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# ShelfLife

GRACE A. DOW MEMORIAL LIBRARY

*“A great book should leave you with many experiences and slightly exhausted at the end. You should live several lives while reading it.”*

William Styron

### STEP-BALL-CHANGE by JEANNE RAY

SHAYE AREHEART BOOKS, 2002

Narrator Caroline McSwain finds tap dancing – and teaching it – one of the most satisfying activities of her life. But the novel isn't primarily about dancing. Rather, the title seems to be a metaphor for the transitions her grown family is undergoing.

Daughter Kay has tearfully announced her engagement to Trey, scion of the most prominent family in Raleigh, at the same time Caroline's glamorous sister Taffy calls and arrives with her killer dog Stamp on the doorstep, devastated by the unfaithfulness of her husband. Meanwhile Caroline and her public defender husband Tom are having some construction done on their home. As is often the case, they despair of ever having the thing finished. Woodrow, the black contractor, may often be found mornings, seated at the breakfast table having coffee he has made for everyone and dispensing gentle words of wisdom about dog training, wedding preparations, and life in general.

*“Not every girl is going to grow up to be a dancer, and ... let us be thankful for that, but even the ones who will grow up to be physicists and heart-transplant surgeons are better off for having danced.”*

Enter other players, whose individual personalities add to the mix and create humorous, sometimes stressful situations. Of course all is resolved in the end – but perhaps in unexpected ways.

Read this book in a weekend. It is a real perker-upper with sparkling dialogue, witty observations, and likable, if conflicted, characters. In addition, it is blessedly free of “isms” of age, sex, or race. It is a pleasure.



### LYDIA CASSATT READING THE MORNING PAPER by HARRIET SCOTT CHESSMAN

PERMANENT PRESS/SEVEN STORIES PRESS, 2001

Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) used her sister Lydia as her model and inspiration for five of her works.

Lydia is the voice in this short novel, telling the story of Mary and of her own struggle with a terminal illness, Bright's disease.

*“May's moving quickly now, brush to palette to canvas, and I resist the urge to move. To pose, after all, is to agree to a form of enchantment.”*

Readers have insight not only into a renowned painter's life but also into the paintings referred to, which are included in the book. The loving relationship between sisters unfolds as each picture is painted, one picture for each chapter. Lydia shares the sometimes tragic story of her family and of the man she loved. She relates the developing relationship of Mary and Edgar Degas. Lydia's thoughts about her imminent death reflect her fears and life's disappointments. This is a gentle and warm story that could be read in one sitting. The author has written one other novel, *Ohio Angels*.



### 2002 NATIONAL FICTION BOOK AWARD WINNERS

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Place

*Three Junos* by Julia Glass

#### Finalists

*Big If* by Mark Costello

*You Are Not a Stranger Here* by Adam Haslett

*Gorgeous Lies* by Martha McPhee

*The Heaven of Mercury* by Brad Watson

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Welcome to the inaugural issue of our book review newsletter, *ShelfLife*, a quarterly publication from the Adult Services Department of the Grace A. Dow Memorial Library. Each book has been selected, read, and reviewed by one of our adult services librarians and is in the library collection. Our goal is to introduce readers to new and undiscovered fiction authors whose writing defines excellence. We hope you enjoy the reviews and the books.

*The Reference Staff*

### BEING DEAD by JIM CRACE

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX, 1999

A quivering, like a wake, is a celebration of the life of the deceased, a story told backwards, a preparation for the final departure. Joseph and Celice lie dead in the dunes after a nostalgic visit to the site of their first meeting is rudely interrupted by a thief with a hunk of granite. Joseph and Celice, successful professors of entomology, are loners by nature.

As they play host to their subjects, the little creatures who dine on their remains, Crace relates in tight, lyrical prose how they came to be in this place. Only after they fail to appear for scheduled appointments several days later,

does anyone wonder where they are. As the outside world begins to wonder whatever has happened, the professors slowly rejoin the natural world they so revered.

Crace's book is a meditation on the tender link between human life and the natural world; between death and life.

Crace, well established in Britain, is the author of five books, and winner of the Whitbread Prize for two books: *Quarantine* (1998) and *Continent* (1987).

