

BROWN BAG BOOK REVIEW

MAY 6TH, 2021

Adams, Hope *Dangerous Women* <2021> (Fiction Adams) - This debut novel is historical fiction taking place between April and July of 1841. 180 female convicts were loaded aboard the ship *Rajah* to be transported to Hobart, Australia. A few of the convicts are permitted to bring their children with them. We are introduced to several of the convicts, the ship's master, the ship's doctor, the ship's missionary, and the ship's matron, named Kezia. The matron is assigned to teach the convicts a skill that should ultimately improve their lives. She chooses 18 of the women, who already have some needlework skills, to work on a special project. They are going to create a huge hand-sewn quilt to present to the Governor of Australia. You will learn something about the conditions aboard the ship and something about quilting as well. Hope Adams also inserts a fictional traditional "locked-room" mystery to the basic true outline of the story which adds cohesive drama to the account. One of the quilter convicts is stabbed, but no one knows who is responsible. The ship and the non-convict characters are all true. The quilt still exists and can be viewed online (just look in Google under *Rajah* quilt to see images). If you like Australian historical fiction and if you enjoyed *The Light Between Oceans* by M. L. Stedman, give this one a try. - JAC

Bennett, S. J. *The Windsor Knot* <2021> (Fiction Bennett) - Although I read a lot of cozy mysteries, I rarely bring one of them to this group (really!). I couldn't resist this light-hearted British cozy. In 2016 Queen Elizabeth is at Windsor Castle shortly before celebrating her ninetieth birthday. A young Russian pianist who was a guest at the castle is found strangled. At first it seems to be suicide, but the knot used makes it impossible. Queen Elizabeth is intrigued and begins to make some discreet inquiries. She is aided in this by her assistant private secretary. They know that MI5's investigation is on the wrong track when they insist on questioning the Household's most trusted, loyal servants. Elizabeth is portrayed as kind yet worldly, decisive, shrewd and a superb judge of character. You might remember a story featuring a much younger Lilibet in *Princess Elizabeth's Spy* by Susan Elia MacNeal. - JAC

Brickell, Francesca Cartier *The Cartiers: The Untold Story of the Family Behind the Jewelry Empire* <2019> (Non-Fiction 739.27 B849c) - Readers who enjoy biography will find this multi-generational family account an entertaining means of reading history. The name Cartier has been synonymous with jewelry since the early 1800s when Louis-Francois and his son, Alfred, began the business which came to be known for exquisite creations as well as its famous clientele. The Cartiers started as humble craftsmen but through honest business ethics, creative design, and strategic marriages established their own empire. Their motto was always: "Never copy, only create." They seldom had to advertise because the media often photographed Romanov and Russian royalty, maharajahs, and movie stars wearing Cartier jewels. The third generation of Louis, Pierre, and Jacques expanded the business from Paris to London, New York and seasonal shops in Monaco, Florida, and India, expertly combining their diverse talents in business, design, and marketing and always keeping family first and foremost in mind. The story of the Cartiers represents a bygone age never to be seen again. - EN

Diamond, Jared *Upheaval: Turning Points for Nations in Crisis* <2019> (Non-Fiction 304.28 D537u) - This well-researched, thoughtful, and informative book gives the modern reader a scholarly look at how seven countries overcame political, economic, social, and environmental crises to emerge as healthy

sovereign states in modern history. Diamond focuses on seven countries where he has lived: Finland, Germany, Japan, Chile, Indonesia, Australia, and the U.S.A. Each has managed to survive by using particularly national solutions. There are lessons to learn from this in-depth study, and particularly during this time of the global pandemic crisis. - EN

Dueñas, María *The Vineyard* <2017> (Fiction Dueñas) - This is a seething romantic saga which unfortunately provides only one rather hurried love scene. Nevertheless, there is plenty of passion in this story about fortune-hunter Mauro Larrea, who tries his luck at silver mining, investments, viticulture, and gambling in Mexico, Cuba, and Spain. Along the way he meets the beautiful Soledad Montalvo Claydon. Although they are immediately attracted to each other, she is already married and has several daughters. A surprise ending brings together all the intriguing facets of this entertaining plot. Stock characters include the sidekick, the wise medical doctor, the tragic sister, and others. - EN

