

LITTLE GEMS OF BOOK AND AUTHORS YOU MAY HAVE OVERLOOKED
Friends of the Kankakee Public Library Annual Meeting
Saturday, April 3, 2004

Presented by Mary Jo Johnston and Friends

The Good Brother, Chris Offutt (1997). I finished last year's program with Chris Offutt's *The Same River Twice* (1993) and *No Heroes – A Memoir of Coming Home* (2002). I liked Offutt's writing so much that I tracked down his other books. *The Good Brother* (1997) was a real page-turner that like his other books captures Kentucky mountain dialect and humor. Virgil changes his name to Joe and runs from the law in Kentucky to Montana where he begins a new life. The theme of this book is the futility of revenge – it never ends. *Kentucky Straight* (1992) and *Out of the Woods* (1999) are collections of short stories either set in Kentucky or about Kentuckians who have gone out on the road but who miss Kentucky desperately and constantly. Offutt's characters mostly try to do right, even in the face of wrong, but they can never really escape their past. I like the quote Offutt uses from Flannery O'Connor: *Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it.* I hope Offutt publishes again soon.

The Seven Sisters, Margaret Drabble (2002). Candida, a recently divorced middle-aged woman goes (by choice) to a seedy part of London to face the last years of her life alone. She describes herself as a "drying-out husk" and believes that death is the last height to be faced, and that the only thing to be done is submit to the inevitable – only she is not yet ready to do that. She organizes a trip with a group of women she has met in her new London life, and from that point on, she is "filled with expectation. . . . Who is that waiting on the far shore? Is it her lover or her God?" Also fans of this book are **Evie Torchia** and **Kay Beguhn**, and it's an upcoming selection for our book club. **Grace Dickson** is also reading it, and as of last Sunday couldn't put it down.

Everything Is Illuminated, Jonathan Safran Foer (2002). Although the plot was hard to follow at times, I loved every minute of trying to sort it out, and the language, the setting, and the humor made for a great reading experience. A young Jewish American (also named Jonathan) travels to Eastern Europe after his junior year in college with Alexi, his Ukrainian translator, Alexi's grandfather, and the family dog, Sammy Davis Jr. Jr. (this is not a typo) in the hope of finding Augustine, who may have saved the grandfather Jonathan never knew from the Nazis. A second plot follows the history of one family in Trachimbrod, the shtetl for which they are searching. One of the reviewers calls this book a "breathtaking meditation on love, friendship, and loss." It's also very funny.

The Wife, Meg Wolitzer (2003). This novel chronicles a marriage of 40+ years from the 1950s to the present and is the story of choices made and living with the consequences. The wife has suppressed her own ambitions to allow her writer husband to be in the spotlight. Sound too much like the earlier feminist novels? It's actually quite interesting and well done and would make for a great book club discussion.

Child of My Heart, Alice McDermott (2002). This is a lovely book. The main character, a young girl who is responsible for younger children spending their summer at the beach, is almost mature beyond belief. While many of the characters are facing the end of so many things – childhood, naiveté, marriage, old age, life itself – they are also searching for something more – money, youth, prestige, even life. In the meantime, our young heroine takes life one-step at a time, hesitatingly at first, but stepping forward nevertheless.

Evenings at Five, Gail Godwin (2003). A famous writer writes about the death of her long-time companion, an equally famous composer. The book is a love story, as well as a description of a loss that was unexpected, even though the composer was gravely ill. The descriptions of their daily cocktail hour and all its trappings, along with the minutiae of everyday life, were so touching, and charming illustrations in each chapter added a great deal to this little book about a great love.

The Light of Day, Graham Swift (2003). A disgraced cop turned private detective becomes emotionally involved with a client whose husband has become obsessed with a younger female refugee. There are so many nuances and such depth to this book that it is hard to describe. I especially liked the way the plot moved back and forth between and among characters and time periods. I loved Swift's *Last Orders*, and I admired this book very much, too.

The Dive from Clausen's Pier, Ann Packer (2002). This was a much better book than I expected. A young woman must come to terms with the decision she made to leave her fiancée who as a result of an accident is confined to a wheelchair. She moves to New York and takes a lover as maimed emotionally as her fiancée is physically. This book is also about place (Madison, WI, vs. New York City), friendship, and loyalty. (**Arlene Bartolini** and **Vickie Romein** loaned me this book, and it's a good thing I liked it because our dog, Iris, ate the cover, and now I owe them a new book.)

