

LITTLE GEMS OF BOOKS AND AUTHORS
Presented by Friends of the Kankakee Public Library
April 2008

Welcome to our sixth edition of “Little Gems” Barb Girard, local book-lover, started “Little Gems” in April of 2000 at Barnes and Noble specifically for the Friends. Mary Jo Johnston took on this project and as we all know was quite a master in securing several book lovers to share their book reviews. As you see, this year the number of selections are less – we really miss Mary’s persuasiveness and her own delightful book reviews -- but several of our faithful friends have recommended the following books.

Recommendations from members of the Friends of the Library

Abundance by Sena Naslund

Amazing and absorbing to read facts about aristocratic, royal life pre-French revolution. Sad story about her early teen years, sacrifices by her of her family life. Delightful surprise to me to read of her keen interest in music and support of composers in her time. She knew Mozart as a child! Customs and protocol for royalty which are rigidly followed and endured are like fantasies to an American mind. Ms Naslund's research is thorough. Her story telling gift is a pleasure. Evie Torchia

The Sea Lady by Margaret Drabble

This is a story of a reunion of former lovers at a graduation ceremony at a newly established university in a village where the two spent summers at the shore as children. The lovers are old now and neither knows of their invitations as notable personages to speak at the ceremony until the last minute. Drabble uses the story as a vehicle for essays on academic life and scientific research in the 60s, 70s, and 80s. Interesting to see how Drabble develops intrigue up to the conclusion. Evie Torchia

The Street of a Thousand Blossoms by Gail Tsukiyama

This is a story of two brothers in Japan pre and post WWII. I learned about the ancient practice of sumo wrestling and art of mask making for the Noh Theatre in Japan. The story of the lives of the brothers was predictable in terms of what they chose to do with their lives. I liked how the author used some Japanese folktales and sayings to highlight the action in the story.

The bombing of Hiroshima was descriptively told in terms of the suffering of the population and the devastation of the land. Not overly sentimentalized nor overly dramatized. The minor characters were more interesting than the major ones, Hiroshi and Kenji. Evie Torchia

Coal Black Horse, by Robert Olmstead

Robey Childs is fourteen years old when his clairvoyant mother has a premonition and sends him to find his father and bring him home from fighting in the Civil War. She tailors a reversible coat (blue and gray) and advises him to shoot first. After his horse falters, he is given a coal black horse described as an “uncommon horse” by a blacksmith to use for his journey. Robey’s sense of adventure is soon changed and he is hardened by the horrors and wickedness he encounters on his journey. For a time he is a prisoner of war. He loses and regains the coal black horse and is able to help a young girl escape from a horrible situation. The author vividly describes the aftermath of the battle of Gettysburg. There is no glory to war in this story. The author received the Heartland prize for non fiction at the Chicago Humanities Festival. Burma Mathews

Coal Black Horse, Robert Olmstead. (2007) Another perspective

Winner of the Chicago Tribune 2007 Heartland Prize for Fiction. This is both a story of America’s Civil War and the coming of age of a fourteen-year-old boy whose mother sends him off to find his soldier father and bring him home. The reader is drawn into the hellish journey set against seemingly peaceful landscapes—rolling hills and roiling rivers. Nothing is at it first appears. The boy, Robey Childs, encounters many ne’er do wells along the way and he is loaned a startlingly beautiful black horse that provides Robey with a shaky sense of confidence and courage as he sets off on his mission. Both boy and horse find their way to Gettysburg where they witness apocalyptic scenes on the battlefield—grossly wounded soldiers, body parts, and desolation. And yet the story eventually renders hope and redemption.

