

## LITTLE GEMS OF BOOKS AND AUTHORS YOU MAY HAVE OVERLOOKED

Presented by Friends of the Kankakee Public Library  
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Welcome to our fourth edition of "Little Gems." We have been doing this program since April of 2000 when local book-lover and voracious reader, Barb Girard, got us started at Barnes and Noble. Although we didn't keep a written record back then, this project has grown over the years, not only in number of books reviewed, but in number of book reviewers. Long-time Friends will recognize many of the reviewers and will also note that there are some new ones, too. Now here are this year's recommendations – in no special order or format.

### Some Brief Notes on Books, Charlene Dybedock

I have limited shelf space (a lot, but limited), so I only hang on to those books I want to read again. Here are a few of those.

*Into the Forest*, Jean Hegland (1996). I am not a sci-fi fan, but this is a story about sisters surviving in a future where the power has gone off for good, and they must survive on what they have. From the very beginning you are hooked; how did it happen? Will they make it? Will civilization?

*The Song of the Lark*, Willa Cather (1915). I read almost all recent fiction, but every so often I like to go back to one of the classics, and this is Cather's most autobiographical book about a talented woman and how she makes it on the frontier. It still speaks to women trying to make a career today.

*Waterlily*, Ella Cara Deloria (1988) and *The White*, Deborah Larsen 2002. Both of these books are stories of the Native Americans, specifically the women. *The White* tells the story of Mary Jemison who was captured by a Shawnee raiding party and became part of the tribe. *Waterlily* is the story of two Dakota Sioux women before the white settlers changed their pattern of life. I always cheered for the Indians against the cowboys, and these books gave me a new insight into the lives of their women.

*Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris (1998). If you are interested in spiritual reading you should get to know Kathleen Norris. This is one of those books that you dip into and ponder a chapter at a time. She uses some of the language of Christianity to reflect on what it really means. As a poet and a Presbyterian who regularly goes on retreat with an order of Benedictine monks, she brings a unique perspective to a spiritual journey. Her best known work is *The Cloister Walk*, but I like this one even better. (Do we have a female theme here?)

### Two Non-Fiction Suggestions, Loretto Cowhig

*Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*, John M. Berry (1998). The spring of 1927 was the wettest on record throughout the central U.S., and the Mississippi River watershed, stretching from the Rockies to the Appalachians, was saturated. From the Gulf of Mexico north to the Ohio, the Mississippi and every tributary was backed up as the water continued to accumulate. Levees were reinforced and raised, but the water

inexorably found the low point or the weak spot, and spread over thousands of square miles. The loss of life, the economic devastation, the emotional toll, and the political consequences of this misery make a fascinating story. The book focuses particularly on the Delta, the fertile area between the Yazoo River and the Mississippi River, where the wealthy and powerful Walker family of Greenville was dominant. Herbert Hoover, who had led the relief efforts in Europe following World War I, was put in charge of the reconstruction and welfare programs in the aftermath of the flood. The prominence of this position helped send him to the White House in 1929, but his mistakes contributed to his defeat in 1932, and the racism of his policies spurred the great black migration northward.

*Franklin and Winston: An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship*, Jon Meacham (2003). This dual biography traces the development of “the most fascinating friendship of modern times,” between Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt. Between the start of World War II in September 1939, and FDR’s death in April 1945, the two leaders spent 113 days together and exchanged more than 2,000 letters and cables. Before Pearl Harbor, Churchill was constantly wooing Roosevelt, who had to deal with the strong isolationist movement in the U.S. as well as the remains of the Depression. England needed U.S. military and financial support, and Roosevelt devised Lend Lease as a partial response to these needs. Once the U.S. was in the war, the two worked together to defeat the Axis, although not always with identical long-term goals. Most notably, Churchill wanted the British Empire to continue and thrive, while Roosevelt favored more self-determination of colonial nations. *Franklin and Winston* draws heavily on their correspondence and the memoirs of their wives, aides, and personal friends. It traces the relationship as it grew on an almost daily basis, through their many meetings and through the military and political struggles of the war. Details such as Roosevelt’s “stage-managing” of his immobility, Churchill’s night-owl habits and amazing capacity for alcohol, and both men’s complex relationships with their wives and children shed a personal light on what might otherwise be dry narrative of diplomatic and military maneuvers. Editor’s Note: Loretto dropped off the following addition to her two reviews after they were completed. Thank you, Loretto.

