

Baker Towers by Jennifer Haigh

William Morrow, 2005

The novel begins in the 1940s, in the coal mining town of Bakerton in central western Pennsylvania, and continues through the decades up till the present day. Baker Towers are the 40-foot-high coal waste, known locally as "bony piles," that loom over the town. The central characters are the Novaks, a family of Polish and Italian descent. The father, a miner, dies in the beginning of the story; thus the narrative follows the lives of the five children, each of whom leaves Bakerton at some point. Some will return.

Georgie, the eldest, joins the army and afterwards makes an unhappy marriage. As many girls of the era and locale did, Dorothy finds a job in Washington, discovering that it was not as glamorous as expected. Joyce joins the military and finds that women in these jobs are treated like sex objects. Happy-go-lucky Sandy leaves for California, returning occasionally as an apparently wealthy man, but leaving abruptly. Lucy, the baby of the family, after a miserable adolescence, winds up with probably the most contented life of all.

Baker Towers defines the hardscrabble life of the traditional mining town – with its company houses, the company store, the closed ethnic groups, and the ever-present threat of a mine disaster – from its heyday of three bustling shifts per day to its eventual demise after the steel and, therefore, coal industries failed. The book ends, however, on a note of hope.

Jennifer Haigh knows whereof she speaks. Bakerton is a real place, and the author grew up in a nearby town. She can hardly have actually experienced the era she writes about, but she has surely captured its essence. Ms. Haigh's debut novel, *Mrs. Kimble*, won the PEN/ Hemingway Award for best first fiction.



The Good Wife by Stewart O'Nan

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005

Patty and Tommy are expecting their first child when Tommy is arrested. The charge is murder. Patty's charge becomes even more challenging – fighting for her husband with few resources and little understanding of the system.

Accomplished author Stewart O'Nan tells an unusual love story. Patty's strong sense of loyalty provides her with the determination to maintain a connection with her incarcerated husband. Family plays an integral role in supporting Patty and her son.



"Until now – until the phone rings – she's been happy ..."

The reader may alternate between admiration and admonishment for Patty but will not argue that she should be respected. The story is engaging because Patty never gives up. She is always ready to look beyond the most recent disappointment or setback.

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Absent Friends by S. J. Rozan

Delacorte Press, 2004

Whether or not you've enjoyed the very talented Rozan's mystery series starring Lydia Chin and Bill Smith, chances are you'll be drawn into this story, a departure from her series' witty banter, though not from its complex and engrossing mystery elements.

In this non-series novel, the histories of a small group of friends who grew up together on Staten Island are individual pieces of a puzzle; a tale of greed and tragedy which unfolds around the theme of September 11, 2001. It begins with the supposed suicide of a prize-winning, muckraking reporter who's been investigating mysterious financial support of a family: large payments which have been traced to so-far undiscovered papers belonging to FDNY Captain Jimmy McCaffery, heroically martyred in the 9/11 World Trade Center tragedy. Is Jimmy, the hero the City reveres and needs so desperately as an emblem of hope and reconstruction, the man they remember, or are a tragic shooting and underworld ties about to forever darken his reputation? What's the real story behind the money, and does the acolyte and former lover of the dead reporter have what it takes to finish what the dead man started? Rozan's intimate portrait of a group of 40-something New Yorkers coping with tragedy, both public and private, might be the most eloquent and personal account of post-9/11 grief so far portrayed.



"...a shout, and someone weeping. Sticky dust clinging to skin and hair. An abrupt midday darkness that rolled away to reveal a new, ash-covered world."

Shelf Life

Grace A. Dow Memorial Library

Summer 2005

Original Reviews
of Recommended Books



Outside Valentine by Liza Ward

Henry Holt and Company, 2004

Three different time periods intersect with a common catastrophic event. First time novelist Liza Ward weaves a story that stuns the reader with its violence but also tells of the power of love.

In 1958, Charlie and Caril, two young people who are misfits, kill members of Caril's family because of an argument.

