

BROWN BAG BOOK REVIEW

FEBRUARY 4TH, 2021

Alvarez, Julia *Afterlife* <2020> (Fiction Alvarez) - In this return to adult fiction by Alvarez (*How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*), a retired English professor and writer is caught between her sisters' drama and the plight of a pregnant undocumented young woman -- all in the wake of her husband's death. Antonia Vega is still grieving for Sam a year after his fatal car accident, getting by with the help of aphorisms from her favorite poets. When eldest sister, Izzy, disappears during a manic episode her Dominican sisterhood convenes, bringing along their usual baggage. Meanwhile, a documented worker from the neighboring farm seeks Antonia's help in finding a place for his pregnant girlfriend. Antonia navigates these tumultuous occurrences with Sam and what he would do as her guiding principle. In this life after his death, the protagonist realizes that the best way to memorialize her husband is to embody what she loved most about him. Alvarez's prose is magnetic as she delves into the intricacies of sisterhood, immigration and grief, once again proving her mastery as a storyteller. This stirring novel reminds readers that actions (big and small) have a lasting impact - so they should always act with love. - summary from *Library Journal*, recommended by KG

Amore, Anthony M. *The Woman Who Stole Vermeer* <2020> (Non-Fiction 364.1 A 524w) - Amore has written two other books about art crime. He is Director of Security at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. I don't normally read true crime books, but I was drawn to this one because of Vermeer - one of my favorite artists although we know little about him and we only have about 34 paintings that are officially attributed to him. He was a Baroque Dutch painter (Delft) living from 1632 to 1675. This is the story of Rose Dugdale who is (so far) the only known woman to mastermind a major art heist. She was from a British upper-class background and had a typical debutante presentation and then went to Oxford. She consciously chose to become a radical terrorist for the IRA, while earning her doctorate. She was not Irish and wasn't even acceptable to most of IRA. In 1974 she was the mastermind behind the robbery of Russborough House in Ireland. Her gang stole nineteen artistic masterworks (including the Vermeer, Goya, Gainsborough and Rubens) after gagging and binding the owners of the house and paintings. It was done in the name of the IRA, although the group did not sanction the heist. No one was killed and the paintings were returned essentially unharmed. - JAC

Austen, Jane *Emma* <1815> (Fiction Austen) - Beautiful, clever, rich - and single - Emma Woodhouse is perfectly content with her life and sees no need for either love or marriage. Nothing, however, delights her more than interfering in the romantic lives of others. But when she ignores the warnings of her good friend Mr. Knightley and attempts to arrange a suitable match for her protegee Harriet Smith, her carefully laid plans soon unravel and have consequences that she never expected. With its imperfect but charming heroine and its witty and subtle exploration of relationships *Emma* is often seen as Jane Austen's most flawless work. - summary from the Publisher, recommended by HV

Benedict, Marie *The Mystery of Mrs. Christie* <2021> (Fiction Benedict) - Benedict delivers an uneven novel of what might have happened to Agatha Christie during the 11 days in 1926 when she famously went missing. Chapters alternate between a memoir manuscript purportedly written by Christie, and the story of Christie's husband, Archie, who becomes a suspect in her disappearance. No one knows what really happened, and the clever premise here is that Christie vanished deliberately so

as to ensnare Archie in a trap as payback for his infidelities. The saccharine manuscript, beginning in 1912 with the line, "I could not have written a more perfect man," chronicles Agatha and Archie's courtship and early years of marriage, and her efforts to please him. More satisfying are the chapters in which a heinous Archie emerges and is forced to follow Agatha's instructions in a letter in order to escape prosecution. As the investigators begin to suspect foul play, thanks to phony clues left by Agatha, Archie is forced to admit compromising truths. While the manuscript chapters won't ring true with Christie fans, the story makes for good fun. - summary from *Publishers Weekly*, recommended by SCR.

Bowen, Rhys *The Tuscan Child* <2018> (Fiction Bowen) - I have read Bowen's books for decades now. They include the *Constable Evan Evans* mysteries taking place in Wales, the *Molly Murphy* series about an Irish immigrant who become a private investigator in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century and the *Royal Spyness* series taking place in Great Britain in the 1930s. Recently Bowen has been writing stand-alone novels about World War II. *The Tuscan Child* is one of these novels. In 1944 English bomber pilot and aristocrat Hugh Langley was shot down over Tuscany. The area was then occupied by the Germans, so the badly injured pilot was lucky to find refuge in a ruined monastery. Fortunately, he is discovered by Sofia Bartoli, a young Tuscan villager. They come to love each other, but the romance ends as Hugh is rescued and returns to England, while Sofia disappears. In 1973 Hugh's daughter Joanna comes home to bury her father. While he had survived the war, he had been forced to sell the family manor in order to pay the British taxes. He and his wife (now deceased) and daughter were permitted to live in the guest house on the manor's grounds. While clearing things up, Joanna discovers a letter to Sofia that had never been delivered. Her curiosity is piqued and she goes to Tuscany to see if she can find Sofia and the "golden child" referred to in the letter. As usual, Bowen's descriptions are wonderful in this compelling mystery romance. - JAC

