

Season's Readings 2015

Memoir, Biography, and History

Townie: A Memoir, Andre Dubus III © 2011

12 CDs. Read by the author, and I can still remember his voice. I preferred this to his novel, **House of Sand and Fog**, which I read in 2003. He does a great job of charting his perilous journey through childhood and the zigzag path to his vocation. I actually read this in 2014, but forgot to list it.

Kiss Me Like a Stranger: My Search for Love and Art, Gene Wilder © 2005

6 CDs. Read by the author. It's odd that I even got his book, because I have seen almost none of Gene Wilder's films. I am interested in seeing at least a sample now, but suspect they won't appeal to me. However, I find I like Gene Wilder the man. I recommend getting the audio version, because you hear it in his voice.

Losing Mum and Pup: A Memoir, Christopher Buckley © 2009

6 CDs. Read by the author. In the twelve months between 2007 and 2008, Christopher Buckley lost both his parents, Patricia Taylor Buckley and Wm F Buckley, Jr. Well worth my time. Bob read the paper version of this book (a gift from Eva).

Bonobo Handshake: A Memoir of Love and Adventure in the Congo, Vanessa Woods © 2011

7 CDs. Vanessa Woods is Australian, and she meets and marries American primatologist Brian Hare during the course of the events in this book. Together, they go to a sanctuary, Lola ya Bonobo, located just outside Kinshasa, to do experiments. It is home to dozens of bonobos who have been orphaned by the bush meat trade. Bonobos are indigenous only to Congo. Well written, and you get a good idea of what the experience was like. At Thanksgiving, we found out that Laurel Baker had "adopted" a baby elephant, from a sanctuary in Kenya in our name. We get regular updates online from the keeper on how Kaula is doing. This book about bonobos prepared my heart for that gift.
www.sheldrickwildlifetrust.org

The Reluctant Mr. Darwin: An Intimate Portrait of Charles Darwin and the Making of His Theory of Evolution, David Quammen © 2006

6 CDs. Narrated by Grover Gardner, named "narrator of the year" '05 by *Publishers Weekly*. That view is not shared by a reviewer on Amazon: "Be forewarned: the narrator of the audio book version is an unfortunate cross between J. Peterman from Seinfeld, Mike Wallace from 60 Minutes, and the narrator of old elementary school film strips." I was fine with the narration, and the book added to my rudimentary knowledge of Darwin.

Winter Journal, Paul Auster © 2012

6 CDs. Read by the author. I enjoyed this very much (and Bob read it, too). Paul Auster talks a lot about his life with his wife. He doesn't name her, but I know he is married to writer Siri Husvedt.

Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen, Christopher McDougall © 2009.

9 CDs. Chronicles the training practices of the Tarahumara Native Americans in Mexico, some of the world's greatest

distance runners. I found this book to be a bit confusing, but it got me interested in minimalist shoes (letting the foot do what it was designed to do).

By Myself © 1978, ... **And Then Some**, Lauren Bacall © 2005 6 CDs (abridged). Lauren Bacall (1924 - 2014) wrote **By Myself** when she was 54, and then updated it 27 years later, adding the whole second half of the book. Loved it. Learned a lot about Humphrey Bogart, Katharine Hepburn, and Ms. Bacall's many other friends. Interested now in seeing some of the old movies again, or for the first time.

A Fine Romance, Candice Bergen © 2015

This makes the third memoir by an actor that I read this year (the others being Gene Wilder and Lauren Bacall). And all those dealt in large part with caring for and coming to terms with dying spouses. (And yet another book I read this year was along those same lines: Roz Chast's dealing with the decline and deaths of her parents.) I liked this book very much, but it would be too much detail for some people. I remember having liked her first book, **Knock Wood**, as well.

Subcategory: Graphic Memoirs

Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?, Roz Chast © 2014

Winner of the National Book Critic Circle Award in the Autobiography category. Recommended reading; about her parents' final years.

After the War Was Over, Michael Foreman © 1995

Found this at the Penfield Library sale. My introduction to this prolific British writer and illustrator. Loved this memoir (children's book in pictures and words). Covers his boyhood from about 7 to 17. He was born in 1938. His father had died around the time of his birth, and his Mum ran a shop in their little fishing village on the Suffolk coast of England.

Other Non-Fiction

Why We Get Fat and What to Do About It, Gary Taubes © 2011

Gives convincing evidence for the cut-back-on-carbs theory of how to lose weight. [Bpb adds that this idea is having a resurgence in the cycling community.]

Fiction

Death Stalks Door County, Patricia Skalka © 2014

This is first in a series of Dave Cubiaik Door County mysteries. The author (whom I am proud to claim as a good friend—Aquinas '65!) did one of her first readings in Door County. My friend Sheila Hedberg attended, bought the book for me, and had Pat inscribe it to me. This May, a year later, Sheila visited me, and delivered the book. I read it immediately, but I am already one book behind, as the second book in the series has just (May, 2015) been published.

