam Clay—both Jewish—before, during, and after World War II. Kavalier and Clay become major figures in the nascent comics industry during its "Golden Age."

The Moghul Buffet by Cheryl Benard - This story takes place in Pakistan. There are murders, mistaken identity, cryptic messages and a likable police detective—all the requirements of a good mystery. The story starts in Peshawar, where a naive American businessman is supposed to be making a deal, but instead he disappears.

The Family Orchard by Nomi Eve - Spanning nearly two hundred years in the life of a passionate, eccentric, and altogether extraordinary family, *The Family Orchard* begins in 1837 when the beautiful and sensuous Esther Herschell, granddaughter of the chief rabbi of the British Empire, marries the Eastern European Rabbi Yochanan Schine, and the couple moves to Jerusalem. Thus begins a lineage that will bring forth soldiers and thieves, heroes and lovers, a brother who feels the wound when his twin is shot, a seamstress capable of casting spells through the stories she weaves into dresses, a boy who tries to raise a spirit from the earth, the orchard men who lovingly tend the family's groves of fruit trees, and finally the narrator herself, who weaves her own magic from the legends and stories passed on and sometimes invented about her remarkable family.

A Gesture Life by Chang-Rae Lee - This novel tells the story of Franklin "Doc" Hata, a Japanese immigrant who leads a proper, decorous life in a New York suburb. As his life slowly unravels, he is transported back to his days as a medic in the Japanese army in World War II, and his obsessive love of a young comfort woman.

The Soloist by Mark Saltzman - *The Soloist* is based on the true story of Nathaniel Ayers, a musical prodigy who developed schizophrenia during his second year at Juilliard School. Ayers becomes homeless in the streets of downtown Los Angeles, playing the violin and the cello

Some Things That Stay by Sarah Willis - Tamara Anderson's 15th summer finds her starting a new life in a new town—but for the nomadic and

unconventional Anderson family, that in itself is nothing new. Tamara's parents are atheists, and Tamara's father is a landscape artist. In the feverish pursuit of fresh artistic fodder, the Andersons move from one small town to another, renting houses but never owning homes and rarely living at the same address for more than a year. This "just-passing-through" kind of lifestyle has nurtured Tamara's fierce sense of individuality and independence. But at 15, there awakens a deeper yearning for an indefinable more and Tamara finds herself questioning the ways of her world and her family alike.

The Inextinguishable Symphony by Martin Goldsmith - Martin Goldsmith, was born in St. Louis, and knew little about his parents' background growing up in Germany and trying to establish musical careers (his father on flute, his mother on viola and violin) as Jews in Nazi Germany. In this book he delves into their past and comes up with an inspiring story of goodness and evil, love and death, those who are saved and those who are lost.

Lovingkindness by Ann Rolfe - The novel traces the relationship between a liberal feminist mother, Annie, and her daughter Andrea. Like many mother/daughter narratives, the early part of the novel traces the failures of both--Annie's attempts to impress her own beliefs upon her daughter, and her daughter's rebellion from them.

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The Hero's Walk by Anita Rau Badami - The novel opens in the small town of Toturpuram in South India where Sripathi Rao, a middle-aged man with a mediocre job and a disintegrating family, is about to encounter the most extraordinary events in his life: the death of his estranged daughter in Vancouver and the arrival of the orphaned granddaughter who is now his responsibility. Jolted out of his pseudo-important, self-satisfactory writing of daily letters to a newspaper editor anonymously signed "Pro Bono Publico," Sripathi is forced to come to an understanding about his family's history as well as his own past, in order to make room in his heart and mind for little Nandana, whose bitterness at her fate silences her.

Bel Canto by Ann Patchett - Based on the Lima Crisis, this book is about a group of terrorists who hold high executives and people of high political standing hostage. It explores how the terrorists and

hostages cope with living in a house together for several months. Many of the characters form unbreakable bonds of friendship, while some fall in love.

In My Brother's Image by Eugene Progany - Pogany's father and uncle were Jewish, twin brothers born in Budapest but baptized as Catholics when very young, after their own parents had become Christians. Both men experienced World War II, but in vastly different ways. Miklos Pogany, the author's father, suffered grievously under both Nazi persecution and Christian indifference in Hungary, ultimately being sent to the infamous concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen, where the horrors he lived through caused him to lose his faith entirely. After the war he returned to Judaism, but more as an act of protest against the tacit acquiescence of Hungarian Christians in the Nazi campaign against the Jews than out of any strong religious feeling.

Bee Season by Myla Goldberg - Eleven-year-old Eliza Naumann is the only "ordinary" member of a family of gifted people. Her father, Saul, is a cantor in the local synagogue; her mother, Miriam, is a successful lawyer and her brother, Aaron, is a gifted student. One day Eliza surprises herself by winning the class spelling bee, then the school bee. At first Saul is unaware of her success, but then he becomes increasingly involved with her. Eliza is invited into his study to practice, and Aaron for the first time finds the door closed to him. But as Eliza progresses through the district bee and prepares for the national bee, the troubled lives of her family come into sharp focus. It becomes clear that Saul's ambitions for her go far beyond the winning of the spelling bee. First through drugs and then through study. Aaron, finds himself disillusioned with Judaism and begins to look elsewhere, first to Christianity and then to Buddhism. Through a chance encounter in a park he discovers the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and becomes a devotee, unknown to his family.

Lying Awake by Mark Saltzman - On the outskirts of present-day Los Angeles, Sister John of the Cross lives out her austere and highly disciplined days as a contemplative nun in an isolated Carmelite monastery. Though self-abnegation, humility and sacrifice are paramount to the order's way of life, Sister John can't hide the fact that there is something dazzlingly different about her. After years

of spiritual barrenness in which she merely went through the motions, she received a miraculous gift: the ability to connect with the Divine directly in rapturous visions that inspire her to write luminous poetry. Saltzman describes this state of grace in simple, moving terms.

Martyr's Crossing by Amy Wilentz - One rainy night at a Jerusalem checkpoint, Israeli Lieutenant Ari Doron is ordered to refuse a desperate, young Palestinian mother and her sick boy passage into the city. The incident leads to a series of riots, and Doron finds himself pulled into the bitter political aftermath as battles and bus bombs explode around him. He is drawn to Marina, the boy's American-born mother. And though she is on the other side of the bloody struggle, she finds herself thinking of Doron as "her soldier." In another place, at another time, they might have been lovers.

The Human Stain by Phillip Roth - Set in the summer of 1998, *The Human Stain* chronicles the disgrace and downfall of Coleman Silk, an eminent classics professor at New England's small Athena College. When Silk asks about two absent students, "Do they exist or are they spooks?" a specious charge of racism is brought against him, and in the bitter fight that follows, his life begins to unravel. After his wife's death, which he attributes to the harassment they have suffered, Silk resigns, severs all ties with the college, and begins an affair with a thirty-four-year-old janitor, Faunia Farley. This, too, is exposed and turned into a public scandal by Delphine Roux, the ambitious Yale-educated literary theorist who led the attack against Professor Silk over his alleged racism. But Silk has another secret, a secret he has kept from his colleagues and friends, even from his wife and children, for fifty years, a secret more shocking than anything his enemies could have imagined about him. It is the stunning revelation of Silk's real identity and his hidden history that climaxes this story.

Wholeness of a Broken Heart by Katie Singer - The story is told in the words of four generations of Jewish women, from the great-grandmother Channa, born in Koretz, Poland, in 1880, to the great-granddaughter Hannah, for whom she is named, living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1989. Although the story focuses on particular generations of Jewish mothers and daughters, it transcends these cultural boundaries to include women's relationships in all cultures. The story centers around Hannah and her relationship with her mother, which was intensely

intimate until a casual comment catapulted them into irreparable separation. Hannah struggles with this loss, relying on the comfort and insight of her grandmother to help her survive. As we go back and forth through time, we discover the secrets and events that make this family of women both weak and strong, passive and domineering, depressed and joyful.

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The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd - Set in South Carolina in 1964, *The Secret Life of Bees* tells the story of 14 year-old Lily Owens, whose life is shaped by her blurred memory of the afternoon of her mother's accidental death. When Lily's black "stand-in mother," Rosaleen, insults three racists in town, they escape to Tiburon, South Carolina. Lily is lonely at home and feels that she is unloved by her father, T. Ray. However, with the help of August Boatwright, one of three sisters at whose farmhouse Lily and Rosaleen become guest workers, she is able to find that she has many people who love and care for her. Lily is faced with trying to find out who she is because at her home she is not allowed to ask questions about her past. Lily does this in many ways, such as writing down her thoughts in a notebook, and finding her first love, Zachary Taylor. She finds out who she really is when she learns about her mother's past.

Attonement by Ian McEwan - *This* is a novel written by British author Ian McEwan. It tells the story of Briony Tallis's terrible mistake and how it changes her, Cecilia Tallis's and Robbie Turner's lives forever, and consequentially her effort to find atonement.

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress by Syie Dai The novel is about two teenage boys, Luo and Ma, who are sent to be re-educated at the Mountain of the Phoenix of the Sky (or Phoenix Mountain), as their parents are considered by Chairman Mao to be "enemies of the people" by the state because their parents (who were doctors) were seen as reactionaries of the bourgeois. There, they are captivated by the daughter of the famed tailor, the Little Seamstress of the Phoenix, with whom both fall in love. At the same time, they meet Four-Eyes (Binoclar) who is also being re-educated. Although he is succeeding in re-education, he is in truth hiding forbidden, Western books. He lends one of them to the Ma, the narrator: Ursule Mirouët by Balzac. This book inspires Ma, but Luo uses it to educate the

Little Seamstress, whom he considers primitive. Their romantic relationship grows as Ma silently watches on the sidelines.

Later, Luo's mission of educating the Little Seamstress backfires. At first however, it seemed as if his plan was perfect - she had just adopted the city accent and had sewn more modern, fashionable clothing. Yet, one day, she leaves without saying farewell, and the boys find out that she had learned one lesson from Balzac - that "a woman's beauty is a treasure beyond price."

Life of Pi by Yann Martel - This is a fantasy adventure novel. In the story, the protagonist Piscine "Pi" Molitor Patel, an Indian boy from Pondicherry, explores issues of religion, spirituality, and practicality from an early age. He survives 227 days after a shipwreck, while stranded on a boat in the Pacific Ocean. There is much more to this book with a very mysterious ending.

Mezzuzah in Madonna's Foot by Trudi Alexy - Named among the "Best Reading of 1993" by the Progressive, this thrilling account offers an insider's history of the Marranos of Spain and other secret Jews and explains the mystery surrounding them.

Swimming Toward the Ocean by Carole Glickfield - This is a sharp and tender debut novel chronicling the boisterous life and loves of a Russian Jewish immigrant family in 1950s New York City. Chenia is a Betty Grable look-alike, passionate, sharp-witted, in many ways still Old-World. Her husband Ruben is a handsome philanderer; they have three children. No one expects the devoted Chenia to fall under the spell of a lover of her own, but the Arnows' lives unfold in many surprises. In tart and seductive storytelling, *Swimming Toward the Ocean* follows husbands and wives and children through an often comical kaleidoscope of shifting and misguided connections, ever sympathetic to their restless-if stumbling-quests for love.

The Dive from Clausen's Pier by Ann Packer - A riveting novel about loyalty and self-knowledge, and the conflict between who we want to be to others and who we must be for ourselves. Carrie Bell has lived in Wisconsin all her life. She's had the same best friend, the same good relationship with her mother, the same boyfriend, Mike, now her fiancé, for as long as anyone can remember. It's with real surprise she finds that, at age twenty-three, her life has begun to feel suffocating. She longs for a change, an upheaval, for

a chance to begin again.

That chance is granted to her, terribly, when Mike is injured in an accident. Now Carrie has to question everything she thought she knew about herself and the meaning of home. She must ask: How much do we owe the people we love? Is it a sign of strength or of weakness to walk away from someone in need? Elegantly written and ferociously paced, emotionally nuanced and morally complex,

The Lovely Bones by Alice Seabold - This is the story of a teenage girl who, after being brutally raped and murdered, watches from heaven as her family and friends go on with their lives, while she herself comes to terms with her own death.

Three Junes by Julia Glass - In the novel's first part, we meet Paul McLeod, the patriarch, who is touring Greece after the death of his vivacious wife. The story of his infatuation with a young American artist he meets there, and his gesture toward a new freedom so late in life, segues into the tour de force of part two, where we reexperience the privileged but provincial world of the McLeods--and the cosmopolitan world of the West Village--from the perspective of Fenno, the eldest son. A lovable, slightly repressed but self-aware gay man, he leads the life of an aloof expatriate, trying to protect himself from emotional entanglement--until a worldly neighbor presents him with an extraordinary gift and a seductive photographer makes him an unwitting subject. And in the final part, Fenno crosses paths with Fern, the woman who captivated his father in Greece ten years before and who is pregnant with a son she may decide to raise on her own. All the loves and losses of this rich, emotionally complex book come together in the fateful meeting of these two characters one exquisite night in June over a Long Island dinner table.

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Reading Lolita in Tehran by Azar Nafisi - An inspired blend of memoir and literary criticism, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a moving testament to the power of art and its ability to change and improve people's lives. In 1995, after resigning from her job as a professor at a university in Tehran due to repressive policies, Azar Nafisi invited seven of her best female students to attend a weekly study of great Western literature in her home. Since the books they read were officially banned by the government, the women were forced to meet in secret, often sharing

photocopied pages of the illegal novels. For two years they met to talk, share, and "shed their mandatory veils and robes and burst into color." Though most of the women were shy and intimidated at first, they soon became emboldened by the forum and used the meetings as a springboard for debating the social, cultural, and political realities of living under strict Islamic rule. They discussed their harassment at the hands of "morality guards," the daily indignities of living under the Ayatollah Khomeini's regime, the effects of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, love, marriage, and life in general, giving readers a rare inside look at revolutionary Iran. The books were always the primary focus, however, and they became "essential to our lives: they were not a luxury but a necessity," she writes.