Briggs, Patricia *Cry Wolf* <2008> (Fiction Briggs) - "#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Patricia Briggs presents the first Alpha and Omega novel - the start of an extraordinary series set in Mercy Thompson's world, but with rules of its own... Anna never know werewolves existed until the night she survived a violent attack...and become one herself. After three years at the bottom of the pack, she'd learned to keep her head down and never, ever trust dominant males. But Anna is that rarest kind of werewolf: an Omega. And one of the most powerful werewolves in the country is about to recognize her value as a pack member—and as his mate." It is recommended you read the prequel *Alpha & Omega* before reading *Cry Wolf*. - summary from the Publisher, recommended by NCM

Cline, Ernest *Ready Player One* <2011> (Fiction Cline) - This adrenaline shot of uncut geekdom, a quest through a virtual world, is loaded with enough 1980s nostalgia to please even the most devoted John Hughes fans. In a bleak but easily imagined 2044, Wade Watts, an impoverished high school student who calls a vertically stacked trailer park home, lives primarily online, alongside billions of others, via a massive online game, OASIS, where players race to unravel the puzzles OASIS creator James Halliday built into the game before his death, with the winner taking control of the virtual world's parent company, as well as staggering wealth. When Wade stumbles on a clue, he's plunged into high-stakes conflict with a corporation dedicated to unraveling Halliday's riddles, which draw from *Dungeons and Dragons*, old Atari video games, the cinematic computer hacker ode *War Games*, and that wellspring of geek humor, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. (Of course.) The science fiction, video game, technology, and geeky musical references pile up quickly, sometimes a bit much so, but sweet

self-deprecating Wade, whose universe is an odd mix of the real past and the virtual present, is the perfect loveable/unlikely hero. - summary from *Publishers Weekly*, recommended by NCM

Cline, Ernest *Ready Player Two* <2020> (Fiction Cline) - Days after winning OASIS founder James Halliday's contest, Wade Watts makes a discovery that changes everything. Hidden within Halliday's vaults, waiting for his heir to find, lies a technological advancement that will once again change the world and make the OASIS a thousand times more wondrous - and addictive - than even Wade dreamed possible. With it comes a new riddle, and a new quest - a last Easter egg from Halliday, hinting at a mysterious prize. And an unexpected, impossibly powerful, and dangerous new rival awaits, one who'll kill millions to get what he wants. Wade's life and the future of the OASIS are again at stake, but this time the fate of humanity also hangs in the balance. Lovingly nostalgic and wildly original as only Ernest Cline could conceive it, *Ready Player Two* takes us on another imaginative, fun, action-packed adventure through his beloved virtual universe, and jolts us thrillingly into the future once again. - summary from the Publisher, recommended by NCM

Evans, Lissa *Old Baggage* <2018> (Fiction Evans) - Evan's fourth novel (following *Their Finest*) is a thoughtful and satisfying story featuring 50-something Mattie Simpkins, a suffragette living in 1928 London with her friend Flossie, or, as everyone calls her, the Flea. Instead of still being on the front lines of change, the women now lead predictable, comfortable lives, which bothers Mattie as she fondly recalls fighting for the right to vote. But after running into a former suffragette who tries to turn young people toward Fascism, Mattie and the Flea are spurred into forming their own organization for women called the Amazons, with the goal of educating the next generation to be thoughtful and engaged as opposed to being focused on marriage and going to the movies. When Inez joins the club, Mattie is shocked to discover they have a connected past. Trying to motivate Inez to become a strong person, Mattie inadvertently does something that upsets the Flea and threatens the club. Evans weaves an enchanting tale around Mattie and her circle of friends as they attempt to imbue a new generation with their feminist and antifascist values; readers will be captivated. - summary from *Publishers Weekly*, recommended by KG