Their senseless killings continue when they take refuge in the home of a married couple and their servant, leaving them dead. Their son Lowell is not at home at the time of the murders. Charlie and Caril are caught outside of a town called Valentine.

"Charlie got the chair; which wasn't any surprise, but I got life when I should have got off."

Interest in the killings and those convicted of the killings continues into the 1960s. Susan, a teenager, is intrigued by the events and becomes even more so when she hears that the boy orphaned by the killings lives a few blocks from her. She befriends a girl at school who lives next door to Lowell so that she can spy on him. Susan and Lowell eventually marry.

The story narrated by Lowell begins in the early 1990s. His marriage to Susan is facing difficulties.

He must come to terms with his feelings for her and the haunting memories of his parents' tragic deaths.

Although the chapters alternate among the stories of the three characters, Caril, Susan, and Lowell, the novel becomes one story climaxing in an unexpected but tender ending.

Grace A. Dow Memorial Library

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The Navigator of New York by Wayne Johnston

Anchor Books, 2003

The theme is discovery, as the historic polar exploration rivalry between Cook and Peary sets the stage for young orphan Devlin Stead's parallel revelation as to his true parentage. Having been abandoned by his father, who takes a position as surgeon with polar explorer Robert Peary, Devlin lives with his mother in Newfoundland, until her mysterious drowning. Legendary explorer Frederick Cook begins a strange correspondence with Devlin through the boy's secretive uncle.

When of age, Devlin travels to colorful turn-of-the-century New York City, and accepts a position in Cook's household, as well as on his exploration team. The famous Robert Peary might be the most insurmountable obstacle standing between the two men and their fame and fortune as the true discoverers of the North Pole. Filled not only with engrossing family drama, but also with rich polar exploration detail and gripping depictions of the rigors of traveling through the frozen north, Johnson's tale, nominated for the Giller Prize, is an exhilarating experience.

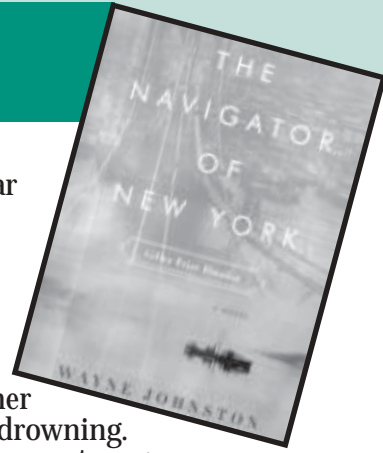
"Whoever makes it to the pole first will owe a greater debt to the Eskimos than he owes to his captain, his crew and his backers put together."

Angel of Harlem by Kuwana Haulsey

One World/Ballantine Books, 2004

A fictionalized biography of the first black female doctor in New York, the *Angel of Harlem*, traces the life of Dr. May Edward Chinn during her early life and career in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The daughter of a former slave and an Indian mother, May Chinn grew up in poverty in Harlem. While her living situation was occasionally desperate, her mother's tenacity and strong belief in education propelled May to reach out to the world. She found her talent in classical piano and dreamed of attending Julliard on a music scholarship, but these plans were dashed with an unwanted pregnancy. She then applied and was accepted to Columbia to study music, even though she never actually finished high school. Through a series of incidents with a racist professor, May was convinced to switch her major to science and later attended medical school. As a physician, she reached out to the downtrodden of Harlem society and earned a reputation in New York for her tireless efforts in aiding the sick and needy. She gained the respect of the medical community for her work in the diagnosis of cancer.

In addition to all of her academic and professional successes, Dr. Chinn became part of the texture of Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s and became friends with the likes of Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston. Her story is one of strong character and inspiration and is a stunning example of a life well-lived.