The People of the Book, Geraldine Brooks © 2008

12 CDs. Using the few known facts, Geraldine Brooks imagines the history of the famed Sarajevo Haggadah, a priceless six-hundred-year-old Jewish prayer book that has been salvaged

from a destroyed Bosnian library. I totally admire her skill and imagination, but this was not a favorite read for me.

Someone, Alice McDermott © 2013

6 CDs. Winner of the National Book Award. Begins in an Irish-American neighborhood in Brooklyn between the World Wars, as Marie Commeford sits on her stoop. This is my first Alice McDermott novel.

Not To My Taste

The Art of Fielding, Chad Harbach © 2011

I gave up on this after a few chapters. It's a first novel that was well-reviewed by *The New York Times*. Partly about baseball, and partly about campus life at the fictional Westish College on the Wisconsin side of Lake Michigan.

Children/Young Adult books

Swallows and Amazons, Arthur Ransome © 1930

6 CDs. Most interesting from a historical perspective—how children used to entertain themselves before electronics. Would also be especially interesting to families who love boats. First published 1930; set in 1929 in England's Lake District. The children in the story range in age from 7 to 14. Though I listened to the book (lovely English accents), I also have a 1985 paperback edition with the author's pen-and-ink illustrations. (He very much disliked the illustrations in the earliest editions; editions since 1938 have the classic Arthur Ransome illustrations.)

Books Sampled

Bogart: In Search of My Father, Stephen Bogart © 1995

I was interested in hearing the son's POV--what it was like to be the son of a famous man, and to have been only eight when his father died. Steve had abandonment issues, and a sense of his identity being stolen by all the people who think of him only as 'Bogart's son.' He vacillated between telling himself his feelings were justified, and telling himself, "Get past it, Steve, it was forty-three years ago." This book is the story of two journeys: Finding out about his father, and the journey of self-knowledge.

Alpha Better Juice, or The Joy of Text, Roy Blount, Jr © 2011

This is very good, but it's a book you sample, not read straight through. This is a followup to **Alphabet Juice** (2008) which I have not yet had the pleasure of reading.

America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy

Inaction, written and edited by Jon Stewart, Ben Karlin, and David Javerbaum (with other contributing writers) © 2004

I think intelligent high school students are the target audience. I just browsed this, but certain things made me laugh out loud. See Excerpts.

Book-related quotes, and quotes from books

"Annus Mirabilis" (Year of Wonder), from Philip Larkin's volume of poetry **High Windows**, contains the frequently-

quoted observation that sexual intercourse began in 1963, which the narrator claims was "rather late for me."

Reading and Writing

I like writing historical fiction because there's that architecture of known fact and then voids of unknowns.

- Geraldine Brooks

How do I know what I think until I see what I say?

- E.M. Forster

The limits of my language are the limits of my mind. All I know is what I have words for.

- Ludwig Wittgenstein

Writing is a kind of revenge against circumstance too: bad luck, loss, pain. If you make something out of it, then you've no longer been bested by these events.

- Louise Glück

Romance: Fiction that owes no allegiance to the God of Things as They Are.

- from Ambrose Bierce's **Devil's Dictionary**

The call letters of the public television station in Chicago, WTTW, stand for Window to the World. And that's what I think of books as.

- Pat Skalka, in an interview

After the War Was Over

The teacher of the top class at Pakefield Primary School was Oscar Outlaw. He realized that none of us had books at home. It wasn't just because of the shortage of books due to the war--we came from a culture which had no books. Oscar Outlaw decided to rectify this by reading from his own favourite boyhood books. One day he started reading **Treasure Island**. For me the two most magical words in English Literature are 'Treasure Island.' Just to hear those words today gives me the same tingle I felt when I was first introduced to Jim Hawkins, Long John and Ben Gunn all those years ago.

Someone

There are many reasons to write a novel. One — maybe the best — is to bear compassionate witness to what it is to be alive, in this place, this time. This kind of novel is necessary to us. We need to know about other lives: This kind of knowledge expands our understanding, it enlarges our souls. There are differences between us, but there are things we share. Fear and vulnerability, joy and passion, the capacity for love and pain and grief: Those are common to us all. Those are the things that great novelists explore. And it's this exploration, made with tenderness, wisdom and *caritas*, that's at the heart of Alice McDermott's masterpiece.

- Roxana Robinson, *The Washington Post*, Sept 9, 2013

Excerpts

Losing Mum and Pup

In 1996, speaking at the Fifth Avenue Synagogue memorial service for his great friend Dick Clurman, he [Wm F. Buckley, Jr] ended his eulogy with a line I can quote today from memory: "It occurs to me that all my life I have unconsciously been on the lookout for the perfect Christian, and when I found him, he turned out to be a non-observant Jew."

- Christopher Buckley, recounting one of his memories of his father

WFB also said, "I grew up, as reported, in a large family of Catholics without even a decent ration of tentativeness among the lot of us about our religious faith."

America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide

There were many "Were You Aware?" sidebars. He jokes that "The term "Did You Know?" is copyrighted by a rival publisher." Example of a sidebar: "To stay fit when Congress is not in session, many congressmen work out on a home podium."

Fun Facts: "The name of Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-WI) became synonymous with an era, not unlike his colleague Representative William Pleistocene (D-MN)."

