

BOOKS—2021

NON-FICTION

Caste, The Origins of our Discontents, Isabel Wilkerson (The Pulitzer Prize winning author of “The Warmth of Other Suns.” In many ways it's an uncomfortable read as she equates the caste systems in India and Nazi Germany with a broader systemic consideration of "race" in America. Her examples of a half millennium of discrimination, slavery, Jim Crow, separate but equal, the Civil Rights Acts, etc., support her hypothesis: systemic infrastructure meant to favor a dominant caste (European-descended Americans) at all costs against a subordinate caste (African-Americans). Wilkerson includes decades of research and study of the caste system of India and Nazi Germany (the Aryans being the dominant caste and Jewish the subordinate) to describe the actions, intentions, and unsuspected ways in which the dominant hold down the aspirations and desires of the subordinate caste.

“A caste system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract but are ascribed life-and-death meaning in a hierarchy favoring the dominant caste whose forebears designed it. A caste system uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranked groupings apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places.” Wilkerson’ definition of caste.

The author includes personal experiences along with those of thousands if not millions of other African-Americans to provide the reader with data and analyses of why it is/will be so difficult to change our way of thinking and acting. While she ends the book with statements of hope, she doesn’t offer ways in which we can change, except suggestions of a Truth and Reconciliation Council (Rwanda/Germany), celebrating (giving voice to) those descendants of the enslaved and not the Confederacy, restitution or reparations in some manner.)

Off Ramp, Adventures and Heartache in the American Elsewhere, Hank Stuever (American journalist, essays of travels around the country, to visit and meet with ordinary, everyday people and at ordinary places, e.g., big box stores, parking lots, to find and write about the mundane, such as wedding preparations, which ultimately are rich and full stories of America. Good tool for writing examples.)

Incidental Inventions, Elena Ferrante (Ferrante was asked to write an essay a week for a year for the *Guardian*. The editors posed a subject each week and she wrote. While she complained a bit, as she’s a fiction writer, having time to savor her words, write and rewrite, the musings provide insight into her life, her thinking on writing, women, family, miscellaneous musings. Ferrante treated this year of writing as an experiment, likely successful, although the pieces are not comparable, in my mind, to her exquisite works of fiction.)

To Be a Friend is Fatal, the Fight to Save the Iraqis who America Left Behind, Kirk W. Johnson (The phrase “To be a friend is fatal,” can be attributed to Henry Kissinger during the Nixon administration and the Vietnam war and debacle. US-affiliated citizens, whether Iraqi, about whom this book is primarily written, or Afghani, or Vietnamese, or other countries in which the US engages in war and employs or contracts with local citizens, can be placed in grave danger for their work with the US, especially when we leave the country. Johnson worked for USAID in Iraq during 2003, the first year of the war. After a horrifying accident, he began to receive communications from US-affiliated Iraqis, begging for help, afraid for their

lives and those of their family, often the subject of death threats (or actual killings), trying to immigrate to the US. Johnson created The List Project, a list containing the names and contact information of those who requested help through the refugee and immigration processes then available. Year after year, meetings with high-ranking government officials, failed legislation, promises made but not kept, goals established, the US failed many of these loyal people, unable or unwilling to bring them to the US. Through both the Bush and Obama administrations, Johnson and colleagues battled for the humane course of action, with minimal success. The actions were discouraging, the processes abhorrent, the fall-out to the US-affiliated Iraqis by our lack of action devastating. An important read as we continue to tread without fully understanding the damage we do.)

*When Time Stopped, a Memoir of My Father's War and What Remains, Ariana Neumann (The author, a journalist and want-a-be-detective, unravels the story of her father, a Czechoslovakian Jew, who emigrated to Venezuela after WWII. The family history is deeply researched, revealing life in both the cities and country before and during the war, family members deported and killed in concentration camps, secrets—many to be able to survive the war and Holocaust—kept for decades, remembrances of happier times. While I personally was not pulled into the narrative, the readers of my book club found this book compelling in its detail and family relationships.)