During World War II E. B. White received a request from the Writers’ War Board for a statement on “The Meaning of Democracy”:

*Surely the Board knows what democracy is, he wrote in The New Yorker. \_ It is the line that forms on the right. It is the “don’t” in “don’t shove.” It is the hole in the stuffed shirt through which the sawdust slowly trickles; it is the dent in the high hat. Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half the people are right more than half of the time. It is the feeling of privacy in the voting booths, the feeling of communion in the libraries, the feeling of vitality everywhere. Democracy is a letter to the editor. Democracy is the score at the beginning of the ninth. It is an idea which hasn’t been disproved yet, a song the words of which have not gone bad. It’s the mustard on the hot dog and the cream in the rationed coffee.”*

*I love it!” Roosevelt said when he read the piece, which he would later quote, adding happily: “Them’s my sentiments exactly.”*

### Some Oldies but Goodies You May Have Missed, Evie Torchia

Evie says that it’s been so long since she read this first list that she relied on *The Trib’s* annotations on their best books list, but she highly recommends them.

*You Remind Me of Me*, Don Chaon (2004). A boy recovers from a vicious attack by his grandfather's dog; a young woman enters a home for unwed mothers; another child seeks love from destructive forces. Chicago Dan Chaon nimbly intertwines three flawed lives at various stages in this superb debut.

*Confinement*, Carrie Brown (2004). An evocative story about the relationship between an Austrian World War II refugee and the pregnant unwed daughter of his employers in the U.S.

*A Bit on the Side*, William Trevor (2004). Cheerful these stories are not. But if you can handle a dose of melancholy, William Trevor is one of the greatest writers you could hope to discover.

*Heir to the Glimmering World*, Cynthia Ozick (2004). An 18-year-old orphan in the Bronx finds employment—and a houseful of trouble—with a German immigrant family during the depression.

And now in Evie's voice: *The Art of Mending*, Elizabeth Berg (2004). Adult children are aghast at secrets hidden by their mother and one daughter. Realistic dialogue.

*The Amateur Marriage*, Anne Tyler (2004). Story follows a 30-year marriage until the break-up on the anniversary. Eldest daughter disappeared in the 60s. The story is a study in obtuseness, oblivion to other's needs, and communication efforts in families.

*Waiting for Snow in Havana – Confessions of a Cuban Boy*, Carlos M. N. Eire (2003). This absorbing autobiography taught me so much about Cuban family life in pre-Castro days. The author, playfully, sometimes not so playfully, refers to his father as King Louis. Carlos Eire was one of the 14,000 children airlifted out of Cuba by his parents at the time of the revolution. His tale is heartrending when he explains what it was like to be exiled from his country and his family. Too my surprise the author has some connections to Illinois. He now teaches at Yale.

### Two That Struck a Chord, **Mary Costanza**

*Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*, Kevin Boyle (2004).

It was a little known episode in early 20<sup>th</sup> century American history: A proud Negro man, a doctor of medicine, had the audacity to purchase a house in a white section of the city. Yet this racially charged event in post World War I Detroit, Michigan in 1925 provided impetus for national exposure for the National Association of Colored People (NACP), demonstrated the growing influence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the northern states, and detailed the appearance of the nationally known, flamboyant lawyer, Clarence Darrow, in a Detroit courtroom. This riveting retelling of the consequences of this event earned author Kevin Boyle the 2005 National Book Award for Non-fiction.

Dr. Ossian Sweet, a son of Florida sharecroppers and grandson of slaves, purchased a home for his wife and baby daughter in a previously all-white section on the east side of Detroit. With the white residents of the neighborhood, informed with this fact and whipped into an emotional frenzy by the KKK and real estate agents in the guise of neighborhood associations, mob rule prevailed. Dr. Sweet, with his wife, brothers and friends, were prepared to protect themselves and their property if attacked. (Dr. Sweet had brought a cache of guns and rifles to the house for this purpose.) Blacks had recently come under attack in nearby predominantly white neighborhoods. One doctor, a colleague of Dr. Sweet, saw a mob of protestors enter his new home, throw his property on the lawn and then force him to escape with his life. Ossian Sweet was not going to let this happen to him and his family, so, on the night of September 9,

1925, while Ossian's family kept watch, the Sweet bungalow was pelted with rocks, windows were shattered, shots were fired, one man was wounded, and one man was killed.

