

BROWN BAG BOOK REVIEW

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Andrews, Ilona *Magic Bites* (Fiction Andrews) - This is a funny, fast-paced urban fantasy series with a strong female lead and a mystery all wrapped up in one book. Kate Daniels lives in Atlanta cleaning up magical problems for a living. When her guardian is murdered, she starts a quest to find justice for his death. Filled with magic, vampires, shapechangers and more, this is just the beginning of the Kate Daniels series. -NM

Cohen, Jared *Accidental Presidents: Eight Men Who Changed America* (Nonfiction 973.099 C678a) - Don't let the size of this book scare you away. It is only about 375 pages long with the rest of the volume being devoted to extensive footnotes that only the most scholarly of us will want to pursue. Cohen's subjects are the eight vice-presidents who became President of the United States. John Tyler succeeded William Henry Harrison, who unexpectedly died after only 30 days in office. Millard Fillmore succeeded Zachary Taylor, who died after only a year in office. Andrew Johnson succeeded Abraham Lincoln, who was the first president to be assassinated. James Garfield was also assassinated after only four months in office and was succeeded by Chester Arthur. The next president to be assassinated was William McKinley, who was succeeded by Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt went on to become the first accidental president to be elected in his own right. Warren Harding died in office in 1923 and was followed by Calvin Coolidge. When Franklin Roosevelt was elected to his fourth term, most knew that he was a dying man. The selection of Harry Truman to be his running mate surprised many. Then last time that a President was assassinated was when John F. Kennedy was killed, and Lyndon Johnson succeeded him. I found this a fascinating read about American history delivered in easily digested chunks. -JAC

Conklin, Tara *The Last Romantics* (Fiction Conklin) - This wasn't my particular taste, but I see a large audience for Conklin's writing and her ability to capture familial relationships as they grow and change. In the book *The Last Romantics*, the main character, Fiona Skinner, is a famous poet looking back on her most iconic work, *The Love Poem*, and is revealing the true story behind the poem. During Fiona's early childhood, her father unexpectedly passed away, causing her mother to fall into a deep depression, a period which she and her three siblings refer to as the Pause. *The Last Romantics* focuses on the trials and experiences that these children faced and how things changed over the years. -NM

French, Nicci *Blue Monday* (Fiction French) - Husband and wife Nicci Gerrard and Sean French teamed up to create a series featuring Frieda Klein and DCI Malcolm Karlsson as they investigate two kidnappings and other crimes around London. Frieda is a gifted and successful psychoanalyst, but she has her own issues; she is a relentless insomniac who walks the streets of London while others sleep. Klein is pulled in as a police consultant to Karlsson after she reports that the most recent kidnapping victim, 5-year-old Matthew Farraday, strongly resembles the fantasy child of her patient Alan Dekker. Along with a compelling mystery, the authors take the time to surround Klein with a large community of supporting characters; a wayward niece, a jilted lover, her mentor, several patients, and a friend who literally drops in on her. This series is for readers who like their mysteries on the darker side. -SCR

Gaiman, Neil and Pratchett, Terry *Good Omens* (Fiction Gaiman) - Normally, a book about an imminent apocalypse isn't something that would entertain me, but this is one book that successfully mixes the (potentially) gruesome ideas of Gaiman and the absurd ideas of Pratchett together in a delightfully enjoyable way. Crowley, a demon ("who didn't so much Fall as saunter vaguely downwards"), has just been informed that the Antichrist has finally been born, and he has been tasked with placing him in an opportune human family and overseeing his dastardly upbringing to successfully bring about the apocalypse in 11 years. Unfortunately, Crowley has become a bit too accustomed to modern amenities on Earth (i.e. his prized Bentley and Queen music collection) and decidedly does not want anything to change. So, he enlists the help of his reluctant heavenly counterpart, Aziraphale, to thwart the apocalypse without alerting anyone upstairs, or downstairs, about their efforts. While certainly irreverent and perhaps a bit ineffable, this book isn't for everyone, but will bring laughs to those who enjoy zany scenarios and humor. It also has received much attention and acclaim for its recently released mini-series adaptation starring David Tennant (of *Doctor Who* fame) and Michael Sheen. -HV