*“All along the shores of Baritone Bay and all the coast beyond, tide after tide, time after time, the corpses and the broken, thinned remains of fish and birds, of barnacles and rats, of mollusks, mammals, mussels, crabs are lifted, washed and sorted by the waves. And Joseph and Celice enjoy a loving and unconscious end, beyond experience.”*



*ShelfLife* is a publication of the Adult Services Department of the Grace A. Dow Memorial Library.

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A SERVICE OF THE CITY OF MIDLAND

**A PARCHEMENT OF LEAVES**  
by SILAS HOUSE

ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL, 2002

This second offering by Kentucky-native Silas House is a celebration of the land and culture of Appalachia. Charting the life of Vine, a young Cherokee woman, as she finds love in local Irishman Saul Sullivan, the story follows their tender relationship during the World War I era. Vine leaves her Cherokee family to make a home with her new husband and is immediately plummeted into deep homesickness. This theme continues throughout the book as she learns to make a new life for herself away from her people. Soon local prejudices against the Cherokee force her family from Kentucky to the hills of North Carolina. Saul takes a mill job in a neighboring county to aid the war effort, leaving Vine and her young daughter alone with her husband's mother and unemployed younger brother, Aaron. Aaron's restless behavior and professed love for Vine begins to take an obsessive course which sets the stage for the tragedy which ensues. The power of forgiveness and the enduring spirit of the human heart follow Vine and Saul throughout this beautiful novel, testing their love and loyalty to each other. Set against the lush backdrop of the Kentucky mountains, the novel makes plain the value of family and familiar ground with subtle lyricism. This is a haunting book not soon forgotten.



**THE PIANO TUNER** by DANIEL MASON

ALFRED A. KNOPF, 2002

Edgar Drake's life as a piano tuner in London is interrupted by a government request to travel to Burma. In 1886, Britain is engaged in a war in the Southern Shan States of Burma under the command of Surgeon-Major Anthony Carroll, stationed at the village of Mae Lwin. Dr. Carroll had a rare Erard grand piano shipped to his post to aid in peacemaking efforts. The conditions of the jungle damaged the piano and Drake is hired to tune the piano because of his expertise with Erard pianos. The journey is not without its dangers and an attack on the village of Mae Lwin halts Drake's travel. With a mysterious guide as an escort, Drake continues, even though he has been forbidden by British orders. Tuning the piano is just one assignment that Carroll entrusts to Drake. An aura of espionage settles over the relationship between Carroll and Drake. Enemy forces are bearing down on the village and Drake is forced to leave.

*"It is much easier to deliver a man than a piano."*

The exotic setting, the naiveté of Drake and the promise of adventure and suspense will draw in readers. The ending is unanticipated and startling. This first novel is compelling with its historical detail, diverse characters and action sequences.



**Life of Pi** by YANN MARTEL

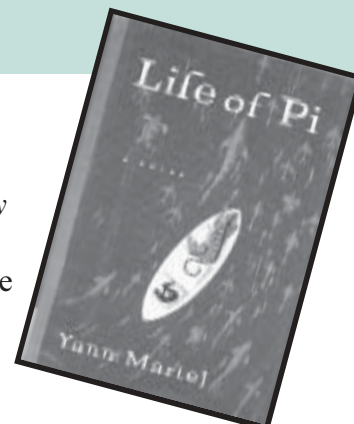
HARCOURT, 2001

*"Then the elderly man said, 'I have a story that will make you believe in God.'"*

Whether or not *Life of Pi* makes you believe in God, you will certainly believe in the ability of a skilled writer to write a story so compelling that you will believe in anything. Pi Patel is a teenager living in Pondicherry, India, when his family decides to emigrate to Canada. Pi is an unusual child, having spent his youth exploring the available religions in his town. At the time of their departure from India, Pi is a practicing Hindu, Christian and Muslim.

Unfortunately, midway to Midway, their ship inexplicably sinks. Pi finds himself adrift in a 26-foot lifeboat with a hyena, a zebra, an orangutan and a Bengal tiger. Faced with the possibility of being somewhat lower on the food chain than was healthy, Pi determines that the tiger's survival is his own, and secures their mutual survival through the force of his own will.

