

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

Presented by Friends of the Kankakee Public Library  
April 7, 2007

Welcome to our fifth edition of "Little Gems." It may look the same, but now there is another way you can access it in case you misplace or wear out your copy. Simply go to the library's home page, [www.lions-online.org](http://www.lions-online.org), scroll down the column on the right-hand side, and click on "newsletters." You will find *The Mane Event*, *The Literary Lion*, *Between the Lions*, *Bookmarks*, and at the end of the column, *Little Gems*. You can download a copy of *Little Gems* for yourself or to share with your friends and family. Long-time Friends will recognize many of the reviewers and will also note that there are some new reviewers, including some representatives of area book clubs who have some great recommendations to add. In addition, there is a contribution from a library staff member, and once again we recognize local book-lover, Barb Girard, who started "Little Gems" in April of 2000 at Barnes and Noble specifically for the Friends. Now here are this year's recommendations.

### On Burning Out, Growing Up, and Crashing SuperVillain Conventions, Nick Garcia

*Editor's Note:* Nick Garcia is a recent graduate of Columbia College and works in the library's Adult Services Department. Many of us have known him since he was a student in the Kankakee schools, and we are very proud of him. This piece was published on the Library Blog on February 16, 2007, and is included here with Nick's permission. And now, in Nick's own words:

Finishing a college degree can be a bit, let's say, "frying" for the mind. Don't get me wrong. I love learning for the sake of learning, but working three independent projects in Chicago while commuting, working and living in Kankakee is a surefire way to turn your cerebellum into gelatinous meat byproduct. After all that schoolwork in December, a break was in order. Reading was set aside in favor of sleeping, making music and enjoying my biggest guilty pleasures, video games and films. I had finally come out of my reading slump at the end of January, and I already had drawn up a mammoth list of literature to devour over the next few months.

And that, dear reader is where Joe Meno comes in. Though I'd never attended any of his classes or lectures, I knew that he was a creative writing professor at Columbia College. What a better way to celebrate graduation than by reading a work by a professor of my alma mater? (I certainly wasn't going to reread Ted Uzzle's *Technical Fundamentals of Audio*, as much as I liked the guy.) In fact, two of his works were sitting at the top of my list: *Haircuts of the Damned* and *The Boy Detective Fails*. I found myself surprisingly disappointed by Meno's critically well-received attempt at a coming-of-age story (*Haircuts of the Damned*), so I expected very little from the Chicagoan's next effort. However, the moment I laid eyes upon the small glob of introductory text tucked into the lower right corner of the first page, I knew that this work would be a special one.

The style of *Boy Detective* is a departure: the narration takes on a deceptively simple structure reminiscent of the genius child-sleuth genre. However, rather than presenting us with a handsome and sharp young genius child, Menno introduces us to a veritable has-been: former child genius Bill Argo, a nervous, pill-popping wash-up of a man, newly released from a ten-year stint at a mental hospital after his sister (and fellow sleuth) Caroline takes her own life. Alone

and unsure in a world very different from the one in which he solved crimes as a child, Billy tries everything he can to get by – avoidance, distractions, feigning helplessness – until he gives in and does the only thing he can: solve the mystery that is the life around him.

The resulting story is simultaneously surreal and touchingly realistic, mixing bizarre crimes (disappearing buildings, scheming corporate overlords, absurd super-villain organization conventions) with mundane postmodern existence (dead-end jobs, antidepressants, social anxiety). Wry humor keeps the book in place throughout – well enough, in fact, that I found myself laughing out loud on several occasions. Meno knows, it seems, how to touch his readers on many fronts. The novel slyly poses the question to us: “What happened to the wonderment and adventure of childhood?...and answers that question quite well. For any one of us who ever faced failure in adulthood, being burnt-out after the brightness of childhood, or the loneliness in the working world, *The Boy Detective Fails* is for you.

### Two Books by Women – One American, the Other an English “Lady”, Eric and Sherry Merry

*The First Salute*, Barbara W. Tuchman (1988). Barbara Tuchman (a double Pulitzer Prize recipient) highlights the emergence of the infant American nation in 1776 onto the international stage by a singular event – The First Salute. As the American ship *Andrew Doria*, flying the flag of the Continental Congress, approached the Dutch-controlled harbor of St. Eustatius, the captain followed the tradition of firing a greeting cannon. This was answered by the gun of the fort as a sign of recognition of a sovereign power and flag. The sign of recognition was not lost on the world’s maritime powers, particularly the English and French as well as the Dutch themselves. America had arrived. Ms. Tuchman goes on to tell the intriguing story of how The First Salute forever changed the world.