Hoang, Helen *The Bride Test* (Fiction Hoang) - A beautiful story about an autistic man and a strong, determined woman. Khai processes his emotions differently from others and has a hard time connecting with people and understanding their emotions due to his autism. His mother decides to help him out in his personal life by finding him a woman to marry from

Vietnam. Esme decides to go to America to meet Khai and take a leap for a better life for her and her daughter. This starts to bloom into a cute, sexy and funny romance that you can't put down. -NM

Holmes, Linda *Evvie Drake Starts Over* (Fiction Holmes) - On the day that Evvie Drake finally packs up to leave her high school sweetheart husband, Tim, she gets word that he has been killed in an automobile accident. Since he was the beloved town doctor, nobody would have understood her decision. She is stuck playing the part of his grieving widow. A year later, as a favor to her best friend, she agrees to let his buddy Dean rent a room in her home. Dean is a down-on-his-luck pro baseball pitcher in need of escaping the relentless paparazzi after suddenly losing his pitching arm. As part of their lease agreement, Evvie and Dean vow not to discuss each other's problems. The promise proves more difficult to keep when the pair becomes closer than the usual landlord/tenant. Holmes, an NPR podcast host, does a lovely job at letting her two characters take their second chance at life. -SCR

Horowitz, Anthony *The Sentence Is Death* (Fiction Horowitz) - It's a good day when I see a new book by my favorite mystery writer, Anthony Horowitz. *The Sentence Is Death*, is the second* in a three-part series where the author himself is "hired" to document several of Detective Inspector Daniel Hawthorne's murder cases. Formerly with Scotland Yard, the discredited DI works purely as a consultant when police are really challenged. In this case, divorce attorney Richard "Blunt Razor" Pryce has been bludgeoned to death with a 3300€ bottle of 1982 Chateau Lafite Rothschild wine. The top suspect is literary author Akira Anno, ex-wife of Pryce's client, real estate developer Adrian Lockwood. But when Pryce's murder is followed by the death of his old university friend Gregory Taylor, the case becomes more complicated. Horowitz's interjection of himself as a character along with his classic Agatha Christie style makes this book a very satisfying read. (**The Word is Murder* is the first in the series.) -SCR

Jones, Darynda *First Grave on the Right* (Fiction Jones) - This humorous, paranormal story follows the grim reaper and part-time private investigator, Charley Davidson, as she tries to solve murders and find justice in this world. Despite being a grim reaper, Charley tries to have a personal life, but with an entity following her around that might not be dead like she thought, it gets a little complicated. Ghosts, crime solving, humor and suspense are all wrapped up in this first book of the Charley Davidson series. -NM

Kane, Andrea *Dead in a Week* (Fiction Kane) - I don't normally read much suspense thriller fiction but this novel caught my attention. If you remember the old television series *Mission Impossible*, this book has a similar premise. A crime has been committed when Lauren Pennington the college age daughter of an American industrial entrepreneur, was kidnapped in Munich. Her father is about to launch a groundbreaking technology with his company NanoUSA. When he receives the ransom demand "Hand over the technology or Lauren will be dead in a week," it includes the usual proviso "Don't contact the FBI or any other authorities." There are two groups that step in to find out where Lauren is being held and who is responsible. The Forensics Instincts Team includes a behaviorist, a former Navy Seal, a techno-wizard, an intuitive and a reformed pickpocket. The Zermatt Group includes a former Marine communications officer (brother of the former Navy Seal), a people whisperer, a former NSA analyst, a former MI6 field operative and unlimited financial resources. The action shifts from Munich to the Silicon Valley to farmlands in Croatia and the skyscrapers of China. I enjoyed the caper and, of course, the good guys win. -JAC

Kelly, Martha Hall *Lost Roses* (Fiction Kelly) - Many of us read and enjoyed Kelly's *Lilac Girls*. This novel moves back in time to a previous generation and features Caroline Ferriday's mother Eliza. In 1914 Eliza Ferriday is thrilled to travel to St. Petersburg with Sofya Streshmayva, a cousin of the Romanovs. When Austria declares war on Serbia, Eliza escapes back to America while Sofya and her family flee to their country estate. Now back in America, Eliza plunges into helping the White Russian families find safety as they escape the revolution. When letters from her friend Sofya stop coming, she fears the worst. -JAC

