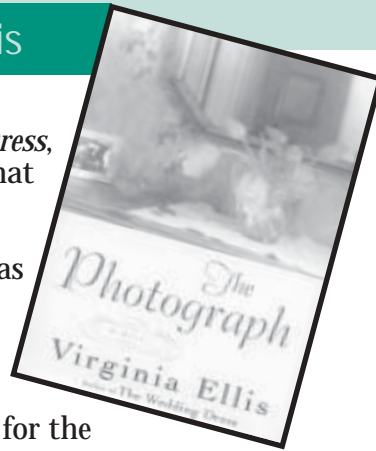


The Photograph by Virginia Ellis

Ballantine Books, 2003

Virginia Ellis, the author of *The Wedding Dress*, brings us another sweet wartime romance that steals our hearts and transports us back in time to the homefront of World War II. Maddy's teenage world took on a new facet as war invaded her 17th birthday on December 7, 1941, and her brother, Davey soon found himself stationed in Miami. Maddy and her frail sister-in-law, Ruth, followed him there, setting up housekeeping at a local residence for the duration. The night before Davey was to ship out, a party, a new love, and a photograph were to shatter what remained of Maddy's known world. Struggling to come to grips with fears for their men and their changing circumstances, Maddy and Ruth forge a new life for themselves.

Ellis' use of the women's alternating voices brings both characters vividly to life as they bond in crisis and in their hopes for the future. This is a heartfelt and memorable story.



The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

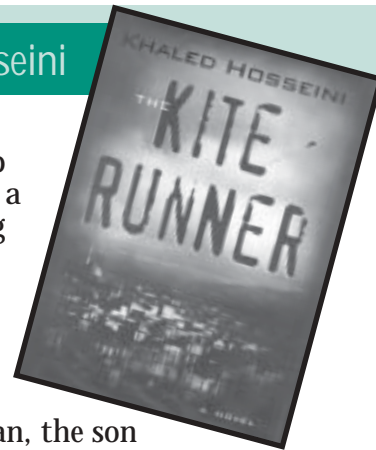
Riverhead Books, 2003

An extraordinary story of family, friendship and betrayal set in Afghanistan begins with a kite-fighting tournament. This novel, taking place from the 1960s to 2001, not only captures the experiences of an Afghan family but also gives a 40-year historical perspective of the country.

Amir lives with his father, a wealthy merchant, in Kabul. His best friend is Hassan, the son of the family servant. Amir dreams of earning his father's respect by winning the kite-fighting tournament and he does so in 1975 with the help of Hassan. It should have been the most wonderful time in his life. After the event, Amir and Hassan search for the fallen kite. Hassan runs ahead and Amir comes upon Hassan being raped by local bullies. Amir does not intercede and must live with the guilt of that moment for the rest of his life.

Due to the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, Amir and his father escape to America. They settle in California in an Afghan exile community. Amir marries and adapts to his new home but he is haunted by memories of Hassan. When word reaches Amir that Hassan has been executed by the Taliban, leaving his son an orphan, Amir decides to rescue the child. Through his efforts to save the child, Amir learns the father's startling secret.

The author, an Afghan, takes the reader inside the political terror of his native country in this remarkable story.



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Easter Island by Jennifer Vanderbes

Dial Press, 2003

Nature is indisputably sexy, and Vanderbes sends this point home with subtlety, contrasting two sets of characters putting in at Easter Island sixty years apart. Dr. Greer Faraday, 20th century palynologist, is recovering from a monumental career scandal, coupled with the death of her famed scientist husband, and flees to the remote island to try to solve natural selection mysteries as they relate to her studies of pollen. 19th century newlyweds Elsa and Edward Beazley, accompanied by Elsa's mentally-handicapped sister Alice, endure a six-month-long sea journey so Edward can study

Charles Darwin's theories of natural selection. Elsa had already loved and lost the mysterious Max, and sought companionship and care for Alice through a platonic marriage to Edward, a contemporary of her father's and a dear friend. The lives of each century's men and women are substantially different, yet in nature's grand plan, at the mercy of the same physical and emotional forces. As they probe the natural history of the island, even more personal revelations await them.



"Angiosperms brought desire into nature, they started the courtship waltz..."

