

1. ***The Go-Between*** by L.P. Hartley ©1953. 326pp. Famous first sentence: “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” Set in the summer of 1900 at a manor house, where a scholarship boy, Leo, is spending a few weeks with his school friend, Marcus. Leo, who has a crush on Marcus’s sister Marion, delivers messages between her and a tenant farmer, Ted, which Leo believes are about business. Leo is also friendly with Viscount Trimmingham, Marion’s fiancé. There’s an epilogue, set 50 years later. Even before I read that Ian McEwan had read this in his early teens, it reminded me of ***Atonement***.
2. ***The Cookbook Collector*** by Allegra Goodman. ©2010. 394pp. Starts in 1998. Emily, 28, and her sister Jess, 23, are close though so different. Jess is a grad student in philosophy at Berkeley, and a Save the Trees activist. She works part time for George, who owns an antiquarian bookstore.. Emily is the CEO of a Silicon Valley startup on the verge of an IPO. There’s a thread about loose pillow talk, and one about Emily and Jess’s late mother’s family secret--she ran away from a Hassidic family. MA scenes.
3. ***Love Marriage*** by Monica Ali ©2022. Read by Ayesha Dharker. 16 hrs. This novel, set in London (always a draw for me), was ***Briefly Noted*** in the ***NYer***. Jasmine is a 26-yr-old doctor-in-training. Her father, Shakut, a GP, loves to discuss diagnostic problems with her. Her mother, Annissa, was from a well-to-do Bengali Muslim family, Shakut was a poor boy who made good. It had not been a traditional arranged marriage. From childhood Jasmine romanticized their “love marriage.” Jasmine’s fiancé, Joe, 28, is also a doctor. His mother is a famous intellectual. Arif is Jasmine’s 24-yr old n’er-do-well brother. His girlfriend is pregnant. Everyone has secrets. A diagnostic problem comes up (Kawasaki’s Disease), reconciling Arif and Shakut.
4. ***The Vanishing Half*** by Brit Bennett ©2020. Read by Shayna Small in 11.5 hrs. Identical twins Desiree and Stella were born circa 1940 in Mallard Louisiana, a fictional town populated by light-skinned Negroes. At age seven D & S witnessed the violent murder of their father. Their mother, Adele, made the twins quit high school and join her in cleaning houses. The twins ran away to New Orleans. At age 18 Stella disappeared, passing for white. Desiree moved to Wash. DC, became a fingerprint analyst, and married a black lawyer. Their child, Jude, is dark. Skin tone was important in Mallard, so Jude has a hard time when her mother moved back there, taking her. Jude escapes on a scholarship to UCLA, where she falls in love with Reese, a transsexual. So, identity is a theme. Eventually Stella and Desiree are re-united. I was alerted to this novel by **Stan’s List**.
5. ***A Town Called Solace*** by Mary Lawson ©2021. 299pp. Margaret from my book group finished this in record time “because I wanted to see what happened.” Set in northern Ontario in 1972, the novel follows three characters, Clara, 8, Liam, 35, and Elizabeth, 72. There are flashbacks to 1942. Liam and Elizabeth have a history. Clara’s 16-year-old sister Rose has run away and she’s missing for most of the novel. Rose’s 16-yr-old boyfriend confides in Clara who confides in Liam. Liam becomes happier.
6. ***The Playwright’s House*** by Dariel Suarez ©2021. 335pp. Set in Cuba in 2007. Serguay and his wife Anabel, both 27, have a good life. The novel opens with the curtain falling on a theater triumph. Serguay’s father, Felipe, directed. Anabel’s sister Alicia was in the play. Serguay’s street-wise brother, Victor, attended. So far I had a good feeling about Cuba: The arts were supported by the government and the populace. The families were close. But then Felipe was arrested. The family, and friend Kiko, who has internet skills, rallies round to try to free Felipe or at least save him from torture. Serguay uses his connections (his privileges are due to connections). The reader realizes the black market economy is a necessity for the masses. There’s apartheid between citizens and tourists. Separate restaurants and hotels. Alicia emigrates. My book group had a good discussion on this.
7. ***The Tenth Muse*** by Catherine Chung ©2019. 282 pp. A novel that reads like a memoir. Katherine, born in 1942 to a Chinese mother and an American father (so she thought), grows up in a small town in Michigan. She majors in math at Purdue, goes to grad school at MIT, and gets a grant to study in Germany. She learns about her real origins.
