

FICTION

The Women in the Castle by Jessica Shattuck (Historical Fiction)

This is an extremely thoughtful and beautifully written story about survival in Germany immediately after WWII. It deals with the conflict between Nazis and resisters, and all the emotional baggage that all of them are left with after the war. The author brings a lot of personal history and passion into this tale with the goal of informing her readers of the complexity of life in Europe in these years and how individual incidents impacted the characters right after the war and for years afterward. Highly recommend it.

Reviewed by Judy Danielson

Clay's Quilt by Silas House (Fiction)

A new author for me, one I'd highly recommend. First in a trilogy. Sila House is a well regarded Southern writer. His writing has a Southern lyrical quality that I find lovely. A motherless boy forges his path to adulthood in Kentucky coal country and his blood relatives and adopted kin. As he struggles to fill up the void created by his mother's death, Clay pieces together his own life's quilt. Silas House first published this in 2001. Two companion books that can be read in any order are *The Coal Tattoo* and *A Parchment of Leaves*.

Recommended by Janet Adelberg

One Thousand White Women: The Journals of May Dodd, written by Jim Fergus (Historical Fiction)

If you haven't read it, please do! The following is from the author's note: "...this book is entirely a work of fiction. However, the seed that grew into the novel was sown in the author's imagination by an actual historical event: in 1954 at a peace conference at Fort Laramie, a prominent Northern Cheyenne chief requested of the U.S. Army authorities the gift of one thousand white women as brides for his young warriors." ..."Needless to say, the Cheyennes' request was not well received by the white authorities and the peace conference collapsed. The Cheyennes went home, and, of course, the white women did not come. In this novel, they do." The Cary has one copy of this book in paperback. I couldn't put it down. It is a book for both men and women.

Reviewed by Jill Howes

Lady Tan's Circle of Women by Lisa See (Historical Fiction)

This historical novel, set in the 15th Century, is inspired by one of China's first female doctors (Tan Yunxian). According to Confucius "an educated woman is a worthless woman", but Lady Tan is reared by her grandparents to be of use. Her grandmother is one of only a handful of women who practices medicine. Girls of her class have their feet bound at an early age to create tiny, delicate feet as their future chosen husband finds this intoxicating, although it is painful for the girl and can even lead to death if not properly cared for. From a young age Yunxian learns about women's illnesses alongside a young midwife-in-training, Meiling. Yunxian takes her skills to the home of her husband in her arranged marriage where her mother-in-law initially forbids her from seeing her friend and from helping other women.

Reviewed by Connie Locashio

The Vaster Wilds by Lauren Groff (Fiction)

The Vaster Wilds starts out as a very tough read but stick with it. The main character's life unspools from her inner thoughts and the extreme physical challenges as she escapes certain death and degradation. Groff's language is so descriptive that all my senses were engaged and reading became a visceral experience of what it might have been like to be a member of the doomed Jamestown colony. Her descriptions of nature and the land were so very beautiful and bordered on the religious. I highly recommend this book.

Reviewed by Cathy McCue

Hello Beautiful by Ann Napolitano (Contemporary Fiction)

One of my favorite books of the past year. This one follows the four Padavanos sisters and their memorable parents in Chicago. Marriages, babies, deaths, divorces unfold over the years. One of the sisters marries a young man from a troubled background and this leads to a rift tearing apart the close Padavanos family, lasting for a generation. Healing takes time. Complex and compelling characters make for a highly engrossing read. Some critics suggest a Little Women tie-in, not sure I saw that. A gem of a story.

Reviewed by Janet Adelberg

First Ladies by Marie Benedict and Victoria Christopher Murray. (Historical Fiction)

This is a story of the relationship of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and civil rights activist Mary McLeod Bethune. The book is a great reminder and review of the history of the period around FDR's administrations. Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary M Bethune established a working partnership that resulted in the colored race, for the first time supporting a Democrat for the presidency. Mrs. Roosevelt's liberal leanings were broadened by Bethune's leadership in the civil rights movement and their combined efforts resulted in several significant changes through FDR's administration. The authors took some liberties in establishing the difference between historical facts and behaviors that they considered might reasonably proceed from the facts.