Boyle explains the story of Ossian Sweet's journey from a bright, first son of sharecroppers who wanted their son to become successful and safe from the continuing lynching in the south. They sent him away at the age of 13 to an all-black school, Wilberforce, in a small Ohio town. Wilberforce wasn't known as an especially good school but it provided Ossian with a full scholarship. Ossian was a proud man, and although he wasn't an exceptional student, he did earn a partial residency in medicine at Howard University in Washington, D.C., one of the finest institutions of learning then and now. He moved to Detroit where he had worked during summers and set up his practice; he expected to earn respect, enter the middle-class and make his way toward the American dream.

This is a compelling book and full of historical background. In addition to the history of the Negro after the Civil War, is Boyle's description of the American landscape in northern cities in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The invention of the automobile and the resulting demand for workers triggered the Great Migration of blacks out of Mississippi and other poor sections of the American south to northern cities, especially Detroit; many blacks realized that they had been betrayed by the promise of more equality under reconstruction. A Negro could own land but could not attend white schools. Industrialization offered many a better life with decent paying jobs. Many poor whites also flooded to the north, as well as immigrants from around the globe. And with the explosion of the population in Detroit, economic forces including competition for jobs exacerbated tensions in race relations. Also, the lack of decent housing for blacks stoked the embers of black/white relationships; when white housing values were threatened when blacks moved into white neighborhoods, violence ensued.

Another tension in Detroit in the 1920s was corrupt politics; the KKK had infiltrated the political scene with a candidate of its own and nearly won the office for mayor. Corruption also infected the police department. Although Detroit police were on the scene to protect the Sweets that September night, officers denied that rocks had been thrown prior to the shootings, thus foreclosing a plea of self-defense. The Sweets and the other defendants in their murder trial did not expect justice to be on their side. Yet, the NACP was looking for just such a case in order to gain national attention for the injustices of segregated housing. It was the NACP who brought in the "Great Defender" Clarence Darrow. Darrow's emotions, flamboyance and passion were worn on his sleeve during trial. In fact, the NACP was not always sure it liked what it heard.

The book parades an influential set of characters of American history across its pages, including the president of the NACP, James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Henry Ford, Pastor and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Clarence Darrow, Frank Murphy and Robert Toms. Murphy presided over *The People v. Sweet, et al* trial; he was promoted to a seat on the United States Supreme Court in 1940. Toms prosecuted the Sweet case for the state. He later became a member of the Detroit branch of the NACP and went on in 1947 to preside over the prosecution of Nazi war criminals as a trial judge for the U.S. Military Tribunal at Nuremberg.

This book is rich in historical understanding of race relations in America, then, and, alas, now. However, understanding is only the first step to achieve fairness. And keep these words close: "The arc of the moral universe is long. But it bends toward justice."  
-Abolitionist Theodore Parker, c. 1850s

*Blackbird House*, Alice Hoffman (2004). This novel is made up of twelve chapters, almost separate short stories except that they are all connected by place -- Blackbird House. Set alongside the outer reaches of Cape Cod, this house is home to several families over the course of two centuries. In formatting the book in this way, Ms. Hoffman provides a veritable history of the United States. In each story, the reader shares the accomplishments and heartbreaks of the residents of Blackbird House. Each character and story is unique, but the reader will be surprised by the connecting details, especially the pink phlox in the yard.

### Some Non-Fiction You May Not Have Read, Janice Strasma

*The Great Game*, Peter Hopkirk (1992). This is a spellbinding account of the great imperial struggle for supremacy in Central Asia. The “great game” between Victorian Britain and Tsarist Russia was fought across desolate terrain from the Caucasus to China, over the lonely passes of the Pamirs and Karakorams, in the Kerman and Helmund deserts, and through the caravan towns of the old Silk Road. Both powers were scrambling to control access to the riches of India and the East. When play first began, the frontiers of Russia and British India lay 2,000 miles apart; by the end, this distance had shrunk to twenty miles at some points. This is a wonderful read for both female and male.

*Charlie Wilson’s War*, George Crile (2003). Is it true that Cocaine Charlie Wilson, Democrat from Texas, protégé of House Speaker Tip O’Neill, was turned loose with a CIA maverick and hundreds of millions of dollars to deal missiles in arms bazaars and to fight a secret war? While reading this book, I kept wondering if all this really happened. We may never know, but if we truly contributed to the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan, we gave them an American army of infidels to fight in Iraq. Not the best-written book but an interesting subject.

