

LITTLE GEMS OF BOOKS AND AUTHORS YOU MAY HAVE OVERLOOKED

Presented by Friends of the Kankakee Public Library
April 2, 2005

Welcome to our third edition of "Little Gems." The "Little Gems" tradition was initiated in April of 2000 under the leadership of Candace Hill. At that time our meetings were held at Barnes and Noble, where we were extremely fortunate to have local book-lover, Barbara Girard, present this program. As a result of some internal changes at Barnes and Noble, our last program was held there in 2003, and we began keeping a written record of "Little Gems" recommendations. Rather than print the opinions of only one or two readers, it was decided to solicit mini-reviews of little gems from our Friends membership, and also from friends of the Friends. Last year there were several contributors and readers who asked for copies of "Little Gems" and were so complimentary about the addition of more opinions that we decided to expand our search for reviewers, even going so far as to figuratively twist some arms. This year we can boast that we have more reviewers than ever writing about a wide range of books, both fiction and non-fiction. Hopefully we will continue to grow this program, and we ask that any of you who may receive a copy of this list write to us and tell us of any books you would like us to include next year, or let us know what books we included that you especially liked or didn't like. Please send your comments to Friends of the Kankakee Public Library, 201 East Merchant Street, Kankakee, IL 60901, or e-mail Mary Johnston at m.johnston2004@comcast.net.

Now here are this year's recommendations – in no special order or format.

A Trio of British Mysteries, **Charlene Dybedock**

Ann Perry, the creator of the wonderful Victorian period mysteries featuring William Monk or Charlotte and Thomas Pitt, has started a new series set during World War I. The first in the series is titled *No Graves As Yet* (2003) and it will not disappoint Perry fans. As usual, her characters are students of human behavior and, like Ruth Rendall (another of my favorites), character is just as important as plot.

Well-Schooled in Murder (1990) by Elizabeth George again features the trio of Inspector Lynley, Detective Sergeant Barbara Havers, and forensic scientist Simon Allcourt-James, this time trying to solve the death of a schoolboy at a prestigious public school in West Sussex. George weaves the murder story with the private lives of her crime fighters, creating a fascinating look into the workings of a private British school and our heroes' lives.

And my favorite new series of British sleuths is the series created by Laurie R. King based on Sherlock Holmes and the woman he takes as a partner and wife, Mary Russell. The latest I've read is entitled *The Game* (2004) and takes place in India. This series usually takes Holmes and Russell to some foreign land where they not only solve a mystery, but manage to have multiple adventures involving disguises and a great deal of knowledge about the local culture. King gives you a great story and an education at the same time.

A Book Not Easily Forgotten, Mary Costanza

Vernon God Little, DBC Pierre (2003). This book won the prestigious Booker Man Prize for fiction in Great Britain. The choice was a controversial one because this novel does not fit the mold for that award; critics did not think it prestigious at all. But it is a book that will stay with you for a long time.

Readers are cautioned that the tale told within this book is a farce – “a comedy in which humorous elements are broadly exaggerated.” While this book will make one laugh, and laugh loudly and feel guilty doing so, it will also expose many elements of American society that are totally out of whack with what one might call common sense.

The eponymous character, Vernon God Little (his true middle name is Gregory) is suspected of being part of a conspiracy to shoot and kill sixteen fellow classmates at his small-town Texas high school. The actual shooter, Vernon’s best friend, Jesus, turns the gun on himself. This suicide leaves the town without an explanation of why this tragedy happened. Townspeople whip themselves into froth in seeking to understand the horror.

The novel is set in Martirio, Texas, a town that has not advanced notably into the 21st Century, at least not before this gruesome event. We meet foul-mouthed, outwardly cocky, thirteen-year-old Vernon, his mother and her upwardly mobile gaggle of women friends, and a slime-ball, who presents himself as a representative of CNN. We witness the role of the national media and how ruthless and unethical TV networks can be to report exclusively a story with national interest. The zealous over-reporting of this story is complicit in whipping up a frenzied police manhunt, hyperbolic in its accusations and total lack of objectivity. Vernon is found and returned to Martirio where he eventually finds himself on death row.