*The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, Antonia Fraser (1992). A hackneyed title for a hackneyed subject? Absolutely not. This is a profound story written by an author who rescues these ladies from their stereotype images. It’s the story of six very different women, some ambitious, some naïve, who had one thing in common – keeping the affections of King Henry VIII and providing him with a male heir. It’s a masterly study of real living women by a lady who has her own British aristocrat connections. Lady Antonia Fraser is a quality historical author whose book, “*Marie Antoinette: The Journey*,” was the basis for the popular 2006 film, “*Marie Antoinette: The Journey*,” directed by Sofia Coppola.

### 2007 Recommendations from a Faithful Friend, Loretto Cowhig

*The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*. Daniel Mendelsohn (2006). The author’s great-uncle and aunt, Shmiel and Ester Jager, and their four daughters, Lorka, Frydka, Rachele, and Bronia, lived in the small town of Bolechow, in what was at one time Austria, then Poland, then Ukraine. All six died in the Holocaust, along with all but 48 of the town’s six thousand Jews. In an effort to learn as much as possible of exactly what happened to them, Mendelsohn began by collecting bits of family history, then by going to Bolechow and searching for their home, their neighborhood, and anyone who had known them or of them. One clue led to another, and over a period of several years Mendelsohn eventually went to other cities in Poland, Sweden, Australia, Denmark, Israel, and many other places as he pieced the dreadful story together, to a remarkable degree of detail and certainty.

At many points in his search Mendelsohn seemed to have reached a dead end, until a chance remark, a corrected mistranslation, or a fortuitous meeting led to the next step in the search.

But these were not fate, or good luck, he says: *So there is a vast mass of things in the world, and the act of creation that cuts through them, divides the things that might have happened from those that did. I did not and do not believe that the dead, that the long dead and disintegrated Shmiel and Frydka, somehow reached out from the ether and pointed us, that day, to Bolekhiv and then Stepan and then Prokopiv and then the house and then the women and then the hiding place, the hole in the ground, the awful box, where they had once cowered in the cold and failed, finally, at their bid for survival. But I do believe in some things. I did and do believe, after all that I've seen and done, that if you project yourself into the mass of things, if you look for things, if you search, you will, by the very act of searching, make something happen that would not otherwise have happened, you will find something, even something small, something that will certainly be more than if you hadn't gone looking in the first place, if you hadn't asked your grandfather anything at all. I had finally learned the lesson taught me, years after they had died, by Minnie Spieler and Herman the Barber. There are no miracles, no magical coincidences. There is only looking, and finally seeing, what was always there.*

*The Few: The American Knights of the Air Who Risked Everything to Fight in the Battle of Britain*, Alex Kershaw (2006). Before the U.S. entered World War II, Franklin Roosevelt was trying to support England and its allies while still hoping to keep America out of the war. The American mood was divided, with some thinking our neutrality and physical distance would protect us, and others believing that the U.S. would inevitably be drawn into the war. A small number of American young men did not wait for that day. Instead they violated U.S. neutrality laws to join Britain's Royal Air Force, and ended up participating in the Battle of Britain in the summer and fall of 1940. Some were motivated by the desire to fly English Hurricanes and Spitfires, some by their support for the Allied cause, and some by the hope that defeating Germany in Europe would make it unnecessary for the U.S. to enter the war. This book tells how these pilots made their way, often by subterfuge, to England, joined the RAF, were trained in combat flying, and engaged in many harrowing missions. Only one of the Americans survived the war, but all of them were among the small group of whom Churchill said, *Never in the course of human endeavour have so many owed so much to so few.*