Some libraries include this book in their Young Adult collections. Mary Costanza

Bachelor Brother’s Bed and Breakfast by Bill Richardson

This book is about a pair of eccentric bachelors in their fifties who own and operate a bed and breakfast establishment where people like them, the “gentle and bookish and ever so slightly confused,” can feel at home. The book is set on a Canadian island in the Strait of Georgia; somewhere between Vancouver Island and the mainland. The two brothers, Hector and Virgil are very interesting characters, as are all their clientele. Hector and Virgil think of their B and B as a refuge, a retreat, a haven, where folks may bring their own books or peruse the brothers’ own library. An unusual feature of their establishment is their guest book, which is a kind of scrapbook album they call “Brief Lives”. The guests are encouraged to write their own stories in it, which are brief autobiographical sketches. These make up the chapters of the book. The guest’s stories are sometime humorous, sometimes insightful or sad. The guests describe their favorite books in their stories. I also enjoyed the chapters entitled “Virgil’s List of Books for When You’re Feeling Low”; and “Hector’s List of Favorite Authors for the Bath”. This book is a quick, easy read and a perfect “little gem”. I would never have know about it had my sister not left it at my house, but it was a fun book to read while sipping ice tea on a summer day on my back porch. Carol Bowman

A 1000 Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini. (2007)

Hosseini's first best-selling book, *The Kite Runner*, told the story of modern Afghanistan from a male's viewpoint. His latest book, also a best seller, focuses on family life of different socioeconomic classes in Afghanistan but from the perspective of two women. The book is set primarily in the city of Kabul and relates Afghan's unfortunate role in geopolitics: the Soviet occupation, the rise of the Mujahadeen, who originally fought the Soviet army and later became Taliban extremists, and Afghanistan after 9/11. Not surprisingly, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is more disturbing than *The Kite Runner* since the treatment of women under the Taliban is dehumanizing to the point of wanting to close the book.

This book is written in a sometimes overwrought style and some would even say, it smacks of sensationalism, but it is a damn good read. Mary Costanza

Bridge of Sighs by Richard Russo

Russo again captures life in a small upstate New York town. This story focuses on Lou, his wife Sarah and their childhood friend and the families that surround them. In the beginning of the book, Lou sets out to recount his childhood. We learn through the involvement of his best friend and future wife, as they also recount their lives, that what he remembers as a child is mainly a matter of perception. Time shifts from present day to their time together in grade and high school as secrets are slowly revealed.

This book raises many questions. One of the themes of the book is what we take away from our parents and our relationship with them. Do we know who are parents are? Do we slowly become them? Can people change? is also a question woven throughout the book. Should you view the world with suspicion or hope? How do childhood events or choices made continue to affect you and those around you years later? It is better to love or be loved?

The ending seemd a bit too pat but the book is an overall good read. Vickie

Recommendations from Friends of the Friends

Confessions of a Pagan Nun by Kate Horsely

Is a fascinating read in the form of a diary written by a pagan woman who converts to Christianity when she needs the shelter of the convent she joins. Set sixth century Ireland, Gwynneve gives us insight into life and mores in the Dark Ages, her pagan values, and early Christianity. Kay Beguhn

Circling My Mother by Mary Gordon

Is an intimate memoir of her mother, Anna Gagliano Gordon, written with great skill and honesty. She recreates her mother's life through her relationships with those people and things most important to her. Kay Beguhn

Larry's Party by Carol Shields

Follows the life of Larry, born in 1950, to the cusp of the millennium. Larry is an ordinary guy who falls, more or less, into a career in floral design, but becomes fascinated with garden mazes while on his honeymoon in Britain. The book sees him through adolescence, two marriages, and a serious illness with great wit and deep understanding. It's full of LOL moments. Kay Beguhn

Born Standing Up by Steve Martin

I didn't know a lot about Steve Martin's life, he's known as a private man, but I have always enjoyed his appearances on Saturday Night Live and his many movies so I eagerly picked up this book. He chronicles his long road to fame in the stand-up comedy world. Ultimately, he walked away from his success in stand-up because of the loneliness of traveling and the pressure of performing. I was surprised to learn that he studied poetry and philosophy along with magic and comedy. He wrote and starred in "Shopgirl" so he has had more than a little experience in writing. If you have any interest in Steve Martin and his career, this is a great quick read. Vicki Stankewicz

