

LITTLE GEMS 2010

Hanna's Daughters by Marianne Fredriksson

Written by Hanna's granddaughter in the present day, we get an intimate view into the hard life of Hanna growing up in the harsh countryside on the Swedish/Norwegian border in the late 1800's. Hanna's tale is both heart-rending and heart-warming. Then we meet Joanna who has moved to the city, but is not understood by her daughter, Anna. Anna, a writer, is trying to understand her past, but like some of us, has she waited until too late to ask her mother those important questions about her mother's life and how it is reflected in her own? An excellent read!

Submitted by Sharon Schiller

Kennedy's Brain by Henning Mankell

Mankell is most noted for his Kurt Wallander mystery series (recently seen on PBS). He is a prolific writer of intrigue. (This is not part of the Wallander series) I certainly wondered what the title had to do with the thumbnail sketch on the cover of the book! A divorced woman finds her 28 year old son dead in his Stockholm apartment. She refuses to believe that he committed suicide and delves into his life. This leads her to Barcelona and Africa, and uncovering a secret life that her son had never hinted at. Full of twists and turns, I was gripped by the story to discover the full truth....and the meaning of the title!

Submitted by Sharon Schiller

The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest by Stieg Larsson

Perhaps you are among the many who have read the first two books of this trilogy. For full enjoyment, you should read them in order: 1) The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo; 2) The Girl Who Played with Fire. The books are long and involved and the reader might get lost without knowing the story from the beginning.

This third novel is only available in England or ordered on line. It will be available in the USA this summer. My copy was a gift from my nephew who was in London. It has already been passed around to several avid fans/readers! I can only say it lives up to the first two in all ways. Although the author died suddenly in 2005, he had delivered the three books to the publisher. It is rumored that there is a fourth book yet to be "exposed". A movie has been made of the first book.

Submitted by Sharon Schiller

Last Night In Twisted River A Novel by John Irving

Over a span of 50 years, it tells the story of Danny Angel (the narrator) and his father on the run from a crazed sheriff. It's about manhood, family, love, friendship and a whole lot of cooking. Sometimes, I laughed at the seemingly slapstick comedic tone of the book, then I would be cringing at the gruesomeness and violence and next crying over the tragedy of it all. It's not the perfect novel and it was a slow read, but it was a great story!

Submitted by Betty Schatz

The Brief History of the Dead: A Novel by Levin Brockmeier

This book has all the makings of a bad book--too many characters to keep track of, no plot to speak of and a disappointing and depressing ending. But for some reason I liked it anyway. It's a rather bizarre story detailing what happens in the afterlife (that space between life on earth and eternity in heaven) and how it relates to those still living. Why do some stay in the afterlife longer than others? And what's happening when everyone starts to leave and there are just a few of you left in the afterlife? Regardless of your culture, religious or spiritual background, this novel will have you thinking. It will have you wondering about whether you impacted enough people in life on earth to be remembered a long time afterwards. Hmmmm...a good book for discussion?

Submitted by Betty Schatz

Remarkable Creatures by Tracy Chevalier

Tracy Chevalier, author of Girl With A Pearl Earring, has done it again with Remarkable Creatures. She has a talent for carrying the reader off to another place, time and society. Remarkable Creatures is set in early 19th century Lyme, England, where Mary Anning searches the beaches for fossils. Her interest in and talent for finding the fossils helps to sustain her impoverished working class family, as they sell the artifacts to tourists and collectors.

She is joined by Elizabeth Philpot who with her two sisters lives in genteel poverty in the same village. Her keen interest in the fossils matches Mary's but Elizabeth is able to establish a fine collection of fish fossils. Her speculations about the possibility that some of the fossils are creatures who have done extinct and what that means to the accepted interpretation of the biblical story of creation seem all too contemporary.

The work of both women was recognized in scientific papers, and Louis Agassiz named fish species after both of them. The book is fiction, but many of the people, including both Mary and Elizabeth, existed and many of the events described did take place. The author includes a list for further reading.