### Our Iron River, Wisconsin Friends, Kay and John Beguhn

*If You Lived Here I’d Know Your Name*, Heather Lende (2005). Heather Lende lives and writes in Haines, Alaska, population around 2,000. Haines is near the farthest north point on the inner passage, 90 miles from Juneau, and inaccessible except by air or water, and then only in good weather. (And I thought Iron River, Wisconsin, was isolated!) In her introduction, Lende says John Muir, visiting in 1879, warned that if you visited Haines, you would either have to stay or know you would be disappointed in every other place for the rest of your life. The book is a collection of stories of life in this beautiful, wild, and dangerous small town. Lende writes obituaries and a “society” column for the local newspaper, *The Chilkat Valley News*. You’ll laugh and cry along with her in this vivid portrayal of life in small town Alaska. **Kay**

*Following in the Footsteps of Ernest Hemingway*, Jay Thurston (2005). Jay Thurston draws on his experience as a retired high school teacher, motivational speaker, and free-lance writer to introduce the reader to the world of trout fishing in the scenic streams of northwest Wisconsin. Much more than an excellent guidebook to trout fishing, Thurston pauses along the way to introduce you to some interesting characters and the life lessons he’s learned from them. From the Dedication page of the book, the following poem is dedicated to his “trout fishing friend, Pat Hogan, and to all who, when wading a trout stream, enter another world.”

Slowly he waded upstream  
And cast the quiet pool.  
Then to the murmuring riffle  
And up to the gentle bend  
In the early morning fog  
He disappeared from view.  
He was gone, he was gone,  
Where he wanted to go.

Savage Press publishes this book. Thurston is a local author and not widely known, but the book is available at [www.savypress.com](http://www.savypress.com) (just in case your library gets requests). **John**

### Middle School and Young Adult Favorites, Sondra Patchett

*Pawn of Prophecy*, David Eddings (c1982). This is the first book of the Belgariad Series and is a wonderful fantasy. Garion leaves the security of a farm in Sendaria with his aunt and “Mister Wolf” to find an unnamed precious object that has been stolen. Their quest is filled with adventures and surprises.

*One of Those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies*, Sonya Sones (c2004). After her mother dies, Ruby is sent to live with her father. In a series of poems she tells the story of moving from the east coast and her first real boyfriend to live in California with the father she has never met. Some of the adjustments she must make are humorous and others are serious. One of her biggest adjustments is to the fact that her father is a famous movie star.

*Stuck in Neutral*, Terry Trueman (c2000). Fourteen- (“almost fifteen”)-year-old Shawn McDaniel has cerebral palsy and cannot move any of his muscles. Everyone thinks that he is “dumb as a rock” because he cannot respond to him or her, but Shawn’s mind is active, and he knows what is going on around him. He even knows that his father thinks Shawn would be better off dead.

### Toddler Favorites, Monica and Sofia Pigato

Monica joined Friends shortly after moving to Kankakee and attended our 2003 annual meeting at Barnes and Noble. She also became a member of a local book club recommended by Friends members, and is an active participant (as well as the youngest member). When Monica became a mom for the first time and wondered if she’d every have time to read serious literature again, Sofia’s book club “grandmothers” reminded Sofia’s mom that children’s literature is serious, too, so here are some “little gems” recommended by both mother and daughter:

*Olivia*, Ian Falconer. This book is about a kid that appreciates Degas, criticizes Pollack, and builds sand castles resembling the Empire State Building. Sofia loves it, and I love it. *Caps for Sale*, Esphyr Slobodkina. Sofia loves shouting “Caps! Caps for sale!” and stomping her feet like the monkeys. Good for working off a little toddler energy. We also love the various Dr. Seuss titles – *Hop on Pop*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, *Cat in the Hat*, *Mr. Brown Can Moo, Can You?*, *One Fish, Two Fish*, and *ABC’s*. Imaginative rhyme patterns and creature composition! I’m sure most of you have heard these titles, but they’re great to revisit with a little one, as is Sesame Street!

And yes, Monica, there is reading after childhood – especially when you’re up late at night waiting for Sofia to come home from her first date!