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

Christopher discovers the dead body of Wellington, his neighbor's dog, speared by a garden fork. The police try to blame Christopher. He is severely limited by his fears and difficulties when interpreting the world around him. Throughout his adventures, Christopher records his experiences in a book, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*.

Ed, his father, discovers the book and confiscates it from Christopher. In his search for the hidden book, Christopher uncovers a trove of letters to himself from his mother, dated after she allegedly died -- which his father had also concealed. Christopher concludes that she is still alive and that his father has lied to him. He is so thoroughly devastated. Ed confesses that he had indeed lied about Judy's death and also that it was him who killed Wellington, stating that it was a mistake resulting from his anger after a heated argument with Mrs Shears. Christopher, having lost all trust in his father and fearing that he may also try to kill him since he had already killed Wellington, decides to escape from home and live with his mother. Guided by his mother's address from the letters, he embarks on an adventurous trip to London, where his mother lives with Mr Shears. Christopher finally finds his way to his mother and Mr Shears' home. His mother, Judy, is happy at his arrival and tries to keep him with her. Mr Shears doesn't want Christopher living with them and never did. Moreover, very soon after arriving, Christopher wants to return to Swindon in order to take his mathematics A-level. His mother eventually leaves Mr Shears, their relationship having apparently broken down because of the conflict over Christopher. The story ends with Ed getting

Christopher a pet dog, and promising that he will rebuild trust with Christopher slowly, "no matter how long it takes".

The book closes with Christopher optimistic about his future, having successfully solved the incident of the murdered dog, gone to London on his own, found his mother, written a book, and got an A in his A-level maths exam.

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini - This book tells the story of Amir, a young boy from the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul, who betrayed his best friend Hassan, the son of his father's Hazara servant, and lives in regret. The story is set against a backdrop of tumultuous events, from the fall of the monarchy in Afghanistan through the Soviet invasion, the mass exodus of refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the rise of the Taliban regime.

Blessings by Anna Quindlan - When Charles "Skip" Cuddy is released from county jail and goes to work for octogenarian Lydia Blessing, he has no idea what a task he has undertaken. When he leaves his garage apartment to make Ms. Blessing's morning coffee, a surprise awaits him at the bottom of the stairs. There, wrapped in a flannel shirt, lies an abandoned baby in a cardboard box. Afraid of what his overbearing boss's reaction might be, he decides to keep the baby a secret. But a young man with no fatherhood experience can't keep the baby hidden for long!

In BLESSINGS, readers are drawn into the world of Lydia Blessing as she deals with family demons and the skeletons in her own closet. The unwanted child of a stern mother and doting father, Lydia continues the legacy by alienating her own daughter, the illegitimate child of one of her father's acquaintances. But when newborn Faith makes her appearance on the Blessings scene, Lydia's sour countenance is softened and she discovers the joys of motherhood that she had never known were possible.

Brick Lane by Monica Ali - This debut novel chronicles the life of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi girl so sickly at birth that the midwife at first declares her stillborn. At 18 her parents arrange a marriage to Chanu, a Bengali immigrant living in England. Although Chanu--who's twice Nazneen's age--turns out to be a foolish blowhard who "had a face like a frog," Nazneen accepts her fate, which seems to be the main life lesson taught by the women in her family. "If God wanted us to ask questions," her mother tells her, "he would have made us men."

Over the next decade-and-a-half Nazneen grows into a strong, confident woman who doesn't defy fate so much as bend it to her will. The great delight to be had in *Brick Lane* lies with Ali's characters, from Chanu the kindly fool to Mrs. Islam the elderly loan shark to Karim the political rabble-rouser, all living in a hothouse of Bengali immigrants. *Brick Lane* combines the wide scope of a social novel about the struggles of Islamic immigrants in pre- and post-9/11 England with the intimate story of Nazneen, one of the more memorable heroines to come along in a long time. If Dickens or Trollope were loosed upon contemporary London, this is exactly the sort of novel they would cook up.

I Am Madame X by Gloria Diliberto - The life of Virginie Gautreau, the notorious beauty of Madame X, John Singer Sargent's most famous and scandalous portrait, provides inspiration for this absorbing and intriguing novel. Gioia Diliberto tells Virginie's story, drawing on the sketchy facts of Virginie's life to re-create her tempestuous personality and the captivating milieu of nineteenth-century Paris. Born in New Orleans to two of Louisiana's prominent Creole families and raised at Parlange, her grandmother's lush plantation, Virginie fled to France with her mother and sister during the Civil War. The family settled in Paris among other expatriate Southerners and hoped, through their French ancestry, to insinuate themselves into high society. They soon were absorbed into a fascinating world of grand ballrooms, dressmakers' salons, luxurious country estates, and a artists' ateliers. Because of Virginie's striking appearance and vivid character, her mother pinned the family's hopes for social acceptance on her daughter, who became a "professional beauty" and married a French banker. Even before Sargent painted her portrait, Virginie's reputation for promiscuity and showy self-display made her the subject of vicious Paris gossip. *I Am Madame X* is a compulsively readable immersion in Belle Epoque Paris. It is also the story of a great work of art, illuminating the struggle between Virginie and Sargent as they fought to control the outcome of a painting that changed their lives and affected the course of art history.

Wild Swans by Jung Chang - This is an autobiographical family history by Chinese writer Jung Chang. First published in 1991, *Wild Swans* contains a biography of the three female generations of Chang's family: her grandmother, her mother and finally her own autobiography. Going through the Communist Regime, the Cultural Revolution, and the

Counter Revolution, Chinese history is interwoven into this moving generational story.

Samurai's Garden by Gail Tsukiyama - Shortly before World War II, a Chinese man, sent to Japan to recover from tuberculosis, meets a desirable Japanese girl and begins a love story which brims over with undying love, devotion and passion. Gail Tsukiyama uses her poetic narrative style to compose the lovely story in THE SAMURAI'S GARDEN, a look at the coming together of two distinctively different cultures and how these differences cause a great deal of turmoil to two who are joined by the heart in a love for the ages.

A Lesson Before Dying by Ernest Gaines - In a small Cajun community in 1940s Louisiana, a young black man is about to go to the electric chair for murder. A white shopkeeper had died during a robbery gone bad; though the young man on trial had not been armed and had not pulled the trigger, in that time and place, there could be no doubt of the verdict or the penalty. Grant Wiggins is the narrator of this powerful exploration of race, injustice, and resistance. University educated, Grant has returned to the tiny plantation town of his youth, where the only job available to him is teaching in the small plantation church school. More than 75 years after the close of the Civil War, antebellum attitudes still prevail. Grant, trapped in a career he doesn't enjoy, eaten up by resentment at his station in life, and angered by the injustice he sees all around him, dreams of taking his girlfriend Vivian and leaving Louisiana forever. But when Jefferson is convicted and sentenced to die, his grandmother, Miss Emma, begs Grant for one last favor: to teach her grandson to die like a man. As Grant struggles to impart a sense of pride to Jefferson before he must face his death, he learns an important lesson as well: heroism is not always expressed through action--sometimes the simple act of resisting the inevitable is enough.

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A Good Distance by Sarah Willis - This book builds a multi-layered and moving study of a family stagnated by betrayal, loss, and memories, but working towards forgiveness. Suffering from Alzheimer's, Rose should be in a nursing home. But her daughter Jennifer, looking for a chance at redemption and to get to know Rose after their

rocky and estranged past, moves Rose into her home to care for her. Jennifer must work through her increasingly strained relationships with her husband, daughter, and siblings, and wade through the past's painful memories, lies, and truth. Jennifer will discover much about herself while unlocking her mother's memories, trying to find out what went wrong between them--and whether it can still be made right.

The Plot Against America by Phillip Roth - This book gives an hypothetical alternate history in which Franklin Delano Roosevelt is defeated in the presidential election of 1940 by Charles Lindbergh. The novel follows the fortunes of the Roth family during the Lindbergh presidency, as antisemitism becomes more accepted in American life and Jewish-American families like the Roths are persecuted on various levels. The narrator and central character in the novel is the young Philip, and the care with which his confusion and terror are rendered makes the novel as much about the mysteries of growing up as about American politics. Roth based his novel on the isolationist ideas espoused by Lindbergh in real life as a spokesman for the America First Committee and his own experiences growing up in Newark, New Jersey.

The Confessor by Daniel Silva - Gabriel Allon, Daniel Silva's protagonist in an interesting series about a Mossad spy who doubles as an art restorer, returns in a fascinating tale of Vatican complicity in the Holocaust. Author Silva, a political journalist turned espionage writer, has done his homework on some recently unearthed documents and written a fast-paced novel that will reawaken the discussion regarding whether the Catholic Church turned a blind eye to Nazi atrocities against Jews in occupied countries during World War II, and if so, why. Allon remains an enigmatic figure whose desire for revenge against the Leopard, the assassin who killed his wife and child, compels him to put down his paints and brushes and take arms against Israel's past and present enemies.

Covenant by Naomi Ragan - American Elise Margulies lives in the holy land, thrilled to own a piece of it where she and her husband, Dr. Jon, can raise their toddler Ilana and unborn child. The one drawback to the house is its distance from the hospital where Jon gives cancer patients treatment and hope. In the past few months, it has become increasingly dangerous to drive through the rural areas so vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Refusing to live in

constant fear, the Margulies family continues life as usual, in the naïve belief that something is being done to keep the roads safe. But then one day the unthinkable happens. The car in which Jon drove Ilana to her ballet recital is found, empty --- and riddled with bullets.

With no bodies at the scene, Elise allows herself to hope. But she has forgotten that death isn't always the worst that can happen. A videotape arrives, showing her husband and her daughter in the hands of Muslim extremists, making unmeetable demands in exchange for their lives. Elise despairs, until she makes a call to her Grandmother Leah.

A petite Jewish lady, Leah has survived Auschwitz. And she has friends --- three powerful, determined, loyal old women who formed the Covenant during their encampment. There is little the world can throw at them that would hurt them more than they already have been. Injuring a granddaughter or her family is one of them. The members of the Covenant join together once again, this time to free Jon and Ilana. These women do not have government's limitations or its political paralysis. Favors are called in and the rescue operation begins. But it's a sticky business, and keeping faith that Elise's family will return home becomes an almost insurmountable task. To make matters worse, Elise starts to worry that she will lose her unborn child from the stress of it all. She sorely needs Grandmother Leah's strength. Thankfully, Leah has strength enough for them both.

The Gilded Chamber by Rebecca Kohn - The story follows the Book of Esther very closely: The portent of this book is found not in the story alone, but in the meticulous research that Kohn has done into the time: Palace life, social customs, history, sexual practices, the place of women, war and politics. Descriptions of the care given to Esther before she meets the King are detailed: her trips to the hairdressers, her hennaed hands, the pungent oils rubbed all over her body, the gold-trimmed clothing she wears. She describes her dinner with a eunuch: "Golden cups in the shape of tulip blossoms were filled with sweet spiced wine from Hodu, and shining silver platters were piled high with meat stews and succulent birds I could not identify. A plate of sugared almonds and pistachios ... and a sweet of sesame, dates and honey..." She is willing to sacrifice all creature comforts to save her people; her success is celebrated to this day in the Jewish feast of Purim.

First they Killed My Father by Loung Ung - This book might be a tough read, but definitely a worthwhile

one, and the author's personality and strength shine through on every page. Covering the years from 1975 to 1979, the story moves from the deaths of multiple family members to the forced separation of the survivors, leading ultimately to the reuniting of much of the family, followed by marriages and immigrations. The brutality seems unending-- beatings, starvation, attempted rape, mental cruelty--and yet the narrator (a young girl) never stops fighting for escape and survival. Sad and courageous, her life and the lives of her young siblings provide quite a powerful example of how war can so deeply affect children--especially a war in which they are trained to be an integral part of the armed forces. For anyone interested in Cambodia's recent history, this book shares a valuable personal view of events.

The Known World by Edward P. Jones - This 2003 historical novel was Edward P. Jones' first novel and second book. Set in antebellum Virginia, it examines issues regarding the ownership of black slaves by free black people as well as by whites. A book with many points of view, *The Known World* paints an enormous canvas thick with personalities and situations that show how slavery destroys but can also be transcended.

Outwitting History by Aaron Lasky - Lasky was a 23-year-old graduate student in 1980 when he came up with an idea that would take over his life and change the face of Jewish literary culture: He wanted to save Yiddish books. With few resources save his passion and ironlike determination, Lasky and his fellow dreamers traveled from house to house, Dumpster to Dumpster saving Yiddish books wherever they could find them--eventually gathering an improbable 1.5 million volumes, from famous writers like Sholem Aleichem and I.B. Singer to one-of-a-kind Soviet prints. In his first book, Lasky charmingly describes his adventures as president and founder of the National Yiddish Book Center, which now has new headquarters at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass. To Lasky, Yiddish literature represented an important piece of Jewish cultural history, a link to the past and a memory of a generation lost to the Holocaust. Lasky's account of salvaging books is both hilarious and moving, filled with Jewish humor, conversations with elderly Jewish immigrants for whom the books evoke memories of a faraway past, stories of desperate midnight rescues from rain-soaked Dumpsters, and touching accounts of Lasky's trips to what were once thriving Jewish communities in Europe. The book is a testimony to his love of Judaism and

literature and his desire to make a difference in the world.

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The Boy Who Loved Anne Frank by Ellen Feldman - Peter Van Pels hid in the attic with Anne Frank and died in the camps just before liberation. But what if he survived, forged a new identity, and came to the U.S. after the war? Feldman imagines the young immigrant, who denies his Jewishness and his horrific past, marries, raises a happy family, and succeeds in business. He reveals his identity to no one, including his Jewish wife, and he never speaks of the Holocaust cruelty he witnessed. But when the *Diary*, edited by Otto Frank, is an international bestseller, followed by the play and the movie, Peter can no longer suppress his survivor guilt, his fury at the exploitation and cover-ups, and his traumatic breakdown. The fiction is sometimes far-fetched, especially the perfect wife (even if it is the '50s). But the history will grab the many devoted readers of the *Diary*, as will Peter's rage at the falsely uplifting message that "people are really good at heart." Feldman strips away the reverential veneer to show the secrets and lies.

