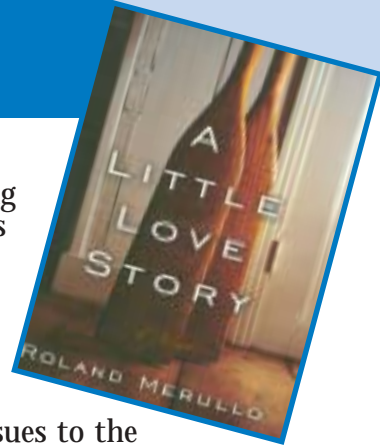


A Little Love Story

by Roland Merullo

Shaye Areheart Books, 2005

When he meets Janet, Jake is still coping with the death of his girlfriend, who was an attendant on the plane that was hijacked by terrorists and crashed in Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001. Their accidental meeting occurs when Janet backs into his truck.



Both Jake and Janet bring emotional issues to the relationship, most importantly the fact that Janet is entering into the last stages of cystic fibrosis. The novel covers the first three months of their time together. They embark on an intense journey, knowing that as their feelings for each other deepen, their chances for a future diminish.

"Be happy while we can."

The author avoids an overdose of sentimentality by letting his characters express anger, frustration, humor, and even violence as they confront their reactions to a situation they cannot control.

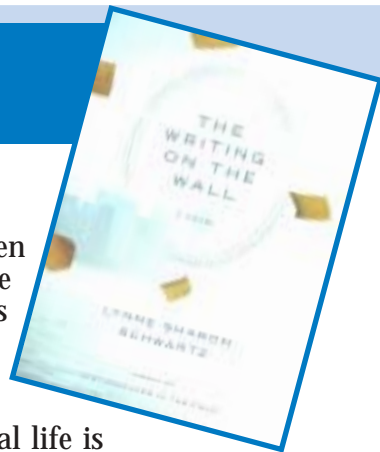
The ending might not be truly satisfying to everyone but will provide hope to those who face seemingly insurmountable challenges. This love story has much to recommend it.

The Writing on the Wall

by Lynne Sharon Schwartz

Counterpoint, 2005

Renata has an uncanny knack for languages. She is capable of learning even the most difficult vernacular with a little time and samples of the language. She is employed at the New York Public Library to assist in cataloging materials in foreign languages. As competent as she is in her professional life, her personal life is unsettled. She has recently met a caring man whom she feels, for the first time in her life, she can trust. But the tragic events of September 2001, force her to face unresolved issues from her youth.



"Something... is working its way through her; a creeping vibration in her cells, an uneasy humming."

Amid the posters and flyers of desperate New Yorkers looking for missing loved ones, a mute and lost teenage girl crosses her path. Because the girl resembles the niece Renata had cared for after her sister committed suicide, but lost to abduction, she takes the girl to live with her. She is hesitant to tell her new boyfriend about her roommate, in case he should question her motive. Their relationship is even further strained when another former contact compels her to travel to Houston to find the uncle who is the key to her family's disintegration.

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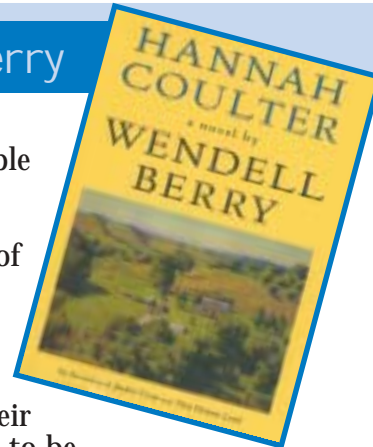
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Hannah Coulter by Wendell Berry

Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004

Hannah is a simple woman living a simple life in Port William, Kentucky. Looking back at her life during the Depression, World War II, and on through the lives of her children up to the present, she finds grief and pain but plenty of love to carry her through those times of despair. After a quiet courtship in 1940, Hannah marries Virgil Feltner and they begin their dreams of a life and home together, only to be interrupted by Virgil's departure off to war. He never returns from the Battle of the Bulge, and Hannah and her baby daughter have to learn to live without knowing what happened to him. Fortunately, Virgil's parents and other members of the Port William community help Hannah find her place among them.



Hannah later marries Nathan Coulter, a returning local soldier struggling with his own war memories. They purchase an old farm in Port William, where they spend the next 50 years of their married life, raising their family and living off the land. Nathan and Hannah sadly watch as their children eventually drift away from the farm and the community they care about so deeply. At the novel's end, Hannah again mourns the loss of her husband, while trying to understand him and his wartime experiences.

Author Wendell Berry has written several novels about the good-hearted folks of Port William. While the plot may not be stirring, the character studies of both the main characters and the other townspeople are inspiring. All the stories weave the themes of commitment to landscape, family, love, and community together with clear, meaningful prose. Hannah's voice is wise, forthright, and compassionate and shows a life well-lived. Wendell Berry's writing makes the simplest telling of a life the most compelling.