### And More from Friends and Friends of Friends

*The Time Traveler’s Wife*, Audrey Niffenegger (2003). I loved the complexity and the pureness of the love between Clare and Henry. This was an all-time favorite pick among my book club members, and I suggest it to everyone. The way the story is told you can almost believe that the time traveling is real. There are not many books that I would be tempted to read a second time, but this would be one of them. **Vicki Stankewicz, KPL Adult Services**

*The Book of Joe*, Jonathan Tropper (2004). The story of a successful young writer who returns to his hometown, rich and famous after his father becomes ill. Family or townspeople not

exactly welcomed him, and he revisits through memory a less than happy family life and his high school experiences, topped off with a traumatic senior year. I found this book interesting and I liked the sense of renewal experienced by Joe. **Marge Trepanier** (P.S. Marge has donated a copy of this book to the library.)

*The Farfarers: Before the Norse*, Farley Mowat (2000). This was a fascinating book by a fascinating writer, "Canada's best story-teller," i.e., *The People of the Deer* and *The Desperate People*. It digresses from Mowat's normal "I went there, I experienced it, I'm telling you what it was" to an unproven story of a maverick Canadian archeologist, Thomas Lee, who found in the barrens of eastern Canada evidence that not all pre-historic populations came to North America from the land bridge between what is now Russia and Alaska. The theory that Mowat and Thomas Lee propose is that there was a migration of fair-haired, pale-skinned Europeans who were driven out of England, crossed the north Atlantic in skin boats to Iceland, moved to Greenland, and finally to Eastern Canada. If you look on a map today you can visualize the route. This theory is supported by ancient stone foundations, which supported the overturned skin boats and acted as a shelter to the occupants during the high Arctic winters. Reviewer Richard Ellis says, "*The Farfarers* is worth reading, if for no other reason than to experience a provocative, alternative version of history, written by a master storyteller." **Terry Johnston**

*The Everlasting Stream: A True Story of Rabbits, Guns, Friendship, and Family*, Walt Harrington (2002). Harrington, a star writer for *The Washington Post Magazine*, writes about rabbit hunting in Kentucky every Thanksgiving with his father-in-law, Alex, who is black, and Alex's friends. "The right or wrong of hunting has nagged at me from the beginning, and after a decade of hunting I finally set out to think it through," he writes. Over the years he had grown to respect his hunting partners, and he developed deep and long-lasting friendships with them, so much so that he began to include his son as well. He speaks about a time following the hunt when the men gathered to clean the game and talk. "As I stood listening to the men at the Everlasting Stream, I realized I hadn't shared that sensation of camaraderie with male friends for nearly 20 years. . . . The hour at the Everlasting Stream seemed endless. . . . I think of it as an hour of near perfection among men." Harrington and his wife eventually gave up their fast-paced, moneyed lifestyle in Washington, D. C., and moved to Illinois where he became a professor of journalism at the U. of I and, as the reviewer states, gave up his designer suits for clothes from J. C. Penney's, opened his mind, and found as his reward a kind of beauty beyond words. **Terry Johnston**

*Thinking in Pictures*, Dr. Temple Grandin (1996). Dr. Grandin offers insight into autism as she describes her struggles and triumphs with this complicated, mind-boggling condition. She grew up in a family that helped her as much as was possible at that time. Her mother hired someone to work with her at home, and she was able to graduate from college. She now has a successful career designing technology for animals. One of her inventions is a zigzag platform on which animals travel on their way to be slaughtered. Because the animals cannot see what is ahead of them, their anxiety is reduced. She also invented the "squeeze machine" that she used to give herself tactile input. These inventions are used today in classrooms and clinics. In an unsentimental manner, her book describes how she perceives the world by "thinking in pictures." A picture represents each word or concept she knows. The pictures do not represent a group of ideas like "dogness." One picture represents one dog she has encountered. Therefore, she must constantly store more "pictures" to increase her knowledge base and vocabulary. Temple also has difficulty "reading other people." She may skip a greeting and go right to the business she has with a person. She practices social niceties but they are not natural to her. The book was fascinating to me because it was a description of autism by a person with autism. Actually that is how the field has gained much of the

information that is known about this condition. Autistic people are the source of much of what we understand today. Dr. Grandin has written another book that talks about the characteristics of people with autism that is found in animals. I look forward to reading it. **Burma Mathews**