Erdrich, Louise *The Night Watchman* <2020> (Fiction Erdrich) - This story is based on the sad fact that at one point in American history, the United States Congress was considering the termination (more like ex-termination) of the Chippewa/Cree peoples of South Dakota, North Dakota and Montana. The main character, Thomas Wazhashk, is the night watchman at the local jewel-bearing plant and chairman of the tribe. It is Wazhashk and a small group of Cree who travel to Washington, D. C. to argue for their existence. Another character, Patrice (better known as Pixie), also travels, but she goes to "The Cities" (Minneapolis/St. Paul) to find her estranged sister, Vera. This is a poignant story of survival on several levels for Native Americans. Child prostitution, drug addiction, and alcoholism are but a few of the problems which emerge, but there is also some uncanny humor as well as a personal look at the rich culture of these plains people. - EN

Harris, Charlaine *Dead Until Dark (Sookie Stackhouse series #1)* <2001> (Fiction Harris) - Sink your teeth into the first novel in the #1 *New York Times* bestselling Sookie Stackhouse series - the books that gave life to the Dead and inspired the HBO® original series *True Blood*. Sookie Stackhouse is just a small-time cocktail waitress in small-town Bon Temps, Louisiana. She's quiet, doesn't get out much, and tends to mind her own business -- except when it comes to her "disability." Sookie can read minds. And that doesn't make her too dateable. Then along comes Bill Compton. He's tall, dark, handsome - and Sookie can't hear a word he's thinking. He's exactly the type of guy she's been waiting for all her life ... But Bill has a disability of his own: he's a vampire with a bad reputation. And when a string of murders hits Bon Temps - along with a gang of truly nasty bloodsuckers looking for Bill - Sookie starts to wonder if having a vampire for a boyfriend is such a bright idea. - summary from the Publisher, recommended by NCM

Harrison, Kim *Dead Witch Walking (Hollows series #1)* <2004> (Fiction Harrison) - In the Hollows, the vampires come out to play ... and it's always witching hour. The first book in #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Kim Harrison's Hollows series! All the creatures of the night gather in "the Hollows" of Cincinnati, to hide, to prowl, to party ... and to feed. Vampires rule the darkness in a predator-eat-predator world rife with dangers beyond imagining -- and it's Rachel Morgan's job to keep that world civilized. A bounty hunter and a witch with serious sex appeal and an attitude, she'll bring 'em back alive, dead ... or undead. - summary from the Publisher, recommended by NCM

Kidd, Sue Monk *The Book of Longings* <2020> (Fiction Kidd) - In her mesmerizing fourth work of fiction, Sue Monk Kidd takes an audacious approach to history and brings her acclaimed narrative gifts

to imagine the story of a young woman named Ana. Raised in a wealthy family with ties to the ruler of Galilee, she is rebellious and ambitious, with a brilliant mind and a daring spirit. She engages in furtive scholarly pursuits and writes narratives about neglected and silenced women. Ana is expected to marry an older widower, a prospect that horrifies her. An encounter with eighteen-year-old Jesus changes everything. - summary from the publisher, recommended by KG

Larson, Eric *The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family, and Defiance During the Blitz* <2020> (Non-Fiction [940.5421 L334s](#)) - Larson has come up with yet another World War II history that manages to entertain as well as inform. The narrative shifts back and forth between Britain and Germany in the several years leading up to America's entry into the war. Although the Prime Minister and his family represent what might be construed as splendid, Churchill is depicted as rather comic compared to most of the many biographies about him, and Clementine is almost ignored. Hitler, Goebbels and Goering have no positive qualities. The destructive and relentless air battles remind all of the devastating realities of the "war to end all wars." - EN

Lecoat, Jenny *The Girl from the Channel Islands* <2020> (Fiction [Lecoat](#)) - This is a story of the Channel Islands during World War II. If you liked *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Society* by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows, you might enjoy this historical novel by debut author Jenny Lecoat. The novel begins in 1940 when Hedy Bercu finds herself trapped on the tiny island of Jersey. She had recently escaped the Nazis in Vienna, and was eking out a living on British Jersey. Great Britain did not have the resources to defend the islands and Nazi Germany easily invaded Jersey. Hedy gets a job as a translator for the Germans, a perilous position for a Jew in wartime. Her best friend is Anton, an Austrian Catholic who also has lived on the island for some time. He falls in love with Dorothea and they marry. Hedy doesn't care for Dorothea, thinking her shallow and trite, but puts up with her. Then Anton is sent off to be a soldier on the eastern front for the Reich and the two women begin to rely on each other. Meanwhile Hedy also forges a tentative friendship with a sympathetic German officer. Based on a true story, this is a tale of resistance and bravery found in quiet acts of heroism and love. - JAC