Kwan, Kevin *Crazy Rich Asians* (Fiction Kwan) - Yes, this is the book that inspired the 2018 film of the same title. Nick Young is heir to one of the wealthiest, if not the wealthiest family in Singapore; however, he isn't keen on taking over the family fortune, preferring to forge a career for himself as a professor in New York. His girlfriend, Rachel Chu, is also a professor in New York, although from a decidedly middle-class background. Nick is finally prompted to bring Rachel home to Singapore for the wedding of his best friend, Colin, but he completely fails to prepare her for what's in store when they arrive. Of course, no one in Nick's family, except for Nick's cousin Astrid, desires to see him connected (or worse yet,

married) to a Chinese-American nobody, so they proceed to tear their relationship apart relentlessly. Nick is generally clueless to the machinations going on around him, so Rachel must learn to fend for herself and decide if Nick is worth all the trouble his family brings. While the characters can all become grating at times, learning the history of wealth in Singapore is interesting, and the scenes of obscene opulence (based on Kwan's childhood memories of Singapore) must be seen to be believed, making this a great book to pair with its movie. This book is part of a trilogy, if readers are interested in the continuing story of the characters. -HV

McCall Smith, Alexander *The Department of Sensitive Crimes* (Fiction McCall Smith) - Set in Sweden comes a new series by acclaimed author Alexander McCall Smith. In the Swedish justice system, the most strange and difficult crimes are given to the Sensitive Crimes Division to solve; the Malmö department is led by the detective with the repetitive name "Ulf Varg" (meaning Wolf Wolf) and his rather motley crew. There's Anna: serious-minded, married to a postal-stamp-obsessed anesthetist; Carl, the hard-working family man, son to a famous pastor/professor; and Erik, the pencil pusher waiting for retirement, which will provide him with an endless amount of time for his one and only passion: fishing. Those familiar with McCall Smith's other stories will find this book to be of a similar nature and cadence, as it features a few smaller cases that sometimes intersect, just as the characters and stories in his other novels do, but this time with a Scandinavian flair. I would consider this McCall Smith "lite" as it doesn't quite develop its characters as much as in his 44 *Scotland Street* series, or flesh out its mysteries quite as much as in his *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series - though it makes quite a passable hybrid of the two series. As always, his characters' musings are entertaining, and his non-sequitur humor doesn't fail (e.g. Ulf's deaf dog who has learned to lip-read provides quite a few laughs throughout). -HV

Obama, Michelle *Becoming* (Nonfiction Biography 92 Obama, Michelle) - It is no secret that I admire Michelle Obama, so when she released her book and went on tour, I was among the first to purchase this autobiography. The book, the story of how she grew up on the south side of Chicago in a loving family, is largely apolitical. Daughter of a blue-collar worker with MS, she lived with her parents and brother on the upper floor of her great-aunt's home. She worked hard to achieve in school, following her brother into Princeton. She later graduated from Harvard Law School. After graduation, she went to work at Sidley Austin LLC, where she mentored a young Barack Obama. Though they were different in many ways, e.g. he was late on his first day of work as an intern, they married in 1992. Obama is candid when she discusses the role of counseling in her marriage, her miscarriage, and infertility treatments. The last part of the book covers her work as First Lady. -SCR

Owens, Delia *Where the Crawdads Sing* (Fiction Owens) - Kya was just 6 years old when her mother left their marsh home in North Carolina. Soon after, her siblings also depart, leaving Kya alone with her negligent, drunken father. Kya learns to fill in for her mother's place, cooking, shopping, and keeping the peace. By the time her father also departs, she is able to function largely on her own. She meets Tate Walker, a kind young man who is interested in the biology of marsh life. Though he promises to visit her after he leaves for college, instead he opts to go for his PhD rather than return. Her second relationship is with Chase Andrews, the town's golden boy. Handsome and privileged, he promises Kya the world, but falls short. When Chase is discovered dead near the marsh tower, Kya becomes the prime suspect. -SCR