Grames, Juliet *The Seven or Eight Deaths of Stella Fortuna* <2019> (Fiction Grames) - This is a debut novel about an Italian family from a rugged mountain village in Calabria. Mariastella Fortuna was the oldest of the four surviving children of Assunta Mascaro and Antonio Fortuna. She was beautiful and very smart, but also very unlucky. As she was growing up, she survived being trampled by pigs, falling and cracking open her head and a bad beating. Her father had gone to America in order to find work and eventually saved enough to bring the family over just before World War II. Somehow, he messed that up and the family were not allowed to board the ship. But that ship sank, so Stella survived (almost) drowning. The family eventually settled in Connecticut and as time went on Stella survived being raped by her husband, childbirth, and choking before suffering a stroke. But she survived even that and lived into her hundreds. As we read about Stella, we get something of an understanding of the patriarchal Italian family. As often as not the males are controlling, sometimes abusive, and totally unaware of women who might need more than a husband and a bunch of children to be fulfilled. But ultimately it is the women who are strong and hold the family together. Sadly, Stella is estranged from her sister and best friend Tina for the last thirty years of her life, although Tina takes care of her

meals and other necessities. The rift occurs after the stroke which Stella survived, although her true memories did not. - JAC

Healey, Jane *The Animals of Lockwood Manor* <2020> (Fiction Healey) - This is a debut novel by a young Scottish author. The story is eerie and haunting - i.e. it is a gothic novel. The setting is unique with the story taking place starting in 1939. Hetty Cartwright has been assigned to watch over a natural history collection which has been moved out of London to a remote manor for safekeeping during the war. The collection of mostly stuffed mammals is unique (for its time). The manor has four floors, six flights of stairs and 92 rooms with some resident ghosts. Some of the stuffed mammals disappear only to be found later in a new location. Lord Lockwood is imperious and lascivious, and his staff is scornful of Hetty. Finally, Hetty makes friends with Lockwood's daughter Lucy. Hetty and Lucy take turns in narrating the atmospheric and frightening story. - JAC

Hearn, Lian *Across the Nightingale Floor* <2020> (Fiction Hearn) - Mystical powers and martial arts rampage through this pseudo-Japanese story, the first of a projected trilogy by newcomer Hearn, with an abandon that's head spinning. From the entrance of the 16-year-old hero, Takeo, as he is about to be swatted down by a mounted horseman and the way he can become invisible or make a duplicate of himself when he needs to, to the head-rolling decapitations that follow interminably, the impossible becomes the semiplausible. Takeo, who joins the Otori clan, is a religious outcast, and also, surprisingly, a member of "the Tribe," a secretive race that has unusual mental and physical powers that lend them an unworldly air. Takeo learns how to control his burgeoning talents just in time to avenge the death of his mentor, while politics and clan rivalries lead to an increasing amount of graphic bloodshed. Takeo enjoys a few blissful moments with the fetching Lady Kaede Shirakawa but, unfortunately, she is not destined to be his, now or in the future. For fans of Japanese samurai warrior fantasy, this novel is right in the ballpark, filled with swords, clan in-fighting, love affairs, invisibility and magical Ninja powers. - summary from *Publishers Weekly*, recommended by HV

Hibbert, Talia *Get a Life, Chloe Brown* <2020> (Fiction Hibbert) - Chronically ill Chloe Brown's near-death experience is the catalyst for a thrilling life-altering adventure that will keep readers riveted. Chloe, living but not thriving in present-day England, is on her daily walk when a car just misses crashing into her. Realizing life's too short for her to settle for her boring routine, she creates a list of ways to change her life - starting with moving out of her family's home and into her own apartment, and working up to traveling the world - but discovers that she needs a little push to follow through. Enter her new building superintendent, "Red" Morgan, a tough guy with a heart of gold and a hidden artistic talent. Their relationship begins antagonistically, but the more time they spend together, with Red coaching Chloe through her list, the more sparks fly. It's quickly clear that the question isn't whether they'll get together but whether they can overcome their past traumas to turn their fling into something that will last. Chloe is a fantastic heroine with a refreshing voice; she's understandably prickly given all she goes through as a black, overweight, disabled woman, but that edge doesn't make her any less endearing to Red or the reader. She feels real and so do her struggles. Red is also dynamic and fascinating. Both characters need to change their lives and stand up for themselves, and readers will find them inspiring. - summary from *Publishers Weekly*, recommended by NCM

