

BROWN BAG BOOK REVIEW

MAY 2ND, 2019

Atkinson, Kate *Transcription* (Fiction Atkinson) - In 1940 England, eighteen-year-old orphan Juliet Armstrong is recruited into the world of espionage. She is sent to a very obscure MI5 department that is monitoring the comings and goings of British Fascist sympathizers. While the work is mostly boring (typing transcriptions of bugged conversations), there are terrifying times of action as well. After the War, Juliet ends up working as a radio producer at the BBC. As we keep reading, however, it gradually becomes clear that once a spy, forever a spy. Figures from Juliet's past keep appearing, and neither she nor we quite know how it all ties together. This is an enjoyable book of historical fiction combined with a spy story. - JAC

Benedict, Marie *The Only Woman in the Room* (Fiction Benedict) - Many, many books of historical fiction being written today are now focused on World War II. Some are easier to read than others. I personally find it difficult to read stories concentrating on Holocaust events. In this case, however, I was immediately drawn in to Benedict's historical novel about beautiful screen star Hedy Lamarr. Hedy grows up as a fully assimilated Viennese Jew who naively assumes that anti-Semitism is only a problem for the non-conforming Eastern Jewish people. Her father, however, is deeply concerned about the world he sees Hitler creating. Her father does everything he can to protect his daughter by making sure she receives an outstanding scientific education and by marrying her to one of the richest men in Austria, the munitions manufacturer Fritz Mandell. Unfortunately, the marriage is a disaster, but the beautiful Hedy gleans much technical knowledge simply by being in the same room with men who think of her as an empty-headed beauty. Hedy ultimately escapes from her marriage, flees to London and secures an introduction to Louis B. Mayer of MGM studios. Her screen career is now legendary, but did you know that she also had a technical idea that might help America defeat the Nazis? That invention became the basis, in part, for the creation of Wi-Fi technology. - JAC

Carreyrou, John *Bad Blood: Secrets and Lies in a Silicon Valley Startup* (Non-Fiction 338.7681 C315b) - This is the true story of Elizabeth Holmes who, at 19, left Stanford to establish Theranos, a biotech company. Their mission was to revolutionize the blood laboratory industry by using microscopic drops of blood to run thousands of tests in mere minutes. Holmes raised millions of dollars in funding, and created partnerships with Safeway, Walgreens, and the United States Army for access to the portable machine. She was able to draw prestigious names like Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, and James Mattis onto her board. Publications like *Fortune*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Forbes* hailed her as the new Steve Jobs. At the height of their success, Elizabeth and her company were valued at over 9 billion dollars. When former employees begin to speak about the machine's failures, it evoked the interest of John Carreyrou, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter. Carreyrou proceeded to interview 150 people, including 60 former employees to unearth the truth: the Theranos technology was unreliable at best and Holmes actually used competitor's machines to run many of their tests. Holmes is now awaiting trial for fraud. HBO is currently airing a documentary on Theranos, titled *The*

Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley. There is also a fictional account starring Jennifer Lawrence in production. - SCR

Choo, Yangsze *The Night Tiger* (Fiction Choo) - This beautiful novel is set in 1930s colonial Malaysia. Choo is a Malaysian writer of Chinese descent and received her undergraduate degree from Harvard. Her first novel, *The Ghost Bride* was a *New York Times* bestseller and this stunning second novel seems set to follow suit. Ji Lin is a very young apprentice dressmaker, who also works as a dance-hall girl to help pay off her mother's mahjong gambling debts. One of her dance partners accidentally leaves behind a gruesome secret souvenir. Ren is an eleven-year-old Chinese houseboy who also has a secret. He has forty-nine days to find his recently deceased master's severed finger and bury it with his body. The lives of these two characters, and various relatives and friends, crisscross each other. Meanwhile we have men who turn into tigers, unexplained deaths in the district, lush plantations, ghostly dreamscapes and mysterious hospital storage rooms. The two main characters are extremely sympathetic and you will be drawn into their stories - JAC