Vernon God Little might not be for every reader; it is excessively outrageous. The language is rough, but at the end of the novel, Vernon no longer cusses as he once did. And behind all the excess the reader is left with a young teenaged boy slowly realizing what life has in store for him, and it’s not pretty. The reader might even wonder in the end – what exactly was so funny?

Tragedy on the Great Plains, Loretto Cowhig

The Children’s Blizzard, David Laskin (2004). Known as the children’s blizzard because so many victims were children at or on their way home from school, this severe storm struck the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Minnesota on January 12, 1888. The day began with unusually mild weather, luring farmers to the far corners of their property for tasks they had postponed during weeks of severe weather. Children went to school with light coats, often with no hats or gloves. When the blizzard struck with such ferocity, young teachers had to decide whether to keep their pupils in poorly heated one-room schoolhouses, with limited fuel and food, or to set out through the storm to the nearest farm. Both choices were fatal in some cases, life-saving in others. Visibility was so poor and the storm so disorienting that both adults and children lost their bearings almost immediately. One man was saved because he bumped into his wife’s clothesline; otherwise he would surely have perished less than a hundred feet from his own back door.

The book describes the meteorological conditions that contributed to the blizzard, and the primitive means of collecting, analyzing, and disseminating weather information. The “indications,” as forecasts were then known, were so general, and often so delayed, that most people relied on their own instincts to predict weather.

Residents of the Great Plains still retell harrowing family stories of life and death in this blizzard. The book will give readers a new appreciation of the hardships and hazards that homesteaders faced.

Three By Andrea Barrett, Evie Torchia

Andrea Barrett, National Book Award winner, weaves fascinating stories around the history of science and around some great men of science. The three titles I recommend are *Ship Fever* (1996), *Voyage of the Narwhal* (1999), and *Servants of the Map* (2002). Ms. Barrett is quoted as saying, “Writing these tales, I felt as though I’d finally found a way to bring together science, history, and fiction, the three great, seemingly disparate, loves of my life.”

What I find so intriguing and enjoyable is her subtle technique of weaving her fictional characters into all three of these novels. Suddenly you realize that you’ve encountered the character before, and it is such fun to unravel the puzzle of where. *Ship Fever* is a collection of short stories with “Ship Fever” being the name of the novella included at the end of the collection. “Ship Fever” deals with the hardships and agony of Irish immigration into Canada. *Voyage of the Narwhal* is about Arctic history and the Franklin Expedition. *Servants of the Map* is a collection of stories about early cartographers trekking into exotic parts of the world and their harrowing efforts to get their maps back to the civilized world.

From Our Friends at Westwood Oaks Retirement Community

The Namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri (2004). This novel takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their transformation into Americans. Ashoke and Ashima have an arranged marriage and come to Cambridge, MA, to live. Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*. **Grace Dickson**

Brick Lane, Monica Ali (2003). The story of Nazeen, born in a Bangladesh village and sent to London at age 18 to enter into an arranged marriage to an older man. **Grace Dickson**

Plain Truth, Jodi Picoult (2000). Katie Fisher, an 18-year-old unmarried Amish woman, gives birth to a baby in her father’s barn. The baby did not die of natural causes. Who did it? **Grace Dickson**

The Time-Traveler’s Wife, Audrey Niffenegger (2003). A novel about Clare, a beautiful art student, and Henry, an adventuresome librarian, who have known each other since Clare was 6 and Henry was 36 and were married when Clare was 23 and Henry was 31.