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

Editors: Barbara Brennan, Margee Smith

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

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Shelf Life

Grace A. Dow Memorial Library

Winter 2006

Original Reviews
of Recommended Books

The Sad Truth about Happiness

by Anne Giardini

Fourth Estate, 2005



Maggie Selfrin, always known as "the easy one" of three sisters, dropped the idea of a Ph.D. program at the university in Vancouver to pursue instead a course in radiation technology. Presently she finds satisfaction in her work in this field, performing mammograms competently and compassionately. She shares an apartment with Rebecca, who devises self-help quizzes for women's magazines. Rebecca invites Maggie to take the latest test which, if answered honestly, purports to predict the date of one's death according to her degree of happiness. To the question "Are you happy?" Maggie responds, "Not completely," with disturbing results. Had she replied yes, her death would take place 55 years hence. As it is, the date will be only several months away.

"Maybe, it occurred to me to ask myself, I was happy but didn't know enough of sorrow to be certain."

Despite developing a case of insomnia, Maggie goes on with her not-exactly-unhappy life, described with wit and humor. Her concern for her high-strung sisters reaches crisis point, however, when pregnant Lucy, engaged to marry Ryan, delivers a child that her former Italian lover claims is his. Gian Luigi arrives at the hospital from Rome, with papers in hand demanding custody. Determined that this will not happen, Maggie spirits baby Philip out of the hospital and flees with him to friends in rural, eastern Quebec.

This is a thoroughly enjoyable first person narrative with sparkling vocabulary, fresh similes, and excellent characterization that draw in the reader. The story is a delight. Anne Giardini, the daughter of author Carol Shields, has inherited her mother's talent and more.

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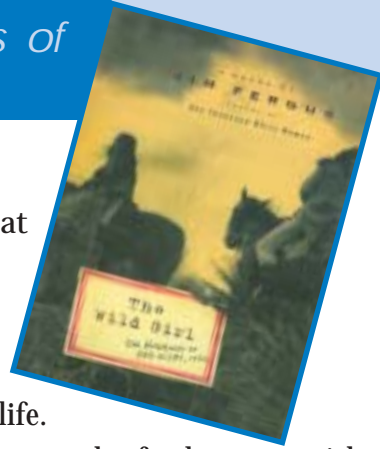
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The Wild Girl: The Notebooks of Ned Giles, 1932 by Jim Fergus

Hyperion, 2005

Elderly newspaper photographer, Ned Giles, sells to an art gallery the photo that means the most to him - that of a wild Apache girl lying desolate in a Mexican jail. Orphaned, destitute, and unwilling to let anyone near her, "La Niña Bronca" captured Ned Giles's heart and soul years before, changing the course of his life.



At 17, orphan Ned Giles leaves Chicago in search of adventure with the Great Apache Expedition of 1932, hoping to become the expedition photographer. The unlikely ensemble of gentlemen, politicians, Apaches, and a female anthropologist leaves Douglas, Arizona, to free a white boy taken captive by the Apaches of the Sierra Madre region of Mexico. A plan is launched by the group to trade "La Niña Bronca" for the white boy. Unfortunately, this task is far more complex than anyone in the group anticipates. While the expedition winds its way through the rugged country of the Sierra Madres, Ned learns to care deeply for the troubled girl and for his accompanying friends. Decisions are made on the trail that will alter the destinies of all of the characters and perhaps signal the end of an era for the Apaches.

Based loosely on several true stories, Fergus does a masterful job in bringing these unforgettable characters alive. The tales are relayed through journal entries, flashbacks, and alternating viewpoints, rounding out this story of adventure, peril, and romance.

A Sudden Country by Karen Fisher

Random House, 2005

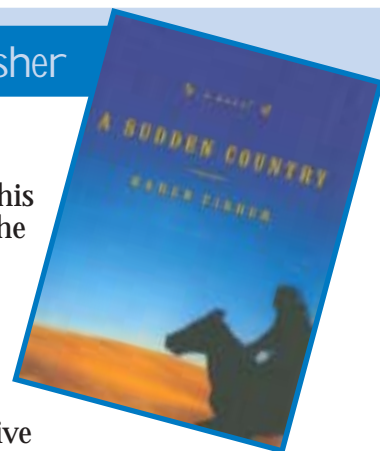
After the deaths of his children from smallpox, James MacLaren searches for his runaway wife and the man with whom she left, leading him to the Oregon Trail, where he is hired on as a teamster.

Fellow traveler Lucy Mitchell nurses a growing resentment as she goes about her duties of cooking, washing, making and breaking camp, and caring for her five children. She is the wagon master's second wife. She did not want to migrate and is convinced that she will lose someone

"Then a wise man told me sorrow is a poison. I did not believe him."

close to her on this harsh journey. Her husband is generally thoughtless of her feelings. Only James MacLaren is sympathetic toward her. He and Lucy grow close despite resistance on both their parts. They finally give in to their desires, and their relationship nearly tears the entire expedition apart.

After suffering the hardships of life on the trail, the people who survive the trip to Oregon are changed forever. This story is based on the author's family history and other actual historical characters.



