

Dies the Fire by S.M. Stirling

ROC/NAL, 2004

An electrical storm over Nantucket produces a blinding white flash that causes all electronic devices to cease functioning — computers, telephones, engines, radio, and television, as well as firearms. The world is plunged into a darkness humanity was unprepared to face. Even as some people band together to help one another, others are building armies. The survivors are those who adapt most quickly by either making it to the country and growing their own crops or taking those crops by force.

Juniper Mackenzie was singing and playing guitar in a pub when the Change hit. Juniper leaves town with her daughter and a few friends to make their way to her cabin in the country. Along the way they pick up a few more people who join them. Juniper realizes she needs to create a community to farm her land in order to survive. Another group is led by an ex-Marine bush pilot, Mike Havel. He teams up with a Texas horse wrangler and his family and a teenage Tolkien fan to create something very much like the Riders of Rohan. These two groups band together to fight off the army of the Protector of Portland, Oregon. The Protector is a medieval history professor who has the idea of reviving a feudal empire in the Willamette valley. As society breaks down, most of the world population dies off from a combination of famine, plague, cannibalism, brigandage, and just bad luck.

Stirling shows that while our technology influences how we live, it is the myths and ideals we believe in that determine the way we live. The novel's dual themes of myth and the loss of technology are well told through the stories of the Mackenzie clan and Havel's strike force, the Bearkillers. This book is a great addition to the "after the apocalypse" genre.

Riding Lessons by Sara Gruen

HarperTorch, 2004

Annemarie Zimmer is a young Olympic contender for the grueling equestrian sport of three-day eventing. She and Harry, her beloved mount, are unstoppable. As they wrap up another successful competition, Harry lands a jump wrong, breaking his leg and sending Annemarie to the hospital with a broken neck. Against the odds, she recovers but runs away from her family and the horse world, unable to bear that life without her horse.

Twenty years later she returns home to the family farm to help her mother manage the barn. Her father, a respected horse trainer, is dying from a rapidly progressing illness. Annemarie struggles with overseeing the busy stable, managing her rebellious daughter, and seeing her once-strong father reduced to such a helpless man. Then into her life comes a horse — maimed, horribly underfed, and wary of people. He also has the same rare markings of Harry. Could there be any connection between the two horses? Two men help her with this new horse — Anton, the new trainer and "Horse Whisperer" and Dan, the gentle veterinarian and her first love.



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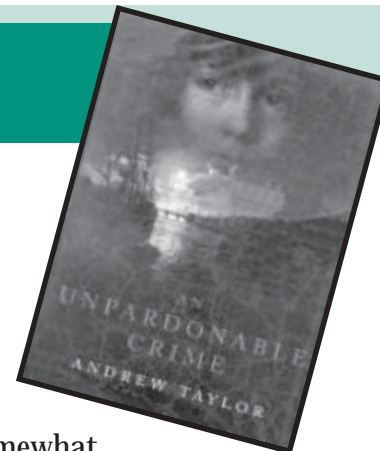
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An Unpardonable Crime by Andrew Taylor

Hyperion, 2004

In this expertly written, wonderfully atmospheric Dickensian tale, Tom Shields is a poor school teacher who finds tutoring work in the home of a wealthy and utterly shady banker. The year is 1819, and Tom, neither gentleman nor servant and therefore somewhat uneasy in his new employment, finds himself in charge of the banker's small son and his schoolmate, the young Edgar Allen Poe. During the course of the story, Taylor's fate-buffed tutor uncovers remarkably plausible solutions to a couple of disturbing mysteries in the life of Poe, while deftly solving the central conflict, a murder involving mistaken identity. Tom is a pillar of ethics, attempting to weigh the interest of two attractive females connected to the household — one to whom he is particularly drawn — against the best interests of his young charges. His fictional plight is entertainingly fraught with literary allusions, as well as every shamelessly engrossing 19th century dime-novel device ever trotted out — live burials, sinister doubles, duplicitous servants, and missing fingers included. On the basis of *An Unpardonable Crime* alone, Taylor's reputation as mystery author extraordinaire is richly deserved.



"Before I venture into the labyrinth, let me deal briefly with this matter of my lunacy."