Amagansett by Mark Mills

G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2004

First-generation Basque fisherman Conrad Labarde and his partner Rollo make a tragic discovery one day as they haul in a fishnet while plying their trade off a remote stretch of beach near the Hamptons, enclave of the rich and powerful. The fiercely principled Conrad and the simple Rollo, both Amagansett natives and companions since boyhood, have no love for the summer residents. There's a fundamental antipathy during the 1940s, the setting of the novel, between hard-scrabble commercial fishermen and wealthy sportsmen vying for the same desirable fishing waters. Conrad's shocking discovery reveals a secret liason and brings him, along with local police detective Tom Hollis, up against the ruthless and politically ambitious Wallace family, whose deceit and corruption he must finally expose, with possibly fatal consequences.

Author Mills has crafted a gripping story – a tale heavy with morality, and loaded with the lore and legend of Amagansett and the people who have shaped it.

Banishing Verona

by Margot Livesey

Henry Holt and Company, 2004

Zeke is painting at the Barrows' home when a pregnant woman knocks on the door, claiming to be the Barrows' niece. The Barrows are vacationing while Zeke works on the house, so, having no reason to doubt her, Zeke lets her in. Before she mysteriously disappears, they spend the night together, leading Zeke to believe that a relationship is possible. Zeke feels especially foolish since he never asked her name. He is hopeful that he can locate her, because she left behind a book, a family diary.

When Zeke contacts the Barrows, he is astonished to hear that the woman is not their niece. His well-ordered life is now in turmoil, fostered further by his father's recent heart attack and the knowledge of his mother's love affair.

Eventually Zeke does find out that the woman's name is Verona and learns about her family from the book, written by her grandfather, that was left behind at the Barrows'. In a desperate voice, Verona soon calls Zeke, seeking his help with a family crisis.

How Zeke responds to Verona's plea speaks to the depth of his feelings for her, a woman with whom he has spent one night. This is a unique love story. Margot Livesey's novels are engaging and intriguing. *Banishing Verona* is no exception.

"Beneath the pillow, his fingers encountered something unexpected. He drew the book into the light."



The Tree Bride by Bharati Mukherjee

Hyperion, 2004

In a story that intertwines past and present, Mukherjee gives us the history of East India through the lives of the characters. In traditional Indian Hindu tradition, marriages are arranged when the children are quite young. It is also terribly unlucky for a girl to be unwed. When her 12-year-old groom was bitten by a snake and died, 5-year-old Tara Lata was wed to a tall, straight sundari tree. Tara Lata then spent the rest of her life in her father's house, studying and teaching.

Later, Tara Chatterje, her namesake, is researching the Tree Bride's story. She and her former husband Bish, who grew up in Calcutta, now live in California. Their families originally lived in Bengal, but relocated to Calcutta when East Pakistan (later to become Bangladesh) was split off from India. Although Bish and Tara have been divorced, they are again living together because Bish had been injured in an explosion at Tara's house.

As she reaches back in time, Tara finds that everything from the past is echoed in the present. As Bish says, "There is no coincidence."

"If nothing in history is ever lost, and if everything human is finally connected, gaps in the record are only temporary, they don't really matter."

Old Boys by Charles McCarry

Overlook Press, 2004

Back in the days when the Cold War provided the context for spy fiction, Charles McCarry was a strong contender for the title of "the American John Le Carre." McCarry's CIA was close in tone to Smiley's Circus. Recruits were chosen from society's elite, products of the best private schools and universities. His chief protagonist, Paul Christopher, appears in all of his books.

In *Old Boys*, Paul's cousin Horace Hubbard recounts the mystery surrounding Paul's death in a Chinese prison. Horace believes that his cousin is still alive and searching for his mother, who had disappeared into the clutches of the Nazis during the war. Horace assembles a team of retired CIA colleagues — the "old boys" of the title — to search for his cousin and aunt. The quest proceeds over three continents as a series of post-Cold War enemies — the Chinese government, Russian mafia, Islamic terrorists, Asian bandits and American black ops agents — are also on the hunt for Paul. The first thing the Old Boys find out is that Paul's mother supposedly has a priceless scroll depicting the death of Christ from a Roman agent's viewpoint. McCarry blends these ingredients and takes the reader on a wild ride.