Eggers, Dave *The Circle* (Fiction Eggers) - *The Circle* is a story that raises many questions about technology and where it may go in the future. Mae Holland is an ambitious woman who gets a job working for the Circle, a powerful internet company, and she is so excited to be a part of something more. This is a realistic, powerful story about technology and its abilities, alongside the limits of humanity, all while raising questions about privacy, democracy, and how ethical lines blur in a technologically advanced world. This is the book that the 2017 film, *The Circle*, with Emma Watson and Tom Hanks was based on. - NM

Fellowes, Julian *Past Imperfect* (Fiction Fellowes) - From the creator of *Downton Abbey* comes yet another tale of high society in England. This time it is set in a later time period. The unnamed narrator of *Past Imperfect* receives a letter from his former friend-turned-enemy, Damien Baxter, asking for help in locating a child (assumedly now grown) that he possibly fathered in the late 1960s. It is now nearly 40 years later, but the narrator is intrigued to hear from Damien as their parting as friends was fraught with emotion and anger. Upon agreeing to help Damien locate his possible child (and the child's mother), he embarks on a nostalgic journey remembering how he came to know Damien and the events that led up to their estrangement. The book provides a rich look into high society England in the 1960s and is a cathartic experience for the narrator. It can be a rather a long-winded tale, but a solid choice for the Anglophiles among us. - HV

Fielding, Joy *All the Wrong Places* (Fiction Fielding) - This is a suspenseful thriller. Four women, friends and family, decide to try online dating, while at the same time a serial killer is targeting victims on these apps. The story is told through different point of view, including the killer's perspective. From the beginning, you know that one of the characters is going to cross paths with the killer, but you are then swept up into following the characters as they grow and interact with each other while they search for love and happiness. Joy Fielding has written this

story in a way that combines contemporary and thriller aspects, where you are interested in the characters' lives just as much as you are reading to see that happens with the serial killer. - NM

Jones, Diana Wynne *Howl's Moving Castle* (Youth Fantasy paperback Jones) - This is a classic children's/teen's fantasy novel published in 1986. Though it was relatively unknown at the time it was published, it was a runner-up for the annual Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, and won the Phoenix Award in 2006. It also was adapted into an animated film by renowned animator and filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki in 2004. The author herself was inspired to write this story when a young schoolboy asked her to write a book about "a moving castle." Jones excels at taking common fantasy or fairytale tropes and elaborating on them to the nth degree in zany and creative ways. This tale is no exception as the main protagonist, Sophie, must accept a boring life as the eldest child. Her stepmother is most definitely conniving to ensure that Sophie's younger sisters find roles appropriate to their birthing order as well: Lettie (the middle child) is apprenticed to a baker, and Martha (the youngest) is slated to have the most interesting life by being apprenticed to a wizard. The three sisters endeavor to make their own plans, however, none of which go as expected, especially when Sophie offends the Witch of the Waste and ends up cursed, and finally working for the nefarious Wizard Howl in his moving castle... With a cast of unforgettable characters, magic, trickery, fire demons, and a convoluted plot, will the three sisters end up with a "happily ever after?" - HV

Jones, Tayari *An American Marriage* (Fiction Jones) - A young African American couple, Roy and Celestial, are enjoying the early days of their marriage after being introduced by a mutual friend, Andre. Celestial is the daughter of a wealthy inventor. She is a talented artist; she uses her skills to make hand-beaded baby dolls. Roy is from Louisiana, the son of simple, but good, people. He is a successful textbook salesman, but is also involved in marketing Celestial's dolls. They live in a lovely home in Atlanta, given to them by her parents. Just after their first anniversary, the two drive to visit his parents. Staying at a nearby hotel, Roy helps a disabled woman carry ice back to her room. The next morning, police break into the hotel room and arrest Roy for assault. Despite his innocence, he is convicted and sentenced to twelve years in prison. Told from the viewpoint of Roy, Celestial, and their mutual friend, Andre, this book follows how each character copes with the incarceration. - SCR

