

The Girl Who Played Go

by Shan Sa

Translated from French by Adriana Hunter Knopf, 2003

The ancient game of Go gives structure to the life of a sixteen-year-old Manchurian girl, who plays it obsessively with the men in the town square. This is highly unusual for a girl, but the game allows her to forget the inner turmoil of her budding sexuality and the outer turmoil of her decaying society. She sees little reason to enter the world of adulthood - her older sister has married unhappily, her cousin wants her to marry him, and her parents are disappointed and remote. After friendship with a fellow student begins to draw her out of her shell, she meets and becomes involved with some of the dissident students fighting for Manchurian independence.

"Independent" Manchuria in the 1930s is under occupation by the Japanese whose troops come to town to quell the rebellious students. A young Japanese officer, away from home on duty for the first time, arrives with the troops. Disguised as a man from Peking, the Japanese officer goes to the Square of a Thousand Winds to get information about the local dissidents. He meets and begins a game of Go with the Manchurian girl.

The Japanese officer and the Manchurian girl learn each other's innermost secrets as they sit facing one another across the game board for days. As political turmoil increases, her student friends are captured. Finally, she asks the officer for his help in escaping. Unable to become allies, they go their separate ways - until meeting once more during the fall of Peking.

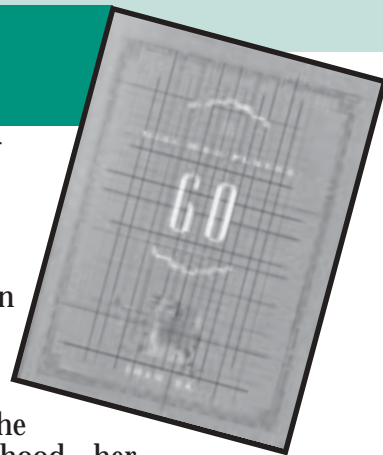
Not All Tarts Are Apple

by Pip Granger

Poisoned Pen Press, 2002

The tart in the title is seven-year-old Rosie's mother who, shortly after giving birth, left the baby with kind strangers when she couldn't resist the urge to follow booze and men. Now it is the 1950s, and "Uncle" Bert and "Aunt" Maggie are lovingly rearing Rosie in a seedy part of London, where they own a café and live in a flat above. In her innocence Rosie befriends mobster and prostitute alike. Her mother, also known as the "perfumed lady," drifts in and out of her life. With the self-absorption of a child, her life seems normal, even in such unusual circumstances. The story takes place during the summer of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation. While all of England celebrates, a mysterious stranger lurks around the café looking for Rosie's mother. Is the stranger connected to her unknown birth family? Why does he threaten the comfortable life Rosie had known up to this point?

This breezy story is perfect for the reader who is looking for a light mystery with lots of quirky characters.



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Bandbox by Thomas Mallon

Pantheon Books, 2004

Bandbox is a behind-the-scenes, often humorous look at competing men's magazines in 1920s Manhattan. Successful *Bandbox* magazine is being challenged by newcomer *Cutaway* magazine whose editor, Jimmy Gordon, formerly worked for *Bandbox*. Subscriptions and ad revenues for *Bandbox* are decreasing and its very existence is threatened.

The future looks dim for *Bandbox* as the staff struggles to put together the upcoming issue. The cover story about the notorious film actress Rosemary La Roche has been complicated because the staff writer finds himself under her command. A photo shoot featuring a bull and a bear goes awry when the bull has no horns and the bear is a koala bear. Another storyline follows the kidnapping of a *Bandbox* subscriber who may be the magazine's savior.

"Anybody got any ideas on how to keep this bandwagon rolling for another month?"

Cutaway has an insider at *Bandbox* who provides them information about *Bandbox's* latest articles and features. To the reader's delight, the scoops passed on to Jimmy are only snatches of overheard conversations leading to incorrect assumptions.