The Master Butcher's Singing Club, Louise Erdrich (2003). A novel loosely based on the German side of the Erdrich family, this book is so rich in its description of people, places, and relationships. I was initially frustrated because many of her characters' stories are also part of her earlier books, and I spent too much time trying to remember their relationships. I decided that her use of language is so spectacular, and the characters so interesting, that how it all hangs together is not all that important, so I just sat back and enjoyed the ride.

The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency (1998), *Tears of the Giraffe* (2000), *The Morality of Beautiful Girls* (2001), and *The Kalahari Typing School for Men*, (2002) by Alexander McCall Smith. By now almost everyone has heard about Mma Precious Ramotswe, proprietor of a ladies detective agency in Botswana, her fiancé, Mr. J. L. B. Matekoni, the two orphans they adopt, and the mysteries Mma solves. The author, a Scotsman, is a forensic pathologist who lived and worked in Botswana. He has been described by *The New York Times* as the "Miss Marple of Botswana." These books are a joy to read, and the characters are memorable. Isn't he about due to write another (and another and another and . . .)?

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Mark Haddon (2003). In this extremely clever novel, a 15-year-old autistic boy sets out to uncover the murderer of a neighbor's dog.

His quest leads him to discover a family secret and results in a conflict with his estranged parents, whose lives are really out of control. The author's understanding of autistic behavior, as well as his compassion for his characters, makes this a truly memorable book. Also recommended by Friends member, **Monica Pigato**. Do not miss this one!

Paradise Alley, Kevin Baker (2003). Looking for a good, long book? How about 666 pages? The center of this novel is the three days of draft rioting in New York City in 1865 (think of the movie, "Gangs of New York"). I knew little or nothing of this period in our history, but I appreciated the amount of research that went into this book; it even includes a glossary of Irish words and phrases. The characters in the book cross all religious, ethnic, cultural, and social boundaries, and two of them go back as far as the Irish Potato Famine. This book is a grim reminder of the fact that some people truly suffer far beyond anything most of us will ever know.

Getting Mother's Body, Suzan-Lori Parks (2003). I love the *Publishers Weekly* description of this book: "When stubborn 16-year-old Billy Beede gets knocked up and jilted by her sweet-talking, coffin-salesman lover, she needs money for an abortion. Her wild mother, Willa Mae, died when Billy was 10, and Billy lives with her 'childless churchless minister Uncle and one-legged church-hopping Aunt' in a mobile home behind their rural Texas gas station. Billy's only hope for serious cash is to dig up her mother's body from its grave in Arizona, where Willa Mae was buried wearing a diamond ring and a pearl necklace." Billy steals Willa Mae's one-time lover's truck, and she and her aunt and uncle set off for Arizona to dig up her mother's grave before a supermarket can be built on the ground where Willa Mae is buried. One reviewer describes this book as "the story of an African-American family, of beauty winding like bright thread through long-held grudges, hopelessness, and greed."

Drinking Coffee Elsewhere, ZZ Packer (2003). The eight stories in this book are about black men and women, mostly young and urban, dealing with the issues of race, culture, parenting, sexual preference, and loneliness. My favorite, "Brownies," is about a black Brownie troop plotting against what they thought were haughty white girls. *Publishers Weekly* says the stories "don't all have happy endings, but they are learning experiences for their characters and moving reading for us."

Train, Pete Dexter (2003). This is Pete Dexter's first new book in seven years, two long of a wait for a serious Dexter fan like me. Lionel "Train" Walk is a seventeen-year-old black caddie at a Los Angeles country club in the early 1950s. He has taught himself to play golf, and it soon becomes obvious that he is very, very good, although he is not allowed to play at golf clubs in the area. He and his friend, Plural, a former boxer who has been hit in the head too many times, is going blind, and sometimes becomes violent, become involved with Norah Still, who has survived a boat high-jacking in which her husband is murdered and she is brutally attacked, and Miller Packard, a survivor of the sinking of the *Indianapolis* and an Orange County sheriff's detective, who dispatches his own brand of vigilante justice while arresting the hijackers. This book is not full of sunshine and light; its themes include sex, race, murder, and golf. It may keep you up well into the night, not just to get see how it ends, but to think about its meaning.

Land that Moves, Land that Stands Still, Kent Nelson (2003). A mid-western farmer is killed in a farm accident, and the lives of his family are forever changed when his long-kept secrets

finally come to light. His wife decides to run the farm herself, and along with her daughter, neighbors, and a runaway Indian boy, battles nature and the unscrupulous farmers next door to continue to hold on to their land. I especially liked the feeling this book engendered about the beauty of the land and the farmers' devotion to working it and caring for it.