Quotes from the Presidents (this one on Diplomacy):
 "Listen, Chief Crybaby. You and your papooses will take the swampland, and you'll like it." - Andrew Jackson, Feb 27, 1830.

Reviews and Commentary

Townie

Townie is a resolute story about the forging of a writer in fire and blood and a wrenching journey through the wreckage of New England's lost factory world during the Vietnam War era. ... Although their charismatic father was oblivious to his children's suffering, he was not unloving, and when an accident left him confined to a wheelchair, their support was profound.

- *Book list*

The People of the Book

Brooks, who won the Pulitzer Prize for her previous novel, **March**, has drawn her inspiration from the real Sarajevo Haggadah. As she explains in an afterword, little is known about this book, except that it has been saved from destruction on at least three occasions: twice by Muslims and once by a Roman Catholic priest. ... An inscription in the real Sarajevo Haggadah reads *Revisto per mi. Gio. Domenico Vistorini, 1609*. Taken with the notion that a Catholic priest surveying the codex during the Inquisition might choose to save it, Brooks creates another memorable character, an erudite scholar with "an innate reverence for books." Sometimes, he finds, "the beauty of the Saracens' fluid calligraphy moved him. Other times, it was the elegant argument of a learned Jew that gave him pause." This priest haunts the sacristy for draughts of unconsecrated communion wine, intent on obliterating painful memories ... of all the texts he has sent to the fires in his 17 years as a censor.

- Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*, Jan 7, 2008

Death Stalks Door County

Skalka's debut shows tremendous potential. Once readers get past a couple of grim opening chapters, the novel just takes off. The author concocts a satisfyingly complex plot while showcasing one of the main characters, Wisconsin's beautiful Door County. A great match for Nevada Barr fans.

- *Library Journal*

Bonobo Handshake

Somewhat she [author Vanessa Woods] manages to be both funny and illuminating on topics as serious as political corruption and the study of primate behavior.

- from a review of the book in *American Scientist*, Mar-Apr, 2011

To read Woods' elegant and entertaining book is to share the experience of a soul realizing there is something more—something mankind must learn. In that self-realisation is the secret of the bonobos.

- from a review of the book in *New Scientist*, June, 2010

By Myself And Then Some

Readers looking for basic Hollywood romance and drama can stick to the first 400 pages [written in 1978]; those seeking a more mature portrait can brave the final 100 [2005]. Either way, Bacall's a class act.

- *Publishers Weekly*

The Reluctant Mr. Darwin

[This book] stands out among the flood of books being published for Darwin's bicentenary. - *Publishers Weekly*

One more fine book in the top-notch "Great Discoveries" series from Norton. - a reviewer on Amazon

Miscellany

The People of the Book

Geraldine Brooks, born 1955, married Tony Horowitz in 1984. Raised Catholic, Geraldine is now Jewish. Interested in Jewish history since she was a teenager, she had converted before marrying Tony, so their children would be Jewish.

Kiss Me Like a Stranger

Gene was born Jerry Silberman in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the son of a Russian Jew, who made spirit miniatures. His mother "loved him as much as a boy could be loved," but that was not enough for Wilder. "Like every actor, I felt I wasn't loved for my true self but for what I could do. Perhaps I felt no one listened to me or heard my ideas until I was funny." That sense of having to sing for his emotional supper was heightened by the heart attack his mother suffered when he was eight. "The night she came home from hospital the doctor said two things to me. The first was, 'Don't get angry with your mother because you might kill her.' The second was to change my life. He said, 'Make her laugh!'

- Cassandra Jardine, *The Telegraph*, 17 Aug 1996

Why We Get Fat, and What to Do About It

The controversy goes on! The debate is not as simple as low-fat versus low-carb. But, this book presents the case (with an explanation of how insulin works, and so on) for carbs being the problem. This quote is from a *NY Times* op-ed piece by Dean Ornish: "Although people have been told for decades to eat less meat and fat, Americans actually consumed 67 percent more added fat, 39 percent more sugar, and 41 percent more meat in 2000 than they had in 1950 and 24.5 percent more calories than they had in 1970, according to the Agriculture Department."

Bonobo Handshake

There are, apparently, British and American pronunciations of "bonobo." Justine Eyre, the narrator of this book-on-CD, pronounces the word as bon-a-bo, but a pronunciation I get on the internet is boh-noh-bo.

Winter Journal

Speaking of pronunciations: According to the pronunciation on the CD, his name is pronounced AW-ster, as in Austin, TX, not OW-ster.

This book is written in second person, “as if addressing himself as a stranger.” An example: “It is an incontestable fact that you are no longer young. One month from today, you will be turning sixty four.”

Swallows and Amazons

This is the first in a series of twelve books, written between 1930 and 1947, “still in print and beloved today.”

The Reluctant Mr. Darwin

It took Darwin 21 years (and the threat that someone else might publish first) to publish his theory because almost all his contemporaries held theological views of nature, and his wife feared that she and Charles would not be united in heaven. - *Publishers Weekly*

Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?

A short and charming video portrait of Roz Chast:

<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/at-home-with-roz-chast>