### Two Related Books. **Kay Green**

*The Worst Hard Time*, Timothy Egan (2006). I think I first heard of the Dust Bowl when I read Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* in high school. Then I developed a deeper feel for the actual conditions of that period after reading Karen Hesse's 1998 Newbery Award-winning book, *Out of the Dust*. But I didn't truly understand the magnitude of this environmental disaster until I read *The Worst Hard Time*, the 2007 winner of the National Book Award for non-fiction. I erroneously believed that the Dust Bowl primarily impacted Oklahoma, when in fact the Dust Bowl covered about 100 million acres, including much of Kansas and parts of Colorado, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. I also thought that the drought lasted a year or two when in actuality it lasted through most of the 1930's. Where Steinbeck gave voice to those who fled these unbearable conditions, Egan like Hesse has given voice to those who stayed and survived. He has meticulously researched this era and incorporated into his spell-binding narrative the compelling and in some cases, unimaginable, stories of real people who are now in their 80's and 90's. As Walter Cronkite said, *This is can't-put-down history.*

After finishing Egan's remarkable book, I decided to re-read *Out of the Dust* and discovered that the trials faced by this 15-year-old narrator were even more heart wrenching now that I had a more thorough understanding of the times. I also discovered that this unforgettable story,

written in verse form, is historically accurate. I guarantee that after reading these two works, you'll no longer complain about some of life's little irritants – at least for awhile.

#### Four from the King of “Gently Read Books” Salesmen, Carl Oberlin

*The Man Who Knew Infinity – A Life of the Genius Ramanujan*, Robert Kanigel (1991). Born in 1888 in South India and self-taught, fate conspired against this genius mathematician at nearly every turn, ultimately ending his life far too early. Yet to this day, his notebooks perplex and dazzle our finest minds. Yes, this book does have formulae, but fear not (or enjoy!). The math is spoon fed and not critical to the ultimate satisfaction of insight into a culture and mind far different from our own.

*America Gone Wild: Cartoons by Ted Rall* (2006). Not to be found in the Tribune, no longer in the New York Times, the cartoons of Ted Rall have infuriated the Right. His post-9/11 collection, *America Gone Wild!* includes an opening section analyzing the reaction to the most controversial of his work. No smiling bunnies, cats or dogs here. A certain maniacal generalissimo, however . . .

*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, Michael Chabon (2000). Josef Kavalier from Prague and Sammy Clay, cousins united in 1939 Brooklyn, artist and writer respectively, together make their mark in the infant comic book industry. A big, bold, exciting New York City story, towering as high as the Empire State Building. Old World golems, Houdini escapes, Dali in a deep-sea diver suit, dazzling dark-haired women, fighting the Nazis in Antarctica, the Brave New World of Suburbia – oh, and a Pulitzer Prize!

*Too Far From Home – A Story of Life and Death in Space*, Chris Jones (2007). The story of the International Space Station astronauts stranded in 2003 when Space Shuttle Columbia burned during re-entry. The two Americans and one Russian were forced to use the Soyuz emergency return capsule or stay in space for 2+ years.

*Imperial Life in the Emerald City – Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, Rajiv Chandrasekaran (2006). A *Washington Post* reporter's experience of the 15 months of American “viceroy” control of Iraq. *Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them. Actually, also under the very odd conditions of Arabia, your practical work will not be as good as, perhaps, you think it is*, T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), August 20, 1917). This is the book that Molly Ivins recommended in her final column . . . . ‘Nuff said.

#### Learning the Purpose of Hunting, Phil Angelo

*The Everlasting Stream – A True Story of Rabbits, Guns, Friendship, and Family*, Walt Harrington (2004). For Walt Harrington, the act of hunting was the closest he has come to being alive as *the birth of a child or making love*. Harrington's explanation of hunting and his general discussion of male bonding are a big part of his book, *The Everlasting Stream*. Last week, the head of the Department of Journalism at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, read from his book and discussed the craft of writing at a “Meet the Author” presentation at the Kankakee Public Library.

Harrington married into a Glasgow, Ky., family and discovered that his father-in-law had many of the same characteristics of his own father – a hard-core working class guy. *They have a certain code*, Harrington says. *Love does not always have to be expressed. And it is not what a man says that counts, but rather what he does.* Harrington, who has made his living all his life by his wits, had always been determined to do better than his father did. The president of the student council wanted a better career than a grease monkey or his milkman father.

Now Harrington realizes that life is a lot more complex. *“The Everlasting Stream,”* he says, *is a book about a man trying to understand men.* Part of that revelation came about through his hunting trips. He had not been interested in hunting at all, but found out that in the Kentucky culture of his wife’s family, all the men hunted, the women all cooked. So the city and suburban kid went off on a rabbit hunt. Animal rights people may cringe at some of Harrington’s passages, because he very graphically describes what it is like to shoot and to clean an animal.