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See - See's engrossing novel set in remote 19th-century China details the deeply affecting story of lifelong, intimate friends (*laotong*, or "old sames") Lily and Snow Flower, their imprisonment by rigid codes of conduct for women and their betrayal by pride and love. While granting immediacy to Lily's voice, See (*Flower Net*) adroitly transmits historical background in graceful prose. Her in-depth research into women's ceremonies and duties in China's rural interior brings fascinating revelations about arranged marriages, women's inferior status in both their natal and married homes, and the Confucian proverbs and myriad superstitions that informed daily life. Beginning with a detailed and heartbreaking description of Lily and her sisters' foot binding ("Only through pain will you have beauty. Only through suffering will you have peace"), the story widens to a vivid portrait of family and village life. Most impressive is See's incorporation of *nu shu*, a secret written phonetic code among women—here between Lily and Snow Flower—that dates back 1,000 years in the southwestern Hunan province.

Saturday by Ian McEwan - In the predawn sky on a Saturday morning, London neurosurgeon Henry

Perowne sees a plane with a wing afire streaking toward Heathrow. His first thought is terrorism--especially since this is the day of a public demonstration against the pending Iraq war. Eventually, danger to Perowne and his family will come from another source, but the plane, like the balloon in the first scene of *Enduring Love*, turns out to be a harbinger of a world forever changed. Meanwhile, the reader follows Perowne through his day, mainly via an interior monologue. His cerebral peregrination records, in turn, the meticulous details of brain surgery, a car accident followed by a confrontation with a hoodlum, a far-from-routine squash game, a visit to Perowne's mother in a nursing home and a family reunion. It is during the latter event, at the end of the day, that the ominous pall that has hovered over the narrative explodes into violence, and Perowne's sense that the world has become "a community of anxiety" plays out in suspense, delusion, heroism and reconciliation. The tension throughout the novel between science (Perowne's surgery) and art (his daughter is a poet; his son a musician) culminates in a synthesis of the two, and a grave, hopeful, meaningful, transcendent ending.

Lucky Child by Loung Ung - In her second memoir, Ung picks up where her first, the National Book Award-winning *First They Killed My Father*, left off, with the author escaping a devastated Cambodia in 1980 at age 10 and flying to her new home in Vermont. Though she embraces her American life—which carries advantages ranging from having a closet of her own to getting a formal education and enjoying *The Brady Bunch*—she can never truly leave her Cambodian life behind. She and her eldest brother, with whom she escaped, left behind their three other siblings. This book is alternately heart-wrenching and heartwarming, as it follows the parallel lives of Loung Ung and her closest sister, Chou, during the 15 years it took for them to reunite. Loung effectively juxtaposes chapters about herself and her sister to show their different worlds: while the author's meals in America are initially paid for with food stamps, Chou worries about whether she'll be able to scrounge enough rice; Loung is haunted by flashbacks, but Chou is still dodging the Khmer Rouge; and while Loung's biggest concern is fitting in at school, Chou struggles daily to stay alive. Loung's first-person chapters are the strongest, replete with detailed memories as a child who knows she is the lucky one and can't shake the guilt or horror. "For no matter how seemingly great my life is in America... it will not be fulfilling if I live

it alone.... [L]iving life to the fullest involves living it with your family."

The Glass Castle by Jeanette Walls - Jeannette Walls's father always called her "Mountain Goat" and there's perhaps no more apt nickname for a girl who navigated a sheer and towering cliff of childhood both daily and stoically. In this book, Walls chronicles her upbringing at the hands of eccentric, nomadic parents--Rose Mary, her frustrated-artist mother, and Rex, her brilliant, alcoholic father. As Rose Mary and Rex, motivated by whims and paranoia, uprooted their kids time and again, the youngsters (Walls, her brother and two sisters) were left largely to their own devices. But while Rex and Rose Mary firmly believed children learned best from their own mistakes, they themselves never seemed to do so, repeating the same disastrous patterns that eventually landed them on the streets. Walls describes in fascinating detail what it was to be a child in this family, from the embarrassing (wearing shoes held together with safety pins; using markers to color her skin in an effort to camouflage holes in her pants) to the horrific (being told, after a creepy uncle pleased himself in close proximity, that sexual assault is a crime of perception; and being pimped by her father at a bar). Walls' removed, nonjudgmental stance is initially startling, since many of the circumstances she describes could be categorized as abusive (and unquestioningly neglectful). But on the contrary, Walls respects her parents' knack for making hardships feel like adventures, and her love for them--despite their overwhelming self-absorption--resonates from cover to cover.

The March by E.L. Doctorow - As the Civil War was moving toward its inevitable conclusion, General William Tecumseh Sherman marched 60,000 Union troops through Georgia and the Carolinas, leaving a 60-mile-wide trail of death, destruction, looting, thievery and chaos. In *The March*, E.L. Doctorow has put his unique stamp on these events by staying close to historical fact, naming real people and places and then imagining the rest. The characters depicted on the march are those people high and low, white and black, whose lives are forever changed by war: Pearl, the newly free daughter of a white plantation owner and one of his slaves, Colonel Sartorius, a competent, remote, almost robotic surgeon; several officers, both Union and Confederate; two soldiers, Arly and Will, who provide comic relief in the manner of Shakespeare's fools until, suddenly, their roles are not funny

anymore. Doctorow has captured the madness of war in his description of the condition of a dispossessed Southern white woman: "What was clear at this moment was that Mattie Jameson's mental state befitted the situation in which she found herself. The world at war had risen to her affliction and made it indistinguishable." And later, " This was not war as adventure, nor war for a solemn cause, it was war at its purest, a mindless mass rage severed from any cause, ideal, or moral principle."

The Memory Keeper's Daughter by Kim Edwards - The story hinges on the birth of fraternal twins, a healthy boy and a girl with Down syndrome, resulting in the father's disavowal of his newborn daughter. A snowstorm immobilizes Lexington, Ky., in 1964, and when young Norah Henry goes into labor, her husband, orthopedic surgeon Dr. David Henry, must deliver their babies himself, aided only by a nurse. Seeing his daughter's handicap, he instructs the nurse, Caroline Gill, to take her to a home and later tells Norah, who was drugged during labor, that their son Paul's twin died at birth. Instead of institutionalizing Phoebe, Caroline absconds with her to Pittsburgh. David's deception becomes the defining moment of the main characters' lives, and Phoebe's absence corrodes her birth family's core over the course of the next 25 years. David's undetected lie warps his marriage; he grapples with guilt; Norah mourns her lost child; and Paul not only deals with his parents' icy relationship but with his own yearnings for his sister as well.

Ordinary Heroes by Scott Turow - When retired newspaperman Stewart Dubinsky discovers letters his deceased father wrote during his tour of duty in WWII, a host of family secrets come to light. In Turow's ambitious, fascinating page-turner, a "ferocious curiosity" compels the divorced Dubinsky to study his "remote, circumspect" father's papers, which include love letters written to a fiancée the family had never heard of, and a lengthy manuscript, which his father wrote in prison and which includes the shocking disclosure of his father's court-martial for assisting in the escape of OSS officer Robert Martin, a suspected spy. The manuscript, hidden from everyone but the attorney defending him, tells of Capt. David Dubin's investigation into Martin's activities and of both men's entanglements with fierce, secretive comrade Gita Lodz. From optimistic soldier to disenchanted veteran, Dubin—who, via the manuscript, becomes the book's de facto narrator—describes the years of

violence he endured and of a love triangle that exacted a heavy emotional toll.

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Suite Francaise by Irene Memerovsky - Celebrated in pre-WWII France for her bestselling fiction, the Jewish Russian-born Némirovsky was shipped to Auschwitz in the summer of 1942, months after this long-lost masterwork was composed. Némirovsky, a convert to Catholicism, began a planned five-novel cycle as Nazi forces overran northern France in 1940. This gripping "suite," collecting the first two unpolished but wondrously literary sections of a work cut short, have surfaced more than six decades after her death. The first, "Storm in June," chronicles the connecting lives of a disparate clutch of Parisians, among them a snobbish author, a venal banker, a noble priest shepherding churlish orphans, a foppish aesthete and a loving lower-class couple, all fleeing city comforts for the chaotic countryside, mere hours ahead of the advancing Germans. The second, "Dolce," set in 1941 in a farming village under German occupation, tells how peasant farmers, their pretty daughters and petit bourgeois collaborationists coexisted with their Nazi rulers. In a workbook entry penned just weeks before her arrest, Némirovsky noted that her goal was to describe "daily life, the emotional life and especially the comedy it provides." This heroic work does just that, by focusing—with compassion and clarity—on individual human dramas.

Whistling Season by Ivan Daig - This book is set in the past in rural eastern Montana—and addresses that time and place in distinct, uncluttered prose that carries the full enthusiasm of affection and even love—for the landscape, the characters, and the events of the story—without being sentimental or elegiac. The novel is narrated by an aging Montana state superintendent of schools, Paul Milliron, who is charged with deciding the fate of the state's last scattered rural schools, and who, in the hours preceding his meeting to determine those schools' fate, recalls the autumn of 1909, when he was 13 and attending his own one-room school in Marias Coulee. Recently widowed, Paul's father, overwhelmed by the child-rearing duties presented by his three sons, in addition to his challenging farming duties, hires a housekeeper, sight unseen, from a newspaper ad. The housekeeper, Rose, proclaims that she "can't cook but doesn't bite." She turns out to be a beguiling character, and she brings

with her a surprise guest—her brother, the scholarly Morris, who, though one of the most bookish characters in recent times, also carries brass knuckles and—not to give away too much plot—somehow knows how to use them. The schoolteacher in Marias Coulee runs away to get married, leaving Morris to step up and take over her job. The verve and inspiration that he, an utter novice to the West, to children and to teaching children, brings to the task is told brilliantly and passionately, and is the core of the book's narrative, with its themes of all the different ways of knowing and learning, at any age. Doig's strengths in this novel are character and language—the latter manifesting itself at a level of old-fashioned high-octane grandeur not seen previously in Doig's novels, and few others': the sheer joy of word choices, phrases, sentences, situations, and character bubbling up and out, as fecund and nurturing as the dryland farmscape the story inhabits is serene and arid. *The Whistling Season* is a book to pass on to your favorite readers: a story of lives of active choice, lived actively.

For The Relief of Unbearable Urges by Nathan Englander - This is a collection of short stories. Englander's specialty is the collision of Jewish law and tradition with secular realities, whether in Brooklyn, Tel Aviv, or Stalinist Russia. In one tale, a wigmaker from an ultra-orthodox Brooklyn enclave journeys into Manhattan for supplies and, more importantly, inspiration--frequenting a newsstand where she pays for the right to flip through forbidden fashion magazines. If all Ruchama wants to do is be beautiful again and momentarily free of communal constraints, others ask only to survive. In "The Tumblers," set in World War II Poland (with a metafictional twist), followers of the Mahmir Rebbe get into a train filled with circus performers rather than into a cattle car. Their only chance is to camouflage themselves as part of the troupe: Another story, "Reb Kringle," is almost breezy by comparison. Each year, one Brooklynite dreads his holiday job from hell, playing Santa Claus in a Manhattan department store: "There were elves posted on each side of Itzik; one--a humorless, muscular midget--wore a pair of combat boots that gave him the look of elf-at-arms. His companion might have been a twin. He wore black high-tops but had the same vigilant paramilitary demeanor." Itzik can put up with the children's accidents and greed, with his sciatica, and even with a mischief maker's attempt to cut off his beard. But when one boy admits that what he really wants to do is celebrate Hanukkah, "the infamous Reb Santa" loses it. Though

this is undoubtedly the collection's lightest piece-- proof positive that you have to be a saint to be a Jewish Santa--it is no less piercing an examination of identity and obligation than Englander's more heavyweight entries.

Disobedience by Naomi Alderman - This is Naomi Alderman's richly told, endearingly evocative tale of two women and the choices they make as they come to terms with their identities in a traditional Orthodox Jewish community.

Ronit Krushka is a lapsed Orthodox Jew, who fled the confines of Hendon, England, and her traditional upbringing for a secular lifestyle on Manhattan's Upper West Side. When her father, the community's revered Rabbi passes away, Ronit returns home to retrieve her mother's precious Shabbat candlesticks, and to revisit her troubled past. She reconnects with Esti, a former lover, whose choices have left her unsure and unfulfilled. As Ronit and Esti navigate through the demons of their past, each woman is forced to decide what kind of life she wants to lead, and with whom she wants to share it. Alderman alternates between a lyrical and familiar style, introducing each chapter with a page of religious commentary that relates directly to the novel.

Raquella; A Woman of Israel by Ruth Gruber - Raquela Prywes lived on the front lines of Israel's history. A ninth-generation Jerusalemite, she found her true calling as a hospital and battlefield nurse, delivering babies in the infamous Atlit detention camp, where Holocaust survivors were interned by the British, and literally walking across minefields to tend the wounded during the 1948 War of Independence.

Surrounded by men of uncommon bravery, Raquela fell passionately in love with the handsome young captain of one of the refugee ships and had to choose between him and the brilliant and distinguished doctor who waited for her back in Jerusalem. Upon her return to Israel, she helped to found the first hospital in the desert frontier of Beersheba, where she delivered the babies of Bedouin women and Jewish immigrants, eventually organizing the hospitals credited with saving Israeli soldiers during the Six-Day War. Alive with the courage of a rare woman and a rugged nation, Raquela tells the powerful and deeply moving story of an Israeli woman who knew passionate love, great danger, and shattering loss and who witnessed the darkest -- and most triumphant -- moments in the history of the Jewish people.

Elegant Gathering of White Snows by Kris Radish - When eight women in rural Wisconsin take off in the middle of the night for a journey of the heart, it touches women everywhere. The walking women are different ages and of diverse backgrounds, yet their friendship and unwavering mutual support have forged an immutable bond. They start their walk as support for Susan, who is facing an unwanted pregnancy, but all are walking for their own lost loves and lost dreams. As they walk, they talk about their lives, and the pain of the past is shed. The media picks up the news of their perambulation, and soon they become a national sensation that starts other women thinking about their lives, resulting in positive changes all over the country. The women are unaware of their influence, and their small community protects their privacy, so they can proceed without the intrusion of the outside world. A rallying cry for the empowerment of women, Radish's novel is also a celebration of the strong bond that exists between female friends.