The Magical Life of Marshall Brodien by John Moehring

Many people don't recognize the name Marshall Brodien but when you explain that he was Wizzo the Wizard on Chicago's WGN hit The Bozo Show people know exactly who you are talking about! Brodien has recently been making appearances on WGN Morning News and has invited the crew to his house where he has a very large collection of memorabilia. Seeing all of these items intrigued me about his life so I picked up the book. He has had a long and extremely successful career. That has spanned several decades. He worked in magic shops, at Chicago's Riverview Amusement Park, hypnotist, entrepreneur, club owner and so much more. He has many amazing stories to tell including his stretch in the Army and working around Chicago's gangsters. I couldn't put this book down! He is an amazing man who has done many fabulous and successful things throughout his life. Vicki Stankewicz

Recommendations from Friends of Evie's Niece

March by Geraldine Brooks

From Louisa May Alcott's beloved classic "Little Women", Geraldine Brooks has animated the character of the absent father, March, and crafted a story filled with the ache of love and marriage and with the power of war upon the mind and heart of one unforgettable man. Brooks follows March as he leaves behind his family to aid the Union cause in the Civil War. His experiences will utterly change his marriage and challenge his most ardently held beliefs. A lushly written, wholly original tale steeped in the details of another time. Larry

Digging to America by Anne Tyler

Anne Tyler's richest, most deeply searching novel – a story about what it is to be an American, and about Iranian-born Maryam Yazdan, who after 35 years in this country, must finally come to terms with her "outsiderness." Two families, who would otherwise never have come together, meet by chance at the Baltimore airport – the Donaldsons, a very American couple and the Yazdans, Maryam's fully assimilated son and his attractive Iranian wife. Each couple is awaiting the arrival of an adopted infant daughter from Korea. After the instant babies from distant Asia are delivered, Bitsy Donaldson impulsively invited the Yazdans, to celebrate: an "arrival party" that from then on is repeated every year as the two families become more and more deeply intertwined. Denise

Three Cups of Tea by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin

The astonishing uplifting story of a real-life Indiana Jones and his humanitarian campaign to use education to combat terrorism in the Taliban's backyard. Anyone who despairs of the individual's power to change lives has to read the story of Greg Mortenson, a hopeless mountaineer who following a 1993 climb of Pakistan's treacherous K2, was inspired by a chance encounter with impoverished mountain villagers and promised to build them in a school. Over the next decade he built fifty-five schools – especially for girls -- that offer a balanced education in one of the most isolated and dangerous regions on earth. Diane

The Interpretation of Murder by Jeb Rubinfeld

In the summer of 1890, Sigmund Freud arrived by steamship in New York Harbor for a short visit to America. Though he would live another thirty years, he would never return to this country. Little is known about the week he spent in Manhattan, and Freud's biographers have long speculated as to why, in his later years, he referred to Americans as "savages" and "criminals." Jeb Rubinfeld weaves the facts of Freud's visit in a riveting story of corruption and murder set all over turn-of-the-century New York. Mike

Books Nominated to Read by Salem, Oregon Book Club

Anil's Ghost by Michael Ondaatje

Anil Tissera, born in Sri Lanka, educated in England and America, is a forensic anthropologist sent by an international human rights group to work with local officials to discover the source of the organized campaigns of murder engulfing the island.

The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11 by Lawrence Wright

A sweeping narrative history of the events leading to 9/11, a ground-breaking look at the people and ideas, the terrorist plans and the Western intelligence failures that culminated in the assault.

Oil on the Brain; Adventures from the Pump to the Pipeline by Lisa Margonelli

This book is an account of the oil industry, the people, economics and pipelines. Oil's unlikely journey from giant rigs in the Persian Gulf to your street corner gas station.

Final Words

This addition of "Little Gems" as well as past additions may be accessed from the Kankakee Public Library's home page, www.lions-online.org, scroll down the column on the right-hand side, and click on "newsletters". You can download a copy for yourself or to share with your family and friends. Please continue to support the Friends of the Library programs and book sales.

Caroline Kennedy once said "One of the greatest gifts my brother and I received from my mother was her love of literature and language. With their boundless energy, libraries open the door to these worlds and so many others. I urge young and old alike to embrace all that libraries have to offer." May we all embrace what the Kankakee Public Library has to offer.