After vividly describing his exhilaration at shooting his first rabbit, Harrington relates sharing it at the dinner table. *I wonder if this is the rabbit I shot?* Harrington says. *I realized I had never thought that way about a Thanksgiving turkey.* Now he understands what has to happen to allow people to eat meat. A woman told him she couldn’t believe that *you killed those little bunnies.* He had a quick response. *I can’t believe you’re eating something,* he said, *without having killed it.*

(This review is part of *The Daily Journal’s* coverage of Walt Harrington’s visit to the library. For a photo and more information about Harrington’s career as a reporter and as a journalism teacher at the U. of I., see the Journal’s Sunday Reader section of April 1. A vod cast of his program is also available on the library’s website. Thanks, Phil, for letting us include your column in *Little Gems*.)

### Area Book Club Favorites

Back in September representatives from ten area book clubs formed a panel to talk about their book clubs – how they got started, how they ran their meetings, favorite and least favorite books, and how they chose the books they read. We asked the clubs if they would submit reviews of books that were special favorites, especially those that generated some of their best discussions, and here they are.

*Moloka’i*, Alan Brennert (2003). *Moloka’i* is classified as historical fiction and is the fascinating story of Rachel Kalama. Brennert takes the reader on a journey, allowing the reader to join seven-year-old Rachel, as she is taken away from her loving family in the late 1800’s. Little Rachel is sent to the leper colony on Moloka’i, an island in the Hawaiian chain. As we follow her through many difficult times, she finds *’ohana* (family), friends, and a gratifying life. Rachel lives the “Aloha” spirit, and when we least expect it, she is free to leave her place of exile. Although this is a work of fiction, the story abounds with Hawaiian tradition and historical facts. The pronunciation of the Hawaiian language may be difficult at times, but don’t let this interfere with reading an amazing book. **Carol G. Kleinmark, Bradley Library’s Tuesday A.M. Book Club**

*Eucalyptus: A Novel*, Murray Bail (1999). On a property in Australia lives a man named Holland and his daughter, Ellen. As the years pass, the man plants hundreds of species of eucalyptus trees all over his land, until at last his farm is virtually an outdoor museum of trees. Meanwhile, his daughter has grown into a beautiful young woman, sought after by many of the local lads. Alarmed, her father proclaims that she may marry only the man who can name the species of each and every eucalyptus tree on his property.

Suitors come from far and wide, especially the stiff Mr. Cave, a renowned expert on these Australian trees, but Ellen is interested in none of them. One day while she walks down by the river she comes upon a strange young man resting under one of the trees. In the days that follow he tells her dozens of stories, set in far off cities, deserts, and countries.'

This is a modern fairy tale and a touching love story centered on the struggle of youth for emancipation. Murray Bail affirms the power and seduction of story telling against the background of Australia's land, its culture, and its people. **Barbara Harro, Tuesday Evening Book Club**

*The Samurai's Garden*, Gail Tsukiyama (1995). Set against the backdrop of the Japanese invasion of China during the late 1930's, this small (211 pages) novel is a moving love story that is a tribute to beauty, love and kindness though it takes place in a leper colony. It begins when Stephen, a young Hong Kong Chinese student of twenty, goes to his family's beach house in Japan to recuperate from tuberculosis. As he is swimming and painting at the beach and getting to know the village people, the Japanese army is marching through China.

One of the main characters is Matsu, the reclusive caretaker and master gardener who has worked for the family most of his life. When Stephen begins to realize that Matsu has some secret mission, he follows his manservant up a mountainside. He eventually meets and learns to love Matsu's soul mate, the gentle Sachi, a woman afflicted with leprosy. Thanks to Tsukiyama's wise storytelling, one is profoundly touched by Matsu who finds beauty in a cruel and arbitrary world.

As Stephen recovers his health, his recovery parallels the seasons in the samurai's garden. It's during this time that he learns and gains much from Matsu's influence – a samurai of the soul. Toward the end of the novel, the reader senses that Stephen has acquired a wisdom and an accepting spirituality that will spread beyond himself, just as it has with Matsu and Sachi.