Lefteri, Christy *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* <2019> (Fiction [Lefteri](#)) - Mustafa, a professor, has taught his cousin Nuri all he knows about tending bees. Together they manage a multitude of hives in the Syrian countryside, then collect the honey and sell the finished product in a local market. Their wives, Afra and Dahah, and their children have an enjoyable life outside Aleppo. But this idyllic lifestyle comes to an end after the beehives are destroyed, their sons killed, and they are forced to flee the dangerous conditions. To make things even more challenging, Afra, a talented artist, has lost her eyesight. She is forced to rely upon her husband to guide her through several harrowing situations, as he faces his own demons. This is a very poignant and dark story, but it is one of my favorite books of the year. For those who appreciated the challenges of *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins. - SCR

Meissner, Susan *The Nature of Fragile Things* <2021> (Fiction [Meissner](#)) - Irish immigrant Sophie Whalen was just twenty years old on the day she arrives in San Francisco, California, to marry a virtual stranger, Martin Hocking. Hocking, newly widowed with a five-year-old daughter named Kat, travels for a living as an insurance adjustor. Sophie settles down quickly into the new household until the day hugely pregnant Belinda Bigelow stops by to claim Martin is actually James Bigelow, her own spouse. The San

Francisco earthquake of 1906 and Martin/James' return further complicates the plot for Sophie, Kat, and Belinda. - SCR

Piper, Karen *A Girl's Guide to Missiles: Growing Up in America's Secret Desert* <2018> (Non-Fiction [358.17 P665g](#)) - This is the story of a woman searching for her place in the world. Growing up on a missile base in the Mojave Desert in California, Karen Piper had rather a sheltered life, never really understanding what her scientific parents did for a living. When she does venture out into the other world, she seems unprepared for higher education or close relationships. She is unsuccessful with both. There are elements of Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle* here, as well as the memoir of Sarah Smarsh (*Heartland*). - EN

Ryan, Jennifer *The Kitchen Front* <2021> (Fiction [Ryan](#)) - It's 1942 Britain, morale is low, and the Blitz has taken a real toll on the food supply. As a boost, a BBC radio station is sponsoring a three-part cooking contest to show off the best rationed food recipes. The winner will earn a life-changing opportunity to become the first woman to cohost the radio program. Four strong ladies enter the contest to vie for the one slot. A widow with several young children; her sister, the lady of the local manor; a trained but undervalued London chef; and an orphan prodigy being trained by the manor's cook are the contestants. All have talent and a good motivation to win, but the contest does little to bring the town together. Ryan is also the author of *The Chilbury Ladies' Choir*. - SCR

Terry, Pamela *The Sweet Taste of Muscadines* <2021> (Fiction [Terry](#)) - Okay, I have to admit that my first question on opening this book was "What on Earth is a muscadine?". I found that it is a grapevine species native to southeastern and south-central United States. The fruit is softer than other grapes and much sweeter. So -- back to the novel which is a debut for Pamela Terry. Lila Breedlove and her brother Henry are summoned home by their younger sister Abigail when their elderly mother dies suddenly and suspiciously in the muscadine arbor behind the family home in Wesleyan, Georgia. Lila is a widow living in Maine who is a wool fabric artist. Henry lives in New York and has an art gallery. Abigail opted to remain home to dote on their domineering mother, Geneva. As the siblings investigate their mother's death, they discover shocking truths about the family history. *Library Journal* praised Terry's "vivid landscape descriptions, Southern charm and heartfelt familial connections." If you like Mary Kay Andrews and Kristin Hannah, try this new author. - JAC

Winspear, Jacqueline *This Time Next Year We'll Be Laughing: A Memoir* <2020> (Non-Fiction Biography [92 Winspear, Jacqueline](#)) - For those of you who don't know, Winspear is the author of the incredibly successful *Maisie Dobbs* mystery series. She is also the author of the critically acclaimed *The Care and Management of Lies*, which is a standalone novel about the great war. Her memoir is a series of stories about her parents and growing up in Kent after World War II. She tells us about how her grandparents shaped her parents, who in turn shaped Jackie. She relates both the hardships and joys of life in the English countryside where the family lived with Romany gypsies and made a living by picking hops and fruit. These experiences are often used in her novels. The memoir was obviously inspired by the fairly recent deaths of her parents and is a love story to them. Winspear emigrated to the United States in 1990 and currently lives in California. The title comes from one of her father's favorite sayings, and has a haunting relevance to today's events and fears. - JAC