

BROWN BAG BOOK REVIEW

NOVEMBER 7TH, 2019

Cabot, Meg *No Judgments* (Fiction Cabot) - A contemporary romance novel with a hint of suspense. A massive hurricane is about to hit Little Bridge Island in Florida. Bree does not escape, but rather stays and prepares for the storm. The animal-loving Bree takes on a mission to save animals that owners left behind when escaping the storm and has the help of a well-known heartbreaker, Drew, to assist her. -NM

Chevalier, Tracy *A Single Thread* (Fiction Chevalier) - 38-year-old Violet Speedwell has lived with her parents in Southampton all her life. Her fiancé died during WWI, making her one of the million-plus "surplus" women in Britain. After her father dies, she seeks a transfer to nearby Winchester. Though this gives her some freedom, it also comes with a sense of loneliness. One afternoon, she wanders into the local cathedral and witnesses the Winchester Cathedral Broderers celebrating what is known as the "Presentation of Embroideries." Though she is asked to leave the private ceremony, Violet finds a way into the group and learns to embroider to the very exacting standards of these women. Along the way, she meets the real-life embroidery pioneer, Louisa Pesel, and a fictional love interest, Arthur, a bell-ringer for the Cathedral. This novel will appeal to those who enjoyed *The Lilac Girls*, or *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. -SCR

Dawson, George *Life Is So Good* (Non-Fiction Biography 92 Dawson, George) - George Dawson was born in 1898, a grandson of slaves, who lived with his father and mother and brother and sisters and a mule on a farm of 40 acres near Marshall, Texas. From the age of 4, he was expected to help the family by picking cotton, hauling water, and cutting sugar cane. His siblings went to school (a colored one) but George helped his dad. When he was 12 he was hired out to a family because his wages of \$1.50 a week would help feed the family. His parents were very caring and when George was 21, his father advised him to leave home. He rode the trains and found jobs building roads, levees along the Mississippi and railroad tracks and was always a satisfied employee. On his days off he'd find a close ranch and break wild horses and other times he managed to play some baseball. He married, settled in Dallas, raised a family, owned a landscaping business, retired and then fished for a few years. In 1996, a recruiter for an Adult Basic Education program knocked on his door and George started a new chapter in the good life. A news article about his age and success in reading was in *The Seattle Times* where Richard Glaubman, a Washington state school teacher and writer, was inspired to write a book about George Dawson's Good Life. Richard took a leave of absence and semi-moved in with George, who never missed a day at school while working on the book. Many familiar landmarks of the 20th Century will remind you of the passage of time in our lives and the life of George Dawson. -SBB

Eban, Katherine *Bottle of Lies* (Non-Fiction 615.1 E151b) - In these days of rising health care costs, the U.S. has been happy to look for low-cost alternatives to brand-name drugs. As a result, we have outsourced the majority of our drug manufacturing to India and China. Katherine Eban has been reporting on the drug industry for over ten years. In 2008, she was contacted by the host of NPR's *People's Pharmacy*. Joe Graedon had been collecting complaints from people who had been previously stable on brand-name drugs, but saw their health decline after switching to generic drugs. Eban's research uncovered that generic drugs are only reverse-engineered from brand name drugs, meaning that they are *not* identical to their brand name counterparts. Her most important discovery is that FDA oversight is not as thorough as when it is manufactured here in the U.S. Much of the book focuses upon a company by the name of Ranbaxy, one of the largest generic drug manufacturers in the world. The company falsified documentation, pre-tested the drugs for efficacy, and routinely discarded unfavorable data. Ranbaxy executives took the FDA inspectors to only the areas that it deemed as suitable. This publication is a must-read for patrons who utilize generic drugs. -SCR