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Shelf Life

Grace A. Dow Memorial Library

Spring 2005

Original Reviews
of Recommended Books

The Coroner's Lunch by Colin Cotterill

SOHO Press, 2004



At the celebrations of the Communist takeover of Laos in 1975, seventy-year-old Dr. Siri Paiboun is dismayed to be appointed coroner, after 46 years of keeping the communist fighters alive in the jungle. Of his new position he says, "I've never done an autopsy in my life." However, Senior Comrade Kahm will not be convinced that taking dead bodies apart is not the same as piecing live ones back together. Using a 27-year-old French textbook, Siri teaches himself to perform autopsies. Despite limited resources, Siri diligently attempts to determine the causes of death of the routine cases that come his way.

When the corpse of Kahm's wife is brought to the morgue, Siri decides he must perform her autopsy carefully, making sure he doesn't miss anything. Kahm is anxious to have the death declared natural and he has the body removed from the morgue later that day. Siri is then called away to the South, where soldiers working on a "crop reclamation" project have died suddenly of no apparent cause. His barely remembered past arises to assist him in resolving this situation. Immediately upon returning, the bloated bodies of two mysterious Vietnamese are carried into the morgue. Siri cannot believe that this sudden influx of difficult cases is coincidence. Quietly using his contacts, Siri delves into the possible relationship between these deaths, while also defending his position against those who would oust him—or kill him.

The mystery is well-crafted, showing each part of the puzzle as Siri himself pieces it together. The book is wonderfully descriptive, leaving the reader with a mental image of a Laos in turmoil during a difficult transition from French colony to communist self-rule. Although Cotterill is British, he has taught in Australia, Laos and Japan. He lives in Northern Thailand and works for UNICEF.

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Blackthorn Winter

by Sarah Challis

Thomas Dunne Books, 2003

If the snow flies when the blackthorn in the hedgerows blooms, legend has it — like the groundhog seeing its shadow — that the winter will be long and harsh. And so it seems, at least figuratively, to almost-divorced Claudia Knight.

Trying to begin a new, private life in the aftermath of her business-tycoon husband's conviction and imprisonment, Claudia wants nothing more than peace, anonymity, and perhaps a means of employment. She hopes to attain these by leaving her life in London and moving to the village of Court Barton. Adding to her sense of loss are her adult children — Lila, who lives and works in New York City and prefers to think her father the victim and Jerome, who has survived a horrific train wreck in India but has shut down, unwilling to talk about it.

In this wonderful British “cozy,” the author, reminiscent of Rosamunde Pilcher and Marcia Willett, brings to life both the charming Dorset countryside and the village people who impact the lives of Claudia and her children and ultimately help them find their way. Challis allows her characters to reveal the story through their own voices. With an open-ended but satisfying finale, there seems, happily, to be room here for a sequel.



Welcome to the Fallen Paradise

by Dayne Sherman

MacAdam/Cage, 2004

After an incident in high school and a strong recommendation by the principal, Jesse Tadlock left Baxter Parish, Louisiana and joined the army. Jesse thought that he would never return.

Twelve years have passed and Jesse's mother has died, leaving him a \$30,000 inheritance. With an offer of employment from the local sheriff's office and the chance to buy a home of his own, Jesse decides to leave the army and again make Baxter Parish his home. When he discovers that his high school girlfriend, now divorced, is interested in seeing him again, he feels that his life is starting anew.

Jesse purchases a home located in a remote area north of Baxter, giving him the peace and privacy that he desires. That is short-lived when he is visited and threatened by Balem “Cotton” Moxley, who believes that Jesse is trespassing on his property. The situation quickly escalates to violence.

““Enter Baxter Parish,” the sign on the interstate read ... Reading the sign let me know I was finally home.”

The excitement and danger intensify with each page. First novelist Dayne Sherman will have readers holding their breath as they follow Jesse in his fight for his rights, putting his life and others' in harm's way.



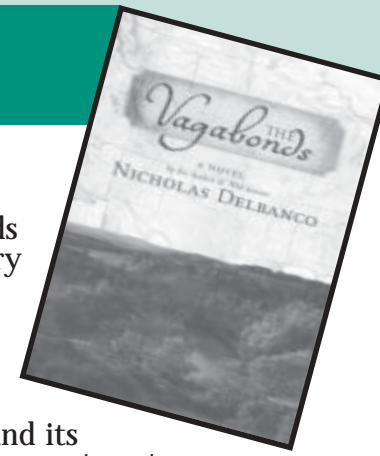
The Vagabonds

by Nicholas Delbanco

Warner Books, 2004

Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, and an assorted cast of friends and camping partners toured the country in their new automobiles during the summers around World War I. The year 1916 found the “vagabonds” traveling through Saratoga Springs, New York. An unexpected event during their tour forever changed the life of a local girl, and its legacy followed her family for most of the next century.