Impossible, but true, because Henry is one of the first people diagnosed with chrono-displacement disorder! **Grace Dickson**

The Kite-Runner, Khaled Hosseini (2003). Taking us from Afghanistan in the final days of the monarchy to the present – a story of friendship between two boys, Amir and Hassan, growing up in Kabul. **Grace Dickson**

Cat's Eyewitness – Mrs. Murphy Mysteries, Rita Mae Brown and Sneaky Pie Brown (2005). The most recent in an entertaining series of mysteries involving a small town Virginia postmistress and her cats and dog. They stumble into a mystery which begins with a perhaps “miracle” – a statue of the Blessed Virgin at a local monastery begins shedding tears of blood. Two suspicious deaths follow and must be solved. Along with the mystery, there are interesting (on-going) characters in the town, with excellent relationship and character studies. In addition, the animals “converse” among themselves and lend their assistance to the less perceptive humans whenever possible. **Liz Gleason**

Molvania – A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry, Tom Gleisner and Rob Sitch (2004). This book is structured as a tourist guide but concerns an imaginary Eastern European country just beginning to emerge upon the tourist scene. It is a complete mock-up of the typical tourist guide, written with tongue firmly in cheek. One example in a section dealing with “Accommodations – Med-Range” in one of the imaginary cities cautions the reader that although boasting a total of 60 rooms, this particular hotel has only 14 beds! The traveler is advised to view the room in advance if booking there. Similar advice included in the book: how to get there, where to dine, etc., in typical travel-guide format. Quite a delightful book. **Liz Gleason**

Farewell, Jackie: A Portrait of Her Final Days, Edward Klein (2004). The author takes the reader along with Jackie Kennedy Onassis on her final spiritual journey, which – as with other events in her famous life – she planned in detail. We are told about the importance of family, friends, and of an awareness of the legacy that would endure after her death. **Betty Feltes and Dorothy Green**

Scott and Amundsen – the Race to the South Pole, Roland Huntford (1980). This book dispels the myths about Robert C. Scott that were perpetuated after his death when his wife edited all unfavorable parts of his diary. It compares the approaches each man took in his quest to reach the South Pole (Amundsen beat out Scott by a month). A really good read! **Dorothy Green**

The Last Kings of Thule, Jean Malaurie (1982). In 1950 Jean Malaurie, a French scientist studying in the Sahara Desert, was granted permission to conduct an expedition in the “cold desert” around the North Pole. There he would be living among the northernmost people of the world, the Polar Eskimos of Thule, Greenland. The men of Thule were a race apart. Through geographic isolation and the social planning of Greenland Eskimo explorer, Knud Rasmussen, they had managed to maintain an advanced, self-sufficient Inuit culture independent of their colonial masters, the Danes. They were truly kings -- strong individualists and heroic hunters; yet they continued to maintain a form of pure communalism -- sharing food, property, labor, and even offspring and sexual mates. Thievery was practically unknown among them, and in all of Greenland there was no jail. This is the society into which Jean Malaurie was granted intimate entry for one historic year. His experience was the last of a kind, for at the end

of that year, the U. S. government built a huge military base in the middle of Thule Eskimo territory. This book has been translated into sixteen languages with acclaim from adventurers, naturalists, and scholars. Malaurie's anecdotal depiction of Eskimo life is easy reading. The 400+ pages also include the harrowing adventure of crossing to Canada by dog sled and the stirring account of Eskimo regeneration in the seventies and eighties. Malaurie's portrait is not only a lesson and inspiration for the 100,000 Eskimos in the U. S., Canada, Greenland, and the U.S.S.R., it is a human model for all mankind. **Dorothy Green**

The Other Daughter, Lisa Gardner (1998). I picked up this book after reading *Alone*, the story of a true hostage standoff that keeps readers guessing to the end. *The Other Daughter* is about a child abandoned in a Boston hospital, adopted by a wealthy couple whose daughter was molested and killed. Twenty years later a reporter turns up investigating the adopted daughter's past and tells her that her biological father was the killer of the adoptive parents' daughter. **Catherine Sthay**