French, Tana *The Witch Elm* (Fiction French) - The story begins as Dubliner Toby Hennessey meets up with his old school friends, Sean and Declan, to celebrate TGIF. Sometime after midnight he awakes and hears someone in his apartment. Grabbing a metal candlestick, he slinks downstairs to confront the intruder(s) but is instead beaten to the brink of death. While recovering from his physical and mental injuries, Toby is invited to stay at the Ivy House to look after favorite Uncle Hugo who has just been diagnosed with a brain tumor. Sunday dinners at the Ivy House have always included Toby's parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. One Sunday the grandchildren are playing in the back garden and find a skull near the wych elm, a discovery that hurls Toby into a series of more frightening and psychological tortures. At one point he is suspected of murder. This is a first-person with Toby the protagonist. The ensemble characters are reminiscent of Donna Tartt, especially *The Secret History*. The novel is riveting, forcing the reader to stay put until the very last paragraph. The storyline is skillfully developed with dialogue that twists and turns. Even when all the loose ends are tied up, there are lingering questions concerning reality, identity, human relationships, justice, good and evil, victim and perpetrator. -EN

Gaynor, Hazel and Webb, Heather *Meet Me in Monaco: A Novel of Grace Kelly's Royal Wedding* (Fiction Gaynor) - At the Cannes Film Festival in 1955, Grace Kelly is the toast of the town. But the Oscar-winning actress is being hounded by the press. As she is being followed by a relentless tabloid photographer, she runs into a small perfume shop in Nice and meets Sophie Duval, a budding parfumeur. Perfume is all that Sophie knows. Taught by her father, now deceased, she is after her own signature perfume. But the business is tough. Though she owns a small apartment, shop, and a desirable property in Grasse, France where the flowers are cultivated, financial pressures are mounting. As a small perfume house, she relies upon the tourists that come through the area in the warmer months of the year. A friendship develops between Sophia and Grace after she becomes engaged to Prince Rainier of Monaco, giving readers a front-row view of the Royal Romance of the century. -SCR

Harper, Karen *American Duchess* (Fiction Harper) - This is the fictionalized story of Consuelo Vanderbilt. Ever since we have become "hooked" on *Downton Abbey*, this period of history has fascinated Americans. Consuelo was the best-known example of an American heiress who married an impoverished European nobleman prior to World War I. In 1895 Consuelo married the Duke of Marlborough. She was forced into the marriage by her mother, Alva, who wanted her family to have a titled member. Marlborough needs a wife with money to save his family's estate, Blenheim Palace - the only castle not owned by the British crown. We follow Consuelo's life as she changes from an innocent young heiress to a self-assured woman. The couple has two sons, but then live separately and eventually divorce, when Marlborough wants to marry his mistress. Consuelo definitely has no objections, as she has fallen in love with a French aviator, Jacques Balzan. The background of how Consuelo uses her wealth to help the impoverished poor helps to round out the story of the "poor little rich girl." As World War II develops, she leaves Europe and moves to Florida where she lives with her French husband. The book includes a Reading Group Guide. -JAC

Kim, Angie *Miracle Creek* (Fiction Kim) - A fast-paced murder mystery that delves into the challenges of parenting a child with special needs. In a small town in Virginia, there is a special treatment center, a hyperbaric chamber, that is thought to cure conditions from infertility to autism. When the chamber explodes and kills two people, a lengthy murder trail ensues. This story is filled with courtroom drama, prejudices, best intentions, and different complexities of life. -NM

Matzen, Robert D. *Dutch Girl: Audrey Hepburn and World War II* (Non-Fiction Biography 92 Hepburn, Audrey) - Audrey Hepburn (nee Audrey Kathleen van Heemstra Ruston), the beloved star of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *My Fair Lady*, *The Nun's Story*, and countless other motion pictures, began life as a baroness in The Netherlands at the end of the 1920s. Never one to seek publicity, Audrey may have had good reason for being "camera shy" because she eventually emigrated to America with her mother, a Nazi sympathizer. *Dutch Girl* is

a well-researched biography which tells of Audrey's childhood and her excruciating life in German-occupied Europe. She was a promising ballerina in her early adolescence, but by the end of the war, she was so malnourished that she worked nearly a decade to regain her health in order to dance and then act. The author describes Hepburn's aristocratic background, broken family, long years of deprivation, hospital volunteerism, and personal losses before she "stumbled into" stardom. The war pursued her in later life as she developed weight problems, was addicted to cigarettes, endured relationship problems (three marriages), and bore the burden of her mother's secrets. Nevertheless, she was able to dedicate her final decade in service to children as a UNICEF ambassador. -EN