Middlesex, Jeffery Eugenides (2002). A well-deserved 2003 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, this book follows a Greek family that moves to Detroit following the Turks' take-over of Greece in 1922. We know from the very beginning that the narrator, Calliope/Cal, is a hermaphrodite, but this book is about so much more – love, family, politics, racism, acceptance – that it's not surprising that Calliope/Cal's words at one point in the book kind of sums it all up, "It's amazing what you can get used to." Amen!

Lunch at the Piccadilly, Clyde Edgerton (2003). Edgerton's newest book is set in the Rosehaven Convalescent Center where Lil Olive is recovering from a bad fall. Her never-married nephew, Carl, visits regularly and befriends L. Ray Flowers, also a resident of the center, who persuades Carl to take up the base guitar again. Carl starts writing lyrics for L. Ray's songs, and they entertain the residents with music as well as L. Ray's preaching. L. Ray convinces many of the residents that nursing homes and churches are interchangeable, and instead of two institutions, there should be only one – Nurches of America or Churching Homes of the U. S. Classic Edgerton.

The Namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri (2003). Lahiri won a Pulitzer Prize for her first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, and she's only in her mid-thirties! *The Namesake* is about immigrants from India and their American-born children – how they adjust, assimilate, and find a life that allows them to celebrate old ways while embracing new ones. American or Indian? The author says she doesn't think of nationality, although it's always there, whether anyone is conscious of it or not. The book should ring true for many immigrant families, regardless of the countries from which they come.

Brick Lane, Monica Ali (2003). Another novel about the immigrant experience by an even younger writer, this book opens in Bangladesh during the early childhood years of two sisters, one who stays in Bangladesh, and the other who accepts an arranged marriage and moves to London. It is also a book about change and how we all adapt differently, and it touches religion, marriage, culture, child rearing, human rights, and politics – and that's only part of it. This is a truly touching and thought-provoking book, and it would lend itself to a great discussion.

The Amateur Marriage, Anne Tyler (2004). Tyler's latest novel is high on my list of favorites. It follows Catholic Michael and Protestant Pauline Anton who meet in 1941, marry, raise children, and struggle with a marriage that never quite meets either of their needs. Like most of Tyler's books, there are family conflicts, confrontations, and reconciliations. At one point Michael tells his oldest daughter that he and Pauline did the best they could but "we never quite got the hang of things; it wasn't for lack of trying." Shelby Hearon in a *Chicago Tribune* book review says that Michael's statement to his daughter "might sum up the theme of all of Tyler's novels: those carefully placed and voiced stories of reckless, thoughtless, foolish, hurtful and gentle people, all searching for charity." Kind of like most of us, don't you think?

The Great Fire, Shirley Hazzard (2003). Set at the end of World War II, this is a novel of introspection, with the characters looking at reasons for past decisions and behavior, and agonizing over future choices. It moves very slowly until the last 75 pages, and then things move along to a very satisfactory conclusion. I liked the fact that most of the characters changed, not drastically, but at least for the better, as a result of their experiences, some of which were so devastating that one could almost forgive them if they had given up. This book made me want to re-read *Transit of Venus*, one of Hazzard's early books.

Winner of the National Book Award, A Novel of Fame, Honor, and really Bad Weather, Jincy Willett (2003). An unusual, entertaining, unsettling read. Twin sisters, prudish Dorcas and promiscuous Abigail, live in Frome, New Hampshire. Abigail has killed her husband, and Dorcas reads all about it in a newly published book just delivered to the library where she, as head librarian, is battening down the hatches at the onset of a hurricane. Each chapter of the book is Dorcas' explanation of what really happened in the "tell all" book she is reading during the storm. Some of the funniest parts of the book are Dorcas' frustrations as a librarian, especially with library workers who don't understand the Mc/Mac rule. This book is both laugh-out-loud funny and deadly serious.

I Sailed with Magellan, Stuart Dybek (2004). The reviews of this book were so interesting that even though I don't read many short stories, I had to see what all of the fuss was about. The eleven interrelated stories are all narrated by Perry Katzek, and are set in Chicago's Little Village in the 1940s and 50s. They are spectacular – funny, violent, sad, and sweet – the childhood memories of one who knows the city neighborhoods and celebrates the diversity of the people who live in them. I was delighted to learn that one of Dybek's earlier books, *The Coast of Chicago* (1990) is the latest "One Book, One Chicago" selection and that it will be the first book in the library's new Adult Book Discussion Group. I read it with a copy of the discussion questions along side, and I doubt that I've ever appreciated short stories as much. The library also has a copy of his earlier book, *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (1980). Read all three of these books, and it will be easy to see why Studs Terkel calls Dybek "our city's blue collar bard." **Don't forget the book discussion on Tuesday, April 27, 7:00 p.m., in the 3rd floor meeting room!**