Inheritance of Loss by K. Desai - This novel is set in mid-1980s India, on the cusp of the Nepalese movement for an independent state. Jemubhai Popatlal, a retired Cambridge-educated judge, lives in Kalimpong, at the foot of the Himalayas, with his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, and his cook. The makeshift family's neighbors include a coterie of Anglophiles who might be savvy readers of V.S. Naipaul but who are, perhaps, less aware of how fragile their own social standing is—at least until a surge of unrest disturbs the region. Jemubhai, with his hunting rifles and English biscuits, becomes an obvious target. Besides threatening their very lives, the revolution also stymies the fledgling romance between 16-year-old Sai and her Nepalese tutor, Gyan. The cook's son, Biju, meanwhile, lives miserably as an illegal alien in New York. All of these characters struggle with their cultural identity and the forces of modernization while trying to maintain their emotional connection to one another. In this alternately comical and contemplative novel, Desai deftly shuttles between first and third worlds, illuminating the pain of exile, the ambiguities of post-colonialism and the blinding desire for a "better life," when one person's wealth means another's poverty.

Three Cups of Tea by Greg Mortenson - Some failures lead to phenomenal successes, and this American nurse's unsuccessful attempt to climb K2, the world's second tallest mountain, is one of them. Dangerously ill when he finished his climb in 1993, Mortenson was

sheltered for seven weeks by the small Pakistani village of Korphe; in return, he promised to build the impoverished town's first school, a project that grew into the Central Asia Institute, which has since constructed more than 50 schools across rural Pakistan and Afghanistan. Coauthor Relin recounts Mortenson's efforts in fascinating detail, presenting compelling portraits of the village elders, con artists, philanthropists, mujahideen, Taliban officials, ambitious school girls and upright Muslims Mortenson met along the way. As the book moves into the post-9/11 world, Mortenson and Relin argue that the United States must fight Islamic extremism in the region through collaborative efforts to alleviate poverty and improve access to education, especially for girls. Captivating and suspenseful, with engrossing accounts of both hostilities and unlikely friendships, this book will win many readers' hearts.

The Law of Dreams by Peter Behrens - An epic novel that follows a hapless wee lad from the rotten potato fields of 1847 Ireland to a New England horse ranch. Fergus O'Brien, the teenage son of a tenant farmer, is sent to a workhouse after his parents are murdered. He quickly escapes, joins a band of brigands and, after raiding his former landlord's farm, drifts to Dublin and then to Liverpool, where he is primed to work as a "pearl boy" (read: male prostitute). He hits the road again, this time settling in Wales, where he works on a rail line and meets Red Molly, a married woman who becomes his lover and traveling companion to America, where he plans to become a horse trader. This is a sprawling, cinematically rendered immigrant story.

Old School by Tobias Wolff - Set in a New England prep school in the early 1960s, the novel imagines a final, pastoral moment before the explosion of the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the suicide of Ernest Hemingway. The unnamed narrator is one of several boys whose life revolves around the school's English teachers, those polymaths who seemed to know "exactly what was most worth knowing." For the boys, literature is the center of life, and their obsession culminates in a series of literary competitions during their final year. The prize in each is a private audience with a visiting writer who serves as judge for the entries. At first, the narrator is entirely taken with the battle. As he fails in his effort to catch Robert Frost's attention and then is unable--due to illness--to even compete for his moment with Ayn Rand, he devotes his energies to a

masterpiece for his hero, Hemingway. But, confronting the blank page, the narrator discovers his cowardice, his duplicity. He has withheld himself, he realizes, even from his roommate. He has used his fiction to create a patrician gentility, a mask for his middle class home and his Jewish ancestry. Through the competition for Hemingway, fittingly, all of his illusions about literature dissolve.

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Septembers of Shiraz by Dalia Sofer - Sofer's family escaped from Iran in 1982 when she was 10, an experience that may explain the intense detail of this unnerving debut. On a September day in 1981, gem trader Isaac Amin is accosted by Revolutionary Guards at his Tehran office and imprisoned for no other crime than being Jewish in a country where Muslim fanaticism is growing daily. Being rich and having had slender ties to the Shah's regime magnify his peril. In anguish over what might be happening to his family, Isaac watches the brutal mutilation and executions of prisoners around him. His wife, Farnaz, struggles to keep from slipping into despair, while his young daughter, Shirin, steals files from the home of a playmate whose father is in charge of the prison that holds her father. Far away in Brooklyn, Isaac's nonreligious son, Parviz, struggles without his family's money and falls for the pious daughter of his Hasidic landlord. Nicely layered, the story shimmers with past secrets and hidden motivations. The dialogue, while stiff, allows the various characters to come through. Sofer's dramatization of just-post-revolutionary Iran captures its small tensions and larger brutalities, which play vividly upon a family that cannot, even if it wishes to, conform.

Those Who Save Us by Jenna Blum - The narrative alternates between the present-day story of Trudy, a history professor at a Minneapolis university collecting oral histories of WWII survivors (both German and Jewish), and that of her aged but once beautiful German mother, Anna, who left her country when she married an American soldier. Interspersed with Trudy's interviews with German immigrants, many of whom reveal unabashed anti-Semitism, Anna's story flashes back to her hometown of Weimar. As Nazi anti-Jewish edicts intensify in the 1930s, Anna hides her love affair with a Jewish doctor, Max Stern. When Max is interned at nearby Buchenwald and Anna's father dies, Anna, carrying Max's child, goes to live with a baker who smuggles

bread to prisoners at the camp. Anna assists with the smuggling after Trudy's birth until the baker is caught and executed. Then Anna catches the eye of the *Obersturmführer*, a high-ranking Nazi officer at Buchenwald, who suspects her of also supplying the inmates with bread. He coerces her into a torrid, abusive affair, in which she remains complicit to ensure her survival and that of her baby daughter. Blum paints a subtle, nuanced portrait of the *Obersturmführer*, complicating his sordid cruelty with more delicate facets of his personality. Ultimately, present and past overlap with a shocking yet believable coincidence. Blum's spare imagery is nightmarish and intimate, imbuing familiar panoramas of Nazi atrocity with stark new power.

The Big House by George Howe Colt - The epicenter of the Colt family is the Big House, built in 1903 on Wings Neck, a deserted strip of Cape Cod. It's not only an architectural gem but a device to chronicle family, local history and the culture of Boston Brahmins-and it accomplishes that task with charm, style and solid research. For 42 summers, Colt traveled from winter homes across the U.S. to partake in this magical place. It's where he learned to swim and play tennis, and where he kissed his first girl. Indeed, the Big House has seen five weddings, four divorces, parties, anniversaries and love affairs. The Colts, a once venerable tribe, had lost their money-"it is not wealth so much as former wealth that defines Old Money families"-but were determined to keep their ancestral home. Time may have marched on, but the Big House refused to cooperate: "Everything in this house breathes of the past." Gilbert & Sullivan sheet music, rotary telephones and ancient globes grace its interiors. Yet all is not perfect in this palace by the sea. Colt, like playwright A.J. Gurney, is adept at exposing the dark underbelly of WASP restraint, recording the mental illness, alcoholism and despair that have plagued his family. His one comfort? The Big House. This love letter to the past is a quiet delight.

Mister Pip by Lloyd Jones - This novel is a portrayal of the small rebellions and crises of disillusionment that constitute a young narrator's coming-of-age against an ominous backdrop of war. When the conflict between the natives and the invading redskin soldiers erupts on an unnamed tropical island in the early 1990s, 13-year-old Matilda Laimo and her mother, Dolores, are unified with the rest of their village in their efforts for survival. Amid the chaos, Mr. Watts, the only white local (he is married to a native), offers to fill in as the children's

schoolteacher and teaches from Dickens's *Great Expectations*. The precocious Matilda, who forms a strong attachment to the novel's hero, Pip, uses the teachings as escapism, which rankles Dolores, who considers her daughter's fixation blasphemous. With a mixture of thrill and unease, Matilda discovers independent thought, and Jones captures the intricate, emotionally loaded evolution of the mother-daughter relationship.

Out Stealing Horses by Per Petterson - Trond Sander is a man nearing 70, dwelling in self-imposed exile at the eastern edge of Norway in a primitive cabin. Trond's peaceful existence is interrupted by a meeting with his only neighbor, who seems familiar. The meeting pries loose a memory from a summer day in 1948 when Trond's friend Jon suggests they go out and steal horses. That distant summer is transformative for Trond as he reflects on the fragility of life while discovering secrets about his father's wartime activities. The past also looms in the present: Trond realizes that his neighbor, Lars, is Jon's younger brother, who "pulls aside the fifty years with a lightness that seems almost indecent." Trond becomes immersed in his memory, recalling that summer that shaped the course of his life while, in the present, Trond and Lars prepare for the winter, allowing Petterson to dabble in parallels both bold and subtle. Petterson coaxes out of Trond's reticent, deliberate narration a story as vast as the Norwegian tundra.

Coal Black Horse by Robert Olmstead - This is a stirring tale of a 14-year-old boy's loss of innocence as he follows the horrors of war. The boy is Robey Childs, sent by his mother to bring his father home from the War. She has "the sight," and when she "sees" that General Thomas Jackson is dead, she tells Robey "Thomas Jackson has been killed... There's no sense in this continuing... This was a mistake a long time before we knew it, but a mistake nonetheless. Go and find your father and bring him back to his home." She sews a coat for him that is blue on one side and gray on the other, tells him to trust no one and sends him off. He is ill-prepared for all that will happen to him. When his horse pulls up lame, he walks her to the blacksmith, but she is unfit for the task ahead. The blacksmith offers Robey a horse on loan until his task is completed. "It was coal black, stood sixteen hands, and it was clear to see the animal suffered no lack of self possession." Indeed, the horse is more fit to do his job than is Robey. Olmstead creates an iconic horse, but never anthropomorphizes or romanticizes the relationship

between boy and horse. When they are separated, Robey is truly at sea. When they are together, they move as one. Robey encounters every kind of evil, venality, cruelty, squalor, and depravity imaginable. He is hardened beyond his years by what he sees. There is a battle scene as horrific as any ever written, graphic and frightening. "There were enough limbs and organs, heads and hands, ribs and feet to stitch together body after body and were only in need of thread and needle and a celestial seamstress." Robey is changed forever, but never dehumanized. Olmstead leaves the reader in no doubt about the unconscionable ravages of war; he also shows us the redemption that such suffering can bring.

Waiting for Snow in Havana by Carlos Eire - At the start of the nineteen-sixties, an operation called Pedro Pan flew more than fourteen thousand Cuban children out of the country, without their parents, and deposited them in Miami. Eire, now a professor of history and religion at Yale, was one of them. His deeply moving memoir describes his life before Castro, among the aristocracy of old Cuba—his father, a judge, believed himself to be the reincarnation of Louis XVI—and, later, in America, where he turned from a child of privilege into a Lost Boy. Eire's tone is so urgent and so vividly personal (he is even nostalgic about Havana's beautiful blue clouds of DDT) that his unsparing indictments of practically everyone concerned, including himself, seem all the more remarkable.

A Pigeon and a Boy by Meir Shalev - In this stunning tale, Shalev masterfully interweaves two remarkable personal stories. Yair Mendelsohn, a middle-aged Israeli tour guide favored with bird watchers, learns that one of his new American clients fought in the Palmach, a clandestine military force in Israel's 1948 war of independence. The American recounts a day when a homing pigeon handler, nicknamed the Baby for his childlike features, was killed in that war and, in his final moments, sent off one last pigeon. Yair is familiar with the American's story and listens with wistfulness. As Yair slowly tells of his present and his past, Shalev patiently builds tension around the Baby's final dispatch, giving vivid detail on homing pigeons and conveying the unique relationship between the birds and their keepers—which echoes the touching care with which the Baby and his true love, the Girl, treat one another. The dark, stocky Yair, whose marriage is threatened by his burgeoning relationship with childhood friend Tirzah, makes a sympathetic protagonist.

The Commoner by John Burnham Schwartz - Schwartz bases his finely wrought fourth novel on the life of Empress Michiko of Japan, the first commoner to marry into the Japanese imperial family. Haruko Tsuneyasu grows up in postwar rural Japan and studies at Sacred Heart University, where she excels—particularly and fatefully—at tennis, which provides her entrée to the crown prince, whom she handily beats in an exhibition match. After more meetings on and off the court, the prince asks Haruko to marry him. Persuaded by their mutual attraction and by assurances that the break with tradition will usher in a modern era, Haruko ultimately agrees, against her father's wishes, to become the first commoner turned royal. But, as her father had feared, her freedom and ambition suffer under the stifling rituals of court life. Eventually, Haruko succumbs to the inescapable judgment of the empress and her entourage, falling mute after the birth of her son, Yasuhito. Though the narrative loses some of its life after Haruko marries—perhaps mirroring Haruko's experience within the palace walls—urgency returns after Haruko chooses a wife for Yasuhito; the marriage tests Haruko's dedication to the crown. Schwartz (*Reservation Road*) pulls off a grand feat in giving readers a moving dramatization of a cloistered world.

Then She Found Me by Elinor Lipman - Meet April Epner, the serious, scholarly, adopted daughter of two equally staid parents. They die, but April finds that she's far from orphaned when her birth mother, Bernice Graverman, comes to claim April's heart and improve her wardrobe and love life, too. April is a Latin teacher, given to wearing flannel jumpers. Bernice is hostess of a third-rate daytime talk show and wears designer labels and toad-sized earrings. She descends upon April's quiet life with the tact of a size-six locust, and the delightful and surprising results of this unlikely reunion will keep you turning pages long after bedtime.