Like a bonsai, this book has been crafted, not written. The sensitive plot and unforgettable characterizations are only part of the spell cast by *The Samurai's Garden*. The other component is Tsukiyama's rather Spartan literary style that highlights her wonderful mastery of language. She weaves universal themes of relationships, isolation/alienation, reconciliation and appreciation of inner beauty over physical appearance in a memorable read. The characters and the setting (both geographical and historical) are stunning. Readers will be wanting to know what happened to the characters after the war. Don't miss this very Zen novel.

The Tuesday Evening Book Club enjoyed this book and found much to discuss. Discussion centered on the war as a background with all of its ramifications and repercussions, and sadly, how it affected the next generation. The group found learning about the differences between Chinese and Japanese cultures, especially the symbolism and rituals of long forgotten traditions and customs of old Japan, very worthwhile. However, the duality in the Japanese culture, the blend of serene harmony with a brutality that led to the rape of Nanking and many other atrocities was difficult to understand. We also discussed the style of Tsukiyama's writing and the devices she used, including the growth and maturation of the characters – how each character's history somehow affected another's, and in turn affected those in the present. The consensus of the group was that this is a moving novel of losses and gains, the universal meaning of life and the sometime misplaced values on beauty and accomplishment. **Anne Miller, Tuesday Evening Book Club.**

*The Dollmaker*, Harriet Arnow 1954). Our club read this book at least 20 years ago, and we were unable to locate a copy in time to write this review. Also it is a book that is unforgettable, and we wanted to do it justice, so we are submitting a review from a source that all book clubs should know about (more on that later). Please note a book club member submits her own review below.

*500 Great Books by Women: A Reader's Guide*, Erica Bauermeister, Jesse Larsen, Holly Smith (1994). In the opening scene of *The Dollmaker* a rough-hewn, uneducated woman performs a tracheotomy on her dying son, guided only by her love for her child and rural common sense. Thus we are introduced to Gertie Nevels, one of the most amazing women in literature. Gertie is a powerful, compassionate woman, a wood sculptor, and a mother who talks to her daughter's imaginary playmates. Her one dream is to buy her own farm in the backwoods of the South and live there with her husband and children. But World War II intervenes, and as a good wife she must take her children and follow her husband to Detroit, where he has been put to work in a war factory. In the city, Gertie fights desperately to keep her family together and maintain their rural values, but it's a hard fight and even her flowers seem to know it: *There was something frantic in their blooming, as if they knew that frost was near and then the bitter cold.* They'd lived through all the heat and noise and stench of summertime, and now each widely opened flower was like a triumphant cry. *We will, we will make seed before we die.* A big book, full of vividly drawn characters and masterful scenes, *The Dollmaker* is both a passionate denunciation of industrialization and war, and a tribute to a woman's love for her children and the land.

Not only do you get this fine review of *The Dollmaker*, but information about from whence it came. *500 Great Books by Women* provides brief descriptions (about 200 words) of 500 selected books. To be selected the books had to be written by a woman and be in prose, in print, and in English (or in translation). They represent multicultural and international perspectives and are arranged by such themes as art, choices, conflicting cultures, ethics, families, friendships and interactions, growing old, growing up, heritage, identity, imagined worlds, mothers and mothering, observations, pioneers and seekers, places and homes, power, trials and adversity, violence, ways of knowing, lovers and partners, and work. Sounds like an indispensable resource for book clubs.

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I'd like to think that every reader has at least one book that will never leave her/his consciousness. That in simply thinking about it, you knew how you felt when you read it. *The Dollmaker* is that book for me. It is tragic, a classic tale of woman/nature against the often sinister values of an industrialized society. Gertie Nevels is a heroine trying desperately to keep her family together after they join the migration from the hills of Kentucky in 1944 to Detroit where her husband finds work making material for war. There she finds the grimy streets of sooty factories and crowded, flimsy government housing. Northern prejudice is revealed when her family is called "hillbillies," a word new to her but, in the way it is hissed, adds to the dehumanizing of their lives. And as the war ends, jobs become scarce and people turn ugly, baiting, scrounging, betraying. She suffers from the knowledge that if they were back in the security of rural Kentucky, she and her family would be sustained by the land. But, in the end, Gertie cannot protect her children (there is a scene where I was socked in the gut—the reaction is still felt viscerally). Indeed, Gertie cannot save herself from the mercilessness of capitalism at its worst. Where she had once stood straight up, safe in her country beliefs, she ends ground down, bent by forces she can no longer stand against. That is the true tragedy of this book.