Reviews by Members of Friends

The House of Sand and Fog, Andre Dubus, III (1999). This tragic story about a house that represents more than just a place to live is told from the viewpoints of the two main adversaries: Kathy, a self-destructive alcoholic, its previous owner, who sees it as a reminder of a kind and gentle past, and Behrani, a former colonel in the Iranian military under the Shah, who sees it as a foot into the door of the American dream. The inevitability of the final confrontation and its tragic results kept me reading, while I kept hoping for a happier outcome. **Burma Mathews**

Tie My Bones to Her Back, Robert F. Jones (1996). Left homeless by the death of her parents during the panic of 1873, a young woman travels west to join her buffalo-hunting brother who follows the herds with a partner and two assistants, one a Cheyenne half-breed. When things go badly for them, they take refuge with a band of Cheyenne. This is a novel of survival, as well as

a historical chronicle of the difference in white and Indian treatment of the buffalo. Reviewers describe it as both savage and lyrical, and a vivid portrayal of people and the hardships they endure by simply trying to survive in that environment. **Terry Johnston**

Personal History, Katherine Graham (1997). Pulitzer Prize winning memoir of the woman who headed the *Washington Post* during the crises of the Pentagon Papers and Watergate. Nora Ephron, writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, says the story of Graham's journey from "daughter to wife to widow to woman parallels to a surprising degree the history of women in this century." **Burma Mathews** recommends this book for both its historical content and its account of the life of an extraordinary woman.

Grouse and Lesser Gods, Ted Nelson Lundrigan (2002). In this book Lundrigan describes a piece of property he owns in Minnesota that he calls the Promised Land. He tells how he nurtures his land for the enjoyment of his family, his dogs, and those guests who share his love and respect for his land. In one of the funniest parts of this book Lundrigan tells about a hunting companion who decides to go through (instead of under) a two-wire electric fence. Although the results are predictable, it gets funnier with each reading, and sharing it with another makes it even funnier (even if it's with your wife). **Terry Johnston**

Great Fortune: The Epic of Rockefeller Center, Daniel Okrent (2003). "A fascinating historical read," says Friends member, **Paula Hearn**, who says that if she came back in a next life, she would want to be a carpenter. This non-fiction book addresses many layers of interest: the history of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the personalities involved, like artist Diego Rivera and his mural for the interior (when Rivera refused to take a figure of Lenin out of it, Nelson Rockefeller ordered it destroyed). It is "a study of ambition, audacity, and deal-making on a grand scale that led to the construction of some of the most famous skyscrapers in the world.

"The Ledge," Lawrence Sargent Hall, originally published in the *Hudson Review*; reprinted in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*, John Updike and Katrina Kenison (Eds.), 1999. John Updike describes this story as "timeless – a naturalistic anecdote terrible in its tidal simplicity and inexorability, fatally weighted in every detail." A Christmas Day duck-hunting trip promised by a fisherman to his son and nephew has unforeseen consequences. This haunting story lives with the reader forever, especially if he/she has ever hunted. This story raises the awareness of the fragility of life, especially when unpredictable weather and other unforeseen circumstances arise. It says to the reader: "Look out! Take care." The images never go away. The writing is absolutely superb. **Terry Johnston**

Motherland – Beyond the Holocaust: A Mother-Daughter Journey to Reclaim the Past, Fern Schumer Chapman (2001). Mother, Edith, and daughter, Fern, travel to the small German town of Stockstadt where two Jewish families lived prior to the Hitler regime. Edith, as a twelve-year-old, was sent to the U. S. to live with relatives in 1938 when her parents could see what was happening to German Jews. She always felt abandoned and rejected, but on returning to Germany, she realized her fate would have been the same as that of her parents and other Jews who were put to death at the hands of the Nazis. I deem this an unforgettable true story. **Betty Davis**

Mary Called Magdalene, Margaret George (2002). George writes historical fiction, especially biographies (*Mary, Queen of Scotland; The Autobiography of Henry the VIII; The Memoirs of Cleopatra*) and this time she creates a very credible tale of Mary Magdalene as one of Jesus' original disciples. A great read, especially if you would enjoy a female perspective of the Gospels. **Charlene Dybedock**

Dark Star Safari: Overland from Cairo to Cape Town, Paul Theroux, (2003). Just about the best travel book I have ever read by one of the great travel writers. Theroux makes a sentimental journey from the northern to southern tip of Africa without resorting to any flights, and the view we get is personal, political, and historical. **Charlene Dybedock**