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Olive Kitteridge by Elizabeth Strout - Thirteen linked tales from Strout (*Abide with Me*, etc.) present a heart-wrenching, penetrating portrait of ordinary coastal Mainers living lives of quiet grief intermingled with flashes of human connection. The opening *Pharmacy* focuses on terse, dry junior high-school teacher Olive Kitteridge and her gregarious pharmacist husband, Henry, both of whom have survived the loss of a psychologically damaged

parent, and both of whom suffer painful attractions to co-workers. Their son, Christopher, takes center stage in *A Little Burst*, which describes his wedding in humorous, somewhat disturbing detail, and in *Security*, where Olive, in her 70s, visits Christopher and his family in New York. Strout's fiction showcases her ability to reveal through familiar details—the mother-of-the-groom's wedding dress, a grandmother's disapproving observations of how her grandchildren are raised—the seeds of tragedy. Themes of suicide, depression, bad communication, aging and love, run through these stories, none more vivid or touching than *Incoming Tide*, where Olive chats with former student Kevin Coulson as they watch waitress Patty Howe by the seashore, all three struggling with their own misgivings about life. Like this story, the collection is easy to read and impossible to forget. Its literary craft and emotional power will surprise readers unfamiliar with Strout.

The Pages In Between by Erin Einhorn

Reporter Erin Einhorn recalls casting about for her next big adventure: a plum assignment on another continent. She found it in Poland, Sweden and the U.S.; in interviews, archives, databases, phone books and graveyards. What she found was the intensely personal story of her family and of herself, one she recounts in The Pages in Between. Einhorn grew up insatiably curious and suspicious about her mother's early childhood. Curious because there were so few details, and suspicious because her mother didn't seem to want any. Her mother, Irene Fydrych, was a Holocaust survivor. To Einhorn, the story of Irene's escape, concealment and double emigration was a tantalizing mystery; to Irene, it was ancient history. When asked about her early life, Irene recounted the same impressions in the same order, in the same words, never trying to remember more. So, using her journalistic skills, Einhorn embarked on a mission to fill the gaps, "the pages in between" the accepted oral history. She was especially eager to find details about her mother's initial escape in Bedzin, Poland. In 1943, when Irene's parents were rounded up for deportation, the child was taken in by a non-Jewish family acquaintance. Einhorn always found it odd that her own family looked upon this woman with suspicion; after all, didn't she save Irene's life at her own peril? Apparently, however, Irene's father had offered the woman something in exchange. Could such a transaction be both calculated and heroic? In the midst of her travels and research, Einhorn must confront the loss of her mother, the endless contradictions of modern Poland, her changing sense of Jewish identity and above all the absolute

unreliability of memory. The ultimate discovery could be that her investigative lens, though focused on her mother, gives a clearer picture of the investigator. The Pages in Between uniquely underscores an old irony of history: when we set out to learn about others in the past, we end up learning more about our present selves.

In The Land of Invisible Women - This memoir is a journey into a complex world readers will find fascinating and at times repugnant. After being denied a visa to remain in the U.S., British-born Ahmed, a Muslim woman of Pakistani origin, takes advantage of an opportunity, before 9/11, to practice medicine in Saudi Arabia. She discovers her new environment is defined by schizophrenic contrasts that create an absurd clamorous clash of modern and medieval.... It never became less arresting to behold. Ahmed's introduction to her new environment is shocking. Her first patient is an elderly Bedouin woman. Though naked on the operating table, she still is required by custom to have her face concealed with a veil under which numerous hoses snake their way to hissing machines. Everyday life is laced with bizarre situations created by the rabid puritanical orthodoxy that among other requirements forbids women to wear seat belts because it results in their breasts being more defined, and oppresses Saudi men as much as women by its archaic rules. At times the narrative is burdened with Ahmed's descriptions of the physical characteristics of individuals and the luxurious adornments of their homes but this minor flaw is easily overlooked in exchange for the intimate introduction to a world most readers will never know.

Falling Man by Do DeLillo - The defining moment of turn-of-the-21st-century America is perfectly portrayed in National Book Award winner Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. The book takes its title from the electrifying photograph of the man who jumped or fell from the North Tower on 9/11. It also refers to a performance artist who recreates the picture. The artist straps himself into a harness and in high visibility areas jumps from an elevated structure, such as a railway overpass or a balcony, startling passersby as he hangs in the horrifying pose of the falling man. Keith Neudecker, a lawyer and survivor of the attack, arrives on his estranged wife Lianne's doorstep, covered with soot and blood, carrying someone else's briefcase. In the days and weeks that follow, moments of connection alternate with complete withdrawal from his wife and young son,

Justin. He begins a desultory affair with the owner of the briefcase based only on their shared experience of surviving: "the timeless drift of the long spiral down." Justin uses his binoculars to scan the skies with his friends, looking for "Bill Lawton" (a misunderstood version of bin Laden) and more killing planes. Lianne suddenly sees Islam everywhere: in a postcard from a friend, in a neighbor's music--and is frightened and angered by its ubiquity. She is riveted by the Falling Man. Her mother Nina's response is to break up with her long-time German lover over his ancient politics. In short, the old ways and days are gone forever; a new reality has taken over everyone's consciousness. This new way is being tried on, and it doesn't fit. Keith and Lianne weave into reconciliation. Keith becomes a professional poker player and, when questioned by Lianne about the future of this enterprise, he thinks: "There was one final thing, too self-evident to need saying. She wanted to be safe in the world and he did not." DeLillo also tells the story of Hammad, one of the young men in flight training on the Gulf Coast, who says: "We are willing to die, they are not. This is our strength, to love death, to feel the claim of armed martyrdom." He also asks: "But does a man have to kill himself in order to accomplish something in the world?" His answer is that he is one of the hijackers on the plane that strikes the North Tower. At the end of the book, De Lillo takes the reader into the Tower as the plane strikes the building. Through all the terror, fire and smoke, De Lillo's voice is steady as a metronome, recounting exactly what happens to Keith as he sees friends and co-workers maimed and dead, navigates the stairs and, ultimately, is saved. Though several post-9/11 novels have been written, not one of them is as compellingly true, faultlessly conceived, and beautifully written as Don De Lillo's *Falling Man*.

My Life In France by Julia Child -

Julia Child single handedly awakened America to the pleasures of good cooking with her cookbook *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* and her television show *The French Chef*, but as she reveals in this bestselling memoir, she didn't know the first thing about cooking when she landed in France. Indeed, when she first arrived in 1948 with her husband, Paul, she spoke no French and knew nothing about the country itself. But as she dove into French culture, buying food at local markets and taking classes at the Cordon Bleu, her life changed forever. Julia's unforgettable story unfolds with the spirit so key to her success as a cook and teacher and writer, brilliantly capturing one of the

most endearing American personalities of the last fifty years.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Diaz

- Junot Diaz's dark and exuberant first novel makes a compelling case for the multiperspectival view of a life, wherein an individual cannot be known or understood in isolation from the history of his family and his nation. Oscar being a first-generation Dominican-American, the nation in question is really two nations. And Dominicans in this novel being explicitly of mixed Taino, African and Spanish descent, the very ideas of nationhood and nationality are thoughtfully, subtly complicated. The various nationalities and generations are subtended by the recurring motif of ***ú, the Curse and Doom of the New World, whose midwife and... victim was a historical personage Diaz will only call the Admiral, in deference to the belief that uttering his name brings bad luck (hint: he arrived in the New World in 1492 and his initials are CC). By the prologue's end, it's clear that this story of one poor guy's cursed life will also be the story of how 500 years of historical and familial bad luck shape the destiny of its fat, sad, smart, lovable and short-lived protagonist. The book's pervasive sense of doom is offset by a rich and playful prose that embodies its theme of multiple nations, cultures and languages, often shifting in a single sentence from English to Spanish, from Victorian formality to Negropolitan vernacular, from Homeric epithet to dirty bilingual insult. Even the presumed reader shape-shifts in the estimation of its in-your-face narrator, who addresses us variously as folks, you folks, conspiracy-minded-fools, Negro, and plataneros. So while Diaz assumes in his reader the same considerable degree of multicultural erudition he himself possesses—offering no gloss on his many un-italicized Spanish words and expressions (thus beautifully dramatizing how linguistic borders, like national ones, are porous), or on his plethora of genre and canonical literary allusions—he does helpfully footnote aspects of Dominican history, especially those concerning the bloody 30-year reign of President Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. The later Oscar chapters lack the linguistic brio of the others, and there are exposition-clogged passages that read like summaries of a longer narrative, but mostly this fierce, funny, tragic book is just what a reader would have hoped for in a novel by Junot Diaz.

A Woman in Jerusalem by A.B. Yehoshua -

Renowned Israeli writer Yehoshua performs a bold improvisation on the basic plotline of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and casts light on Israel's bloody history

and cultural conflicts. The hero of this smart, suspenseful seriocomic tale of guilt, penance, and public relations is the human resources manager of a major Jerusalem company. When the 87-year-old owner learns that a local newspaper is about to run a scathing article about a company employee, a beautiful Russian who was killed by a suicide bomber and whose body remains unclaimed, he directs the human resources manager to find out what happened and make amends, no expenses spared. And so begins a sequence of ludicrous if well-meant mishaps as the manager mounts an improbable and risky expedition to return Yulia Ragayev's body to her isolated Soviet village, a journey that includes a surreal stopover at an obsolete Russian atomic-bomb shelter. Tautly composed in a manner akin to Kafka and Babel, Yehoshua's brilliant under-your-skin satire subtly evokes thoughts of war and terrorism, vulnerability and fate, the sacred and the profane.

A Man and a Woman and a Man by Savyon Liebrecht - Chronicling a romantic fling initiated in a nursing home, of all places, this convincing if sometimes heavy-handed first novel by respected Israeli short-story writer Liebrecht takes readers on a trip into the adulterous psyche. Hamutal meets Saul when they are both visiting parents at a nursing home in Tel Aviv. Hamutal's mother, suffering from Alzheimer's disease, confuses her daughter with figures from her Holocaust past; Saul's dying father is a once-handsome man rendered pathetic by the difficulties of aging. Hamutal, feeling trapped by her family and her job as the editor of a psychology journal, begins a fling with Saul for the feeling of pure escape she derives from it. But what starts as diversion quickly spins out of control, as Hamutal finds herself increasingly attached to Saul. He seems to love her too, momentarily promising marriage, but he can't commit, because he will have to move back to Chicago, where his family awaits his return. Throughout, the author writes perceptively of Hamutal's feelings, such as the abandon with which she throws herself into her doomed affair and the inner release it provides her. However, more trite, melodramatic aspects of the scenario the cartoonishly documented wasting away of the lovers' parents, or Hamutal's exaggerated exasperation with her domestic situation overshadow its moments of understanding and subtlety. The translation is also stiff in places, obscuring the dialogue and disrupting the emotional flow of the tale. Although the situation Liebrecht describes is a universal one, and she approaches it with considerable emotional

intelligence, the buttons she pushes to tell her story have been pushed too many times before.

Garden of the Finzi-Continis by Giorgio Bassani - Giorgio Bassani's masterwork has Vittorio de Sica's 1971 film adaptation to thank for its dual success and obscurity. Not enough people know that this tale of a middle-class Jewish youth's obsession with the far more aristocratic Micol Finzi-Contini stems from a novel, not a novelization. Bassani's doom- and tomb-ridden examination of one-sided love is far more complex--about individuals' inability to contend with personal and political annihilation. Events call for heroism, yet it seems "downright absurd that now, all of a sudden, exceptional behavior was demanded of us." The narrator writes in retrospect, 13 years after World War II's end, and reveals the Finzi-Continis' 1943 deportation to Germany right from the start: "Who could say if they found any sort of burial at all?" As Fascist racial laws go from strength to strength, the family, which had long isolated itself from the other inhabitants of Ferrara, opens its walled grounds and tennis court to other young Jews and even returns to the local temple. Unfortunately, the situation encourages the narrator's dream that Micol will return his love, and she is forced into cruel honesty. "She looked into my eyes, and her gaze entered me, straight, sure, hard: with the limpid inexorability of a sword." The author has re-created a tragic era in which even nobility could not outrun events, let alone admit they needed to. (For a nonfiction account of the fates of five Italian Jewish families under fascism, see Alexander Stille's *Benevolence and Betrayal*.) Bassani's elision of historical and personal agony is furthermore superbly translated by William Weaver. All is foretold in the novel's Manzonian epigraph, "The heart, to be sure, always has something to say about what is to come, to him who heeds it. But what does the heart know? Only a little of what has already happened."

Precious by Sapphire - With this much anticipated first novel, told from the point of view of an illiterate, brutalized Harlem teenager, Sapphire (*American Dreams*), a writer affiliated with the Nuyorican poets, charts the psychic damage of the most ghettoized of inner-city inhabitants. Obese, dark-skinned, HIV-positive, bullied by her sexually abusive mother, Clareece, Precious Jones is, at the novel's outset, pregnant for the second time with her father's child. (Precious had her first daughter at 12, named Little Mongo, "short for Mongoloid Down Sinder, which is what she is; sometimes what I feel I is. I feel so stupid sometimes. So ugly, worth nuffin.") Referred to a pilot program by an unusually solicitous principal, Precious comes under the experimental pedagogy of a lesbian miracle worker named, implausibly enough, Blue Rain. Under her

angelic mentorship, Precious, who has never before experienced real nurturing, learns to voice her long suppressed feelings in a journal. As her language skills improve, she finds sustenance in writing poetry, in friendships and in support groups--one for "insect" survivors and one for HIV-positive teens. It is here that Sapphire falters, as her slim and harrowing novel, with its references to Harriet Tubman, Langston Hughes and *The Color Purple* (a parallel the author hints at again and again), becomes a conventional, albeit dark and unresolved, allegory about redemption. The ending, composed of excerpts from the journals of Precious's classmates, lends heightened realism and a wider scope to the narrative, but also gives it a quality of incompleteness. Sapphire has created a remarkable heroine in Precious, whose first-person street talk is by turns blisteringly savvy, rawly lyrical, hilariously pig-headed and wrenchingly vulnerable. Yet that voice begs to be heard in a larger novel of more depth and complexity.