Richardson, Kim Michele *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek* (Fiction Richardson) - This beautiful and inspiring book brings together two little-known historical facts. The main character, Cussy Mary Carter, is a blue-skinned native of Troublesome Creek, Kentucky. There really were such people living in that area as late as the 1930s. Her skin is a deep shade of blue that is instantly noticeable. It is caused by the marriage of two people with a very specific recessive gene that causes the condition. Thanks to Franklin Roosevelt's Kentucky Pack Horse Library Project, the remote area of Troublesome Creek got its very own traveling librarian, Cussy, and her mule Junia. Not everyone wants to be bothered with books and hardly anyone wants to interact with a blue-skinned native, but courageous Cussy Mary resolutely does her job. The descriptions of how the library was created and the story of the experimental medical treatment to change the color of Cussy's skin are mesmerizing. -JAC

Zasio, Robin *The Hoarder in You: How to Live a Happier, Healthier, Uncluttered Life* (Nonfiction 616.85227 Z38h) - Robin Zasio is a therapist that works on A&E Network's *Hoarders*. Coming from a professional psychologist, this book offers a lot of insights as to why we buy and keep things. The book is written to explain that though the author works with extreme cases, most people fall somewhere on the hoarding continuum. The focus is not so much on how to clean or get rid

of things, but how to recognize what you bring in, why you collect and how to relinquish things that are negatively affecting your life without you even realizing it. -NM

Also Recommended

Benjamin, Melanie *Mistress of the Ritz* (Fiction Benjamin) - Many of us have read Benjamin's previous historical biographies: *The Aviator's Wife*, *The Swans of Fifth Avenue* and *The Girls in the Picture*. This time her subject is Blanche Auzello and the time period is World War II in Paris. After a whirlwind romance, the American ingenue marries hotelier Claude Auzello, who has just become director of the famed glamorous Ritz. In 1940 the German Army sweeps into Paris and everything changes. Instead of hosting royalty, the hotel becomes the Nazi headquarters and Hermann Göring is now resident. Meanwhile the Auzellos' tempestuous marriage is nearly on the rocks and the couple keep secrets from each other that could destroy them. The story is based on true events and turns out to be a fascinating look at the Paris underground. -JAC

Griffin, Patience *To Scotland with Love* (Romance Paperback Griffin) - Occasionally I like to read romantic fiction. I especially enjoy series that develop a set of characters in a special location. I have recently discovered Patience Griffin, who has a series called *Kilts and Quilts*. *To Scotland with Love* is the first in a series that takes place in the charming Scottish seaside town of Gandiegow. Catriona Macleod has given up her career as an investigative reporter in America and returned to her birthplace after the death of her philandering husband. Graham Buchanan is a movie star with many secrets, including his family hidden in Gandiegow. Quilting with her gran and other women in the village brings Caitriona peace and fulfillment, but the story of Graham is nearly impossible to resist - she is, after all, an investigative reporter. -JAC

Harman, Patricia *Once a Midwife* (Fiction Harman) - Patience Hester is a midwife in Hope River communities. In this novel she has managed to mostly survive the Depression with her veterinarian husband and their four children. The communities are in a very isolated area of West Virginia and many women still choose to have a midwife rather than a doctor when they are ready for birth. But it is now 1941 and the war in Europe has everyone on edge. Patience's husband, Daniel, is a conscientious objector. He fought in the First World War and has vowed to never be in a position again where he must kill. But, he is still a patriot. Patience, and most of their friends and neighbors, don't really understand this position and when he is imprisoned for his beliefs the tension mounts. This novel was a very understanding look at one of the facets of war that is seldom discussed. Try this heartwarming historical novel, especially if you enjoy stories about midwives. -JAC