Submitted by Kay Beguhn

Too Much Happiness by Alice Munro

As usual Alice Munro in her latest book has an assortment of absorbing short stories. Some are about difficult, changing marriages being faced with courage or grief. One is a shocking story about children's cruelty and how it replays later in adult life. The title of the book, Too Much Happiness, refers to the longest story in the book dealing with the life of Sophia Kovelevsky, a late-nineteenth century Russian emigre and mathematician. After a narration of her adventures and her strong-willed ways, we learn that Sophia is to be employed in Sweden at the only university willing to have a female mathematician on its staff. Alice Munro's stories are wonderful to read because of her interest and sensitivity about human weaknesses and heroics. Plus her ear for dialogue is on target and incomparable.

Submitted by Evie Torchia

Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy

by Vincent Bugliosi

In 1969 Vincent Bugliosi prosecuted Charles Manson and his "family" for one of the most heinous crimes of the 20th century, the Tate/LaBianca murders. In 2007 he took on another legendary crime, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. His massive book, Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy, seeks to straighten out the historical record twisted by decades of conspiracy theories and rumor. Bugliosi uses 1,648 pages to get the job done. By the time he finishes, no other possible suspect remains but Lee Harvey Oswald. Before rejecting the book due to its intimidating length, be aware that it is not organized as a single enormous narrative, but rather as a collection of thoroughly explored topics. One section doesn't necessarily rely on the others.

The book opens with a minute by minute account of the assassination in unprecedented detail. Bugliosi describes the grisly work of the emergency room doctors in a "you are there" style. Special attention is given to Lee Oswald's family, including his hard working sympathetic brother Robert who is forced to deal with a nightmare that is both national and familial. Readers gain insight into Lee's bizarre mother, whose mania answers many of the formerly unanswered questions concerning Oswald's strange personality. The characters populating Dallas' police headquarters alone would make any novelist jealous. This first section was republished as a stand-alone book in 2008 as Four Days in November: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Subsequent chapters deal with each of the prevalent conspiracy theories one by one. Each is dismantled and discarded as impossible. The section on the trial of Oswald's assassin Jack Ruby is particularly enlightening. The portrait of the emotionally fragile Ruby lays waste to the idea that he was a cold hit man for the mob. Bugliosi takes particular relish in crushing Oliver Stone's film *JFK*. The reader will not be able to watch that film in quite the same way again. Readers can pick and choose from these chapters according to interest since there is no story thread to be lost. For example, the lengthy section on Oswald's time in Russia is well done, but can be skipped. The essential work on that topic is Norman Mailer's Oswald's Tale.

One weakness of Reclaiming History is the sarcastic tone Bugliosi takes with the conspiracy “community”. The group fairs badly enough under the weight of the evidence without the personal snipes in which the author indulges. Oddly, Bugliosi also attacks Gerald Posner, author of Case Closed, whose thesis is nearly identical to his own. Bugliosi’s pompous sarcasm weakens a case otherwise built on dispassionate science and logic. Perhaps these tactics work in court, but they fall flat in print.

Reclaiming History is the kind of book that is referred to repeatedly over time rather than read from front to back. Its wealth of narrative information, meticulous footnotes, and associated research CD will go far to return rationality to the story of the death of our 35th president.

Submitted by Steve Bertrand, Director of Kankakee Public Library

The March by E. L. Doctorow

Doctorow shines a bright light on General Sherman’s march through Georgia in 1964. The reader is captured by numerous characters and the parts Docotrow has them play in this dramatic, terrible period. One aspect of Doctorow’s style may bother some readers. He does not use quotation marks. After a few pages one can easily adapt to that and will be caught up in the story.

Submitted by Sondra Patchett

Murder on the Leviathan by Boris Akunin

If you love convoluted mysteries, this is the book for you. It begins with a dry police report about the murders of eleven people in a fashionable district of Paris. It continues when police commissioner Gauche follows the one clue in the case by setting sail for China on the Leviathan. As passengers begin to die, Gauche makes little headway until...