*"The pandit spoke first. ... 'it's good to see a boy so keen on God.' The imam and the priest nodded. 'But he can't be a Hindu, a Christian and a Muslim. It's impossible. He must choose.'"*



**YEAR OF WONDERS**  
by GERALDINE BROOKS

VIKING, 2001

The "Black Death" usually brings to mind the medieval time period, when Europe was decimated by the pestilence. There were plague outbreaks for many years after the major outbreak in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Brooks' novel was inspired by the true story of the village Eyam in Derbyshire. When the village is struck by the bubonic plague in 1666, the villagers voluntarily quarantine themselves for a year. We follow the story of the plague year through the eyes of Anna Frith. Anna, a young widow with two small boys, works as a maid for Vicar Michael Mompellion and his wife Elinor, who has taught her to read. When the plague erupts, the vicar says it is a scourge from God and commands his congregation to seal off the village from the outside world. The vicar ministers to his dwindling flock as his wife, assisted by Anna, uses herbs to alleviate their pain. As deaths mount, grief and superstition cause mob violence against "witches." Cults of self-flagellation and devil worship spring up. Brooks realistically describes the customs and depicts the fabric of life in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. *Year of Wonders* is a rich evocation of one moment in history. Through Anna's perspective, we see the story of people reacting and dealing with a terrible situation. Anna is one of the few to survive to tell this tale. This story is a haunting one and will linger with you long after you finish the last page.

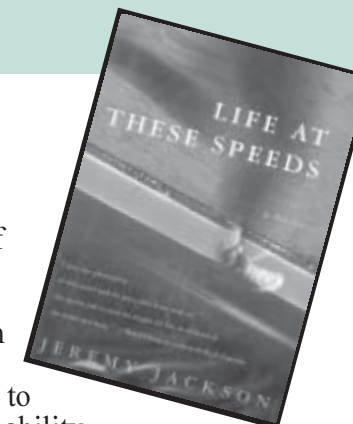


**Life at These Speeds**  
by JEREMY JACKSON

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, 2002

Kevin Schuler is the only surviving member of his track team, which included his closest friends. When he rides home with his parents instead of the team, he is spared the van crash that leaves him one of the two remaining members of his small school's class. He is sent to a larger school where his exceptional running ability quickly gains the attention of the principal and coach. Though Kevin dislikes running, he excels to the point of attracting the attention of colleges, the media, and local dignitaries. He uses running and the silence it brings in him to avoid his repressed grief. But dreams and memories of his life before that night leach into his consciousness.

Author Jackson succeeds in his realistic representation of the two conflicting issues in Kevin's life: his talent which draws people to him and the trauma that causes him to separate himself from the outside world. Kevin is an admirable hero, though a little out of touch with his generation. Life in rural Missouri and his internal conflict might add to his maturity. Kevin is a compelling character; an extraordinary but honest personality. We should look forward to more titles by this talented new author.



**THE STORY OF LUCY GAULT**  
by WILLIAM TREVOR

VIKING, 2002

In a style so captivating as to render convincing even the remarkable coincidence upon which the author bases his latest novel, William Trevor pulls the reader irresistibly into his story. After a shooting incident, six-year old Lucy Gault's parents decide civil war-torn 1920s Ireland isn't safe for an English soldier and his family, so they make plans which will uproot Lucy from the only home she's ever known, as well as from that home's beloved servants. As any willful child might, Lucy runs away upon hearing of the plan. When an exhaustive search for her turns up evidence of a tragedy, her parents conclude she's lost to them forever and the grieving, guilt-ridden Gaults depart for the Continent to begin a new life. Lucy, traumatized but still alive, finds her way back to the homestead, which her parents have only just mournfully deserted, leaving no effective forwarding address. Under the protection of the homestead's caretakers, Lucy grows up isolated - a local curiosity. Did she, in childish deserting her family, end up forever abandoned, or will reconciliation and mutual forgiveness prevail? The life Lucy makes for herself lays groundwork for a startling relationship, and thus a belated penance, with a person from her past who unknowingly set the tragic events in motion so long ago.

*"Lucy did not wonder much about the nature of exile, accepting, with time, what had come about, as she did her lameness, and the features that were reflected in her looking-glass."*