National Geographic Almanac 2020: Trending Topics; Big Ideas in Science; Photos, Maps, Facts and More (Non-Fiction [032.02 N277 2020](#)) - This is a great browsable book by one of the most respected scientific publishers in the world. It is divided into seven main sections: *Trending 2020; Exploration and Adventure; This Planet and Beyond; Life on Earth; The Science of Us; Yesterday to Tomorrow; Our World*. As you might imagine the photos are typically amazing. Each section opens with quizmaster pages full of fascinating trivia to whet your appetite for what lies ahead. For example, *Life on Earth* is further divided into *All Living Things; Of the Earth; Of the Sea; Of the Sky; Care for All Life*. So, how many hearts does an octopus have? Turn to page 192 and find the answer is three. Plus, the picture highlights that the largest octopus ever recorded was thirty feet across and weighed more than 600 pounds. The hearts pump blue blood through a boneless frame. They may have been the first intelligent creature on Earth, but two-thirds of their 500 million neurons are located in their arms, not their heads. -JAC

Noble, Shelley *A Beach Wish* (Fiction [Noble](#)) - This is an enjoyable summer beach read. Even though it is no longer summer and we don't have beaches in Arizona, it is a feel-good family story. Zoe Bascombe's mother has passed away and has requested that Zoe spread her ashes on a beach that no one else in the family has ever heard of. Her brothers are not to make the journey with her, so Zoe is on her own to find Wind Chime Beach and comply with her mother's wishes. In the process she discovers that her mother has another whole family. The beach, with its eponymous chimes, actually becomes a character in the story as Zoe works her way into reconciling the two families and their relationships with herself and with each other. It is a wonderful story about families and secrets and reconciliations. Noble has written many best-sellers that almost always include a beach or lighthouse setting and an uplifting conclusion. The book includes a Reading Group Guide. -JAC

Prescott, Lara *The Secrets We Kept* (Fiction [Prescott](#)) - Women, who had served crucial roles in WWII in the CIA, were usually relegated to the typing pool after the war. Only a select few were kept in active roles. This debut novel follows both Sally, an old hand in the spy game, and newcomer Irena during the Cold War. The mission of the CIA during this era was to discredit the Soviet Union in every way possible, including the promotion of subversive literature in the U.S.S.R. Boris Pasternak was known as a gifted poet for much of his career. In 1910, he began writing his masterpiece, *Doctor Zhivago*. Progress really only picked up in 1946 after he met his lover, Olga Vsevolodovna, who served as the inspiration for Lara. Confined in the Gulag for three years for her relationship with Boris, Olga returned to him to help type and edit his work. Though the Soviet Union would not publish the work because of its humanistic and authentic portrayal of Soviet life, the manuscript was smuggled to Italy in 1957 where it was published and awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958. Though Pasternak survived the publication, the Soviets forced him to decline the Nobel award. Sally and Irena were instrumental in getting copies of the publication back home. -SCR

Simsion, Graeme *The Rosie Project* (Fiction [Simsion](#)) - An enjoyable debut novel set in Australia. Don Tillman may be a brilliant genetics professor, but in all other aspects of his life he is hardly adept. Don schedules his life logically and simply; his primary goal is to eliminate the unexpected as much as possible. While to an outsider, Don appears anal and awkward, he considers his methods quite successful and decides to employ the same orderly

approach to his next life goal: finding a (suitable) wife, which he entitles "The Wife Project." To that end, Don thoughtfully constructs a 16 page survey for potential wives to fill out to determine their compatibility, but is disappointed with the lackluster response from every female he encounters. Despondent, he leans on his trusted friends to help, and they convince him to let them set him up on a blind date: enter Rosie. She certainly fails almost every question on the survey, but Don seeks out her company repeatedly anyway, and somehow becomes embroiled in yet another "project" that is both completely ridiculous and hilarious. Thoroughly predictable and equally enjoyable, I very much recommend this book to those wanting a laugh. -HV