Houston, Keith *The Book: A Cover-to-Cover Exploration of the Most Powerful Object of Our Time* <2016> (Non-Fiction 002.09 H843b) - This is a must-read for librarians, publishers, historians, bibliophiles, and anyone interested in the origins and development of books. The treatise begins with papyrus, that versatile reed growing along the Nile River in Egypt, and the earliest reading material and ends with the standardization of paper sizes. This is followed by parchment and then paper, which is traced to the paper-makers of Uighur, China. Once humankind had the correct surface and inks and brushes, they began to develop writing skills. Early manuscripts were hand-written until Gutenberg invented the printing press with movable type. Contrary to common belief, his 42-line Bible was preceded by a smaller Latin grammar. This book also covers illuminated manuscripts, woodcuts, limestone prints, copperplate, photography, lithography, and rotary presses. Printing was followed by various binding techniques. Papyrus scrolls developed into wax tablets, folios, railway novels, portable books, hard cover or paperback books, and now electronic tablets. The book has been around for thousands, not hundreds, of years, and Houston's premise is that it will remain a part of our history for many years to come. The average reader probably knows the spine, end pages, and index, but *The Book* informs about the headband, foolscap, codex, codicologist and countless other details. - EN

Hunting, Helena *Kiss My Cupcake* <2020> (Fiction Hunting) - It's cupcakes and cocktails vs. beer and pub grub in this delicious romantic comedy about feuding Seattle bar owners from Hunting (*Meet Cute*). Determined entrepreneur Blaire Calloway's new bakery/bar is off the ground running, until yummy-looking Ronan Knight moves his pub next door and steals away her customers. Blair's desire to succeed without assistance from her wealthy but dysfunctional family makes her instant competitiveness with Ronan understandable and urgent, especially since they're both in the running to be named the best bar in the Pacific Northwest by a social media influencer who's holding a contest. As their rivalry ramps up amid increasingly brazen strategies to bring in business, their feud turns increasingly flirtatious and they eventually realize they'll have to work together in order for either to succeed. Their romance develops at a convincing pace, and their relationships with their families round out the plot with Ronan's close relationship with his grandfather serving as a stark contrast to Blaire's outlandish family. Though the plot stays relatively breezy, Hunting knows when to crank the heat and when to tug at readers' heartstrings to keep the pages turning. Light and fluffy with the perfect balance of sweetness and spice, this is a winning confection. - summary from *Publishers Weekly*, recommended by NCM

Randall, Alice *Black Bottom Saints* <2020> (Fiction Randall) - Randall's novel will give readers another look at Black culture in America and also provide an interesting history of Detroit (much easier to absorb than LeDuff's *Detroit: an American Autopsy*, 2006). Told through the eyes of Ziggy Johnson, who runs his own theatrical school in the Black Bottom (Detroit's Harlem), the story provides a virtual Who's Who of African Americans from Joe Louis to Della Reese to Sammy Davis Jr. and many more. This is an insightful yet nostalgic look at the breadwinners who kept it all going - the cocktail bars, barber shops, churches, theatres, arenas. Each of the short chapters is about one of Ziggy's former students. Some were born and raised in Detroit; others like Nat King Cole may have hailed from Chicago but were considered part of the entertainment scene of Motor City. - EN

Rees, Delia *Miss Graham's Cold War Cookbook* <2020> (Fiction Rees) - While World War II novels are all the rage these days, Rees has moved beyond that time with a novel beginning at the end of the war in 1946. Edith Graham was a teacher during the war at a girls' school outside London. When the

war ends, she applies for a position with Britain's Control Commission to help repair Germany's education infrastructure. Before her posting in Lübeck (in northern Germany) she is also recruited as a spy. Her friend Dori wants her help in finding out what really happened to several female World War II spies dropped in Paris and never heard from. Their families want to know what happened and Dori pretty much wants to eliminate former Nazis. She is especially tasked with finding Kurt von Stavenow and his wife Elizabeth. Edith knows Kurt from when he studied in England before the war and they had a romantic relationship. Edith and Dori create a code based on a cookbook that almost everyone in England had - it was included with a purchase of a cooker (what we would call a stove). Edith sends Dori all kinds of recipes which include information about the former Nazis. Once the spy mission is complete, the recipes are collected in a new cookbook. - JAC