The characters in this novel are interesting, unpredictable, and comical. All of this takes place against the backdrop of prohibition and police corruption of the 1920s. As in his other novels, Thomas Mallon incorporates real people in the story, including Al Jolson, Leopold and Loeb, and President Cleveland.

Thomas Mallon has a reputation for well-written historical novels. *Bandbox* is no exception and, in addition, showcases his wit.



The Pleasure of My Company

by Steve Martin

Hyperion, 2003

In this funny and touching short novel, Daniel Pecan Cambridge keeps to his apartment more than most people, largely because, once outside, he finds even the curbing on the opposite side of the street insurmountable. He is also given to routing himself through the neighborhood Kinko's to touch all four corners of the copiers. His odd behavior and semi-isolation lead to a limited social circle, consisting of Philipa and Brian, his neighbors; Zandy, the local Rite Aid's attractive pharmacist; Elizabeth, the realtor he watches showing apartments; and his case-worker-in-training, Clarissa. Daniel passes the time waiting to hear of his successful application to Mensa by taking control of his life in small increments. He enters the Tepperton Pie Company's Most Average American essay contest, and makes 'magic squares': grids of columns of unique numbers that produce the identical sum, whether read vertically or horizontally. Daniel's desire to be part of the world at large thrusts him into comic situations, but also more potentially serious circumstances, when a murder is committed nearby. Finally, the death of his beloved Granny in Texas sends him back to his boyhood home, where he discovers the roots of his disorder. Whether his mental progress is due to this epiphany or merely a result of cumulative trips to his beloved Rite Aid, Daniel manages to conquer his loneliness, one grid-square at a time.

"With a cheery delicacy, she divided my obsessions into three categories: acceptable, unacceptable, and hilarious."

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If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things by Jon McGregor

Houghton Mifflin, 2002

This imaginative and compelling first novel was nominated for the Booker Prize. It chronicles a day in the life of a neighborhood and a tragic episode.

The beginning pages of this poetic novel set the stage. Hints of a terrible event are interwoven in the prose. Throughout the day inhabitants' lives are revealed, including their dreams, secrets, and pasts. Suspense builds to the novel's conclusion.

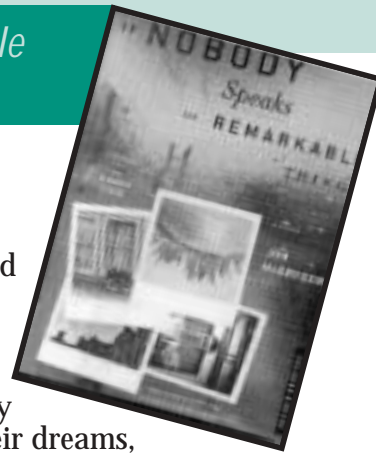
Chapters alternate between describing the lives of the neighbors and the first person account of a young, single girl who is coping with an unexpected pregnancy. Meet the man with

"If you listen, you can hear it. The city, it sings."

scarred hands who tried to save his wife from their burning home, now left alone to raise their child. Feel the love of the older couple, the husband lying to his wife to shield her from knowing about his terminal illness. Empathize

with the husband and wife with twin boys and a daughter who must house and care for elderly parents.

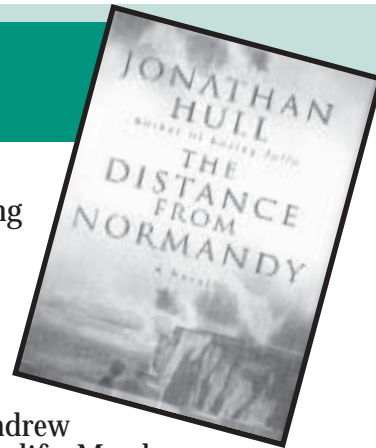
Readers will be moved and astonished that so short a novel can portray ordinary yet extraordinary lives.