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The Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet by Jamie Ford- Henry Lee is a 12-year-old Chinese boy who falls in love with Keiko Okabe, a 12-year-old Japanese girl, while they are scholarship students at a prestigious private school in World War II Seattle. Henry hides the relationship from his parents, who would disown him if they knew he had a Japanese friend. His father insists that Henry wear an "I am Chinese" button everywhere he goes because Japanese residents of Seattle have begun to be shipped off by the thousands to relocation centers. This is an old-fashioned historical novel that alternates between the early 1940s and 1984, after Henry's wife Ethel has died of cancer. A particularly appealing aspect of the story is young Henry's fascination with jazz and his friendship with Sheldon, an older black saxophonist just making a name for himself in the many jazz venues near Henry's home. Other aspects of the story are more typical of the genre: the bullies that plague Henry, his lack of connection with his father, and later with his own son. Readers will care about Henry as he is forced to make decisions and accept circumstances that separate him from both his family and the love of his life.

Little Bee by Chris Clive - The publishers of Chris Cleave's new novel "don't want to spoil" the story by revealing too much about it, and there's good reason

not to tell too much about the plot's pivot point. All you should know going in to *Little Bee* is that what happens on the beach is brutal, and that it braids the fates of a 16-year-old Nigerian orphan (who calls herself Little Bee) and a well-off British couple--journalists trying to repair their strained marriage with a free holiday--who should have stayed behind their resort's walls. The tide of that event carries Little Bee back to their world, which she claims she couldn't explain to the girls from her village because they'd have no context for its abundance and calm. But she shows us the infinite rifts in a globalized world, where any distance can be crossed in a day--with the right papers--and "no one likes each other, but everyone likes U2." Where you have to give up the safety you'd assumed as your birthright if you decide to save the girl gazing at you through razor wire, left to the wolves of a failing state.

Burnt Shadows by Kamila Shamsie - Shamsie's complex fifth novel, spanning the years between August 1945 and September 2001, is a story of twainextricably connected and politically impacted families. Berliner Konrad Weiss and Hiroko Tanaka, his translator, meet in Nagasaki and plan to marry. But after he is incinerated by the bomb and she is left permanently scarred, Hiroko journeys to Delhi, home of Konrad's half-sister, Elizabeth Burton, and her British husband, James. Hiroko bonds with James' assistant, Sajjad. With Partition between India and Pakistan looming, the Burtons return to England, where their son Henry is in boarding school. Hiroko and Sajjad marry, but they're not allowed back into India, since Sajjad is a Muslim who "chose to leave." Shamsie takes up their story 35 years later in Karachi, where they have one son, Raza, after bomb-related miscarriages. Henry appears, searching for his past, and offers to assist with Raza's education; by 2001, they're working together for the CIA in the U.S. Shamsie offers a moving look at the "complicated shared history" of these two families, an increasingly common facet of globalization.

A Long Time Ago and Essentially True by Brigid Pasulka - Pasulka's delightful debut braids together two tales of old and new Poland. The old is the fairy tale love story of the Pigeon, a young man so entranced by village beauty Anielica that he builds her family a house to prove his devotion. When war comes to Poland, the Pigeon works for the resistance, guarding the town and his Jewish sister-in-law with creativity and bravery. After the war, he and Anielica get engaged and the Pigeon brings his

family to Kraków, but the fabled promises of the golden city and the glories of communism prove hollow. The new tale is about Anielica and the Pigeon's granddaughter, Beata, whose plainness has earned her the nickname Baba Yaga. Now living in a much-changed Kraków, Beata is a bar girl with no hopes of love or plans for the future. When tragedy strikes and Beata uncovers family secrets, she brings together the old and new to create her own bright future. Pasulka creates a world that's magical despite the absence of magical happenings, and where Poland's history is bound up in one family's story.

In Other Rooms, Other Wanderers by Daniyal Mueenuddin - In eight beautifully crafted, interconnected stories, Mueenuddin explores the cutthroat feudal society in which a rich Lahore landowner is entrenched. A complicated network of patronage undergirds the micro-society of servants, families and opportunists surrounding wealthy patron K.K. Harouni. In *Nawabdin Electrician*, Harouni's indispensable electrician, Nawab, excels at his work and at home, raising 12 daughters and one son by virtue of his cunning and ingenuity—qualities that allow him to triumph over entrenched poverty and outlive a robber bent on stealing his livelihood. Women are especially vulnerable without the protection of family and marriage ties, as the protagonist of *Saleema* learns: a maid in the Harouni mansion who cultivates a love affair with an older servant, Saleema is left with a baby and without recourse when he must honor his first family and renounce her. Similarly, the women who become lovers of powerful men, as in the title story and in *Provide, Provide*, fall into disgrace and poverty with the death of their patrons. An elegant stylist with a light touch, Mueenuddin invites the reader to a richly human, wondrous experience.

Mudbound by Hillary Jordan - Jordan won the 2006 Bellwether Prize for *Mudbound*, her first novel. The prize was founded by Barbara Kingsolver to reward books of conscience, social responsibility, and literary merit. In addition to meeting all of the above qualifications, Jordan has written a story filled with characters as real and compelling as anyone we know. It is 1946 in the Mississippi Delta, where Memphis-bred Laura McAllan is struggling to adjust to farm life, rear her daughters with a modicum of manners and gentility, and be the wife her land-loving husband, Henry, wants her to be. It is an uphill battle every day. Things started badly when Henry's trusting nature resulted in the family

being done out of a nice house in town, thus relegating them to a shack on their property. In addition, Henry's father, Pappy, a sour, mean-spirited devil of a man, moves in with them. The real heart of the story, however, is the friendship between Jamie, Henry's too-charming brother, and Ronsel Jackson, son of sharecroppers who live on the McAllan farm. They have both returned from the war changed men: Jamie has developed a deep love for alcohol and has recurring nightmares; Ronsel, after fighting valiantly for his country and being seen as a man by the world outside the South, is now back to being just another black "boy." Told in alternating chapters by Laura, Henry, Jamie, Ronsel, and his parents, Florence and Hap, the story unfolds with a chilling inevitability. Jordan's writing and perfect control of the material lift it from being another "ain't-it-awful" tale to a heart-rending story of deep, mindless prejudice and cruelty.

My Father's Paradise by Ariel Sabar - For his first 31 years Sabar considered his father, Yona, an embarrassing anachronism. Ours was a clash of civilizations, writ small. He was ancient Kurdistan. I was 1980s L.A. Yona was a UCLA professor whose passion was his native language, Aramaic. Ariel was an aspiring rock-and-roll drummer. The birth of Sabar's own son in 2002 was a turning point, prompting Sabar to try to understand his father on his own terms. Readers can only be grateful to him for unearthing the history of a family, a people and a very different image of Iraq. Sabar vividly depicts daily life in the remote village of Zahko, where Muslims, Jews and Christians banded together to ensure prosperity and survival, and in Israel (after the Jews' 1951 expulsion from Iraq), where Kurdish Jews were stereotyped as backward and simple. Sabar's career as an investigative reporter at the *Baltimore Sun* and elsewhere serves him well, particularly in his attempt to track down his father's oldest sister, who was kidnapped as an infant. Sabar offers something rare and precious—a tale of hope and continuity that can be passed on for generations.

How The Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents by Julia Alvarez - This sensitive story of four sisters who must adjust to life in America after having to flee from the Dominican Republic is told through a series of episodes beginning in adulthood, when their lives have been shaped by U. S. mores, and moving backwards to their wealthy childhood on the island. Adapting to American life is difficult and causes embarrassment when friends meet their parents,

anger as they are bullied and called "spics," and identity confusion following summer trips to the family compound in the Dominican Republic. These interconnected vignettes of family life, resilience, and love are skillfully intertwined and offer young adults a perspective on immigration and families as well as a look at America through Hispanic eyes. This unique coming-of-age tale is a feast of stories that will enchant and captivate readers.

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Room by Emma Donoghue - In many ways, Jack is a typical 5-year-old. He likes to read books, watch TV, and play games with his Ma. But Jack is different in a big way--he has lived his entire life in a single room, sharing the tiny space with only his mother and an unnerving nighttime visitor known as Old Nick. For Jack, Room is the only world he knows, but for Ma, it is a prison in which she has tried to craft a normal life for her son. When their insular world suddenly expands beyond the confines of their four walls, the consequences are piercing and extraordinary. Despite its profoundly disturbing premise, Emma Donoghue's Room is rife with moments of hope and beauty, and the dogged determination to live, even in the most desolate circumstances. A stunning and original novel of survival in captivity, readers who enter Room will leave staggered, as though, like Jack, they are seeing the world for the very first time.

Memory Palace by Mira Bartok - This moving, compassionately candid memoir by artist and children's book author Bartok describes a life dominated by her gifted but schizophrenic mother. Bartók and her sister, Rachel, both of whom grew up in Cleveland, are abandoned by their novelist father and go to live with their mother at their maternal grandparents' home. By 1990, a confrontation in which her mother cuts her with broken glass leads Bartók (née Myra Herr) to change her identity and flee the woman she calls the cry of madness in the dark. Eventually, the estrangement leaves her mother homeless, wandering with her belongings in a knapsack, writing letters to her daughter's post office box. Reunited 17 years later, Bartók is suffering memory loss from an accident; her mother is 80 years old and dying from stomach cancer. Only through memories do they each find solace for their collective journey. Using a mnemonic technique from the Renaissance—a memory palace—Bartók imagines, chapter by chapter, a mansion whose

rooms secure the treasured moments of her reconstructed past. With a key found stashed in her mother's knapsack, she unlocks a rental storage room filled with paintings, diaries, and photos. Bartók turns these strangely parallel narratives and overlapping wonders into a haunting, almost patchwork, narrative that lyrically chronicles a complex mother-daughter relationship.

Comedy In A Minor Key by Hans Keilson - A German Jew who survived the war by hiding in Holland, Keilson later became a psychiatrist and published the first systemic study of children who had suffered from Nazi persecution. This selection is one of two novels Keilson began writing during the war. Its better-known sibling, *Death of the Adversary* (Eng. trans 1962), explored the thoughts of an oppressed man; plotless and psychological, it was something of an aesthetic experiment. Not previously translated, *Comedy in a Minor Key* takes a different approach: it tells the story of a Jewish man who dies in hiding from the perspective of the Dutch couple who shelter him and dispose of his body, and offers only slight clues as to the thoughts of the man in hiding. The story is simple and lean, but irony is plentiful, particularly when the couple must themselves go into hiding after realizing that tags bearing their name were left on the deceased's clothing when his body was discovered. In spite of potentially comedic elements (and its title), most readers will not find this to be an essentially humorous book. They will find, however, a brisk, engaging work of Holocaust literature that deserves to be better known.

My Own Country by Abraham Verghese - In fall 1985 Verghese--who was born in Ethiopia of Indian parents--returned with his wife and newborn son to Johnson City, Tennessee, where he had done his internship and residence. As he watched AIDS infect the small town, he and the community learned many things from one another, including the power of compassion. An AIDS expert who initially had no patients, Verghese describes meeting gay men and then eventually others struggling with this new disease. Verghese's patients include a factory worker confronting her husband's AIDS, bisexuality, and her own HIV status and a religious couple infected via a blood transfusion attempting to keep their disease secret from their church and their children. This novelistic account, occasionally overly detailed, provides a heartfelt perspective on the American response to the spread of AIDS.

The Girl Who Fell From The Sky by Heidi W. Durrow - Durrow's debut draws from her own upbringing as the brown-skinned, blue-eyed daughter of a Danish woman and a black G.I. to create Rachel Morse, a young girl with an identical heritage growing up in the early 1980s. After a devastating family tragedy in Chicago with Rachel the only survivor, she goes to live with the paternal grandmother she's never met, in a decidedly black neighborhood in Portland, Ore. Suddenly, at 11, Rachel is in a world that demands her to be either white or black. As she struggles with her grief and the haunting, yet-to-be-revealed truth of the tragedy, her appearance and intelligence place her under constant scrutiny. Laronne, Rachel's deceased mother's employer, and Brick, a young boy who witnessed the tragedy and because of his personal misfortunes is drawn into Rachel's world, help piece together the puzzle of Rachel's family. Taut prose, a controversial conclusion and the thoughtful reflection on racism and racial identity resonate without treading into political or even overtly specific agenda waters, as the story succeeds as both a modern coming-of-age and relevant social commentary.

How To Read The Air by Dinaw Mengestu - Mengestu stunningly illuminates the immigrant experience across two generations. Jonas Woldemariam's parents, near strangers when they marry in violence-torn Ethiopia, spend most of the early years of their marriage separated, eventually reuniting in America, but their ensuing life together devolves into a mutual hatred that forces a contentious divorce. Three decades later, Jonas, himself moving toward a divorce, retraces his parents' fateful honeymoon road trip from Peoria, Ill., to Nashville in an attempt to understand an upbringing that turned him into a man who has "gone numb as a tactical strategy" and become a fluent and inveterate liar--a skill that comes in handy at his job at an immigration agency, where he embellishes African immigrants' stories so that they might be granted asylum. Mengestu draws a haunting psychological portrait of recent immigrants to America, insecure and alienated, striving to fit in while mourning the loss of their cultural heritage and social status. Mengestu's precise and nuanced prose evokes characters, scenes, and emotions with an invigorating and unparalleled clarity.

Great House by Nicole Krauss - In each of the short stories that nest like rooms in Nicole Krauss's *Great House* looms a tremendous desk. It may have belonged to Federico García

Lorca, the great poet and dramatist who was one of thousands executed by Fascists in 1936, when the Spanish Civil War began. We know that the desk stood in Weisz's father's study in Budapest on a night in 1944, when the first stone shattered their window. After the war, Weisz hunts furniture looted from Jewish homes by the Nazis. He scours the world for the fragments to reassemble that study's every element, but the desk eludes him, and he and his children live at the edges of its absence. Meanwhile, it spends a few decades in an attic in England, where a woman exhumes the memories she can't speak except through violent stories. She gives the desk to the young Chilean-Jewish poet Daniel Varsky, who takes it to New York and passes it on (before he returns to Chile and disappears under Pinochet) to Nadia, who writes seven novels on it before Varsky's daughter calls to claim it. Crossing decades and continents, the stories of *Great House* narrate feeling more than fact. Krauss's characters inhabit "a state of perpetual regret and longing for a place we only know existed because we remember a keyhole, a tile, the way the threshold was worn under an open door," and a desk whose multitude of drawers becomes a mausoleum of memory.