8. ***Comrade Lost and Found: A Beijing Story*** by Jan Wong ©2007 320pp. Non-fiction. In 1972, Jan Wong, a 3rd generation Canadian, was one of 2 foreign exchange students admitted to Beijing University. She had read Edgar Snow’s ***Red Star Over China*** and was a true believer in Mao. The Cultural Revolution was still ongoing. A fellow student, Yin, confided in Jan that she had a burning desire to go to America. Jan promptly snitched on her. Yin disappeared around the time Jan returned home. Jan married an Anglo-Canadian, Norman, who had come to China in 1966, lived there for 20 years, and spoke fluent Mandarin. Jan was Beijing correspondent for ***The Toronto Globe and Mail*** 1988-94, and has made many other trips to China as well. The trip recounted in this book was to Beijing for the month of August 2006 with Norman and their two sons, Ben and Sam, 16 and 13. Jan’s goal was to find Yin, if she was even alive, and ask her forgiveness. She did it! In the course of the telling, we see old Beijing being bulldozed for the Olympics. No one wants to remember the Cultural Revolution. Young people barely know about Tiananmen Square. We get Sam and Ben’s POV.
9. ***Smalltime, A Story of My Family and the Mob*** by Russell Shorto ©2021. 272pp. Russell Shorto (born 1958), a narrative historian, takes on his hometown, Johnstown PA. The local mob boss, Little Joe Regino, and his #2, Russ Shorto (the author’s namesake and grandfather), ran Johnstown out of City Cigar, right next door to City Hall. Everyone in Poppy’s Johnstown online book group was loving this, which re-created a place and an era. The smalltime mob drew the line at murder (there was only one in the book, unsolved), but people were beaten up and threatened with guns. Gambling, not drugs, was where the action was. History—prohibition, the Estes-Kefauver hearings, Robert Kennedy’s organized crime focus. The mob died down in the decades after 1960. This is a story of three generations of an American family that emigrated from Sicily in 1901. Besides the mob stuff, the author reveals irregular liaisons that made some family members squirm. It takes guts to be an honest writer.
10. ***The Code Breaker: Jennifer Doudna, Gene Editing and the Future of the Human Race*** by Walter Isaacson ©2021. 481pp. In 2020 Jennifer Doudna and Emmanuelle Charpentier won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for CRISPR. I liked the short chapters each preceded by a photograph. I enjoyed the mini-biographies of the many international researchers. There was more bioethics than I wanted, but it was interesting reading about the Chinese doctor jailed for 3 years for jumping the gun. CRISPR can be applied to recognizing COVID (or other pathogens), and set to chopping it up, bypassing the immune system, which, when overstimulated, can be part of the problem. The hard part would be delivering CRISPR to the human lung. So it’s not ready.

11. **The Innovators** by Walter Isaacson ©2014 15 CDs, read by Dennis Boutsikaris. On many “Best of 2014” book lists. I can chart my own career by what I was doing when each tech advance was made. I remember when hobbyists were making their own computers (I was at ACS in London). Time-sharing was in vogue when I was applying for programming jobs in Boston in 1979. When I was at Fin Pub, Poppy’s husband got a Lisa. In 1985 I visited Sak who already had a Mac. Browsers hit the world (1992-93) when I was at Schlumberger Cad/Cam. I made my website when I was at BBN (1995). I contributed South American bird photos to Wikipedia which started in 2000. The tech revolution models the collaborative (not “Great Man”) theory of history.
12. **The Violinist’s Thumb** by Sam Kean ©2012. 555 pp. (Large Print). Discusses scientific discoveries in a narrative style. Humans have less genetic diversity than would be expected, given their numbers and time on earth. This suggests bottlenecks in human history where we almost became extinct. Think California Condors. Bottlenecks are not always bad. An advantageous gene in a bottlenecked population can sweep through it fast. There’s a discussion of epigenetics to explain our variety. DNA, hardware; epigenetics, software. Epigenetics combine nature and nurture. A natural experiment: In Holland in the winter of 1944-45 there were places where people had to subsist on 500 calories/day. They gnawed tulip bulbs. After liberation they got 2000 calories. As adults, babies gestated during the starvation period had higher rates of schizophrenia, obesity, and diabetes than the babies gestated with adequate maternal diet. Since they came from the same gene pool the difference probably arose from epigenetic programming in the womb. PTSD can epigenetically activate and deactivate at least a dozen genes. Whales w/their 20 lb brains do not dominate the globe. Cuvier (1769-1832. Naturalist of Cuvier’s Toucan fame and much more.) suggested brain/body ratio.
13. **The Photographer: Into War-torn Afghanistan with Doctors without Borders** by Emmanuel Gilbert, Didier Lefevre, & Frederic Lemerrier. Translated by Alexis Siegel. ©2009. 267pp. For 3 months in 1986 documentary photographer Didier Lefevre embedded himself with a *Medecin sans Frontieres* team. The challenges are recounted with those photos, and even more expressively, by the graphic artist Emmanuel Gilbert. There’s an afterward telling what became of the participants. On the Web I found an interview by Rachel Maddow with Dr. Juliette Fournot, leader of the mission. *MSF* got the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999. The physical, medical, and cultural challenges awed me. They avoided Russians but would have used their hospital in a pinch.
