

LITTLE GEMS OF BOOKS AND AUTHORS YOU MAY HAVE OVERLOOKED

Friends of the Kankakee Public Library Annual Meeting

Barnes and Noble Booksellers

Saturday, April 5, 2003

10:30 a.m.

Presented by Mary Jo Johnston

The Two Hearts of Kwasi Boachi, Arthur Japin, 1997 (originally written in Dutch). Two African princes are sent by their families to Holland at age 13 to live with the royal family and never return home. They have very different reactions to their experience—one more realistic, the other on the order of the butler in *The Remains of the Day*. Both real and fictional characters living in Holland and Africa during the period from 1840 to 1900 make for a fascinating read.

In Sunlight, in a Beautiful Garden, Kathleen Cambor, 2001. This novel is based on the events leading up to the Johnstown flood that occurred on Memorial Day, 1889, and killed 2,200 people, with whole families destroyed by drowning and fire. Many of the characters are based on real people (Carnegie, Mellon, Frick), some of who knew the danger posed by a dam at a lake where wealthy people summered but chose to ignore it. Each chapter opens with a quote by Marcus Aurelius; my favorite is “Remember how long you have been putting off these things, and how many times the gods have given you days of grace, and yet you do not use them.” Cambor is also the author of *The Book of Mercy* which won a PEN/Faulkner award and uses alchemy as a theme.

North Spirit – Sojourns Among the Cree and Ojibway, Paulette Jiles, 1995. This book was recommended by former Friends member, Kay Beguhn. Jiles moves to northern Ontario in 1973 to help run an Ojibway radio station and later a newspaper and is determined to live with the Ojibway, eschewing the comfort of running water and heat afforded to English residents. You can tell she’s a poet. Her descriptions of the land, the weather, and the changing seasons are breathtaking. Of special interest is her love of the unwritten tales and legends as related by the tribal elders and her knowledge of how difficult it is to put the “spirit” of this oral history into writing. Jiles is also the author of the best-seller, *Enemy Women* (2002).

Mackerel by Moonlight, William Weld (former governor of Massachusetts), 1998. (One of William Weld’s choice quotes: “You can lead the House to order, but you can’t make it think.”) A political novel that I first thought was just too slick, but then I got into it and ended up hoping that Weld writes another. There are many illusions to hunting and fishing in this book, and the title comes from a comeback from one of the character’s political opponents: “Your record, sir, resembles a rotting mackerel by moonlight: it shines and it stinks.” A fun read, and a good vacation book.

The Long Home, William Gay, 2000. Set in the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee in the 1940s, this is a first novel published when the author was in his early 50s. The reviewers say Gay’s writing is reminiscent of William Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy. He takes on dark subjects, and violence is often intense. However, there are also moments of humor, and the

characters are memorable. Gay also published *Provinces of Night* in 2000 and a book of short stories, *I Hate to See that Evening Sun Go Down* in 2002. I really like this author. He may have been a slow starter, but he has made up admirably for lost time.

The Journey Home, Olaf Olafsson, 2000. A woman facing death goes back to Iceland to confront unfinished business from her younger years (1930s). A male author writing as a woman was not at all troublesome, and both Terry and I were deeply touched by this story. Olafsson also wrote *Absolution*, translated from the Icelandic language, about “my little crime.”

Singing Boy, Dennis McFarland, 2000. I think this is one of the best books on this list. A husband, father, and friend is senselessly murdered, and his wife, son, and best friend attempt to come to terms with the tragedy. The wife is inconsolable, the best friend has to also cope with his own past history, and the son is simply trying to understand the adults who should try to understand his feelings. In their darkest moments, however, they take small steps forward, until one day . . . you have to read the book. This is the kind of book you want to buy to keep. McFarland is also the author of *The Face in the Window* (1997), a page-turner about a couple on the verge of overcoming a terrible threat to their marriage and to the man’s own sanity.

Give Us a Kiss – A Country Noir (1996), *Woe to Live on* (1997), *Tomato Red* (1998), and *The Death of Sweet Mister* (2001), all by Daniel Woodrell. Woodrell has been dubbed “the William Faulkner of the Ozarks.” Critics claim his humor is dark (it is), but it is also laugh-out-loud funny. He probably isn’t to everyone’s taste, and you just know that most of what happens will not turn out well, but you keep on hoping for a happy ending.

All Over but the Shoutin’, Rick Bragg, 1997. Bragg, reporter for the *Miami Herald* and a columnist for *The New York Times*, wrote this book after he won the Pulitzer Prize and bought a home for his mother, the subject of this memoir. It is an incredible tribute to his family and a description of the effect of social and economic class on Bragg’s life. Bragg has followed this book with *Ava’s Man*, the story of the grandfather he never knew. (There’s an excellent piece on Bragg in the September/October 2001 edition of *Book*.) Although much of what he writes is serious, his sense of humor creeps in everywhere. One of my favorite parts of *Shoutin’* is where Bragg describes how to tell the character of a person: “Show them a squirrel with a jaw full of hickory nuts, and if they don’t smile, there is something bad wrong with them. . . . It’s hard to be lonely with a yard full of gray squirrels.”

The Good German, Joseph Kanon, 2001. Set in Berlin in 1945 at the time of the Potsdam Conference, a U. S. Army reporter searches for his former lover in the ruins of the city. The effect of the war on all concerned is so confounded by circumstances, values, and opportunity (or lack thereof) that there are no purely good or bad guys. This book is quite an achievement, both in terms of plot and in the writer’s description of Berlin directly after World War II.