The Imperfectionists by Tom Rachman - Set against the backdrop of a fictional English-language newspaper based in Rome, it begins as a celebration of the beloved and endangered role of newspapers and the original 24/7 news cycle. Yet Rachman pushes beyond nostalgia by crafting an apologue that better resembles a modern-day *Dubliners* than a *Mad Men* exploration of the halcyon past. The chaos of the newsroom becomes a stage for characters unified by a common thread of circumstance, with each chapter presenting an affecting look into the life of a different player. From the comically overmatched greenhorn to the forsaken foreign correspondent, we suffer through the painful heartbreaks of unexpected tragedy and struggle to stifle our laughter in the face of well-intentioned blunders. This cacophony of emotion blends into a single voice, as the depiction of a paper deemed a "daily report on the idiocy and the brilliance of the species" becomes more about the disillusion in everyday life than the dissolution of an industry.

The Glass Room by Simon Mawer - Honeymooners Viktor and Liesel Landauer are filled with the optimism and cultural vibrancy of central Europe of the 1920s when they meet modernist architect Rainer von Abt. He builds for them a home to embody their exuberant faith in the future, and the

Landauer House becomes an instant masterpiece. Viktor and Liesel, a rich Jewish mogul married to a thoughtful, modern gentile, pour all of their hopes for their marriage and budding family into their stunning new home, filling it with children, friends, and a generation of artists and thinkers eager to abandon old-world European style in favor of the new and the avant-garde. But as life intervenes, their new home also brings out their most passionate desires and darkest secrets. As Viktor searches for a warmer, less challenging comfort in the arms of another woman, and Liesel turns to her wild, mischievous friend Hana for excitement, the marriage begins to show signs of strain. The radiant honesty and idealism of 1930 quickly evaporate beneath the storm clouds of World War II. As Nazi troops enter the country, the family must leave their old life behind and attempt to escape to America before Viktor's Jewish roots draw Nazi attention, and before the family itself dissolves.

The Art of Fielding by Chad Harbach - Though *The Art of Fielding* is his fiction debut, Chad Harbach writes with the self-assurance of a seasoned novelist. He exercises a masterful precision over the language and pacing of his narrative, and in some 500 pages, there's rarely a word that feels out of place. The title is a reference to baseball, but Harbach's concern with sports is more than just a cheap metaphor. *The Art of Fielding* explores relationships--between friends, family, and lovers--and the unpredictable forces that complicate them. There's an unintended affair, a post-graduate plan derailed by rejection letters, a marriage dissolved by honesty, and at the center of the book, the single baseball error that sets all of these events into motion. *The Art of Fielding* is somehow both confident and intimate, simple yet deeply moving. Harbach has penned one of the year's finest works of fiction.

The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes - A novel so compelling that it begs to be read in a single setting, *The Sense of an Ending* has the psychological and emotional depth and sophistication of Henry James at his best, and is a stunning new chapter in Julian Barnes's oeuvre.

This intense novel follows Tony Webster, a middle-aged man, as he contends with a past he never thought much about--until his closest childhood friends return with a vengeance: one of them from the grave, another maddeningly present. Tony thought he left this all behind as he built a life for

himself, and his career has provided him with a secure retirement and an amicable relationship with his ex-wife and daughter, who now has a family of her own. But when he is presented with a mysterious legacy, he is forced to revise his estimation of his own nature and place in the world.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Ann Frank by Nathan Englander - These eight powerful stories, dazzling in their display of language and imagination, show a celebrated short-story writer and novelist grappling with the great questions of modern life.

From the title story, a provocative portrait of two marriages inspired by Raymond Carver's masterpiece, to "Peep Show" and "How We Avenged the Blums," two stories that return to the author's classic themes of sexual longing and ingenuity in the face of adversity, these stories affirm Nathan Englander's place at the very forefront of contemporary American fiction.

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The Buddha In The Attic by Julie Otsuka - A gorgeous novel by the celebrated author of *When the Emperor Was Divine* that tells the story of a group of young women brought from Japan to San Francisco as "picture brides" nearly a century ago. In eight unforgettable sections, *The Buddha in the Attic* traces the extraordinary lives of these women, from their arduous journeys by boat, to their arrival in San Francisco and their tremulous first nights as new wives; from their experiences raising children who would later reject their culture and language, to the deracinating arrival of war. Once again, Julie Otsuka has written a spellbinding novel about identity and loyalty, and what it means to be an American in uncertain times.

The Tortilla Curtain by T.C. Boyle - Topanga Canyon is home to two couples on a collision course. Los Angeles liberals Delaney and Kyra Mossbacher lead an ordered sushi-and-recycling existence in a newly gated hilltop community: he a sensitive nature writer, she an obsessive realtor. Mexican illegals Candido and America Rincon desperately cling to their vision of the American Dream as they fight off starvation in a makeshift camp deep in the ravine. And from the moment a freak accident brings Candido and Delaney into intimate contact, these four and their opposing worlds gradually intersect in

what becomes a tragicomedy of error and misunderstanding.

Once We Were Brothers by Ronald Balson - Elliot Rosenzweig, a wealthy Chicago philanthropist, is attending opening night at the opera. Ben Solomon, a retired Polish immigrant, makes his way through the crowd and shoves a gun in Rosenzweig's face, denouncing him as former SS officer, Otto Piatek. Solomon is blind-sided, knocked to the floor and taken away. Rosenzweig uses his enormous influence to get Solomon released from jail, but Solomon commences a relentless pursuit to bring Rosenzweig before the courts to answer for war crimes. Solomon finds a young attorney, Catherine Lockhart, to whom he recounts his family's struggles and heroisms during the war, revealing to her that he and Piatek grew up as brothers in the same household. Once We Were Brothers is a contemporary legal thriller and a poignant look back into the lives of small town Poland during World War II.

Yellow Birds by Kevin Powers - "The war tried to kill us in the spring." So begins this powerful account of friendship and loss. In Al Tafari, Iraq, twenty-one-year old Private Bartle and eighteen-year-old Private Murphy cling to life as their platoon launches a bloody battle for the city. Bound together since basic training when Bartle makes a promise to bring Murphy safely home, the two have been dropped into a war neither is prepared for. In the endless days that follow, the two young soldiers do everything to protect each other from the forces that press in on every side: the insurgents, physical fatigue, and the mental stress that comes from constant danger. As reality begins to blur into a hazy nightmare, Murphy becomes increasingly unmoored from the world around him and Bartle takes actions he could never have imagined.

Caleb's Crossing by Geraldine Brooks - Bethia Mayfield is a restless and curious young woman growing up in Martha's vineyard in the 1660s amid a small band of pioneering English Puritans. At age twelve, she meets Caleb, the young son of a chieftain, and the two forge a secret bond that draws each into the alien world of the other. Bethia's father is a Calvinist minister who seeks to convert the native Wampanoag, and Caleb becomes a prize in the contest between old ways and new, eventually becoming the first Native American graduate of Harvard College. Inspired by a true story and narrated by the irresistible Bethia, *Caleb's Crossing* brilliantly captures the triumphs and

turmoil of two brave, openhearted spirits who risk everything in a search for knowledge at a time of superstition and ignorance.

The Invisible Bridge by Julie Orringer - Even if this weren't her first novel, Julie Orringer's *Invisible Bridge* would be a marvelous achievement. Orringer possesses a rare talent that makes a 600-page story--which, we know, must descend into war and genocide--feel rivetingly readable, even at its grimmest. Building vivid worlds in effortless phrases, she immerses us in 1930s Budapest just as a young Hungarian Jew, Andras Lévi, departs for the École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris. He hones his talent for design, works backstage in a theater, and allies with other Jewish students in defiance of rising Nazi influence. And then he meets Klara, a captivating Hungarian ballet instructor nine years his senior with a painful past and a willful teenage daughter. Against Klara's better judgment, love engulfs them, drowning out the rumblings of war for a time. But inevitably, Nazi aggression drives them back to Hungary, where life for the Jews goes from hardship to horror. As in [Dr. Zhivago](#), these lovers can't escape history's merciless machinery, but love gives them the courage to endure

The House at Tyneford by Natasha Solomons - Fans of Kate Morton's *The Forgotten Garden* and Sarah Jio's *The Violets of March* will love this *New York Times* bestselling sweeping historical novel of love and loss. It's the spring of 1938 and no longer safe to be a Jew in Vienna. Nineteen-year-old Elise Landau is forced to leave her glittering life of parties and champagne to become a parlor maid in England. She arrives at Tyneford, the great house on the bay, where servants polish silver and serve drinks on the lawn. But war is coming, and the world is changing. When the master of Tyneford's young son, Kit, returns home, he and Elise strike up an unlikely friendship that will transform Tyneford-and Elise-forever.

The Snow Child by Eowyn Ivey - Alaska, 1920: a brutal place to homestead, and especially tough for recent arrivals Jack and Mabel. Childless, they are drifting apart--he breaking under the weight of the work of the farm; she crumbling from loneliness and despair. In a moment of levity during the season's first snowfall, they build a child out of snow. The next morning the snow child is gone--but they glimpse a young, blonde-haired girl running through the trees.

This little girl, who calls herself Faina, seems to be a

child of the woods. She hunts with a red fox at her side, skims lightly across the snow, and somehow survives alone in the Alaskan wilderness. As Jack and Mabel struggle to understand this child who could have stepped from the pages of a fairy tale, they come to love her as their own daughter. But in this beautiful, violent place things are rarely as they appear, and what they eventually learn about Faina will transform all of them.

Crossing California by Adam Langer - Set in Chicago's Jewish neighborhood of West Rogers Park, this is the story of three families--adults and children alike--coming of age during the tumultuous, turbulent days of the Iran hostage crisis. At the close of the 1970s, the Rovners, the Wasserstroms, and the Wills-Silvermans will have to shed their pasts to cross into that new, shining decade of hope: the 80s.

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Someone Knows My Name by Lawrence Hill - Winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. "Wonderfully written...populated by vivid characters and rendered in fascinating detail."—Nancy Kline, *New York Times Book Review*

Kidnapped from Africa as a child, Aminata Diallo is enslaved in South Carolina but escapes during the chaos of the Revolutionary War. In Manhattan she becomes a scribe for the British, recording the names of blacks who have served the King and earned their freedom in Nova Scotia. But the hardship and prejudice of the new colony prompt her to follow her heart back to Africa, then on to London, where she bears witness to the injustices of slavery and its toll on her life and a whole people. It is a story that no listener, and no reader, will ever forget. Reading group guide included.

The Garden of Evening Mists by Tan Twan Eng - Malaya, 1951. Yun Ling Teoh, the scarred lone survivor of a brutal Japanese wartime camp, seeks solace among the jungle-fringed tea plantations of Cameron Highlands. There she discovers Yugiri, the only Japanese garden in Malaya, and its owner and creator, the enigmatic Aritomo, exiled former gardener of the emperor of Japan. Despite her hatred of the Japanese, Yun Ling seeks to engage Aritomo to create a garden in memory of her sister, who died in the camp. Aritomo refuses but agrees to accept Yun Ling as his apprentice "until the monsoon comes." Then she can design a garden for herself. As the months pass, Yun Ling finds herself intimately drawn to the gardener and his art, while all around them a communist guerilla war rages. But the

Garden of Evening Mists remains a place of mystery. Who is Aritomo and how did he come to leave Japan? And is the real story of how Yun Ling managed to survive the war perhaps the darkest secret of all?

The Chaperone by Laurie Moriarty - Only a few years before becoming a famous silent-film star and an icon of her generation, a fifteen-year-old Louise Brooks leaves Wichita, Kansas, to study with the prestigious Denishawn School of Dancing in New York. Much to her annoyance, she is accompanied by a thirty-six-year-old chaperone, who is neither mother nor friend. Cora Carlisle, a complicated but traditional woman with her own reasons for making the trip, has no idea what she's in for. Young Louise, already stunningly beautiful and sporting her famous black bob with blunt bangs, is known for her arrogance and her lack of respect for convention. Ultimately, the five weeks they spend together will transform their lives forever.

For Cora, the city holds the promise of discovery that might answer the question at the core of her being, and even as she does her best to watch over Louise in this strange and bustling place she embarks on a mission of her own. And while what she finds isn't what she anticipated, she is liberated in a way she could not have imagined. Over the course of Cora's relationship with Louise, her eyes are opened to the promise of the twentieth century and a new understanding of the possibilities for being fully alive.

Far From the Tree by Andrew Solomon (nonfiction) Solomon's startling proposition in *Far from the Tree* is that being exceptional is at the core of the human condition—that difference is what unites us. He writes about families coping with deafness, dwarfism, Down syndrome, autism, schizophrenia, or multiple severe disabilities; with children who are prodigies, who are conceived in rape, who become criminals, who are transgender. While each of these characteristics is potentially isolating, the experience of difference within families is universal, and Solomon documents triumphs of love over prejudice in every chapter.

All parenting turns on a crucial question: to what extent should parents accept their children for who they are, and to what extent they should help them become their best selves. Drawing on ten years of research and interviews with more than three hundred families, Solomon mines the eloquence of ordinary people facing extreme challenges. Elegantly reported by a spectacularly original and compassionate thinker, *Far from the Tree* explores

how people who love each other must struggle to accept each other—a theme in every family’s life.

The Testament of Mary by Colin Toibin - In the ancient town of Ephesus, Mary lives alone, years after her son’s crucifixion. She has no interest in collaborating with the authors of the Gospel, who are her keepers. She does not agree that her son is the Son of God; nor that his death was “worth it”; nor that the “group of misfits he gathered around him, men who could not look a woman in the eye,” were holy disciples.