No Second Chance, Harlan Cohen (2003). A man awakens to find himself in ICU, hooked up to an IV, his head swathed in bandages. Twelve days earlier he had been a successful surgeon with a beautiful wife and baby he adored. Now he lies in a hospital bed shot by an unseen assailant. His wife has been killed, and his 6-month-old daughter has vanished. He receives a note – he has one chance to save his daughter. After reading this thriller, I recommend Cohen's many others. **Catherine Sthay**

Honeymoon, James Patterson and Howard Roughan (2005) – 2005 International Thriller of the Year. Why is the FBI interested in Nora? Mysterious things keep happening to people around her, especially the men. An FBI agent is inexplicably drawn to Nora, while at the same time he is filled with fear -- will she be his fatal obsession? **Catherine Sthay**

And Many More from Many More Friends

Hatless Jack, Neil Steinberg (2004). This history of men's hats is as charming as its subject is unlikely. It discusses the fashion, etiquette, economics, and even the politics of hats, often with hilarious details. Hatlessness was once as unthinkable for an adult male as shoelessness, and men would go to any extreme to avoid it. The decline of hat wearing is often attributed to Jack Kennedy, but Steinberg says it had started well before that. Such is the power of myth that most Americans "remember" – incorrectly – that Kennedy was hatless on his inauguration day. Look for the delightful anecdote about Kennedy's first silk top hat. **Loretto Cowhig**

John Adams, David McCullough (2004). This is one of those books I bought because I thought I should read it, it was a Pulitzer Prize winner, and because McCullough's biography, *Truman*, was so memorable. However, it sat on my shelf awhile until I finally recently picked it up. And once I did, I could barely put it down. Adams and his extraordinary wife, Abigail, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin are presented as real people, warts and all, and the story of those early years of our country reads more like a novel than a history book. **Charlene Dybedock**

The Little Book of Letting Go, Hugh Prather (2000). I know, you're going to say isn't that kind of "new age" stuff? Not really. The subtitle is "A Revolutionary 30-Day Program to

Cleanse Your Mind, Lift Your Spirit and Replenish Your Soul,” and I go back to this little book when I find myself fretting too much. It is full of down-to-earth advice and the kind of wisdom and lessons we need to constantly re-learn. One of my favorite quotes -- “Don’t waste your time judging your parents. They had parents, too.” If self-help books are your thing, try this one – it actually helps. **Charlene Dybedock**

The Known World, Edward P. Jones (2003). A riveting work of historical fiction set in the antebellum south. Henry Townsend, a black farmer, expert boot maker, and former slave, unexpectedly dies at a young age, leaving his wife, Caldonia, to run the plantation he owned. Things quickly fall apart for her when slaves she trusted begin escaping under the cover of night, and families who once worked together start betraying each other. The story moves seamlessly between the present, the past, and the future and gives the reader a greater understanding of the lives of freed and enslaved blacks, whites, and American Indians who endured in a world created by slavery. This novel won the 2003 National Book Award. **Kay Green**

Interpreter of Maladies, Jhumpa Lahiri (1999) – winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. While I’m not an avid fan of short stories, I found this debut collection impossible to put down. Ms. Lahiri chronicles the immigrant experience with insight, empathy, and occasionally humor. Her stories are rich with the details of the Indian culture and vividly describe the feelings of homesickness, alienation, and cultural barriers those new to our country most certainly encounter. In a few short pages, I found myself caring deeply about the characters she created and finished each story wondering what happened to them next. Her choice of words and her selection of details make each story unique and memorable. In 2004, Ms. Lahiri published her first novel, *The Namesake*. It, too, is a must read! **Kay Green**

On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon, Kay Gibbons (1998). The story of a fascinating Southern woman who lived from 1842-1900, this book’s first sentence will capture you, and it won’t let you go until the last page. **Sondra Patchett**

