

The River House by Margaret Leroy

Little, Brown & Co., 2005

Ginny Holmes of suburban London is a wife, mother, and practicing child psychologist. But because of an indifferent husband, a daughter who's leaving the nest for university, a rebellious younger daughter, Amber, and an ailing mother, Ginny's life is not one of contentment. When she meets with detective Will Hampden about one of her difficult cases, she falls instantly, passionately, and helplessly in lust. The married Will responds in kind, and the two begin their trysts at a boathouse down by the Thames.

The day comes, however, when Ginny – but not Will – witnesses a man running along the riverside and behaving suspiciously, whom she connects with the recent murder of a young woman. She then begins a torturous wrestling with her conscience. Keep quiet and protect herself and her lover from the exposure that will send their families reeling? Or “do the right thing” and speak to the authorities? Parallel to this almost numbing dilemma is her concern for 16-year-old Amber, whose behavior is rapidly becoming out of control.

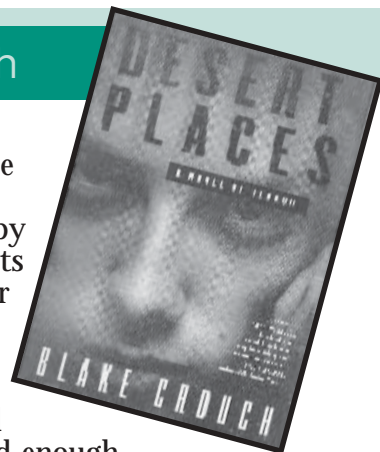
The story is breathlessly suspenseful; yet the author takes time to present her characters and their situations in an utterly human way. The reader feels that yes, that's how it might be. The conclusion is hardly pat, but oddly satisfying.

Desert Places by Blake Crouch

St. Martin's Minotaur, 2004

Blake Crouch's debut novel is a gruesome psychological thriller. Novelist Andrew Thomas is stalked and then kidnapped by his estranged brother, Orson. Orson wants Andy to see the evil within himself. After forcing Andy to watch and participate in his murderous games, Orson releases him. Andy, however, is not free. Orson continues to stalk and threaten him and his acquaintances. Finally, Andy has had enough. He sets out to find Orson and kill him. Taking along a good friend, Walter, he finds Orson, kidnaps him, and attempts to force needed information from him. However, Orson is able to outsmart Andy until the final scene when one of Orson's protégées reappears to destroy them all.

Though violent, this book is chiefly about fear. Orson is carrying out a psychological experiment of turning a seemingly normal human being into a killer. As Andy's feelings about Orson change, the reader wonders if Orson will indeed be successful.



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March by Geraldine Brooks

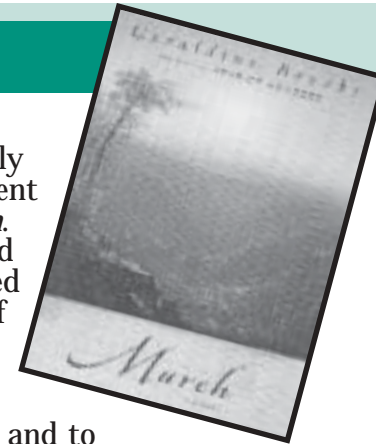
Viking, 2005

Brooks' newest historical novel brilliantly elucidates the life of Mr. March, the absent father of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. An idealistic man of strong religious and moral virtue, March loses his hard-earned fortune in the support of the ventures of abolitionist John Brown, leaving his family poor, but not lost in spirit. He determines to join the Union Army as a chaplain to aid and comfort the soldiers and to attempt to right some of the wrongs in the world as he sees it. Leaving his beloved wife and four young daughters at home, March follows the “boys of Concord” to the frontlines of the Civil War.

March finds himself powerless to prevent the violence, racism, and hardship of war in the South. He struggles with issues of courage, finding himself bereft when he fails to save a fellow soldier. He is soon transferred from the battlefield to a cotton plantation under Union control where he is to minister and teach the “contraband” slaves from the area in a grand experiment. Confederate guerillas attack the plantation and inflict unspeakable barbarism on those slaves that March has come to care about. He himself is injured and awakens in a Washington army hospital.

Marmee, his wife, is summoned from Concord to aid in his recovery. Their marriage is severely tested as she attempts to understand the horrors of her husband's life over the past year. Struggling to regain his shattered strength, Mr. March must also face his own inadequacies in the face of the moral complexities of slavery and war.