Shelf Life

Grace A. Dow Memorial Library

Winter 2004

Original Reviews
of Recommended Books

Elsewhere in the Land of Parrots by Jim Paul

Harcourt, 2003



When rowdy parrot "Little Wittgenstein" is thrust into the life of a reclusive poet, the man's life is forever changed. David Huntington's father presents him with the parrot, of the breed Cherry-head Conure. Though David and his new pet co-exist at a standoff for half a year, the parrot interferes with David's first attempt in years at finding love, and he chucks the bird out the window. His immediate remorse and guilt compel him to try to track down his former pet and he discovers Wittgenstein has joined a flock of similar parrots adapting to San Francisco's Telegraph Hill. Even though David finds it a struggle just to journey across his hometown, he is compelled to travel to Ecuador to view parrots in their natural habitat, hoping to gain some insight to help the flock in San Francisco. His travels lead him to Fern Melartin, an American graduate student, also studying the parrots.

This delightful novel transports the reader from the urbane and trendy setting of San Francisco to the verdant lushness of tropical South America. The reader can almost hear the hum of insects and feel the moist heat of the jungle.

"The cry he heard echoing over the streets and wharves was the cry of those extraordinary flocks of old over the islands of the Caribbean, the flocks that Columbus had said obscured the sky."

Contributors: Melissa Barnard, Barbara Brennan, Ann Jarvis, Jan Kimmel, Carrie MacDonald, Katherine Redwine, Margee Smith
Editors: Barbara Brennan, Margee Smith
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A Service of the City of Midland

Since the Layoffs by Iain Levison

Soho Press, 2003



A more compulsively readable work of dark comedy would be hard to achieve. Jake Skowran has been laid off from his factory job in northern Wisconsin. He's a resident of a dying, hopeless community, and it makes him mad, in every sense of the word. As he lucks into a minimum-wage job at a convenience store, the Gas 'n Go, Fortune is indeed smiling upon him since, nearly simultaneously, he's the beneficiary of another, more lucrative offer of employment from the local crime boss. Jake's work ethic, along with his desperate desire to be his own man, compels him to accept the man's appalling offer, leading him into a world of trouble. He's saved by his natural savvy which enables him to, putting it mildly, make the best of a bad situation. Jake's tale is powerfully told, thanks to Levison's narrative from Jake's own point of view. He puts the reader right into the mind of his character, at times a frightening place. The personalities of Jake and his companions are rendered colorfully, often through use of slang which might be objectionable to some, but nonetheless helps the story ring true. This macabre yet eloquent comic tale truly hits its mark.

"Aren't henchmen supposed to have manners?"

Single Wife by Nina Solomon

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2003



Who's that man you're married to? What do you really know about him?

Grace Brookman knows that her husband of five years, Laz, occasionally disappears for days at a time. He leaves without a word and returns equally mysteriously. Grace copes by acting as if he is still present—she leaves his unwashed cup in the sink, crumbs on the counter, his clothes on the floor—so the maid won't know he's gone. However, this time he has been gone since Halloween and it is nearly Thanksgiving. Their anniversary party goes on without him. Grace tells friends and family that he is called away, or at a meeting, or coming late. Improvising, she keeps up the fiction that he's only temporarily unavailable. It's important to Grace that no one knows Laz has been gone nearly six weeks.

Grace begins to recognize the way she has conformed to his expectations. She has stopped working, stopped sculpting, and stopped visiting her best friend. But the longer Laz remains missing, the more Grace regains herself. Grace copes with unpaid bills and malfunctioning electricity. She investigates the mystery of Laz's bachelor apartment, which he has kept ever since their marriage. She finally discovers some of his darkest secrets.

But who will Grace be when Laz returns? Will she be the same wife she was before he left?

We Need to Talk about Kevin by Lionel Shriver

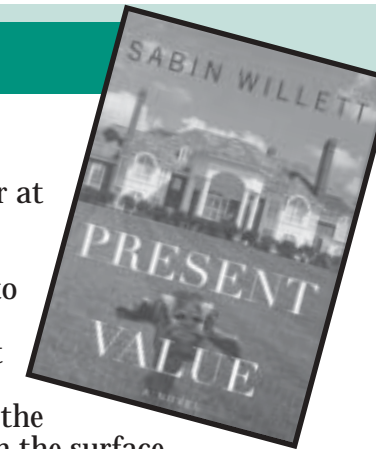
Counterpoint, 2003



Kevin commits an atrocity, a massacre at his high school. Could earlier parental concern have prevented the tragedy? Or was he born bad? The nature versus nurture question pervades this novel, yet there is no satisfaction in deciding one over the other. Kevin is seriously troubled, but is that necessarily because his mother never had any maternal response to him? The book is disturbing because this fiction is not so separate from the facts of Columbine and other high school murderous rampages. Eva, Kevin's mother, writes a series of letters to her estranged husband about their son and how they handled his difficult childhood. There are some very troubling scenes, especially between Kevin and his sister. *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is strong and suspenseful. It is full of unanswerable questions that lead the reader to respond: "I need to talk about it."