Russo, Richard *Trajectory* <2017> (Fiction Russo) - The four stories in Russo's new collection are all winners, and one is a standout. His familiar blue-collar denizens of dying mill towns are not present here; these characters are professionals, middle-aged or beyond, successful in their careers but feeling weathered by life's vicissitudes. The trajectory they travel involves coming to terms with life-changing situations and gamely going on. As always, snappy banter defines personality; Russo's ear for dialogue is superb. In "Horseman," a female professor's confrontation with a student plagiarist forces her to acknowledge the coldness in her nature that has kept her from producing significant work and establishing a deep emotional relationship with her husband and son. In "Voice," a student with acute Asperger's syndrome is the object of an obsession that embroils a professor in a scandal. The experience leads to a clarifying breakthrough with his domineering older brother. Another strained family relationship is explored in "Intervention" when a Maine realtor gains clarity about his father's behavior as he comes to terms with a dire medical diagnosis. The final story, "Milton and Marcus," is the most satisfying: a novelist whose work has lost vitality has a chance to write a movie from one of his forgotten scripts, but to do so he must ignore his own ethical standards. Russo develops these stories with smooth assurance, allowing readers to discover layers of meaning in his perfectly calibrated narration. - summary from *Publishers Weekly*, recommended by KG

Santos, Yaffa S. *A Taste of Sage* <2020> (Fiction Santos) - This is a romance, which is something I don't often read. But this story really has some depth beyond the requisite sexy scenes. Lumi Santana is a Dominican chef who has opened a fusion restaurant in Inwood, Manhattan, New York. In addition to serving her native dishes, she is gifted with a unique gift: she can perceive a person's emotions by tasting their cooking. When her restaurant fails, she takes a position as a sous chef at a very staid and traditional French restaurant in midtown. Julien Dax is the owner of that restaurant and does not allow anyone to change any of his recipes by one iota. He is also known for his acid tongue, which Lumi experiences first-hand when she adds green apple slices to his ratatouille recipe. She vows never to taste his cooking. Since this is a romance, of course their relationship very slowly develops into a love affair. Usually, when Lumi tastes Dax's cooking, she is aware of the overwhelming aromas with a delicious undercurrent of sage. When she tries one of the dishes, however, she tastes an extremely bitter flavor which leads to an accident. As Lumi recovers from the accident, so does their relationship as they discover someone else added something to Dax's dish, making it unpalatable. The couple eventually find a way to combine traditional recipes with intuitive cooking and they open a new restaurant together. - JAC

Tan, Amy *The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings* <2003> (Biography Non-Fiction 92 Tan, Amy) - Tan's bestselling works of fiction are, in part, based on her own family history, and this robust book, her first nonfiction effort, explains much about where those stories came from and how they influenced her. The collection of "casual pieces" (previously published in such diverse venues as *Harper's Bazaar*, *Ski Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *Salon.com* and even *PW*) covers Tan's childhood in California and Switzerland; her writing career; her relationships with her mother and her late editor, Faith Sale; and, most significantly, the role of fate in her life. Raised with "two pillars of beliefs" (Christian faith on her father's side; Chinese fate on her mother's), Tan finds luck—both good and bad—in all corners of her life. Ultimately, however, she knows "a higher power knows the next move and... we are at the mercy of that force." As she reflects on how things have happened in her 50-odd years, Tan's writing varies from poetic to prosaic. In an excerpt from a journal she kept during a 1990 trip to China, she eloquently describes Shanghai's streets: "Gray pants and white shirts are suspended from long bamboo poles that overhang the street. The laundry flaps in the wind like proletarian banners." But reading about Tan's adventures with her rock band, the Rock Bottom Remainders, feels a bit like reading someone else's high school yearbook's inside jokes, as she reminisces about truck-stop breakfasts and late-night sing-alongs. - summary from *Publishers Weekly*, recommended by *KG*

Wood, Tracey Enerson *The Engineer's Wife* <2020> (Fiction Wood) - If you've seen the Ken Burns documentary of the Brooklyn Bridge, you know the history of this engineering feat. Wood's novel about Emily Warren, the wife of Wash Roebling, magnifies her contributions to her husband's success. The story begins at the turn of the 20th century with Emily and Wash marrying soon after his leaving the U.S. army. Roebling rises quickly in his career and is soon given the commission as chief engineer of the Brooklyn Bridge. This will necessitate their moving from Trenton where Emily has become active in the suffragette cause. She compromises her concerns and they move to New York. When Wash is badly injured on site, Emily must take over some of his duties, often soliciting financial investments for this long overdue project. Soon Emily takes over more and more responsibilities as she battles for recognition in the man's world of architecture, construction, and civil engineering. She begins to question her own identity as well as her marriage. This is a story about a strong woman who met her challenges with perseverance and courage. Of special interest is the appearance of showman and philanderer P.T. Barnum who weaves his way in and out of the story in pursuit of Emily. In one scene he loans his prize performer Jumbo to lead the parade across the bridge at the historical opening. - *EN*