Murder Never Forgets by Diana O'Hehir

Berkley Prime Crime, 2005

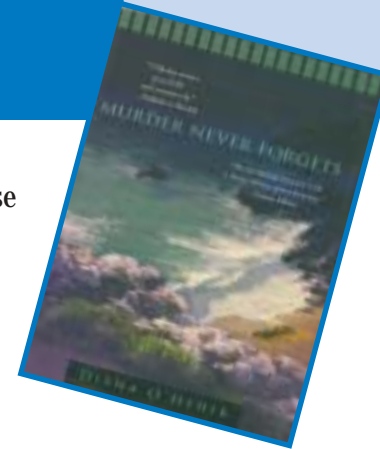
When she learns that her father may lose his apartment at Green Beach Manor, a colony for independently functioning adults, Carla quits her job and heads there. Her father has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, but his unpredictable behavior has management considering moving him to an auxiliary facility.

Through her contact with other residents, Carla becomes aware of a series of "accidents" in the complex, as well as concerned about her father's increased confusion. Carla's father was an authority on Egyptology and his ramblings about a token, the pyramids, and a woman being wrapped in a fishing net seem to be memories from his past excursions to Egypt.

When an employee is found dead on Manor property, Carla knows that no one at Green Beach Manor is safe. She is convinced that her father's seemingly irrelevant references to Egyptian history are the key to solving not only this murder but also a plot to undervalue the Manor.

"There was a woman on the beach. They seized her soul. Three people. With a fishing net."

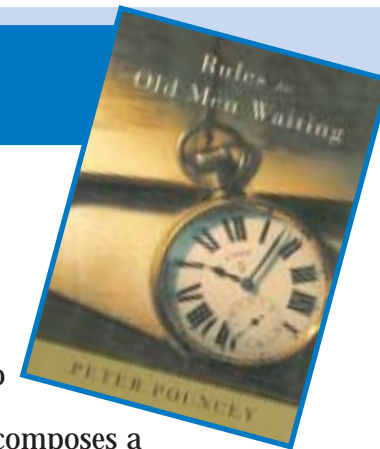
This first mystery by the author of *I Wish This War Were Over*, incorporates references to Egyptology, addresses the difficulty of caring for Alzheimer's patients, provides an array of suspects requiring detective work, and entertains with its humorous moments.



Rules for Old Men Waiting by Peter R. Pouncey

Random House, 2005

Grieving the loss of his wife of many years, octogenarian Robert McIver establishes for himself rules of conduct which will govern whatever is left of his life, which he now spends alone in the Cape Cod house they shared. Wishing to infuse dignity and purpose into the last lonely chapter of his existence, McIver composes a fictional World War I soldier's memoir. As he exercises enormous self-discipline writing the story (dictated by his first rule: work every day), the purposeful task flexes his memory, and he relives his own experiences during World War II, and those shared by his son, who served in Viet Nam. McIver's will to thrive intellectually and emotionally in the solitary winter of his life seems fueled by the memory of his beloved late wife. Author Pouncey weaves enormous morality and integrity throughout not only McIver's story, but also into the tale his character is writing, bringing cinematically alive McIver's gripping yarn, and rendering a beautiful and moving portrait of his character's former family life.



The Secret Goldfish: Stories by David Means

Fourth Estate, 2004

The fifteen stories that comprise this collection are, with very few exceptions, finely crafted little masterpieces of loss and desertion. Born and raised in Michigan, David Means has a filmmaker's ability to stage the struggles of lonely people living in desolate locations with such precision and so humanely that you find yourself questioning whether or not this is fiction and if, perhaps, the characters encountered on the page are people you know. Much like the short stories of Joyce Carol Oates, Means has a strategy of creating violence, often random and usually catastrophic, within his characters' lives. The point of view Means most often relies on isn't the victim's; it's a detached, third person perspective, and the effect is disturbing. In *Michigan Death Trip*, Means recounts the last moments of a cross-country skier. It is in these moments of chance or misfortune that Means shines. The elements - fate, luck, etc. - which keep us anchored to life are tenuous.



Mr. Emerson's Wife

by Amy Belding Brown

St. Martin's Press, 2005

This first work by Amy Belding Brown is fictional literary biography at its best. Told in the first person, it is the story of Lydia Jackson, a well-educated, independent woman of Plymouth, Massachusetts, who becomes enamored after a brief meeting with Ralph Waldo Emerson. Although she has foresworn marriage, he convinces her that their marriage could be an equal meeting of the minds — a true partnership — and she agrees to marry him and move to Concord.

The Emerson home quickly receives houseguests of the likes of Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and neighbor Henry Thoreau, making it a haven for transcendentalist thought. As the Emerson children are born and the duties of motherhood call, Lydia (renamed Lidian by Emerson) begins to feel left out of her husband's inner circle. Loneliness and disillusionment overwhelm her and she finds solace in her friendship with introspective Henry Thoreau. Soon their relationship takes shape as a long-standing romance, which, while passionate, is tempered by nineteenth century conventions of morality and propriety.

The story becomes a rich panorama for the relationship between three well-known individuals: Emerson, Thoreau, and Lidian. The philosophies of each are reflected in the context of the time, providing a backdrop for the character study. Belding effortlessly blends fact and conjecture to come up with a revealing and realistic portrait of Mr. Emerson's wife.