Kamal, Soniah *Unmarriageable: A Novel, Pride and Prejudice in Pakistan* (Fiction Kamal) - This new adaptation of the beloved novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, is set in Pakistan. Alysba Binat is a 31-year-old single English literature teacher at the exclusive British School of Dilipabad. She and her sister, Jenazba, have been teaching for the past 10 years because the Binat family fortune has been reduced to mere pennies. Educated at an international school, Alysba definitely has Western values. It is her belief that her students should be able to think critically, not just be groomed as wives and mothers. Everything changes when the Binat family receives an invitation to a society wedding. True to the original novel, Mrs. Binat sees the opportunity to find wealthy husbands for her girls. Jena meets the kindly Mr. Bingle, while Alys attracts the attention of Valentine Darssee. - SCR

Kistler, Bonnie *House on Fire* (Fiction Kistler) - Leigh and Pete have the perfect blended family. Pete has a son, Kip, about to graduate from a prestigious high school academy and serve as a summer intern for the Governor, and Mia, a young daughter. Leigh has college age twin boys, plus a beautiful teen daughter named Chrissie. On their fifth anniversary, Leigh and Pete go off to Greenbriar for the weekend. When work cuts the trip short, daughter Chrissie rides her bike over to warn Kip. Though he has had a few beers already, Kip drives them back home. On the way their car swerves to avoid hitting a dog and ends up in a ditch. Because they both seem fine, they just go home. The next day Chrissie develops a severe headache and dies from a brain injury. Leigh and Pete's woven family begins to fall apart when Kip changes his story to claim that Chrissie was really the driver. For readers who enjoy legal dramas or are fans of Jodi Picoult. - SCR

Loigman, Lynda Cohen *The Wartime Sisters* (Fiction Loigman) - Older sibling Ruth has always been the studious, but less valued girl in the family. Millie, the baby, is not as smart, but is a rare beauty. Their mother is critical of Ruth, but has big plans for Millie. She is sure her beauty will lead her to an advantageous marriage. Ruth goes to college and then marries a steady and reliable man. When Millie finds love with a handsome scamp with few prospects, Mom turns to Ruth to help her break up the relationship. Unexpectedly, the parents die in an accident. Millie is rootless; so marries her beau. One day, she turns up on Ruth's doorstep as a WWII widow with a young son. Despite past hard feelings, Ruth takes Millie in and gets her a job at the armory during the war. If you liked *The Lilac Girls*, then you will enjoy this novel. - SCR

Morris, Heather *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* (Fiction Morris) - Based on the true story of Holocaust survivor and Auschwitz-Birkenau tattooist Ludwig (Lale) Sokolov, comes the novel *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. This story is a heartbreaking tale filled with hope, love, and courage during the time of World War II. Lale Sokolov, a Slovakian Jew, is transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in April of 1942 and is put to work as the tattooist shortly after. In July of 1942, Lale tattoos Gita and can't stop thinking about her. This is his story about the hope and love he found in the concentration camp and how he vowed to survive the camp to marry her. - NM

Peters, Elizabeth *Borrower of the Night: The First Vicki Bliss Mystery* (Mystery paperback Peters) - Egyptologist and award-winning novelist Elizabeth Peters (A.K.A. Barbara Mertz) is one of my favorite authors. She has several different series set in Europe, England, Egypt and America, but the Vicky Bliss series ranks among my top choices. This first installment in the series is set in Rothenburg, Germany in a medieval castle. Vicky is challenged by her arrogant, yet handsome, colleague Tony to find a missing masterwork in wood. The work was the last creation of a master carver who died in the violent tumult of the sixteenth century. Never one to back down from a challenge, Vicky embarks upon her adventure, sleuthing around Rothenburg to determine if the missing carving is indeed hidden somewhere nearby. Peters writes in a witty fashion, and has highly indulgent plots and characters, which are either endearing or grating, depending on how farcical a plot the reader will accept. I, however, love the characters, such as the zany Anton Schmidt and courageous Vicky, and enjoy their adventures together. If you enjoy a light, romance-infused mystery set in Europe, give this a try! - HV