The Distance from Normandy: A Novel by Jonathan Hull

St. Martin's Press, 2003

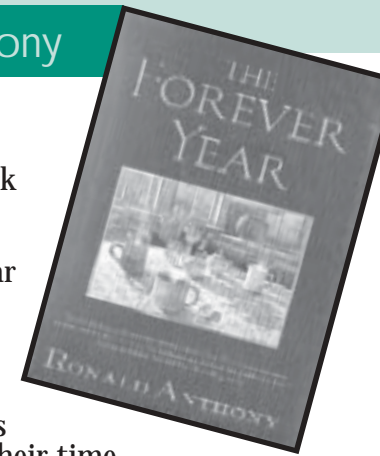
This generational story reflects the struggling relationship of World War II veteran Mead and his angry, troubled teen grandson Andrew. Mead has recently lost his beloved wife and has been coping poorly with his grief and loneliness, when the call comes that his grandson has been suspended for bringing a knife to school. Thinking that Andrew could benefit from some firm structure in his life, Mead invites him to spend three weeks with him at his home in California. A classic generation gap is evident from the onset as Andrew - with his earring, headphones, and baggy pants - collides with the world of orderliness and discipline that Mead learned as a young man in the Army. Mead can't relate to his grandson's lack of focus in life when his own youth had been so clearly defined by war and the violent loss of so many of his comrades. When Andrew gets himself into more trouble, Mead decides that a trip to Normandy to see the battlefields will instill in Andrew a sense of perspective and straighten him out. Once there, Mead finds himself lost in his memories of the war, from his terrifying parachute-drop on D-Day to the final days of the war in Germany. The trip provides a catharsis for both as they deal with their loss of innocence and their fears for the future. The author has created vivid characters full of pain and hope. Author Jonathan Hull reiterates the theme characterized in his first novel, *Losing Julia*, that *"Our lives...all our lives...are a struggle between love and loss."*



Forever Year by Ronald Anthony

Forge, 2003

Written in the style of Nicholas Sparks, Ronald Anthony's first novel hits its mark with a time-tested tale of romance and generational differences. After nearly burning his house down, eighty-three year old Mickey Sienna is running out of options. His children summit to determine his fate. While some opt for assisted living, the youngest son, freelance writer Jesse, steps forward and asks Mickey to live with him. Believing that their time together will be a father-son bonding experience, Jesse is unprepared for the huge impact Mickey and his past life will have on his own choices for the future. Jesse, through a series of bad relationships, has sworn off love, thinking it could never last. When Mickey moves in, he seems unable to understand Jesse's no-strings-attached relationship with his girlfriend Marina and feels that Jesse is a fool not to see how special that relationship could be. Mickey finds himself compelled to relate his own story of great love, doling out pieces of his life fifty years ago in a way that will change Jesse's perceptions of love and the possibilities of a lasting relationship. The characters are real, tender-hearted people struggling to find connection in an often cynical world. As they touch each other's hearts, they will find a place in yours as well.



Anja the Liar by Thomas Moran

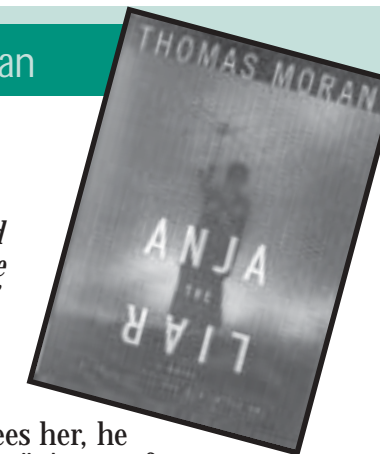
Riverhead Books (Penguin), 2003

"First Krakow principle: If you lie about anything ... with confidence and complete consistency, and repeat it over and over and over again, the lie will miraculously become the truth to you and everyone you tell it to."