**Mary Costanza, Underground Book Club**

## A Book Club Reading List, Loosey Goosey Book Club (submitted by Nancy Payne)

This club submitted a list of books that they have read since they have been together. In looking at the books on their list, we noted that many of them have been selected by other clubs as well. We think keeping a history of selections is a good idea. It's fun to go back and see what we have read in the past and what we might want to re-read in the far distant future.

*The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver  
*The Time Traveler's Wife*, Audrey Niffenegger  
*Empire Falls*, Richard Russo  
*Giants in the Earth*  
O. E. Rolvaag  
*The Devil in the White City*, Erik Larson  
*Our Kind*, Kate Walbert  
*Strange Fits of Passion*, Anita Shreve  
*Back When We Were Grownups*, Anne Tyler  
*Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi  
*The Red Tent*, Anita Diamant  
*The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, Mitch Albom  
*The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros  
*The Diary of Ann Frank*  
*Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell

*The DaVinci Code*, Dan Brown  
*Revenge of the Middle-Aged Woman*, Elizabeth Buchan  
*Hidden Power -- Presidential Marriages That Shaped Our History*, Kati Marton  
*The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini  
*Three Junes*, Julia Glass  
*The History of Love*, Nicole Krauss  
*Princess – A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*, Jean P. Sasson  
*The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, Kim Edwards  
*The Amateur Marriage*, Anne Tyler  
*The Last Time They Met*, Anita Shreve  
*Catcher in the Rye*, J. D. Salinger  
*The News from Paraguay*, Lily Tuck  
*The House of Spirits*, Isabel Allende  
*The Good Earth*, Pearl Buck

### From Friends, and Friends of Friends

*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Lisa See (2006). A chilling insight into the life of Chinese women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this novel reads more like an anthropologist's study of what women endured to climb the social ladder in the Hunan Province of China. The story follows two women whose friendship and love for each other surpasses their relationships with their husbands and even, at times, their children. From their childhood experience of foot binding, described in gory detail, to their experience hiding in the mountains during the Taiping Rebellion to their deaths, this is fascinating historical fiction similar to *Memoirs of a Geisha*. In fact, there is a cover blurb of praise from Arthur Golden. It's one of those wonderful books that takes you to a different time and place in history. **Charlene Dybedock**

*Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow*, Elizabeth Lesser (2004). I wouldn't know in what category to designate this book; it is part memoir, part self-help, part spiritual, and even New Age. Written by Elizabeth Lesser, who is the co-founder of the Omega Institute, the world's largest center for spiritual retreat and personal growth (hate that phrase!), it is a very personal accounting of how we can benefit from adversity. It's one of those books you must read in small chunks and then ponder and reflect. As I get older those books don't appeal to me as much as they used to. This one does. It is well written, thoughtful, and reminds me of the lessons I have to learn over and over again. **Charlene Dybedock**

*If Grace Is True*, Philip Gulley and James Mulholland (2004). A short and readable book on theology that takes some very controversial positions about what it means to be saved and why the authors, both Quaker ministers, believe that God's grace is for everyone, not just Christians.

What they propose is a theology of universalism that would stress grace and love for all. A terrific book for a group to read and discuss in any church. **Charlene Dybedock**

*The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus*, Margaret Atwood (2006). This is The Odyssey from Penelope's perspective. Atwood describes details about the diet of the ancients. The maids sing a rhymed chorus of events around Penelope's palace. Atwood writes with humor about what Penelope really thinks about being a matched bride or a prize bride after Odysseus wins a contest for her. Even though we know how the story will end, Atwood keeps us interested with her imaginative description of what Penelope thought about her marriage and her mother-in-law. **Evie Torchia**

*Moral Disorder*, Margaret Atwood (2006). This is a collection of stories, somewhat autobiographical, about a woman living in the decades from the 40's through the 90's. The book opens with an older woman musing on the start of the new century with bad news. From then on the reader reflects with the narrator on the society of the eras. We get a look at and a description of the narrator's family, marriages, love relationships, stepchildren, and development as a writer. The later chapters deal poignantly with the sadness of parents' failing old age and illness. **Evie Torchia**