Hunger, a Memoir of (my) Body, Roxane Gay (A searing memoir of Gay's relationship with her body, her "unruly, undisciplined" body, her struggles with being fat, being sexually assaulted as a thirteen-year-old, who ate and ate and ate to be safe, to be undesired, to be hidden in plain sight. The acceptance of herself, the despise of herself, the longing and wanting something, bigger or smaller, to be seen but not seen, to be invisible, to be stared and taunted, all and each emotional comes with shame and pride and struggle. These essays resonate so well with me, body images, being invisible (due to aging), talking to my body but not always listening, she captures so well all those feelings.)

The Alchemy of Air, Thomas Hager (The chemical and industrial discoveries of converting air (fixed nitrogen) to ammonia (for fertilizer and later, gunpowder and explosives) by Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch, early twentieth century Germans. Hager writes a very readable scientific biography of both men, their successes, their failures, their frailties, their arrogance, their downfalls at the end of very illustrious careers creating a Germany whose chemical prowess was unsurpassed. Fascinating history of making nitrogen to feed the world and its corollary, explosives, which helped destroy the world.)

First Steps, How Upright Walking Made Us Human, Jeremy DeSilva (Paleoanthropologist, DeSilva traces the evolution of bipedalism, upright walking, the distinct, but not entirely unique, feature of humans. Fascinating analysis of fossil finds, in the quest to discover why and how and when humans started to walk upright, the advantages and disadvantages of bipedalism, the continual change in understanding as more fossils are discovered, following the "foot prints" of our earliest ancestors and relatives of millions of years ago. Written for the lay-person, the reader can begin to understand time, evolution, starts and stops, the wonders of fossil finds, the deep knowledge of anatomy required to piece together disparate parts of *homo sapiens*. Wonderful read.)

Late Migrations, a Natural History of Love and Loss, Margaret Renkl (A series of braided essays, tying in family loss and grief with the cycle of life of birds, bees, squirrels, and other animal life around the author's southeastern homes. Lovingly described, the multigenerational family snippets and the seasonal turns of nature reflect and integrate one another. The artwork, by the author's brother, connect the bonds between love and loss, nature and humans. Tender but strong writing.)

Immersion, the Science and Mystery of Freshwater Mussels, Abbie Gascho Landis (A reverence for freshwater mussels, many endangered, unique creatures that signal destruction and devastation of our waterways by their living and dying. Almost an ode to these creatures, Landis, a veterinarian, whose husband is an aquatic ecologist, explores the rivers of Alabama and Georgia, once home to large diverse species of freshwater mussels, to learn their habitat, their life cycle, their reproduction, their life stories. Ultimately, “[T]he continued existence or disappearance of mussels will be evidence of how we shape our relationship with the water that supports life.” These tiny animals have much to teach us even as we continue to learn about them.)

Spineless, the Science of Jellyfish and the Art of Growing a Backbone, Juli Berward (Jellyfish are one if not the most ancient animal alive today, having survived millions of years of climate change. The author, a science writer, becomes intrigued by jellyfish, their complexity, their ability to change, to dominate waters, to survive, to be destructive, to be magical. The study and understanding of jellyfish is flourishing even as questions about their viability, their marker as oceans become warmer and more acidic, their dangers, have unsettled answers. Part love story to jellyfish, part coming-of-realization of the health of our planet, part science exploration, this book is full of science, side-roads, musings, with the final plea that we all, whether citizen scientists or otherwise, must unite to save our planet.)

Notes on Grief, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Adichie’s father died unexpectedly in June 2020. She was crushed, blindsided by the pain, both physical and emotional, of grief. The difficulty of travel to Nigeria added to her heart ache, not being with him before he died or with her family immediately after the death. The book is a eulogy, of sorts, to him, through the tears and anger and sadness of him no longer being present.)