Postorino, Rosella *At the Wolf's Table* (Fiction Postorino) - Rosella Postorino is an internationally bestselling Italian author. This is her first novel to be translated into English and it won one of Italy's most important literary awards. Once again, we have an author who takes a little-known series of events from World War II as the basis for a novel. Rosa Sauer's parents are deceased and her husband is off fighting on the front lines. She makes the decision to leave her native war-torn Berlin to live with her in-laws in the countryside. One morning the SS arrives on her doorstep to tell her that she has been conscripted to be one of Hitler's tasters. Twice a day she and nine other women are taken to his secret headquarters, the Wolf's Lair, to eat his meals before he does. The women really have nothing in common: some are fanatics, others are totally loyal to Hitler and some (like Rosa) insist they aren't even Nazis, as they risk their lives every day to protect the leader. - JAC

Reid, Taylor Jenkins *Daisy Jones & The Six* (Fiction Reid) - This book is about a fictional rock band in the 1970s and their rise and fall from fame. The author writes the book as an oral history of what took place during the seventies. Each character describes their account of what happened to the band. The audiobook does a fantastic job of giving everyone their own voice, adding to the complexity of the characters as they grow and develop. This novel proves that Reid can get into the head of a celebrity band and express what it really feels like to be those people onstage singing songs they lived through. - NM

Shawver, Katrina *Henry: A Polish Swimmer's True Story of Friendship from Auschwitz to America* (Non Fiction Biography 92 Zguda, Henry) - Katrina Shawver is a writer-in-residence at the Glendale Public Library. She is currently holding memoir writer's workshops and one-on-one consultations in the libraries. Her accomplished memoir about Henry Zguda is really a model of what good Holocaust writing can be. Shawver met Zguda in 2002, when he was eighty-five years old. He possessed an amazing memory, and an even more surprising cache of original documents and photos. As an experienced newspaper reporter, Shawver was immediately captivated. One of the most important things to remember is that Henry was not Jewish; he was a Catholic Polish political prisoner. Shawver became good friends with Henry and his Italian-American wife Nancy. She also traveled to Europe in 2013 in order to research the Camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald where Henry had been imprisoned. No story about the death camps is easy to read, but this poignant and inspiring story is really a must-read. - JAC

Also Recommended

Jenoff, Pam *The Lost Girls of Paris* (Fiction Jenoff) - This is yet another book of historical fiction based on events of World War II. Jenoff has written a story that is very loosely based on the true story of Vera Atkins and the women who served as agents for Special Operations Executive under her leadership in Britain during World War II. Jenoff states that the novel is "first and foremost a work of fiction." In 1946 Grace Healey finds an abandoned suitcase and to satisfy her curiosity she opens it, only to discover a dozen photographs. She learns that the suitcase belonged to a woman named Eleanor Trigg, leader of a network of female secret agents deployed out of London during the war. Twelve of these women never returned home, their

fates a mystery. One of these young women is "Marie," whose daring mission reveals a story of friendship, valor and betrayal. If you want to read a story a little more closely based on history, try *The Alice Network* by Kate Quinn. - JAC

Lindsey, Erin *Murder on Millionaires' Row* (Fiction Lindsey) - Rose Gallagher is a housemaid in a posh Fifth Avenue brownstone mansion. When her boss, Mr. Thomas Wiltshire, disappears, Rose is certain Mr. Wiltshire is in trouble, but neither the housekeeper nor the police will take her seriously. Rose sets out to find Wiltshire, which leads to a series of adventures featuring magic, ghosts, romance and Pinkerton detectives. This is the first in a new mystery series set in the Gilded Age of New York. - JAC

Rous, Emma *The Au Pair* (Fiction Rous) - This suspenseful novel alternates between two narrators and two time periods. Seraphine Mayes and her twin brother Danny were born in the middle of summer at their family estate, Summerbourne, on the Norfolk coast in 1991. In 2017 her widowed father dies in an unexplained accident. Seraphine wants to know more about her family. All she has ever heard is that hours after the birth of the twins, her mother had committed suicide by throwing herself off the cliffs. The other main character is Laura, the au pair who was employed to take care of the twins' older brother Edwin in 1991. She really does not want to be drawn back into the Mayes family, but Seraphine is very persistent. The storyline is a little far-fetched, but the setting and character descriptions are very captivating. - JAC