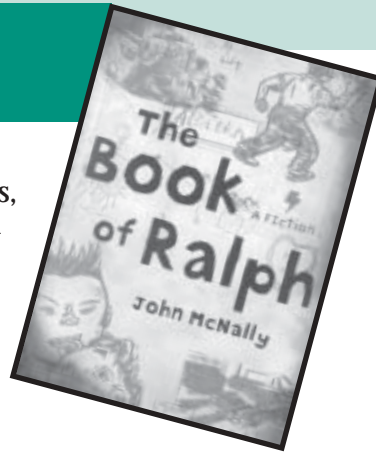


The Book of Ralph: A Fiction by John McNally

Free Press, 2004

Through a series of interconnected vignettes, Hank and his best friend Ralph are revealed to be remarkable in their thoughts, views, and actions. Hank, who was raised to be polite and therefore cannot deny Ralph a friendship, and Ralph, who does not appear to have been raised at all, are thrown into bizarre, tragic and humorous scenarios.



Chicago's Southside setting plays as big a role as the characters. Ralph is a frightening bully, left back two classes. Hank, while curious about Ralph, does not want to know any more than he already does. Ralph is often an accomplice to his older, criminal-minded cousins while Hank's clan clearly illustrates the term "dysfunctional family." His father collects street junk (bean bags, scrap metal, and charred plastic reindeer) to create a Christmas spectacular, only to have the police tell him he is in violation of several city ordinances. Hank and Ralph do everything together in the eighth grade, from dressing as Big Bird and Snuffleupagus for a car sale promotion to dreaming of a concert by Styx in the town's empty reservoir basin. Nostalgia for the 1970s is nearly complete with Hank's addiction to CB radio and his KISS Halloween costume. Years pass, and a car accident followed by a visit to a law office bring the injured and currently out-of-work Hank back to Chicago and Ralph's world, with surprising results.

Old School by Tobias Wolff

Alfred A. Knopf, 2003

At an exclusive New England prep school in the early 1960s, the young unnamed narrator in this coming-of-age novel competes obsessively with his peers to win an audience with his hero, Ernest Hemingway. Students at this boys' school are exhorted to know what's most worth knowing—the bearing and accomplishments of those who have preceded them at this historic, revered institution.



So anxious are he and his fellow members of the school's literary publication to win the respect and admiration of a string of famous visiting writers, that they enter their literary efforts regularly in a contest for an award and audience with the likes of Robert Frost, Ayn Rand, and Hemingway himself. It's an innocent place in time for American youth, when the qualities which demonstrate character and integrity are somewhat more benevolently tested than in later, socially tumultuous decades and settings. Wolff's engrossing novel demonstrates that people are shaped not only by the times, but also by striving for the things they most fervently desire, regardless of the cost.

"Stories though - one could not live in a world without stories."

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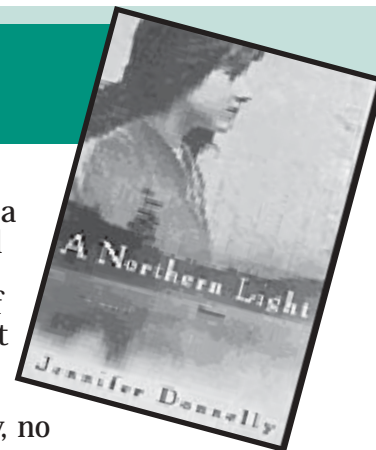
Saturday: 10AM - 5PM ~ Sunday: 1PM - 5PM

Closed Sundays from Memorial Day - Labor Day

A Northern Light by Jennifer Donnelly

Harcourt, 2003

The year is 1906. Mattie Gokey has taken a job as waitress at Glenmore, a resort hotel in the Adirondacks. A troubled young woman there has given Mattie a packet of letters with instructions to burn them, but before Mattie has a chance to carry out the request, the girl's body is recovered as the result of a boating accident. Strangely, no trace of her companion can be found.



Related by Mattie, the story switches back and forth between the present and the past year, during which Mattie, a lover of words and books, tries desperately to save for Barnard, the school to which she has received a scholarship. But prospects for college look dim. The promise she made to her dying mother to look after the household and her younger sisters, her father's resistance to her further education, the hardscrabble life of farming, and her physical attraction to the handsome but intellectually limited Royal Loomis all conspire to limit her opportunities. Meantime, her teacher Miss Wilcox, realizing Mattie's potential, remains her mentor, her supporter, and, along with classmate Weaver Smith, her friend.

Mattie is faced with two agonizing decisions: whether to pursue her dream of a higher education against all odds and whether to turn over the drowned Grace Brown's letters she had promised to destroy. The drowning, an actual occurrence, is the same that inspired Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.

"I know it is a bad thing to break a promise, but I think that it is a worse thing to let a promise break you."

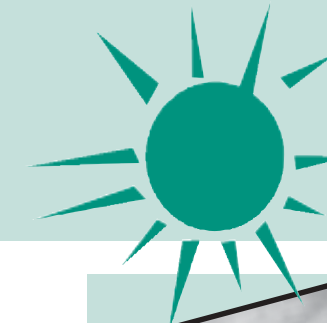


Shelf Life

Grace A. Dow Memorial Library

Summer 2004

Original Reviews
of Recommended Books



Aloft by Chang-rae Lee

Riverhead Books, 2004

Enter the world of Jerry Battle, a 60-year-old man who narrates this story of his family.