Smarsh, Sarah *Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth* (Non-Fiction Biography [92 Smarsh, Sarah](#)) - Readers who read *Hillbilly Elegy*, *The Glass Castle*, or *August: Osage County* will appreciate *Heartland*, which is a memoir of growing up in Kansas in the 1950s (although it seems like the 1930s). The storyline covers five generations, including the author's unborn daughter August (conceived in her mind only), beginning with Betty, the grandmother whose life was never easy. Betty is typical of the women in the family: she was always doing something for the underdog, never hardened her heart, was no saint, knew the world was not easy for anybody, and changed her physical address 48 times (from Wichita, Chicago, Denver, Dallas and back). Sarah directs her words to August in an effort to explain the poverty of the plains states at a time when the country chose to ignore the white working class in this "fly-over country," a place that required creative, industrious people. The women lived a life of peril, knew their bodies were born into hard labor, and were taught that they were dispensable. Most aimed to get off the farm. The men were most often drinkers and beaters. What saved Sarah was her love for school and her father who was somehow above the norm though not without fault. The author tells a very personal story in an easy style while at the same time giving a clear look at the socio-economic culture of her years growing up in the Nixon and Reagan America. -EN

Stradal, J. Ryan *The Lager Queen of Minnesota* (Fiction [Stradal](#)) - I believe this second novel by Stradal will cement him as the authentic voice of lower-middle-class living in the Midwest. This is a story about family: fractious, fraught with jealousy, passion, and ... craft beer. Younger, prettier, and more talented younger sister Helen dreams of brewing her own beer, and cavalierly leaves behind her family farm to achieve that goal. She proves herself to be both ruthless and calculating in addition to ambitious as she convinces her father to disinherit her older sister in Helen's favor to further her brewery dream. Though both sisters' lives are traveling in opposite directions, they continually intersect peripherally over the years, and everything always comes back to beer and brewing. A twisting tale full of humor and insight into family life in the Midwest, with a bittersweet but satisfying ending. -HV

Turansky, Carrie *No Ocean Too Wide* (Fiction [Turansky](#)) - Many of us have read *Before We Were Yours* by Lisa Wingate and *Orphan Train* by Christina Baker Kline. Thanks to Olive Norris who discovered this book in the same vein. Between 1869 and 1939, more than one hundred thousand impoverished British children were sent to Canada with the promise of a better life. Most of them were taken in to work as farm laborers or household servants, while a lucky few were actually adopted. The claim that all the children were orphans, turned out not to be the case. The fictional McAlister family is living in poverty in London in 1909. Tragically the father dies in a train wreck and then the mother becomes seriously ill. The oldest daughter, Laura, works at an estate more than an hour from their home. When she returns home, she finds her mother in the hospital and her three younger siblings have somehow slipped into the orphan system. Laura follows the kids to Canada where she is finally able to reunite the family with the help of Andrew Frasier; a wealthy young barrister. *The Reader's Guide* at the end of the book gives us questions for future discussions. -JAC/ON

Whelan, Julila *My Oxford Year* (Fiction [Whelan](#)) - A moving, contemporary read set amidst the beauty of Oxford. Ella Durran has always wanted to study at Oxford and has finally made it on a Rhodes Scholarship.

After a year abroad, she will return to Washington, D.C. to work a dream job on a presidential campaign. What she wasn't expecting was to meet a life-changing man, Jamie Davenport, on her first day at Oxford. -NM

Recommended for Christmas

Berenson, Laurien *Here Comes Santa Paws* (Fiction Berenson) - I always enjoy Berenson's cozy mysteries featuring many dogs. While her sleuth, Melanie Travis, is addicted to poodles, the mysteries often feature other breeds. In this Christmas mystery, the puppies in jeopardy are Australian Shepherds left by someone in an outdoor Christmas stocking decoration. But an even bigger mystery surrounds the death of Lila Moran, a secretive woman with an untraceable past. -JAC

Bradford, Laura *A Killer Carol* (Paperback Mystery Bradford) - The hook for this cozy mystery series is that it takes place in an Amish village in Pennsylvania called Heavenly. Claire Wetherly is English, but her friends are almost all Amish. This year she has spearheaded a new event called One Heavenly Night where all the businesses on Lighted Way (both English and Amish) have special decorations and lighting for the holiday season. Then a double murder seems to threaten everything, and some of Claire's closest Amish friends are suspects. It doesn't help that her boyfriend is Jakob Fisher, a former Amish man turned police detective. -JAC

