

The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint

Brady Udall

Vintage. ISBN: 0375719180. 423 pages. Paperback 2002.

"If I could tell you only one thing about my life it would be this: when I was seven years old the mailman ran over my head. As formative events go, nothing else comes close. . . ." With these brave new words, Brady Udall joins the ranks of Tolstoy, Dickens, Jane Austen, and their ilk—all those who have contributed an unforgettable first sentence of a novel to the realm of literature—just as Edgar Mint, his feisty but sensitive hero, will soon join the ranks of our favorite fictional characters. You just can't help rooting for Edgar, the perspicacious young orphan whose first memory is of the left tire of a United States postal jeep grinding his tiny head into the hot gravel of the San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation. From these inauspicious beginnings, Edgar sets out on a grand journey to discover his past and his purpose, making his way from the intensive care unit to a home for wayward American Indian kids to the bosom of a devout but deeply disturbed Mormon family.

Everything is Illuminated

Jonathan Safran Foer

Houghton Mifflin. ISBN: 0618173870. 276 pages. Hardcover 2002.

Everything is zany; everything is irreverent; everything is wonderful about this spankin' new novel from a disgustingly talented new writer—only twenty-five years old! What are they putting in the water back East? At any rate, Safran Foer is the fortunate creator of two great new heroes for our time. The first, also named Jonathan Safran Foer, or alternately, "the hero," is a young American Jew (born, coincidentally, the same year as the non-fictional Safran Foer, 1977) who has traveled to the Ukraine to trace his family roots. The second, Alexander Perchov, also known as "Alexi-stop-spleening-me!" is a plucky young stud from Odessa who enjoys, according to his own account, much success with the ladies in many famous and premium nightclubs. It is Alexi's job to escort the fictional Jonathan to the remote village of his ancestors, in aid of research that Jonathan needs to complete the novel that he is working on. It all adds up to a story within a story within a story, but despite this postmodern trickiness, the novel is a joy and a delight to read, truly capable of reducing the reader to both helpless laughter and uneasy tears.

The Lovely Bones

Alice Sebold

Little, Brown. ISBN: 0316666343. 328 pages. Hardcover 2002.

The Lovely Bones is the lovely and amazing story of Susie Salmon, the most dynamic teenage murder victim ever to narrate a novel. Fourteen-year-old Susie has only been dead about a week as she addresses us from heaven, a place that takes a bit of getting used to in the beginning. Lonely and uneasy in her unbelievably felicitous new environment, Susie spends the majority of her time looking down on the family and friends she has left behind in the land of the living. In the weeks, months, and eventually years that pass following her untimely death, Susie continues to observe her loved ones as they struggle to overcome the crippling grief of loss, as each of her friends and family members seeks his or her own way to make sense of the totally senseless horror of her death. This would have been an incredibly powerful story of a family's collective response to tragedy even without Sebold's creative masterstroke of choosing a dead girl to narrate, but Susie's perspective and presence make this novel something transcendent, strange, and wonderfully unique.

Bel Canto **Ann Patchett**

Harper Perennial. ISBN: 0060934417. 336 pages. Paperback 2002.

Somewhere in South America, a birthday party is going terribly wrong. The vice-president has welcomed over a hundred people to his home in order to celebrate the birthday of a wealthy Japanese businessman who might be convinced to invest in this struggling country. Included among the guests is the world's greatest soprano, whose otherworldly voice, it is hoped, may help open the potential investor's pockets. Before she can begin her encore, the house is suddenly flooded with a swarm of most unwanted guests, a desperate group of guerilla terrorists who hope to abduct the President. The President, however, is home watching his favorite soap opera. Thus begins the story of a most unusual hostage situation, as both we—as readers—and Patchett's characters—as terrorists and hostages—find allegiances and boundaries shifting more deeply than anyone could imagine. Winner of the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award for best novel of 2002.

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Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight **Alexandra Fuller**

Random House. ISBN: 0375507507. 301 pages. Hardcover 2001.

The first thing we ought to say about this memoir by Alexandra Fuller is that it may be the most brutally honest reminiscence of Rhodesia by a white Rhodesian that has ever come out of that lovely but unlucky region. The second thing would be that it's unbelievably well-written and defiantly readable. Even if we can't sympathize with Fuller's account of her family's role as unquestioning rulers of their own small domain and the native Africans who populate it, it doesn't matter, because Fuller doesn't ask us to do so. This is a story of a childhood by a young woman who isn't afraid to admit that she was the center of her own universe, that she was primarily concerned with protecting her own personal comfort, just as children who are well-fed and much-loved do everywhere. Only it just so happens that this particular child's comforts are inextricably connected with her white family's relative position of power over their black neighbors, a power that is slowly deteriorating as an anti-colonial war heats up. This has got to be one of the very best and most unforgettable memoirs we have read in years.