*Gentlemen and Players*, Joanne Harris (2006). Mystery readers will love the twists and turns in Joanne Harris's (*Five Quarters of the Orange* and *Chocolat*) latest novel. Set in a wealthy English prep school for boys, the story is told in alternating chapters by two narrators—one a long-time teacher at the institution and the other a newly hired faculty member with old ties to the campus of St. Oswald's. Anyone who has ever been a teacher will relish the scenes in the faculty lounge and smile over the constant battles between faculty and administration about such issues as who is assigned which classroom and how the use of computers will improve the standing of this venerable institution. But as entertaining as those scenes are, they also hold clues to the identity of a pathological killer. Ron Charles writes in his *Washington Post* review that he "was hooked by the first page" and warns readers that at the end "you'll gasp so loudly the librarian will throw you out." **Kay Green**

*Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, Alexandra Fuller (2001). If the James Frey "Million Pieces" fiasco hasn't turned you off to memoirs, you will want to read this one. It's the story of Ms. Fuller's childhood in Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi during the time of political and social upheaval. Set in the 1970s and 80s it weaves together the stories of the author's family and the freedom movements that kept the Fullers moving from farm to farm and country to country. And, yes, I do believe her mother blew the head off a cobra in the pantry. **Laura Hays**

*The History of Love*, Nicole Krauss (2005). This book continues to haunt me. It's a book about a book, but it's much more than that. When a long lost book resurfaces, the lives of the feisty Leo Gursky and the lonely Alma Singer are linked together. The author's prose sang to me. Her renditions of the past, Nazi-occupied Europe, and present, New York City, were equally compelling. The story is incredibly sad and undeniably hopeful. It is the best book I've read so far this year. I ignored the laundry, my kids, my husband, and read until I finished. Nicole Krauss (I can't believe she's only 29) left me longing for more. **Kim Donald**

#### My Favorite Reads from This Past Year, Mary Jo Johnston

*The Professor's Daughter*, Emily Raboteau (2005). This first novel is the story of an interracial marriage (black husband, white wife) in which the husband tries to protect his children from the discrimination and lack of belonging he felt. It doesn't work. The children, Emma who lives in the shadow of her shining star brother, Bernie, are only beginning to understand their family history. Bernie is seriously injured in an accident, and Emma feels she has lost a rib. How the family survives and heals – running away, experimenting with alternative life styles, and finally finding some measure of peace – is fascinating. It deserves a second read and would make for an intense and interesting book club discussion. One reviewer describes Raboteau's sensitivity to life and to people as "nothing short of astounding."

*The Ha-Ha*, Dave King (2005). Howie, the victim of a head injury in Vietnam, is left unable to speak, read or write. For thirty years he gets by working at a convent and renting rooms to an odd cast of characters. One day his ex-girlfriend (whom he still loves) drops off her eight-year-old biracial son for Howie to care for while she enters a drug rehab program. This sets off a chain of events that triggers feelings Howie has long repressed, and they almost destroy him. Because he cannot speak, only the reader knows what Howie wants to say if only he could, and somehow he communicates to those who really listen. This is a beautiful book and should not

be missed! By the way, in case you're wondering, a ha-ha is "a sunken ditch not visible until one reaches its brink," and a very apt title for this book.

*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Jonathan Safran Foer (2005). This book is one of the first books of fiction about September 11, and it is incredible – one of the most innovative plots and visual presentations I've ever seen. All the characters are memorable. There are stories of horrific events but also stories of courage and love and kindness. I haven't read a book that moved me so much in years. I loved eight-year-old Oskar – what a funny kid, and what a loving father (and trusting and understanding mother) he had – not to mention his grandmother and, in the end, his grandfather. I cried so hard when I finished this book that my eyes hurt all day, but some of my tears were tears of gratitude for the extraordinary gift of this book.

*The Painted Drum*, Louise Erdrich (2005). I have been a fan of Louise Erdrich ever since *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen* and everything in between. This is one of the ones I like best, although the competition is tough. It opens in the present when fifty-year-old Faye and her mother, who run a family estate, discover a ceremonial drum among the possessions of an old New Hampshire family whose ancestor was an Indian trader. Faye becomes obsessed with the drum, and as she increasingly questions who she is and what she is doing, the history of the drum begins to unfold. It is really the history of grief for dead children, and it was fashioned to honor the daughter of the man who made it. It is believed that the drum possesses special powers, and that a little girl (or girls) may speak through it. Beginning with Faye, a realist, and proceeding through the mysticism of Ojibwa culture, Erdrich attempts to "solder" (her term) both worlds together. Is Faye able to make the transition? Maybe at least some of the time. Did the little girls speak through the drum? I choose to believe they did.