Present Value by Sabin Willett

Villard, 2003



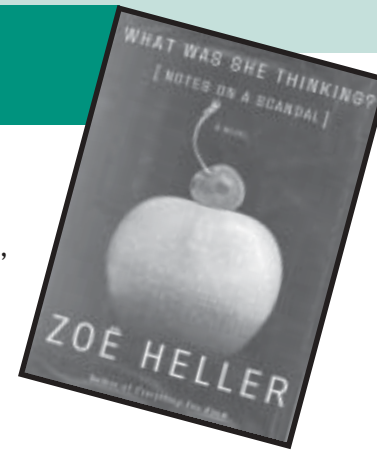
Fritz Brubaker, senior assistant controller at the toy company Playtime, and his wife Linda, a senior partner at the prestigious law firm Elboe, Fromme, & Athol, seem to live the perfect life. They own a mansion in Dover, Massachusetts and a Nantucket cottage, with the requisite family – a boy and a girl – and all the appurtenances of the good (read *high*) life. But looking beneath the surface, we find that the children, especially son Matthew, are spoiled, selfish, and rude; the brittle Linda is having an affair with an officer of Fritz's company; and there's books-cooking going on at Playtime. Fritz seems to be the only genuine person in a world of pretense and sham. The house of cards comes tumbling down when Playtime's stock takes an enormous nosedive that Fritz is accused of causing through insider trading. Not only accused but — he takes the blame! What possible motive could he have? And how very embarrassing for his family!

Present Value, a Wall Street term, is a powerfully wrought novel, in a style reminiscent of Tom Wolfe's. With acute irony and dry wit, Willett captures, skewers, and roasts the absurdities of 21st century America: the desire for monster vehicles, a rush to file suit, people welded to their cell phones and Blackberries, an emphasis on rights rather than responsibility, and most of all – greed, both corporate and otherwise. He has written a blockbuster of a book.

"Values mattered to Dad, and value too: but he cared nothing for money."

What Was She Thinking? by Zoe Heller

Henry Holt, 2003



However incomprehensible it seems that a teacher would have an affair with a student, Sheba Hart becomes entangled in a relationship with 15-year-old Steven Connolly. Barbara, a single woman in her sixties, also teaches at the school and is befriended by Sheba. She is the narrator of this complex story.

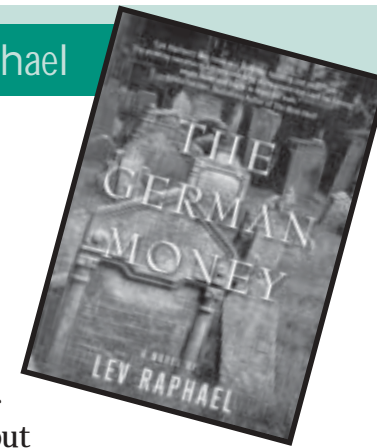
The reader must grapple with the ethics of both Sheba and Barbara. Sheba, who is married to a man much older than she, has a troubled teenage daughter and a son with Down's Syndrome. Barbara has lived a solitary life with her cat and does not easily make friends. When Sheba confesses her indiscretions to Barbara, she looks for support and loyalty. Barbara, on the other hand, worries about how the affair will affect their relationship. Both women are obsessed and their obsessions lead to an unexpected series of events.

British novelist Heller addresses female friendships, loneliness, and betrayal in this candid, sometimes humorous, look at human behavior. The question "What Was She Thinking?" will resound for the reader long after this book is finished.

"Come on. Buck up. True friendship weathers this sort of crisis."

The German Money by Lev Raphael

Leapfrog Press, 2003



When his apparently healthy, estranged German mother suddenly dies, 42-year-old Paul Menkus has some discoveries awaiting him in this engrossing family history/Holocaust tale. Paul, a librarian at a large Michigan university, travels home to New York City after the funeral, and renews acquaintance with his ne'er-do-well brother Simon and his sister Dina, the well-heeled but dissatisfied wife of a French Canadian entrepreneur. And back into his life comes Valerie, the lover he'd left behind. His mother's doting neighbor, Mrs. Gordon, provides a sympathetic ear, helping Paul handle his loss and his siblings' abrupt appearances back in each others' lives. Unexpectedly, they must also deal with the strange terms of their mother's will, a wedge threatening to cleave what little familial affection still exists, particularly on the part of Paul's unhappy sister. The basis for the dissention is the German money of the novel's title—sizeable reparations paid to their mother, a Holocaust victim. Why did she draw up such a will, what are the real circumstances surrounding her death, and how exactly was Mrs. Gordon involved in her life? Raphael's vivid and affectionate descriptions of northern Michigan and New York City, combined with his expert grasp of narrative style render *The German Money* a great read.