In the Time of Butterflies, Julia Alvarez (1994). This is a fictionalized account of four sisters, known as Las Mariposas (the butterflies), who lived in the Dominican Republic while it was under the dictatorship of General Trujillo. A selection of several area book clubs. **Sondra Patchett**

Stuck in Neutral, Terry Trueman (2000). Narrated by a 14-year-old boy who suffers from severe cerebral palsy who thinks his father is trying to kill him, this Young Adult book will make you think and challenge some of your preconceived ideas. **Sondra Patchett**

To the White Sea, James Dickey (1993). The story of an American shot down in his B-29 over Tokyo in 1945. He knows his only means of escape is to travel north in an effort to reach his native Alaska. This is the same James Dickey who wrote *Deliverance*, and this book is every bit as much of a thriller. It is also clear in his descriptions of land, place, and the images of war that he is a poet as well. **Terry Johnston, Kay and John Beguhn (former Friends members now living in Iron River, Wisconsin)**

Five Quarters of the Orange, Joanne Harris (2001). Set in France during the Nazi occupation of World War II, this book explores the complex relationship of the occupied with the occupiers as well as a troubled mother-daughter relationship. A fascinating read with no pat solutions from the author of *Chocolat*. **Kay Beguhn**

Wolves Eat Dogs, Martin Cruz Smith (2004). Arkady Renko, the Russian detective first introduced to readers in *Gorky Park* is investigating the death of a New Russian billionaire. The puzzle leads him to Chernobyl, a “zone of exclusion” since the nuclear accident of 1986. Well-drawn characters and a glimpse of life after communism and nuclear disaster. If you liked *Gorky Park*, you’ll love this one. **Kay Beguhn**

The Plot Against America, Phillip Roth (2004). Imagine if Charles Lindbergh were elected President of the United States in 1940 instead of Franklin Roosevelt. The aviator hero was an isolationist along with many other Americans at this time. He was also reputed to be a Nazi sympathizer. The story is completely credible, and told from the viewpoint of a young Jewish boy, a frightening scenario. A thought-provoking book and one of Roth’s best. **Kay Beguhn**

The Devil You Know, Wayne Johnson (2004). A father, his teenage son, and a 7-year-old adopted daughter head to the Boundary Waters for a canoe trip in an effort to come to terms with the father rejoining the family after a four-year absence. The trip turns into a living nightmare as they are pursued and attacked by three strangers bent on killing them. Not only do they have to come to terms with the physical wounds from the attack but also the emotional wounds inflicted by unknown and misunderstood events from their family’s past. How they heal and live with the scar makes for more than just a thriller. The action scenes leave the reader breathless and on an emotional roller coaster. I loved the language and the writing style. **Mary Jo Johnston**

Ordinary Wolves, John Kantner (2004). A winner of the Milkweed Prize, this autobiographical first novel about a father, his two sons, and daughter who live in a sod igloo in Alaska is about respect for nature, kindness to others, and survival. It is also about discrimination – of Eskimos against whites in the wilderness and of whites against Eskimos in the cities, and the main character does not really fit into either group. I can’t imagine living the way this family did, but I admire them for it. In an interview I heard with the author, he appeared to be surprised at the widespread interest in this book. The Milkweed Prize was well deserved, I think. **Mary Jo, Terry, and Steven Johnston**

Maisie Dobbs (2003) and *Birds of a Feather* (2004), Jacqueline Winspear. Winspear has been described as the London counterpart of Alexander McCall Smith, but I disagree. Although Maisie, the sleuth in both novels, deals with her cases on a deep emotional and personal level, and the structure of the books is similar to Smith’s, there is little light-heartedness and pleasure therein. Set at the end of World War I Maisie not only solves mysteries but also probes the devastating effects of the war on soldiers and the families they left behind. Maisie and her mentor, Maurice, strive to understand why people do what they do and then to show compassion, even when the acts are despicable. I think Dobbs’ books are a cut above many of the mysteries I’ve read, and I look forward to more from her. **Mary Jo Johnston**