Peace Like a River, Leif Enger, 2000. You can tell Enger is a poet and that he is from a close, loving family. I learned this when we heard him read at a bookstore in Stillwater, Minnesota. It was one of the nicest readings I’ve ever attended because he spoke so much about his life and family and appeared to be genuinely interested in the audience’s experiences and opinions. He

loves westerns and especially admires Cormac McCarthy and Peter Carey. I really liked the characters in this book, and I hope Valdez and Sundown ride again soon!

Spies, Michael Frayn, 2002. This is another book not to be missed. Set during World War II, two young boys believe one's mother is a German spy during World War II and set out to prove their case. Although she has a secret, it is not what they think, and one of them spends the rest of his life coming to terms with what he thought he knew with what really happened. This book would be great for discussion.

Oxygen, Andrew Miller, 2002. A finalist for the Booker Prize, this novel is the story of two brothers who return to their childhood home to care for their dying mother. There is also a parallel story of a Hungarian writer who, as with all the characters, attempts to face his own demons. I found all the characters sympathetic; each one is attempting to right what they perceive as something they've done wrong.

The Whore's Child and Other Stories, Richard Russo, 2002. This book is quite a change of pace for Russo who excels at long analyses of people and places but is also able to capture the intensity of crises in people's lives in a shorter format. Of course, I liked this book; I like everything that Richard Russo writes.

A Few Corrections, Brad Leithauser, 2001. This book was recommended by Barb Girard, and I'm sorry I waited as long as I did to read it. The first chapter opens with the obituary of a man in his 60s, and at the start of each subsequent chapter, a correction to the obituary is made with an explanation of the "real" circumstances. Although we know many things that were incorrectly stated in the original obituary and how they came about, do we really get to know the deceased any better? Too bad he couldn't speak for himself. What a great read!

Three Junes, Julia Glass, 2002. This first novel is divided into three sections, each about events occurring in the month of June over a period of about 15 years. It includes reflections on the past by the members of a Scottish family, three brothers and their father. Its overall theme is about connections – family and otherwise – and how we each perceive life's events differently. A National Book Award winner!

The Seal Wife, Kathryn Harrison, 2002. Prodigious research supports this novel about a weatherman who moves to Anchorage, Alaska, in 1915. He becomes involved with a mute Inuit woman and realizes he loves her after she leaves. The descriptions of his daily life and his terrible loneliness are gut wrenching, and the very touching ending to this book left tears running down my face and dripping off my chin.

When the Emperor Was Divine, Julie Otsuka, 2002. A first novel about a Japanese father taken away in his pajamas in the middle of the night and kept interred for four years while his family was "relocated" from California to the Utah desert during World War II. The young woman who wrote this book is unusually perceptive, it seems to me.

The Story of Lucy Gault, William Trevor, 2002. Trevor is such a fine writer. This story of how misinformation, misunderstanding, and events outside our control can change lives forever, and

yet how some people find a peace of sorts regardless, was gripping. What incredible insight, sadness, and hope this book provokes. It's also a book that deserves a second reading.

The Piano Tuner, Donald Mason, 2002. An English piano tuner arrives in Burma in 1840 to tune an Erard piano in the politically unstable Shan region. Fantastic descriptions of place, people, flora and fauna, weather – makes you want to travel there. Although time seems to pass slowly in this book, everything builds to a crescendo, and the ending is a total surprise, although I found that I had been patiently led there all along. It's hard to believe this is a first novel.

This Boy's Life – A Memoir, Tobias Wolff, 1989. Our son, Steve, has been telling me for the past ten years that I had to read this book. He said he had read it at least three times, and it is one of his all-time favorites. Late last year I read *Lucky*, Alice Sebold's account of her rape when she was a student at Syracuse. I was most interested in her recovery process and how family, friends, even the prosecuting attorney and police officers, and especially teachers made such an impact on her at the time. Two teachers she specifically named were the poet, Tess Gallagher, who encouraged her to write about her experience, and the writer, Tobias Wolff, whose advice to her she described "as a shout across a great distance." When I finally read this book, I was sorry I had waited so long. Wolff describes growing up in the 50s as he and his divorced mother move around the country, at first fleeing from a stepfather abusive to his mother and then another stepfather abusive to Wolff. Both funny and sad, nevertheless Wolff is a survivor, and it's not surprising that this book was so important to Sebold.

No Heroes – A Memoir of Coming Home, Chris Offutt (2002). Late last year I read a review of this book and jotted down the author's last name. I forgot about it until I found a copy of *Writer's Harvest 3 – A Collection of New Fiction* (2000) edited by Tobias Wolff on the Barnes and Noble bargain books shelf. One of the stories was by Chris Offutt, and after reading it, I immediately bought a copy of *No Heroes*. Offutt was raised in the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky. He left home at the age of nineteen and wandered around the country for fifteen years, a journey described in a memoir written ten years earlier, *The Same River Twice* (1993). *No Heroes* begins when Offutt is 40 and returns to teach at his alma mater, Morehead State University. There are so many levels to this book – the beauty of the mountains, home, family, friends, the debt he owes to his teachers and the local librarian, his own love of teaching, and gratitude and respect for the past. Offutt alternates chapters about his return home with the concentration camp memories of his in-laws, Arthur and Irene, both Holocaust survivors. Arthur asks him how he will tie the book together, and Offutt admits that he doesn't know and will just have to wait and see. He does tie it together so beautifully that you just have to read it. Anyway, who could resist a book where the author is pictured on the jacket with a possum under his arm.