Hoang, Helen *The Kiss Quotient* (Fiction Hoang) - This is the first book by Helen Hoang and is technically the first in *The Kiss Quotient* series, where *The Bride Test* is the second in the series. You do not have to read them in order, although one of the main characters in the second book is a cousin of one of the main characters in the first book. I liked the second one more, so if you do not like the second one, then I do not think that you will like the first one. *The Kiss Quotient* is the story of a woman, Stella, with Asperger's trying to understand the dating world by hiring an escort, Michael Phan. -NM

Mayhew, Anna Jean *Tomorrow's Bread* (Fiction Mayhew) - This novel takes place in 1961 in Charlotte, North Carolina. The bustling black neighborhood of Brooklyn is a city within a city. It has its own restaurants, schools, theaters, churches and night clubs. There are shacks and poverty along with well-maintained homes like the one Laraylee Hawkins shares with her young son, her uncle and her grandmother. Laraylee's love for Archibald Griffin, the white father of her son and the manager of the cafeteria where she works, must be kept secret in the segregated South. But in a way, the character of Brooklyn is the real focus of this historical novel. The city wants to bulldoze the neighborhood, claiming that it is dilapidated and dangerous, and promises to provide new housing and relocate businesses. This is a very moving story about just how wrong the urban renewal programs of the 1960s were. -JAC

Montclair, Allison *The Right Sort of Man* (Fiction Montclair) - This is the first novel in a mystery series set in post-WWII London. Two women join forces to begin a business venture in Mayfair called The Right Sort Marriage Bureau. Miss Iris Sparks has a somewhat mysterious past and may be characterized as impulsive but very quick-witted. Her partner Mrs. Gwendolyn Bainbridge is practical. She is widowed with a young son and desperately wants to achieve independence while doing some good. The promising start to their bureau takes quite a blow when one of their young female clients is found murdered. The man arrested for the crime is the prospective husband they matched her with. Iris and Gwen are convinced that the man is innocent and decide to investigate for themselves. There is some humor in this debut mystery, but what really stands out is the period detail and the chances for character development as we go along. -JAC

Ryan, Jennifer *The Spies of Shilling Lane* (Fiction Ryan) - This book is by the best-selling author of *The Chilbrury Ladies' Choir*. This is another tale of World War II England and a village busybody. Mrs. Braithwaite is the self-appointed queen of her English village until she is dismissed because of her overbearing ways and because her husband has gotten a divorce from her. She decides to go to London to see why her daughter Betty has not written to her recently. When she arrives, Betty's landlord, the timid Mr. Norris, tells her that Betty hasn't been home in days. With bombs falling everywhere, Mrs. Braithwaite turns her attention to finding and rescuing her missing daughter. Mrs. Braithwaite drags along the very reluctant Mr. Norris as a sidekick. It seems that there will be a sequel to this novel as Braithwaite mother and daughter and landlord Norris become involved as rather unorthodox spies. -**JAC**

Snelling, Lauraine *Half Finished* (Fiction Snelling) - Lauraine Snelling has been writing inspirational novels since 1980. I was attracted to the idea of how crafters can be drawn together. It is very common for crafters to start many projects, but to finish few. A group of women get together to form a guild called Unfinished Projects Anonymous in order to keep each other accountable and on track. As they meet on a regular basis, gradually projects are finished and the repercussions are heart-warming. The group also includes some men and even a dog. The characters discover that much of life is unfinished, including projects, friendships and the raising of children, but that with cooperation anything is possible. -**JAC**

Wood, Shelley *The Quintland Sisters* (Fiction Wood) - This is the historical fiction debut of Shelley Wood. She takes us inside the true story of the Dionne quintuplets, believed to be the first set of identical sisters born alive. She tells the story from the viewpoint of a fictional aspiring apprentice midwife, Emma Trimpany. Emma is present at the 1934 births in remote and hardscrabble Northern Ontario and stays throughout their early years as their nurse. She relates the harrowing births and the decision to put the babies in an isolated specially built nursery as wards of the British king. Thousands of people travel to watch the Dionne Quints play and hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations and endorsements flow in. The parents, with their 7 other children, live across the road from the nursery and have only supervised interaction with the girls. Wood also tells us about the doctors who take care of the Quints and the escalating battles over custody as Yvonne, Annette, Cécile, Marie and Émilie begin to grow up. -**JAC**