Anja clings fervently to that and two other principles in order to keep at bay the memories of what she did in Krakow during the war. When Walter Fass first sees her, he thinks of her as "an empty dress, walking." Anja refuses to acknowledge Walter's presence on the other side of the fence of the displaced persons camp in Bavaria. The other women in the camp spend each day talking with the men who crowd the fence line. They are arranging marriages so that the allied occupiers will release the women from the camp.

Walter and Anja eventually come to terms, and they leave the camp to walk to his uncle's farm in northern Italy. Walter is an engineer and, after learning enough Italian to pass the engineer's exam, is able to continue his career. He is soon successful enough to purchase a house in town for Anja, and they have a child. After several years, an old acquaintance of Walter's arrives, and insinuates herself into their lives. Anja has become comfortable in her new life, but quickly resorts to reviewing the Krakow Principles to protect herself from this dangerous interloper.

Someone who has never been in a war might struggle to understand the feelings of those who have. This book brings us perilously close to comprehension.



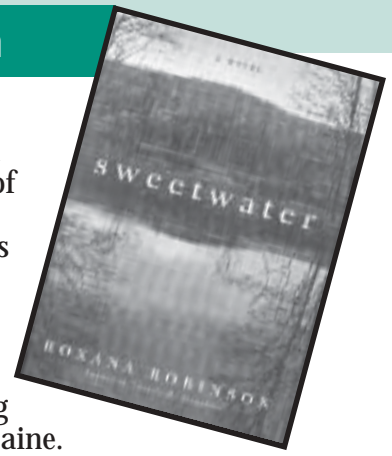
Sweetwater by Roxana Robinson

Random House, 2003

Isabel Green, an environmentalist, has been nearly traumatized by the untimely death of her husband Michael. Trying to get hold of herself and on with her life, she meets and is courted by the steady Paul Simmons. Not exactly on fire in her feelings for him but ready to love again, Isabel marries Paul, and shortly afterward they journey to Sweetwater Lodge and its three surrounding cabins, his family's summer compound in Maine. When Paul's brother Whit arrives from the Far West to join in the family vacation, an electrifying attraction occurs between him and Isabel. Fueled also by their mutual interest in conservation, the two find they have much in common, a situation which becomes painfully apparent to Paul. The memory of a past, misunderstood incident involving Whit and Paul's girlfriend intensifies Paul's growing bitterness. Try though Isabel and Whit may to do the right thing - or at least not do the wrong thing - she begins to find her marriage intolerable. Thus begins the downward spiral of feelings of anger, betrayal, jealousy, and guilt which begin to tear the family apart.

Meanwhile, a flashback reveals Isabel and Michael's passionate yet turbulent marriage and Michael's eventual death - an experience that haunts Isabel even after so many years. Some of the parallels between this and the brothers' mutual hostility explain both Isabel's and Whit's reluctance to follow their hearts.

Back in the present, the story of family ties gone wrong builds to a horrific climax, followed by a surprising, satisfying epilogue.



Secret Father by James Carroll

Houghton Mifflin, 2003

In National Book Award winner Carroll's ninth novel, the year is 1961. Three teenagers travel to East Berlin from the American school in Weisbaden, just weeks before the erection of the Berlin Wall divides the world into cold-warring factions. Tension is high between the Soviet bloc and the free world. Border guards are on hair-trigger stand-by, as Michael, an American banker's son under the thrall of German schoolmate and budding revolutionary, Ulrich, finds the glamour of traveling into East Berlin on a U.S. Army train for the spectacle of a May Day parade too exciting to resist. Ulrich's chic American girlfriend Kit also goes along for the ride, against

"...the cold war itself had begun as a currency dispute."

her better judgment. The naive students' daring outing turns drastically dangerous as they confront the sinister political machinery in motion, and

mistakenly place their trust in strangers. Novelist Carroll shakes a little romance into the mix, and cranks up the heat on the Cold War in this complex, richly written coming-of-age thriller.