The Clearing, Tim Gatreaux (2004). What terrific use of language! I felt I was living at the lumber camp in Mississippi at the end of World War I right alongside the workers. This novel has the potential to be a page-turner, but to read only for plot would be a great disservice to the book. It is so dense with place, character, and motive that the reader has to slow down to savor every little bit. To read only for plot, although it’s tempting, would be a great disservice to this book. It’s also hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys. Nothing is black or white. And, oh, the ravages and permanent scars of the war! **Mary Jo Johnston**

Aloft, Chang-rae Lee (2004). This seemed like a calm, quiet, introspective book – just like the main character, Jerry Battle, whose greatest pleasure is flying alone in his small airplane over the area he had lived all of his life (hence, the title). Jerry, however, is less than engaged with the people who make up his life -- family, friends, co-workers, and even his deceased wife and current girlfriend(s). It's sort of a male mid-life crisis book, and I was rooting for Jerry and his family. I can still picture Jerry at the end of *Aloft*, sitting at the bottom of the hole that has been dug for his new swimming pool, looking up at the sky from which he had previously looked down. **Mary Jo Johnston**

Our Kind – A Novel in Stories, Kate Walbert (2004). The voices in the stories are those of ten wealthy suburban women who come of age in the 50s: “Years ago we were led down the primrose lane, then abandoned somewhere near the carp pond.” They talk, drink, take up “hopeless causes” (protecting the slaughter of the country club’s fairway geese), and dress up in their old wedding gowns. But what kind are we, they ask? “Yellowing pearls on a taut string, valued once, but now too fussy. Grit when crushed, we could tell them. we were fakes all along.” Much of this book rings true for me, and I suspect for other women of my generation as well. **Mary Jo Johnston**

Remember Me, Trezza Azzopardi (2004). Red hair and a case full of apparently unrelated objects – clues to the past of Winnie, a 72-year-old woman also known as Lillian, Patsy, Patricia, and Pikey who slowly looks back at her life in pre-World-War-II England through the 1970s until she is finally able to unravel the ghosts of her past. This is a “get under your skin” book that stays with you for a long time. A sad and tragic story, it still offers a glimmer of hope. Don’t miss this one. **Mary Jo Johnston**

Eventide, Kent Haruf (2004). I stayed up late at night to finish this novel about ordinary people living ordinary lives and facing adversities of varying difficulty – some with simple grace and extraordinary courage, others with bitterness, fear, and sometimes cruelty. I cared about all the characters and what happened to them. Most of all, I loved Haruf’s description of place – I felt I was living with his characters. “Gentle,” “genuine,” and “empathetic” are words I would use to describe this fine book and Haruf’s writing. **Mary Jo Johnston**

March, Geraldine Brooks (2005). A reviewer in the *Tribune* says this second novel by the author of *Year of Wonders* (2001) “breathes new life into the historical fiction genre,” while *The New York Times Book Review* says the book “makes a distressing contribution to recent trends in historical fiction,” which seems to return the genre to its old “sentimental contrivances and costumes.” Sometimes I like sentimental contrivances and costumes, and I thought the idea of inserting the character of Mr. March (father of Louisa Mae Alcott’s *Little Women*) into the Civil War made for an unusual plot twist. The book definitely requires a stretch of the imagination, but I found it to be an interesting read. **Mary Jo Johnston**

Runaway, Alice Munro (2005). Of all the books I’ve read this past year, *Runaway* (Munro’s newest short-story collection) is my runaway favorite! These are not stories to be read one right after another. They deserve to be read slowly, pondered, re-read, and savored. Munro captures the innermost thoughts and desires of men and women – young and old – from all walks of life and from across wide periods of time. Each new story collection is better than the last in terms of character, description, dialogue, and plot. They are timeless and can be read over and over. This is one of my all-time favorite books. **Mary Jo Johnston**