Reviewed by Jim DiRenzo

The Exiles by Jane Harper (Thriller)

A masterfully spun web of crime and buried secrets. Another Australian thriller that yearns to be read. This one features investigator Aaron Falks who was also part of The Dry and Force of Nature.

Reviewed by Steve Dodge

The Frozen River by Ariel Lawhon (Historical Fiction)

Journey back to Hallowell and Auggusta in the 1700's. Travel by horseback with midwife Martha Ballard as she delivers hundreds of babies over a 35 year career. She was justifiably proud of never having lost a mother. I couldn't put this down. The author notes that this novel is inspired by Martha Ballard's detailed daily journal entries, meticulously kept over her adult life. (She also notes how rare it was for a woman in the 1700s to be literate.) About 75% of the novel is factual; the murder mystery and other details are invented. But oh so real! Lawhon spins a compelling and vivid tale that will keep you reading right through to the end. Highly recommended. I was sorry for the book to end!

Reviewed by Janet Adelberg

Violin Conspiracy by Brendan Slocumb (Fiction)

A young Black man persists against family, poverty, and prejudice of the deep South to play classical violin in international competitions. A wonderfully written look at the cutthroat world of classical music.

Reviewed by Steve Dodge

NON-FICTION

The Ride of Her Life;The True Story of a Woman, Her Horse and the Last Chance Journey Across America by Elizabeth Letts

Nonfiction. In 1954, Annie Wilkins, a 63 year old farmer from Minot, Maine embarked on an impossible journey. With little money, she bought a cast-off horse in Winthrop that she named Tarzan and with her dog (Depeche Toi) they started riding for the west coast which is a journey of more than 4,000 miles. She believed in the goodness of people and her belief was proven true by the many kind individuals she met along the way. She had nothing like a map, GPS or even a phone, of course. I found this book probably my favorite read of 2023 as it was uplifting, and had interesting tidbits of information about the times and lifestyles. BTW, in case you are wondering, she did make it clear across America!

Reviewed by Connie Locashio

Burning Questions- Essays and Occasional Pieces 2004-2021 by Margaret Atwood

In 63 short chapters, Margaret Atwood writes like she is sitting with you and giving her opinions, remembrances, and observations over a cup of tea. And she has a lot to say. Not hurried or slap-dash but spoken directly to you. A real treat to spend time with this treasured Canadian author. Tid-bit of the hour-do you remember the Old Dutch Cleanser graphic? She says that image was her inspiration for the costume for the Handmaid's Tale.

Reviewed by MJ Cowing

Gardening can be Murder by Marta McDowell

How Poisonous Poppies, Sinister Shovels, and Grim Gardens Have Inspired Mystery

Writers

If, like me, you are a gardener and a voracious reader of mysteries, all kinds of mysteries; I think you will really enjoy this book. Chapters of the book include **Gardening Detectives, Motives, Clues** and **Suspects**.

Many of the mystery authors, books and plots were familiar to me; some were not. Descriptions of the plants and how they were used in plots: very interesting.

One thing I learned was where and how the phrase “red herrings” originated. At the end are the **Book List** and the **Sources and Citations**.

Reading this book in this snowy season when we can't go outside and garden was a bonus.

Reviewed by Cynthia Pelliccia

The Art Thief; A True Story of Love, Crime, and a Dangerous Obsession by Michael Finkel

How hard is it to steal a valuable treasure from a small museum? Stephane Breitwieser, and girlfriend Anne-Catherine Kleinklaus did it 200 times over 10 years. He only stole items that made him tingle with delight and was small enough to hide in his overcoat or pants. All his new ill-begotten objects were kept in his attic bedroom to be admired by them alone. Follow his fully admitted story and wonder at his thought processes. This would make a great movie-ala Catch Me If You Can.

Reviewed by Mary Jean Cowing