Chiaverini, Jennifer *The Christmas Boutique* (Fiction Chiaverini) - We have read and I have recommended several historical novels by Jennifer Chiaverini over the years. My true favorites, however, are her fictional stories in the *Elm Creek Quilts* series. This Christmas story brings us up to date with some of the lovable characters in the series. When severe winter weather damages a church where an annual sale of handcrafted gifts is held, Sylvia Bergstrom and the Elm Creek Quilters offer to hold the event at Elm Creek Manor. What we have is a holiday novel that mixes family, legacy, reconciliation, and shared experience. Even if you haven't read one of these novels before, you will enjoy this heartwarming tale. -JAC

Monroe, Mary *Right Beside You* (Fiction Monroe) - Mary Monroe is a *New York Times* bestselling author of romance. This novella is about two long-time co-workers who seem unlucky in love. This Christmas season Felicia Hawkins and Richard Grimes may actually find love for themselves when they open up their hearts to each other. -JAC

Roberts, Sheila *Christmas from the Heart* (Fiction Roberts) - Sheila Roberts is a *USA Today* bestselling author of romance. In this story, she takes us to the charming, snowbound town of Pine River, Washington. The novel pits Olivia Berg against Guy Hightower. She runs a charity called Christmas from the Heart and he has recently taken over Hightower Enterprises. For several generations Hightower Enterprises has been one of the biggest donors to the charity. But now Scrooge the Second (i.e. Guy Hightower) has decreed that the donations must stop. -JAC

Rosenfelt, David *Dachshund through the Snow* (Fiction Rosenfelt) - Lawyer Andy Carpenter is very rich and tries to take on as few cases as possible. He prefers spending time with his dogs, golden retriever Tara and basset hound Sebastian, and family. His wife Laurie is in charge of giving away as much of their fortune as possible. One of her projects is working with "wish cards" from children during the Christmas season. Danny wishes for a coat for his mom, a very long sweater for his dachshund dog, and to bring his dad home. This ends up being a case for Andy as the dad in question is accused of a murder that took place fourteen years ago. Andy's other current client is police dog Simon, who wants to retire with his partner. The police department doesn't consider him old enough, but his arthritis is clearly going to affect his quality of life going forward. The humor in this Andy Carpenter series of mysteries is always enjoyable. -JAC

Seduction on a Snowy Night (Fiction Seduction) - This is a collection of three novellas by three different romance authors. Madeline Hunter has written *A Christmas Abduction*, Sabrina Jeffries has penned *A Perfect Match* and Mary Jo Putney has authored *One Wicked Winter Night*. If you enjoy Regency romance, this is the holiday collection for you. -JAC

Thayne, RaeAnne *Coming Home for Christmas* (Fiction Thayne) - Thayne is a *New York Times* bestselling author of contemporary romances. Although this story is part of her Haven Point series, it can easily be read as a stand-alone novel. This is the story of Luke and Elizabeth Hamilton and their reunion after spending years apart. Luke's love for his wife is so strong that he can't give up hope. Elizabeth is dealing with a mental illness that takes her on a journey she didn't expect. This is a story of regret for the past and hope for the future. -JAC

Woodsmall, Cindy *A Christmas Haven* (Fiction Woodsmall) - Cindy Woodsmall and her daughter-in-law Erin Woodsmall have written several Amish romances together. Old Order Amish Ivy Zook needs to shed her community's beliefs in order to grow her new business as a party planner. Arlan Keim and his very ill sister Magda are members of the ultraconservative Swartzentruber Amish sect. The story opens in summer as Arlen drives a car into the front window of Greene's Pharmacy. Ivy Zook and her family rescue and ultimately house the young runaways and the story moves along toward the Christmas season. Eventually each of the characters learn that it is possible to live the simple life and yet exist in the modern world. I especially enjoyed learning about the differences in all the Amish communities. -**JAC**