Told in first person narrative from the viewpoints of both Mr. March and Marmee, Brooks accurately captures the cadences of nineteenth century language and period. Weaving Mr. March's tale into the well-known story of the March family, she presents a realistic perspective on disillusionment, introspection, and overwhelming guilt in the mind of a fascinating character.



Shelf Life

Grace A. Dow Memorial Library

Fall 2005

Original Reviews
of Recommended Books



Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See

Random House, 2005

In a remote area of China during the 1820s, Madame Wang, a matchmaker, is discussing the future of a young girl with the girl's parents. Lily is only six years old, but custom dictates that plans begin to prepare her for marriage.

It comes as a surprise and honor to the family that Lily will also have a laotong: she will be paired up with another young girl because eight characters align. They were both born in the year of the horse, same month, same day, and same year. Snow Flower and Lily have the same number of brothers and sisters, each is the third child, and the third daughter of each family is with her ancestors. The girls are the same height and of equal beauty, and, very importantly, their feet were bound on the same day. Although they are of different social and economic standing, it is a good match.

Snow Flower first communicates with Lily with a message on a silk fan. Sending messages using the fan will continue throughout their lives. As children, their friendship flourishes. As married women and mothers, the stresses caused by culture and tradition threaten to destroy their bond.

This beautifully told story transports the reader into complex Chinese society. The happiness and the sorrow experienced by Snow Flower and Lily are moving and memorable.

“A laotong relationship is made by choice for the purpose of emotional companionship and eternal fidelity. A marriage is not made by choice and has only one purpose – to have sons.”

Contributors: Melissa Barnard, Barbara Brennan, Ann Jarvis, Jan Kimmel, Emelia Parker, Margee Smith, Ron Suszek

Editors: Barbara Brennan, Margee Smith

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A Service of the City of Midland

Harbor by Lorraine Adams

Alfred A. Knopf, 2004

Twenty-four year old Aziz Arkoun stows away for 52 days in the hold of a tanker—his third attempt at illegal immigration to the United States. No stranger to either physical suffering or social invisibility, Aziz manages to get by in his new land through a series of illegal connections elegantly engineered by his host, Rafik, a shady character with a mysterious storage unit north of Boston, where Aziz first arrived. In the unit could be stored anything from black-market designer clothing to the materials for terror-bound weapons of mass destruction, one of many ambiguities that render the story by turns hilarious and sobering. While Aziz' new circumstances are a slight improvement over his old ones, the reader gains a new grasp of the profound desperation in the illegal immigrant experience.

“Water never warms in American harbors. They had told him.”

Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Adams deftly contrasts the farcical qualities of Aziz' not quite seamless adoption of his new culture against the horror of the old — his former life in Algeria, where he was an accidental double agent during his forced military service in a bloody ground war against radical Islamists. Adams' attention to detail seems to put us into Aziz' own ground zero, a fatalistic place of unceasing confusion and uncertainty.



The Company Car by C.J. Hribal

Random House, 2005

Like Jonathan Franzen (*The Corrections*) before him, Hribal creates a well-defined cast of characters and brilliantly uses the family as a structure to explore a larger conceit. Hribal sets his vision of unique Midwestern family life first in the suburbs of Chicago, and then on the prairies of northern Wisconsin. His landscapes, his characters, and his perception of the American family ultimately become an appraisal of America in the last half-century.

The Czabeks are a large Catholic family headed by hard-drinking, often emotionally vacant Wally and his edgy, but stoic wife Susan. The marriage seems to exist almost exclusively for producing and raising children. Their son Emil narrates the novel from his perspective as a now middle-aged man whose own marriage and family life are dysfunctional. Ironically, it is Emil's analysis that makes the story work. While there is much humor in Hribal's storytelling (flying pumpkins and car surfing scenes alone make the novel worth reading), the substance lies in his evocative homage to the Czabeks' dogged attempts to live the American Dream.



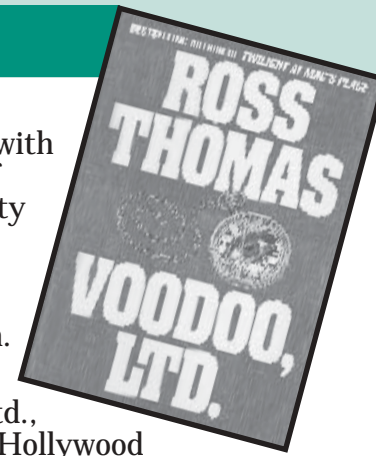
Voodoo, Ltd. by Ross Thomas

Mysterious Press, 1992

Fuse the dark humor of Evelyn Waugh with the knack for chicanery and suspense of Graham Greene and you will have a pretty good idea what Ross Thomas is up to in *Voodoo, Ltd.* This thriller is stuffed with incidents, lively characters, and sophisticated wit. Thomas is in top form.