Fast forward...2003...Alice Saperstone has passed away leaving as heirs her grown children: Joanna, Claire, and David. When the children return to their childhood home in Saratoga Springs, they discover they have been bequeathed a trust fund set up in 1916, containing five shares of General Electric stock, which are now worth a small fortune. The inheritance will transform the adrift Saperstone children and will provide them with a new vision of family and home for which all have been searching. They will soon come to grips with the idea of inheritance, “so it doesn't matter, really, if what we inherit is money or debt, a set of cats or cutlery or a portrait of Grandfather Aaron: what matters is the way we deal with what's been left behind.” The tale is a fascinating look at events of the past and the legacy of the future.



Snowed In

by Christina Bartolomeo

St. Martin's Press, 2004

Sophie Quinn, a thirty-something artist married for two years, has moved to Maine from the D.C. area for the year her husband Paul needs to spend on a special project. Although smart, likable and considerably talented, Sophie lacks self-confidence. There are changes other than the harsh climate that are making her life difficult. In spite of a marriage that had seemed happy, Paul has turned distant, dismissive, and condescending, along with his controlling mother Natalie. Meantime, Rory, the “one who got away” and married someone else, has resumed correspondence with her, temptingly indicating a hope to meet once again.

Meantime, through Stephen, a man she chanced to meet in a coffee shop, Sophie has joined a walking group whose members have become her friends, especially Stephen and his brother Ned. These men, her sister Delia, and her best pal Marta in Washington, are people she can count on when her spirits are low. Unlike Paul, they applaud her growing self-awareness, independence, and capabilities.

Like her old and new friends, the reader will also want to root for Sophie, hoping she will find the life she deserves — and with the right person. It is a wonderfully engaging story, with well-drawn characters and witty dialogue. It may be read in a weekend, or the reader may prefer making it last by taking it in small doses.



The Painting by Nina Schuyler

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2004

This debut novel tells two love stories that unfold because of a painting.

In Japan in 1869, Ayoshi paints to escape the unhappiness of her arranged marriage. Her paintings keep alive for her the man whom she will always love. Ayoshi's husband makes pottery and ships it around the world. Ayoshi slips one of her paintings in one of his packing crates.

The crate is unpacked by Jorgen, who works for an importer in Paris. He hides the painting to prevent it from being discovered by his employer. Paris is in the grip of the Franco-Prussian war, a war in which Jorgen has lost a leg. Jorgen has left a woman whom he loved when he came from Denmark to fight in the war as a paid replacement for a wealthy Frenchman.

The painting, a watercolor of lovers in an embrace, speaks to both Ayoshi and Jorgen of their lost loves. The two will never meet, but their lives become defined by the painting. The chapters alternate the stories of Ayoshi and Jorgen as they struggle with the emotional impact of their situations.

The Painting is an imaginative story that explores different cultures and the desire to survive.

“The woman in the painting stares at him and Jorgen's heart stutters.”



East Side Story

by Louis Auchincloss

Houghton Mifflin, 2004

In his 60th novel, 87-year old Louis Auchincloss strikes a moral chord in his elegant novel *East Side Story*. Following the story of a New York family, the Carnochans, from the arrival of Scottish forebear David Carnochan prior to the Civil War through the next six generations, the novel describes the loves, careers, and life choices of this wealthy segment of society. With a fortune grown from the thread industry, each generation faces the struggle of determining its place in the family, in society, and in the hearts of its members.

The Carnochan saga is told in a series of vignettes with each chapter following the intriguing story of a different individual. A family tree in the front of the book helps with orientation, but Auchincloss so deftly weaves the stories that the relationships are not as crucial as the challenges each member faces. Scottish pragmatism, idealistic vulnerability, nagging inadequacy, and vague disappointment color many of the characters' lives as they struggle to define their own versions of success. From the mansions and boardrooms, from those who make money to those who marry it, this novel is a strong sociological statement on the times and characters that make up the elite of our society.