Submitted by Sondra Patchett

Mister Pip by Lloyd Jones

The first sentence will capture you. The story is set on an unnamed island that is involved in a civil war and how 13 year old Matilda is affected by what is happening. The teachers have fled and the school is closed until Mr. Watts reopens it and introduces the children to Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations. He reads to them each day and Matilda finds that Pip’s adventures help her escape the reality of her situation until explaining who Pip is to soldiers endangers everyone.

Submitted by Sondra Patchett

Back Roads by Tawni O'Dell

Harley's father is dead and his mother is in prison for the murder, so he is left to raise his three younger sisters who each have their own distinctive personality. Working two jobs, and looking for love in all the wrong places, raising his siblings while he is just a teenager -- can he be the savior of the family? The story becomes a tale of children with misdirected passions brought into a harsh, cruel world too soon. The book was hard to read with some disturbing issues but also hard to put down, waiting to see what Harley would do next, hurting for him and hoping he would survive.

Submitted by Vickie Romein

The Help by Kathryn Sockett

This book is about a young white woman, Skeeter, in the early 1960's in Mississippi who becomes interested in the plight of the black maids that every white family has working for them. She writes their stories about mistreatment, abuse and heartbreaks of working in white families' homes all just before the Civil Rights revolution. There is real danger for the maids sharing their stories as well as danger for Skeeter herself. The theme of the story is the strong will of human beings to survive against all odds -- because of the color of their skin. There is never a dull moment in this book and gives you an insider's view of Mississippi in the 60's of child-rearing, Junior League benefits, town gossip, and race relations.

Submitted by Vickie Romein

Testimony of an Irish Slave Girl by Kate McCafferty

Set in the 17th century, the Testimony of an Irish Slave Girl, tells the little known story of Irish indentured servants and slaves who were sent to Barbados by the British. Cat Daley is kidnapped as a young girl in Galway, Ireland and sent to Barbados. She works in the sugar cane fields with African slaves. The story is told by Cat as she gives testimony to British Peter Coote who considers both the Irish and African slaves to be inferior beings to be observed. . He is conducting an inquiry following an attempted uprising of African and Irish slaves. He sets out to produce a report that explains how the two groups came to plot the uprising together. Cat Daley was part of the uprising along with her rebel African husband. She takes the opportunity to given an account of her life. It is the story of fifty thousand Irish who were sold as indentured servants to Caribbean plantation owners to meet the needs of the expanding British colonial system.

During an interview at the New York State Writer's Institute, McCafferty offered an explanation for taking up this carefully researched project. She says that we have a right to speak for the people who have gone before us and were not allowed to tell their history and tales. Her imagined oral history is a convincing example of what might have happened to those who were so marginalized.

Submitted by Burma Mathews

The Irresistible Henry House by Lisa Grunwald

Did you know that for 50 years during the first half of the last century, babies were taken from orphanages to be used in home economic departments in major universities? The purpose was to have a baby on hand for young women to learn how to parent. So, the babies were kept on campus for months on end for the young "mothers" to practice the baby business... diapering, feeding, getting the child to sleep, etc. Each baby had lots of "mothers" (the whole freshman class of home economic students, for example) and thus the babies did or did not bond to lots of young women. Well, this novel is about such a case. Young Henry House is the lucky baby. The middle aged professor, Martha Gaines, who managed the home ec program, fell in love with him and took him as her own. This is a great sketch of characters whose emotional lives dip and turn in a variety of directions during the 1950's and 1960's. This is an interesting read that was hard to put down.

Submitted by Rosemary Pistorius

Still Alice by Lisa Genova

This is a first novel for Lisa Genova a neuroscientist from Harvard. Lisa decided to write the novel after watching her grandmother decline as her Alzheimer's disease progressed. She wanted to understand what her grandmother was feeling. This is a fictional story of a Harvard professor diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease at the age of fifty. Although it may seem to be a depressing topic as you proceed through the book, with Alice, you find that each day finds a new way of living and loving. It was a book that I could truly not put down. As I read I felt that I was inside Alice's head trying to find the best way to cope in her new world. I feel that this is a must read for everyone.

Submitted by Arlene Bartolini