Artie Wu and Quincy Durant, the principal soldiers-of-fortune in Wudu Ltd., are called in to clean up the mess when Hollywood star Ione Gamble is accused of killing her producer/fiancé Billy Rice. On New Year's morning Ione is found passed out in the Malibu home of her ex-fiance. She is holding the gun which killed him, but can't remember anything because she was extremely drunk the night before. Ione's go-between hires Wudu Ltd. to track down a pair of fly-by-night hypnotherapists who promised to find out what Ione could remember about the fatal night. They skipped with incriminating videotapes of Ione under hypnosis. Artie and Quincy hire their own helpers: Otherguy Overby, Booth Stallings, and Georgia Blue. Once assembled in L.A., the plot takes off. Murder, blackmail, and double-crossings galore speed the story along.

This exhilarating, splendidly choreographed caper has a satisfying ending, capped by a wonderful final line.



Season of the Snake by Claire Davis

St. Martin's Press, 2005

St. Martin's Press, 2005

It is three years after the brutal beating death of Nance's husband before she remarries. Her new husband, Ned, is an elementary school principal. He is caring, considerate, and supportive of Nance in her career as a herpetologist.

When Nance's estranged sister Meredith unexpectedly comes for a visit, they begin to reconnect and find mutual satisfaction as they attend to Nance's field work. As the sisters grow closer, Ned's behavior becomes unpredictable and then inexplicable.

Meredith, who has experienced physical abuse, fears for her sister's safety. The unraveling of Nance's marriage leads her to suspect her husband of more than unfaithfulness.

Suspense builds in this thriller as Nance, Meredith, and Ned head for a dangerous confrontation.



“He's so ... reluctant to talk about himself; it's like pulling teeth.”

Emilie's Voice by Susanna Dunlap

Touchstone, 2005

Intrigue and deception at Versailles!

Emilie is the daughter of a modest violin maker. When composer Marc-Antoine Charpentier overhears her singing in her father's workshop, he recognizes her rare talent and persuades her parents to let her come and take lessons. After performing at a society party, Emilie is swept away by the dangerous noble Comte de St. Paul to Versailles, there to live and perform. St. Paul and his patron Madame de Maintenon would like to use Emilie to turn the king away from his powerful mistress. When Emilie does catch the eye of the king, she is summoned to his bedchamber but before the appointed time, Charpentier arrives to take her away. The king's mistress had been forewarned of the plot and arranged for Emilie's rescue. Back in Paris Emilie must hide, because the court at Versailles believes that she had committed suicide. She is happy living as the secret wife of Charpentier but wishes to assure her family that she is still alive. St. Paul learns that she still lives and schemes to find her and return her to the palace.

With a Ph.D in Music History from Yale University, first time novelist Dunlap has earned the right to write about the music scene in 15th century France. She is currently the Director of Development for Connecticut Opera.



Sweet Dreams at the Goodnight Motel by Curtiss Ann Matlock

MIRA, 2004

Claire Wilder is in a rut. She is forty years old, childless, and divorced, but still pining for her ex-husband. She gets a wake-up call when she sees the statement “On my way, just passing through, looking for real life” written on the wall of a truck stop restroom. She quits her job and heads out of town to look for her roots. She travels to the small town of Valentine, Oklahoma, hoping to discover more about her father, a man of whom she has had little knowledge since he left Claire and her mother. She comes to stay at the Goodnight Motel, a tired and broken-down place, whose main claim to fame is a legendary visit by Patsy Cline. She is drawn there by remote memories of visits to a similar place with her mother and father. Once in town she quickly makes friends with several eccentric town folk: Winston, an elderly but lively would-be suitor, Vella, the feisty drugstore keeper and caretaker of her disabled husband, and Travis and Larkin Ford, father and son, who are in competition for her affections. She comes to find meaning in her life through helping a young, abandoned pregnant woman and rejuvenating the Goodnight Motel.

This is a delightful feel-good read, with a charming sense of place and good things happening to good people.