The Power of the Dog **Thomas Savage**

Back Bay. ISBN: 0316610895. 276 pages. Paperback reprint 2001.

Thomas Savage is a Great American Writer. And when we say great, we mean great like Faulkner, like Hemingway, like Toni Morrison, like Philip Roth. Originally published in 1967, *The Power of the Dog* was a critical sensation, but somehow, the "buzz" on Thomas Savage never reached most of us average slobs, the general reading public. Fortunately, readers and author have another chance to get together—Little, Brown reissued the novel (long out-of-print) in 2001. Set in 1920s Montana, *The Power of the Dog* tells the story of two families who come together in a distinctly unharmonious fashion. Its utterly convincing narrative voice offers a chillingly precise look into the demanding lives of its strong, complex characters. It's hard to tell who are the villains and who are the victims, but one of them will scare you silly. We don't usually try to push our readers around, but dang it, read this novel by the devastating dark horse Thomas Savage.

Plum & Jiggers **Susan Richards Shreve**

Picador. ISBN: 156895137X. 228 pages. Paperback 2001.

Susan Richards Shreve starts her story with a literal and literary explosion of such force that it almost knocks you off the page. The four McWilliams children—Sam, the oldest, at seven, and younger siblings Charlotte, Oliver, and Julia—are waiting for lunch aboard the express train from Milan to Rome. Their parents, James and Lucy McWilliams, have just stepped into the café two cars down to get the meal, when a terrorist bomb goes off, killing everyone in the first two cars, James and Lucy included. In telling the story of the McWilliams orphans, especially the story of Sam—vigilant new head of a shattered family—Shreve begins with a bang and never stops for breath. This novel makes you dizzy with fear and fierce with hope all at the same time, taking you in one after another unexpected direction—just like Sam, who turns the family tragedy into the family enterprise. In creating the dynamic dark comedy of *Plum & Jiggers*, a laugh-cause-it-hurts double brother-sister stage routine, Sam launches an entertainment vehicle that will rocket the McWilliams kids from Second City to Saturday Night Live and beyond. But as Sam and his siblings know all too well, you're never safe from surprise, and at the height of the McWilliams's professional success, a stranger comes a-knockin' on the door.

The Group **Mary McCarthy**

Harvest Books. ISBN: 0156372088. 487 pages. Paperback reprint 1991.

Could this classic story of eight Vassar grads—class of '33—be the ultimate book group book? Well, it's certainly one of the most insightful, wickedly funny, embarrassingly accurate renditions of the group-life of women that has ever been written. As our eight heroines leave the shelter of the university to explore new worlds their mothers didn't dream of, they never, of course, leave the shelter of class or privilege. These are the women of our mothers' or grandmothers' time, but as we read about their expectations, their ideals, their debates over the nature of womanhood in a brand new era, it's truly unnerving to see how little, in some ways, things have changed. McCarthy's ability to make you care about these women, even while you're laughing at their naiveté and sense of entitlement, makes *The Group* an endlessly fascinating classic.

Middlesex **Jeffrey Eugenides**

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. ISBN: 0374199698. 529 pages. Hardcover 2002.

Are you ready to read the Single Greatest American Hermaphrodite Epic of the Twenty-First century? Meet Calliope Stephanides, who is soon to become your absolute favorite Intersex character in all of literature. "I was born twice: first as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960, and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974." That's the first sentence, and with that irresistible lure, Eugenides reels us in—hook, line, and sinker—for the next 500 pages of a truly unique and important novel. Like one out of every two thousand kids born in America, Calliope arrived in this world with an ambiguous set of primary sexual characteristics. But Calliope doesn't know this for the first fourteen years of her life, nor do her parents, nor her friends, or her brother. The only people who might have some information to impart on this subject, if they had any idea of the problem, are Callie's grandparents, who have carried a guilty secret all the way from Greece, which they fled during the last days of the Ottoman Empire. And they sure aren't talking. But Eugenides does. This is a novel about what it means to be a boy, and a girl, and all the places in between—and it creates an amazing potential for a crazy-good discussion.

Life of Pi **Yann Martel**

Harcourt. ISBN: 0151008116. 319 pages. Hardcover 2001.

How to describe this meaty and miraculous novel? Well, it's kind of like *The Old Man and the Sea* meets *The Black Stallion*, only quite a bit better than either of those two respectable tomes. A smallish Indian sets sail for Canada with his family, accompanied by the remaining animals of the former family zoo. A mysterious shipwreck leaves Pi the sole survivor, well, almost the sole survivor: he is stranded alone on a rowboat in the middle of the ocean, with only an enormous and very hungry full-grown male Bengal tiger for company. The water around him is churning with sharks. This heart-thumping story is so strong and so good that you can almost hear the water around Martel churning with publishers vying to acquire the paperback rights. You'll race to finish the novel, but you won't forget it in a hurry—unique, awesome, and utterly necessary.