Mary judges herself ruthlessly (she did not stay at the foot of the cross until her son died—she fled, to save herself), and her judgment of others is equally harsh. This woman whom we know from centuries of paintings and scripture as the docile, loving, silent, long-suffering, obedient, worshipful mother of Christ becomes a tragic heroine with the relentless eloquence of Electra or Medea or Antigone. Toibin’s tour de force of imagination and language is a portrait so vivid and convincing that our image of Mary will be forever transformed.

The Rules of Civility by Amor Towles - This sophisticated and entertaining first novel presents the story of a young woman whose life is on the brink of transformation. On the last night of 1937, twenty-five-year-old Katey Kontent is in a second-rate Greenwich Village jazz bar when Tinker Grey, a handsome banker, happens to sit down at the neighboring table. This chance encounter and its startling consequences propel Katey on a year-long journey into the upper echelons of New York society—where she will have little to rely upon other than a bracing wit and her own brand of cool nerve. With its sparkling depiction of New York’s social strata, its intricate imagery and themes, and its immensely appealing characters, *Rules of Civility* won the hearts of readers and critics alike.

Behind the Beautiful Forevers by Katherine Boo - In this brilliant, breathtaking book by Pulitzer Prize winner Katherine Boo, a bewildering age of global change and inequality is made human through the dramatic story of families striving toward a better life in Annawadi, a makeshift settlement in the shadow of luxury hotels near the Mumbai airport. As India starts to prosper, the residents of Annawadi are electric with hope. Abdul, an enterprising teenager, sees “a fortune beyond counting” in the recyclable garbage that richer people throw away. Meanwhile Asha, a woman of formidable ambition, has identified a shadier route to the middle class.

With a little luck, her beautiful daughter, Annawadi’s “most-everything girl,” might become its first female college graduate. And even the poorest children, like the young thief Kalu, feel themselves inching closer to their dreams. But then Abdul is falsely accused in a shocking tragedy; terror and global recession rock the city; and suppressed tensions over religion, caste, sex, power, and economic envy turn brutal. With intelligence, humor, and deep insight into what connects people to one another in an era of tumultuous change, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, based on years of uncompromising reporting, carries the reader headlong into one of the twenty-first century’s hidden worlds—and into the hearts of families impossible to forget.

How It All Began by Penelope Lively - When Charlotte Rainsford, a retired schoolteacher, is accosted by a petty thief on a London street, the consequences ripple across the lives of acquaintances and strangers alike. A marriage unravels after an illicit love affair is revealed through an errant cell phone message; a posh yet financially strapped interior designer meets a business partner who might prove too good to be true; an old-guard historian tries to recapture his youthful vigor with an ill-conceived idea for a TV miniseries; and a middle-aged central European immigrant learns to speak English and reinvents his life with the assistance of some new friends. Through a richly conceived and colorful cast of characters, Penelope Lively explores the powerful role of chance in people’s lives and deftly illustrates how our paths can be altered irrevocably by someone we will never even meet. Brought to life in her hallmark graceful prose and full of keen insights into human nature, *How It All Began* is an engaging, contemporary tale that is sure to strike a chord with her legion of loyal fans as well as new readers. A writer of rare wisdom, elegance, and humor, Lively is a consummate storyteller whose gifts are on full display in this masterful work.

Billy Lynn’s Long Half-time Walk by Ben Fountain - A razor-sharp satire set in Texas during America’s war in Iraq, it explores the gaping national disconnect between the war at home and the war abroad. Ben Fountain’s remarkable debut novel follows the surviving members of the heroic Bravo Squad through one exhausting stop in their media-intensive “Victory Tour” at Texas Stadium, football mecca of the Dallas Cowboys, their fans, promoters, and cheerleaders.

Scenes from Village Life by Amos Oz - “*Scenes from Village Life* is like a symphony, its movements more impressive together than in isolation. There is, in each story, a particular chord or strain; but taken

together, these chords rise and reverberate, evoking an unease so strong it's almost a taste in the mouth . . . *Scenes from Village Life* is a brief collection, but its brevity is a testament to its force. You will not soon forget it."—*New York Times Book Review*

Strange things are happening in Tel Ilan, a century-old pioneer village. A disgruntled retired politician complains to his daughter that he hears the sound of digging at night. Could it be their tenant, that young Arab? But then the young Arab hears the digging sounds too. And where has the mayor's wife gone, vanished without a trace, her note saying "Don't worry about me"?

Around the village, the veneer of new wealth—gourmet restaurants, art galleries, a winery—barely conceals the scars of war and of past generations: disused air-raid shelters, rusting farm tools, and trucks left wherever they stopped. *Scenes From Village Life* is a memorable novel in stories by the inimitable Amos Oz: a brilliant, unsettling glimpse of what goes on beneath the surface of everyday life.

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The Goldfinch by Donna Tartt - Theo Decker, a 13-year-old New Yorker, miraculously survives an accident that kills his mother. Abandoned by his father, Theo is taken in by the family of a wealthy friend. Bewildered by his strange new home on Park Avenue, disturbed by schoolmates who don't know how to talk to him, and tormented above all by his longing for his mother, he clings to the one thing that reminds him of her: a small, mysteriously captivating painting that ultimately draws Theo into the underworld of art.

As an adult, Theo moves silkily between the drawing rooms of the rich and the dusty labyrinth of an antiques store where he works. He is alienated and in love--and at the center of a narrowing, ever more dangerous circle.

The Goldfinch is a mesmerizing, stay-up-all-night and tell-all-your-friends triumph, an old-fashioned story of loss and obsession, survival and self-invention, and the ruthless machinations of fate.

Snow Hunters by Paul Yoon - "Exquisitely enigmatic...a small but radiant star in the current literary firmament" (*The Dallas Morning News*), *Snow Hunters* traces the extraordinary journey of Yohan, a twenty-five-year-old North Korean POW refugee who defects from his country at the end of the Korean War, leaving his friends and family behind to seek a new life in a port town on the coast

of Brazil.

Though he is a stranger in a strange land, throughout the years in this town, four people slip in and out of Yohan's life: Kiyoshi, the Japanese tailor for whom he works, and who has his own secrets and a past he does not speak of; Peixe, the groundskeeper at the town church; and two vagrant children named Santi and Bia, a boy and a girl, who spend their days in the alleyways and the streets of the town. Yohan longs to connect with these people, but to do so he must sift through the wreckage of his traumatic past so he might let go and move on.

Clever Girl by Tessa Hadley - *Clever Girl* is an indelible story of one woman's life, unfolded in a series of beautifully sculpted episodes that illuminate an era, moving from the 1960s to today, from one of Britain's leading literary lights—Tessa Hadley—the author of the *New York Times* Notable Books *Married Love* and *The London Train*. Like Alice Munro and Colm Tóibín, Tessa Hadley brilliantly captures the beauty, innocence, and irony of ordinary lives—an ability to transform the mundane into the sublime that elevates domestic fiction to literary art.

Written with the celebrated precision, intensity, and complexity that have marked her previous works, *Clever Girl* is a powerful exploration of family relationships and class in modern life, witnessed through the experiences of an English woman named Stella. Unfolding in a series of snapshots, Tessa Hadley's moving novel follows Stella from the shallows of childhood, growing up with a single mother in a Bristol bedsit in the 1960s, into the murky waters of middle age.

The Good Lord Bird by James McBride - Henry Shackleford is a young slave living in the Kansas Territory in 1857, when the region is a battleground between anti- and pro-slavery forces. When John Brown, the legendary abolitionist, arrives in the area, an argument between Brown and Henry's master quickly turns violent. Henry is forced to leave town—with Brown, who believes he's a girl. Over the ensuing months, Henry—whom Brown nicknames Little Onion—conceals his true identity as he struggles to stay alive. Eventually Little Onion finds himself with Brown at the historic raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859—one of the great catalysts for the Civil War.

An absorbing mixture of history and imagination, and told with McBride's meticulous eye for detail and character, *The Good Lord Bird* is both a rousing adventure and a moving exploration of identity and survival.

All the Light We Cannot See by Anthony Doerr - From the highly acclaimed, multiple award-winning Anthony Doerr, the beautiful, stunningly ambitious instant *New York Times* bestseller about a blind French girl and a German boy whose paths collide in occupied France as both try to survive the devastation of World War II.

Marie-Laure lives with her father in Paris near the Museum of Natural History, where he works as the master of its thousands of locks. When she is six, Marie-Laure goes blind and her father builds a perfect miniature of their neighborhood so she can memorize it by touch and navigate her way home. When she is twelve, the Nazis occupy Paris and father and daughter flee to the walled citadel of Saint-Malo, where Marie-Laure's reclusive great-uncle lives in a tall house by the sea. With them they carry what might be the museum's most valuable and dangerous jewel.

In a mining town in Germany, the orphan Werner grows up with his younger sister, enchanted by a crude radio they find. Werner becomes an expert at building and fixing these crucial new instruments, a talent that wins him a place at a brutal academy for Hitler Youth, then a special assignment to track the resistance. More and more aware of the human cost of his intelligence, Werner travels through the heart of the war and, finally, into Saint-Malo, where his story and Marie-Laure's converge.

The Orphan Train by Christina Baker Kline -

"Christina Baker Kline is a relentless storyteller. Once she sets her hook and starts reeling you in, struggle becomes counterproductive. The narrative line is too taut, the angler at the other end too skillful." – Richard Russo Between 1854 and 1929, so-called orphan trains ran regularly from the cities of the East Coast to the farmlands of the Midwest, carrying thousands of abandoned children whose fates would be determined by pure luck. Would they be adopted by a kind and loving family, or would they face a childhood and adolescence of hard labor and servitude? As a young Irish immigrant, Vivian Daly was one such child, sent by rail from New York City to an uncertain future a world away. Returning east later in life, Vivian leads a quiet, peaceful existence on the coast of Maine, the memories of her upbringing rendered a hazy blur. But in her attic, hidden in trunks, are vestiges of a turbulent past. Seventeen-year-old Molly Ayer knows that a community-service position helping an elderly widow clean out her attic is the only thing keeping her out of juvenile hall. But as Molly helps Vivian sort through her keepsakes and possessions, she discovers

that she and Vivian aren't as different as they appear. A Penobscot Indian who has spent her youth in and out of foster homes, Molly is also an outsider being raised by strangers, and she, too, has unanswered questions about the past. Moving between contemporary Maine and Depression-era Minnesota, *Orphan Train* is a powerful tale of upheaval and resilience, second chances, and unexpected friendship.

Life After Life by Kate Atkinson - *What if you could live again and again, until you got it right?*

On a cold and snowy night in 1910, Ursula Todd is born to an English banker and his wife. She dies before she can draw her first breath. On that same cold and snowy night, Ursula Todd is born, lets out a lusty wail, and embarks upon a life that will be, to say the least, unusual. For as she grows, she also dies, repeatedly, in a variety of ways, while the young century marches on towards its second cataclysmic world war.

Does Ursula's apparently infinite number of lives give her the power to save the world from its inevitable destiny? And if she can -- will she?

Pioneer Girl by Bich Minh Nguyen - Jobless with a PhD, Lee Lien returns home to her Chicago suburb from grad school, only to find herself contending with issues she's evaded since college. But when her brother disappears, he leaves behind an object from their mother's Vietnam past that stirs up a forgotten childhood dream: a gold-leaf brooch, abandoned by an American reporter in Saigon back in 1965, that might be an heirloom belonging to Laura Ingalls Wilder. As Lee explores the tenuous facts of this connection, she unearths more than expected—a trail of clues and enticements that lead her from the dusty stacks of library archives to hilarious prairie life reenactments and ultimately to San Francisco, where her findings will transform strangers' lives as well as her own.

A dazzling literary mystery about the true origins of a time-tested classic, *Pioneer Girl* is also the deeply moving tale of a second-generation Vietnamese daughter, the parents she struggles to honor, the missing brother she is expected to bring home—even as her discoveries yield dramatic insights that will free her to live her own life to its full potential.

Me and My Baby View the Eclipse by Lee Smith -

"Extremely powerful...*Me and My Baby View the Eclipse* is about striving and the secret nobility of people who live in a small-town American South. In these stories—thank heaven—not everything fits:

they are loose, they are sometimes awkward, but just about every one shines with revelation and awe in the face of momentary greatness and tragedy....Nearly every one of these stories could move a reader to tears, for in almost every one of them there is a moment of vision, or love, or unclothed wonder that transforms something plain into something transcendent.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

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The Boston Girl by Anita Diamant - An unforgettable novel about a young Jewish woman growing up in Boston in the early twentieth century, told “with humor and optimism...through the eyes of an irresistible heroine” (*People*)—from the acclaimed author of *The Red Tent*.

Anita Diamant’s “vivid, affectionate portrait of American womanhood” (*Los Angeles Times*), follows the life of one woman, Addie Baum, through a period of dramatic change. Addie is The Boston Girl, the spirited daughter of an immigrant Jewish family, born in 1900 to parents who were unprepared for America and its effect on their three daughters. Growing up in the North End of Boston, then a teeming multicultural neighborhood, Addie’s intelligence and curiosity take her to a world her parents can’t imagine—a world of short skirts, movies, celebrity culture, and new opportunities for women. Addie wants to finish high school and dreams of going to college. She wants a career and to find true love. From the one-room tenement apartment she shared with her parents and two sisters, to the library group for girls she joins at a neighborhood settlement house, to her first, disastrous love affair, to finding the love of her life, eighty-five-year-old Addie recounts her adventures with humor and compassion for the naïve girl she once was.

Every Day Is for the Thief by Te Ju Cole -

Fifteen years is a long time to be away from home. It feels longer still because I left under a cloud.

A young Nigerian living in New York City goes home to Lagos for a short visit, finding a city both familiar and strange. In a city dense with story, the unnamed narrator moves through a mosaic of life, hoping to find inspiration for his own. He witnesses the “yahoo yahoo” diligently perpetrating email frauds from an Internet café, longs after a mysterious woman reading on a public bus who disembarks and disappears into a bookless crowd, and recalls the tragic fate of an eleven-year-old boy accused of stealing at a local market.