Jerry lives a comfortable life on Long Island. He has retired from the family's landscaping business that his son Jack is now running. His daughter Theresa has a successful career as a university instructor and is happily engaged to Paul. Jerry's father is in an assisted care facility, still alert and mobile.



There are no guarantees in life as Jerry discovers. As the novel opens, Jerry is coping with the end of a 21-year live-in relationship with Rita - her choice, not his. He will soon learn that Theresa and Paul will be marrying in the fall. Theresa is pregnant and has been diagnosed with terminal non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Jack has over-invested in the business and is facing bankruptcy. While coping with the news about his children, Jerry is notified that his father has walked out of the Ivy Acres Life Care Center and is missing.

As the crises mount, Jerry reflects on his childhood, the tragic death of his wife Daisy, and his relationships with his family and friends. Jerry finds solace in the air as he flies his small plane, taking in the calmness of the world below as viewed from the sky.

The author has written with compassion, honesty, humor and hopefulness about one man living and learning many roles - as son, husband, father, and lover. The reader will find "family" reaffirmed in the pages of this novel.

"... when you are up here and aloft and all you are really trying to do is ... simply stir with this special velocity that is in itself worth the whole of any voyage..."

Contributors: Melissa Barnard, Barbara Brennan, Ann Jarvis, Jan Kimmel, Carrie MacDonald, Emelia Parker, Margee Smith

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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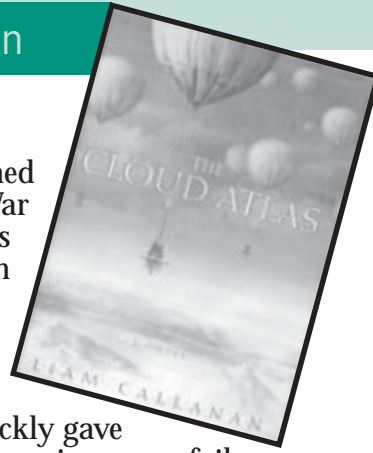
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The Cloud Atlas by Liam Callanan

Delacorte Press, 2004

First time author and NPR contributor Callanan crafts a poignant and well-researched historical novel. Toward the end of World War II, Japan floated bomb-laden balloons across the Atlantic to continental America. Though most didn't complete the journey, many did, landing as far east as Michigan. The army was successful in suppressing news of these arrivals. Americans did not know of the invasion until after the fact, since Japan quickly gave up sending the bombs, assuming that the campaign was a failure.



"There is something about the silence of a balloon in flight that consumes you, that renders everything around it silent, as if the balloon's magic included not only flight but the ability to swallow sound."

Naive young Louis Belk is stationed in Alaska as part of the detection and disposal team devoted to the floating bombs. His commanding officer is a cruel man who, Louis suspects, is quickly losing his sanity. Louis meets and falls for

Lily, a half native-Alaskan, half Russian girl who has an unexplained ability to know the unknown. With her help, Louis learns of the locations where the balloons will arrive. Then one of the balloons comes, not with its usual payload of explosives, but with a young injured boy, possibly a carrier of the plague.

Remember Me

by Trezza Azzopardi

Grove Press, 2004

Nostalgic and disturbing, the story of 70-year-old Winnie, aka Lillian Patricia Richards, is set against the backdrop of World War II London. Having been continually abandoned by those she trusts throughout her childhood, Winnie is, sixty years later, mysteriously tracked, and then robbed of her few useless belongings. Winnie's childhood unfolds to us through these meager relics. Raised in her very early years by an angry and confused father and a delusional mother, Winnie's only hope seems her domineering grandfather, but he dies, leaving her in the care of his friend, Mr. Stadnick. Stadnick takes Winnie to Chapelfield, to live with her uninterested Aunt Ena. Lonely Winnie becomes pregnant by a local boy and runs away, only to be taken in by a brother and sister in the business of seances, who spot in her naivete the perfect shill for their spiritualism scam. But in spite of their 'care' of her, these two steal something very precious from Winnie, perpetuating the momentum of her tragic life, and culminating in disaster. Azzopardi's earlier novel, *The Hiding Place*, was a Booker Prize finalist.



The Grenadillo Box

by Janet Gleeson

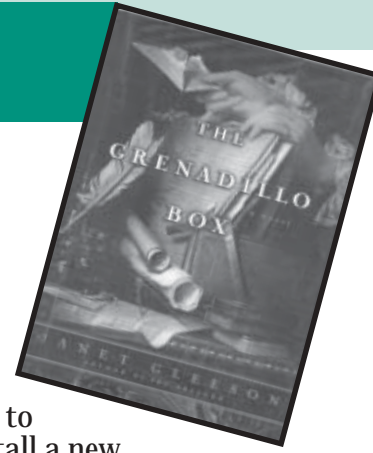
Simon & Schuster, 2004

The Grenadillo Box is a classic murder mystery set in 18th century England. Rich with period detail, this tale of gothic intrigue will entertain both mystery and historical fiction fans.