*Suite Francaise*, Irene Nemirovsky (2006). Irene Nemirovsky was born in 1903 in Kiev, Ukraine, and emigrated to France during the Russian Revolution. She became a successful novelist after attending the Sorbonne, and died in the Auschwitz concentration camp in 1942 at age 39. *Suite Francaise* was a work in progress begun while she was attempting to elude the Nazis in occupied France. When she was arrested, her daughters took the manuscript with them into hiding. Sixty-four years later, the uncompleted work was published as *Suite Francaise*. It is the first two parts of a planned five-part epic, a fascinating glimpse of provincial France under German occupation. The writing is beautiful, and the novel seems complete as it stands, but you regret the loss of the unwritten complete work. **Kay Beguhn, Iron River, Wisconsin**

*The Whistling Season*, Ivan Doig (2006). *The Whistling Season* continues Doig's legacy of portraying the Western landscape. It is the story of a widower, Morris, who is drawn to work on the "big ditch" – an irrigation project intended to make the Montana prairie bloom. The lives of Morris, his three sons, and a housekeeper at home, in their one room schoolhouse and on the Montana prairie in 1909 make for a great story. If you like *The Whistling Season*, look for more of Doig's books. *This House of Sky – Landscapes of a Western Mind* (1980) was the book picked in 2006 for all Montanans to read. **Linda Bishop**

Now is the time to read some of the books your teenage daughter is reading and enjoying. I suggest you start with Ellin Hopkins' *Burned* (2006) or *Crank* (2004). Both are written in free verse poems and deal with girls facing difficult choices and problems. I read *Burned* first and liked it best, but those who read *Crank* first liked it better. I suggest you read both for yourself and decide which is better. **Sondra Patchett, Kankakee High School Librarian**

*Rules for Old Men Waiting*, Peter Pouncey (2005). *Rules for Old Men Waiting* is a list of "Rules for Winter Watch" by retired college professor Robert MacIver, as he tries to come to terms with the death of his wife and his own terminal illness. After descending to the depths of despair and rage, the rules he develops form a plan to "take back his life, until he could give it away on an acceptable basis," and includes such items as "keep personally clean, eat regularly, play music and read." The most important, however, is the one on which this book is based – "Work every morning." Work, according to this rule, means writing a story, which becomes a novel within this novel, set in the trenches of World War I. We also learn about MacIver's own life, particularly his

relationship with his late wife, Margaret. Theirs is a love story that rivals many of the great ones, and a marriage that grows stronger as they live their lives together, until it is tested by a tragedy almost too great for it to bear. This is my favorite book of the year. A book like this can make its readers consider how life's challenges can defeat us or how they can give us the strength to live as fully as possible, right up to our final breath. It is a true little gem; don't overlook it. **Mary Jo Johnston**

*Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez (2004). Marquez wrote this little book (slightly over 100 pages) when he was in his 80's, a decade after the last one he wrote. A man who had never loved anyone, never had a friend, who has never made love to a woman that he hasn't paid decides that he wants to celebrate his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in the arms of an adolescent virgin. Wait, wait! Don't stop reading in disgust. He falls in love with her, and for the first time in his life he is happier than he has ever been – and looking forward to his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. I included this review after a conversation with **Evie Torchia** in which she thought that this book would be a good companion to *Rules for Old Men Waiting*. Evie's comments were that "*it is another wonderful book about old age with a more jubilant ending. There are many penetrating thoughts and wise insights, but our favorite is one at the end: "Ah, my sad scholar, it's all right for you to be old, but not an a\_\_hole.*" **Mary Jo and Evie**

### Some Final Words

And so another year has passed, and we have another edition of "Little Gems" for our Friends members and reviewers. If you would like additional copies, you can go on line at the library or you can e-mail me ([m.johnston2004@comcast.net](mailto:m.johnston2004@comcast.net)), and I will e-mail a copy to you. Nineteen reviewers have submitted 28 book reviews and one list of book club recommendations (four book clubs are represented). If this is not enough to keep you busy until next year, you can always return to the list of past "Little Gems" on the library web site. Now is also the time to start a reading journal of mini-reviews. That will give you some pre-written "Little Gems" for submission next year. It will also serve as a reminder of what you've already read so you won't check the same book out or buy it twice (as some of us have done). Thank you for all your assistance with this project, and please watch the library web site for upcoming programs, Friends Book Sales, and other items of interest.

A last reminder: Most of you are familiar with the following words of Jorge Luis Borges: *I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library.* The next time you walk past the lions and through the library doors, picture this sign as you enter: Welcome to Paradise – the Kankakee Public Library.