Life of Pi, Yan Martel (2001). Not a book I would have picked up if it weren't a Book Club selection, but, oh, am I glad it was! This is not just a good story; it is an experience you will never forget. **Charlene Dybedock**

Memoirs of a Geisha, Arthur Golden (1997). This book is so well done and such an adventure into a different culture that I am still recommending it to friends seven years after first reading it. A really great read! **Charlene Dybedock**

Cloudsplitter: A Novel, Russell Banks (1998). This book is more like rock than a jewel. Engrossing, fascinating historical fiction about John Brown and the pre-Civil War period. All Americans need to read this well-researched book. **Evie Torchia**

Governor Richard Ogilvie: In the Interest of the State, Taylor Pensoneau (1997). Peter and I met this author at an Illinois Elderhostel last October. Pensoneau is a former *St. Louis Post Dispatch* writer who traveled with Ogilvie on his whole campaign. He writes of Ogilvie's military heroics, his political career, and the elections of 1968, 1979, and 1972. Fascinating, important details you didn't read in the newspapers or hear on television. **Evie Torchia**

Why Did I Ever? Mary Robinson (2001). A *New York Times* Notable Book written in diary format and an experimental book as well. Robinson is a new author for me, and this book was a new reading experience. It moves quickly, the characters are colorful, and the writing is humorous, even though it is not meant to be a humorous novel. Try it! **Evie Torchia**

Johnston Grandchildren Recommendations

Summer of the Sea Serpent, Mary Pope Osborne, Magic Tree House #31 (2004). This book is interesting and adventuresome. I read it in Florida. **Anders Sandstrom, age 9**

One-Dog Canoe, Mary Casanova (2003). I like this book because it has a motto: Sometimes it's okay to say no to your friends. I got my cousin, Ethan, an autographed copy for his birthday. **Kjell Sandstrom, age 6 ½**

Oh, the Places You'll Go, Dr. Seuss (1990). I specially like the part where the black bumps are because it says, "You'll meet things that scare you right out of your pants." That's a funny part. **Quentin Gentry, age 4 ½.**

Ten Little Ladybugs, Melanie Gerth (2000). Read! Read! R E A D! **Ethan Gentry, age 1 year, 11 ¾ months.**

The Best of the Best!

An Open Book – Coming of Age in the Heartland, Michael Dirda (2003). **Loretto Cowhig** handed this book to me back in February and said, "Here, check this out. This book is perfect for you" (or words to that effect). Michael Dirda is a writer and the senior editor of the *Washington Post Book World*. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Criticism in 1993. This book describes growing up in Lorain, Ohio, in a blue collar home with a father who regularly said "Get your nose out of that book and go do something useful" (even though he took his children to the library every week without fail), a mother who took advantage of "first volume free" deals on sets of encyclopedias and then canceled the deal (consequently all reports the children wrote had to begin with a subject starting with the letter A), and two sisters who were also voracious readers. The real focus of this book, however, is how Dirda became a reader. James Salter, an author who Dirda greatly admires, says Dirda tells what it's like "**from earliest youth to be stricken by the only incurable disease for which there is boundless relief: a love of books and reading.**" The book is filled with lists of books, including all the books Dirda had read by the time he was sixteen. I am telling you right here that all the books we have all read put together could not begin to touch the volume and quality of Dirda's reading. Thank you, Loretto. This book is a real find!

Readings: Essays and Literary Entertainment, Michael Dirda (2000). I was so taken with *An Open Book* and Michael Dirda as a reader and writer that I tracked down this collection of what he calls "literary entertainments," originally published weekly in *Washington Post Book World*. There was only one copy in all of the Heritage Trail System, so I had no trouble getting it in a timely fashion. (It may be because the title may not be too appealing to the casual reader.) This book is such a treasure that I have bought a copy for myself, and I cannot recommend it highly enough to all of you who truly love books. I have to say though that many of the books Dirda talks about I have never read (to my great regret), and many I have never even heard of (to my even greater chagrin), but it really doesn't matter. Just take Dirda's advice on how to read this book: *In an introduction to an omnibus volume of his fiction, P. G. Wodehouse once advised his admirers to go slowly, to ration the stories over several weeks, lest his idiosyncratic prose start to pall through sheer excess. May I beg the same indulgence? Don't rush through these essays all at once. Dip into the book at random. Browse. Trust the gods of serendipity. As Randall Jarrell once proclaimed, Read at whim!* That's what I'm doing. What a treat to have a really good cup of coffee and dip into this book at random, while treating my incurable disease: a love of books and reading!