Nathanial Hopson, apprenticed to famous cabinetmaker Thomas Chippendale, is sent to the country estate of Lord Montfort to install a new library. Shortly after arriving, Hopson literally stumbles across the lifeless body of Montfort, who is clutching a small, elaborately-carved grenadillo wood box, in his exquisite new library. The gun found near the body suggests suicide, but Hopson suspects foul play immediately.

The plot thickens as fellow apprentice John Partridge's frozen body is retrieved the next day from the estate's pond. Suspects abound as Hopson delves into the investigation of Montfort's death: the cruel son who stands to inherit, the unhappy wife, the neighbor to whom Montfort owed a huge gaming debt, a former mistress with whom he had a child, the sister who served as his housekeeper, and even John Partridge. Hopson becomes convinced his own life may be in danger as he struggles to solve the crimes and discover the meaning of the grenadillo box.

The rich language of the novel is in itself a commentary on the social life and manners of the elite and draws the reader into the historical setting. All in all, a unique and entertaining read.



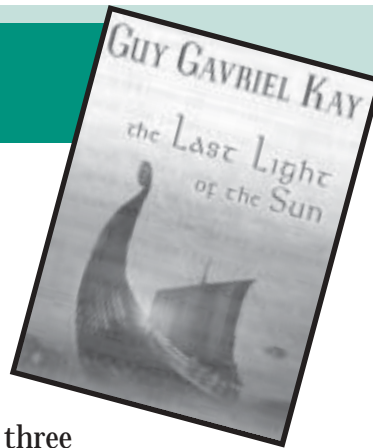
The Last Light of the Sun

by Guy Gavriel Kay

ROC, 2004

In this historical fantasy, Kay starts with seemingly random deeds which connect Erling (Viking) raiders with Anglcyn (English) lords and Cyngael (Welsh) princes. The time period in this alternate Britain is the late 8th century. The people of Cyngael and Anglcyn have started to rally to defeat the invaders. The story has three alternating views of the events. The Vikings are seeking revenge against the Welsh, who had scored a victory over the raiders. The Welsh princes make an alliance with the English King Aeldred, who has had some success beating the Vikings back out of part of his kingdom. There is also a Celtic faerie plotline involving the Welsh princes.

Kay's book has a well-researched background that enriches the story without letting the action drag. The story unfolds, drawing the reader into the characters' lives. Kay makes imaginative use of motifs from sage, song and chronicle to conjure up a world on the edge of change.



Neptune Strategy

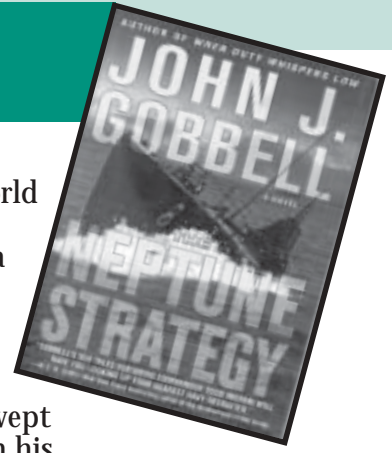
by John Gobbell

St. Martin's Press, 2004

There's nothing like an edge-of-your-seat World War II naval adventure to keep one reading late at night. John Gobbell's fourth book in a series about naval commander Todd Ingram mimics the pace and prose of C.S. Forester's Horatio Hornblower books.

In this installment, Ingram finds himself swept overboard during a dive bomber attack from his command, the destroyer U.S.S. Maxwell. Alone and adrift in the South Pacific, he is picked up hours later by a Japanese submarine. Needless to say, the Japanese sub, its commander, and a German "advisor" aboard are up to no good, with an agenda not entirely military in mind. While Ingram endures his brutal POW treatment, his naval friends and fellow commanders plot his rescue, using espionage and military threat in a deadly game that spans both the Pacific and finally the Atlantic.

Reading the first three books in the series adds depth and context to the characterizations, but this work can certainly stand alone in drawing the reader into its world of high-seas adventure and intrigue.



The Rules of Engagement

by Anita Brookner

Random House, 2003

Two women, childhood friends, meet after many years at the wedding of one of the women. Elizabeth is marrying a much older man, hoping that her relationship with her husband will not mirror that of her parents' unhappy union. Betsy is living in Paris with an artist, perhaps seeking romantic love not evident in her upbringing with a maiden aunt.

"A woman with a partner feels superior to a woman who has none. But this is illusory...handing over one's life to another person is not really to be recommended."

Their paths will cross again when Elizabeth's husband dies. Before his death, Elizabeth had taken a lover, Edmund, because she had become bored with her husband's submissiveness. Betsy's lover in the meantime has died in an accident. After the funeral, Elizabeth decides to end her affair. Betsy and Edmund then become lovers.

Anita Brookner, Booker Prize winning author, has written a novel around the complex interaction of friends seeking companionship. Whether the reader empathizes with or is disdainful of these women, Elizabeth and Betsy are very human in their desires.