*No Country for Old Men*, Cormac McCarthy (2005). I think this is my favorite Cormac McCarthy book, even though some reviewers may not agree. A failed multi-million-dollar drug transaction results in a border war that leaves lots of dead bodies along the trail where the ultimate question seems to be "How does a man decide in what order to abandon his life?" The dialogue is so realistic, as is the description of the bloody frontier between Texas and Mexico. I could see it, hear it, smell it, feel it. I loved the sheriff, Ed Tom Bell, and his wife, Loretta. I loved how Ed Tom talked to his uncle about his memories of his father and his concern about people who don't care who they hurt to make money. Some say this may be McCarthy's last book, but I hope not. I like what Michael Dirda, a critic I greatly admire, says in *The Washington Post Book World*: "Like the novelists he admires – Melville, Dostoyevsky, Faulkner – Cormac McCarthy has created an imaginative oeuvre greater and deeper than any single book. Such writers wrestle with the gods themselves."

*The Hummingbird's Daughter*, Luis Alberto Urrea (2005). Are there any of us from this area who haven't yet heard of this book? Luis' January visit to our library is still generating conversation about his work and especially his description of "My New Favorite Town" (Kankakee, in case you missed it). I hear more people talk about how they were torn between slowing down so that the book would last longer and staying up all night to see how it ended. Well, actually, it hasn't, since there is a sequel coming, and a movie as well.

*The All of It*, Jeannette Haien (1986). This is one of the most thought-provoking books I've read in ages. Recommended by **Mary Maddox** for the Tuesday Evening Book Club, it provoked a discussion that was deep and rich – just like the book. I read it a second time, and I think about it often. A deathbed confession results in a priest's examination of many of his beliefs, and his soul-searching is a lesson in suspending judgment and in forgiveness. I was torn by my sympathy for every character in this beautifully written little book.

How to choose the book I most liked out of all of the above? It's difficult, and I first have to rule out *The Hummingbird's Daughter* because of our library's very personal connection with the author. With that said, the one book that has crept into my thoughts and dreams most often since I read it has been already described by **Kim Donald**, one of our newest Friends members: Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*. Here's what I wrote about it on June 10, 2005: "This is a book to own! This is one of the best books I've read this year (maybe longer than that). Every character is nearly a book unto himself/herself. Leo Gurskey, the octogenarian anchor of the book, is a character with which the reader does not want to part. In this book there is sadness, humor, lost love, and love that lasts a lifetime. There is no way to express how much I loved this book in words – no way."

### A Few (Or More) Last Words

In the January-February 2006 edition of *Poets & Writers Magazine*, the Executive Director, Elliot Figman, addressed a gathering to celebrate the organization's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary. He asked the questions: What has brought us here? What has attracted us to poets and writers? We could ask the same thing about today's gathering of Friends of the Kankakee Public Library: What has brought us here? What has attracted us to books and their authors? This is what Mr. Figman says, and I submit that it is perfectly true for the Friends as well:

- *I propose that all of us believe that literature is essential to the development of the individual spirit and that it forms a fundamental cornerstone of a healthy society. We're here . . . because we love words – the look of words on the page, the sound of words, the taste of them on our tongues. Some of us are here because a poem once moved us to tears or took our breath away . . .*
- *We're here because a short story helped us unravel the mystery of who we are or because we couldn't bear to turn the last page of a novel whose characters we'd come to know – characters, who, in their way, became as dear to us as our loved ones.*
- *We're here because we seek truth, and in an age of information overload, we know that literature gives us something facts can never provide – we turn to books to instruct us, to bring us into closer contact with what really matters.*
- *We're here because we're grateful to the writers whose work enriches our lives, and we understand the importance of nurturing writers. We believe authors should be conferred a dignified status in our culture and that their work should reach as broad an audience as possible. . . .*

Thank you for those words, Mr. Figman, and thank all of you for being here today, thank you for being members of Friends, and thank you for sharing with us our love of reading.