14. **Surviving the Savage Sea** by Dougal Robertson ©1973. 223pp. A family departed on a round-the-world tour from Britain on a 43 ft. schooner. Dougal had a Master Mariner’s certificate, but had farmed for the last 17 years. They sold the farm to do this. Lyn was a nurse. They waited out hurricane seasons in ports where they had friends. In May 1972 their boat was sunk by killer whales. They had a minute to get into the rubber life raft with trailing dinghy. They rigged up a sail. They survived for 39 days. The rubber disintegrated. They were all in the dinghy when a Japanese fishing trawler picked them up. I like survival stories.
15. **Things My Mother Never Told Me** by Blake Morrison ©2002. 338pp. Nonfiction. The author’s parents were both physicians with practices in the Yorkshire Dales. After both parents’ deaths, the author found a cache of their love letters. He went through them, and created this wonderful book, which incorporates elements of his own life, of course. His mother had been pretty much estranged from her roots in Ireland. Emotional issues are plumbed.
16. **The Lost Family: How DNA Testing is Upending Who We Are** by Libby Copeland ©2020. 276 pp. Non-fiction. The central story was gripping, but the author fed it to us in teasing parcels. In between we read unrelated DNA anecdotes that were not detailed enough to satisfy me. For example, we read about an unmarried woman in 1949 who gave birth in a hospital. She was told her baby was born dead. At age 88 she met her 69-year-old daughter. But the central story, facts that did not add up until they did, the clues, the false leads, and the epilogue, **IS** told in satisfying detail. Photographs. Carola recommended this.
17. **Epic Measures, One Doctor, 7 Billion Patients** by Jeremy N. Smith ©2015. 291pp. The story of the early days of IHME*, Ezra’s Employer. This book is to Chris Murray and the Global Burden of Disease concept as **Mountains Beyond Mountains** was to Paul Farmer (1959-2022) & **Partners in Health**. “Moneyball meets medicine.” It’s a personal profile and workplace narrative. It inspired me to eat more fruit. Now if billions of others did, the world DALY** metric would be a tick better. *Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation **Disability-adjusted Life Years. www.healthdata.org. P.S. 8 billion as of 2022.
18. **All that Moves Us: A Pediatric Neurosurgeon** by Jay Wellon ©2022. 239pp. I like to read about meaningful careers, especially ones that awe me like this one. The author’s impressed by EMTs. He had been the first doctor on the scene of a car crash—he was *enroute* to a triathlon—that’s how HE decompresses. He was so relieved when the EMTs came. There’s a thread about the author’s father’s career in the Air Nat’l Guard. There’s an account of a malpractice suit where a doc did deserve to be sued.

Full disclosure: I am proud to say I have known each the next three authors for many years:

19. **Genealogy Scrapbook of Elinor A. Haider’s Family** by Constance Soja ©2021. Connie’s *tour de force* COVID project. 11”x 17” and quite thick, replete with photos, professionally bound and printed in a limited edition. The annotated family tree goes back to 1765. Herman’s photo is in it, birding in Ecuador with Ellie. I loved seeing Ellie (1930-) in context with family members and homes at all stages of her life. Ellie’s father, Michael L. Haider (1904-1986), who retired as CEO of Standard Oil of NJ, is covered. It had been a secret that Ellie’s mother, Alice Strauss Haider, was Jewish. 90-ish Alice let it slip to her granddaughter Connie. It is unknown whether Alice ever told her daughter Ellie. Stauffer did not know, and he’s been married to Ellie for 44 years. DNA testing would soon have let that cat out of the bag. I loved the in-depth interview Connie did with her mother Ellie in the 1970s. Connie’s brother Tom warmly thanked her for his gaining deeper insights into their father, Eugene Soja.
20. **Wings Across the Border, an American’s Travels to See Mexico’s Birds** by Stauffer Miller ©2022. 11.5” x 8.75”, 89pp + index. Illustrations by Catherine Gausman. Maps, photos. Herman and I are pictured with guide Rich Hoyer in the 2007 Villahermosa chapter. I can confirm the text faithfully describes that trip, and the vibe of the other Mexican trips is consistent with many other birding trips Herman and I enjoyed with Ellie and Stauffer. Available on Amazon.
21. **Breathe Here** by Ellie O’Leary ©2020. 74pp. MaryDan and I are into writing 35-word stories inspired by little incidents in our lives. Ellie’s poems are similarly inspired by her own life. I have found my Christmas gift for MaryDan.