The Heartbeat of Trees, Embracing our Ancient Bond with Forests and Trees, Peter Wohlleben (Author of “The Hidden Life of Trees,” which introduced many of us to the extraordinary abilities of trees, including their extensive root communication system, their home to thousands of animal and insect life, their ancient lifelines, continues to teach us about the interconnectedness of humans and trees. He focuses on forest management practices, the value of ancient (or at least old) forests, the climate change harm to trees set against the incredible benefits (e.g., carbon sequestration), how we relate to trees through all our senses, and maybe even a sixth sense. He believes there is hope in preserving forests and trees, as humans gain more empathy with these mighty plants. I appreciated “The Hidden Life of Trees” as more original, but believe “The Heartbeat of Trees” contributes to our understanding, and absolute need, to save our forests.)

An Elegant Defense: The Extraordinary New Science of the Immune System: A Tale in Four Lives, Matt Richtel (Richtel, a science journalist, writes an engaging, extremely informative book about immunology, from the Black Plague to twenty-first century diseases (the book was published just before the COVID pandemic) with evolving knowledge about our internal defense system, its genetic compositions, its killer cells, T cells, B cells, monoclonal antibodies, etc. Based on years of research, interviews with scientists and medical providers, Richtel weaves the history of the science of immunology with the stories of four individuals, each with his/her own immune system, which might be aggressively dangerous or excessively protective. As we continue to learn more about immunology, we can create more protections against disease but we also must understand the dangers of our modern lifestyle. “An Elegant Defense” probes and prods our knowledge, delving into “self” versus “alien”, to help us understand this extremely complex system.)

Home Made: A Story of Grief, Groceries, Showing Up - and What We Make When We Make Dinner, Liz Hauck (An unexpected outcome to three years in the author's life, grieving for her father, trying to keep connections with him through creating a once/week cooking dinner session for boys at the residential home above her father's office. What starts out as a simple plan to spend one hour making dinner and then one hour eating dinner with whomever of the boys were around—and willing to get together—becomes so much more. Boys come/go, with juvie records, years of foster care, no biological family, substance abuse and mental health problems. Yet, Liz tenderly approaches her time with them, reminding them she is not paid to do what she's doing, it's not a required program for them, they're "neighbors," not quite friends but not a formal relationship either. Her questions that prompt conversations: "about food and security and violence and trust and mothers." One person's experience working beside the "system," touching the lives of a few boys, expanding her understanding of their lives, and remembering her father. Each of our lives are so different from others, assumptions made are not universal, but food can be the connection to start the conversations.)

Sprinting through No Man's Land, Endurance, Tragedy, and Rebirth in the 1919 Tour de France, Adin Dobkin (An extensive history of the 1919 edition of the Tour de France, the first tour held after WWI, as told through the perspective of Desgranges, editor of "l'Auto" newspaper and founder of the Tour in the early 1900s. The participants had almost all served in the war in various capacities and for various countries; their individual stories of struggle, cold, tired, perseverance are a nod to the human spirit, especially Eugene. Desgranges imagined a tour covering the full borders of France, some of which were added after the war, others "Zone Rouge," where the ground was barely recognizable from the horrors and destruction of the war, fifteen stages through a moment in history, to revitalize the French, to bring together a severely country damaged. The detail is amazing of each stage of the race yet I yearned for more of the broader history of that time, which wasn't entirely what Dobkin was seeking. The interspersing of several chapters unrelated to the Tour was odd, no clear reason why they were included. Overall a good read but with the concerns described above.)

Speak, Okinawa, Elizabeth Miki Brina (Brina's parents met in Okinawa during the Vietnam War, her mother a war bride. A story of being out-of-place, the only Asian American in her town and school. The narrative is spare but effective, a coming of age memoir, but with the backdrop of the daughter effectively rejecting her mother, not knowing the mother's culture or history; the inability to truly communicate due to the lack of a common language; the daughter's shame and embarrassment and her mother's nightly drunkenness, lonely in her own family. As an adult, the author learns of the poverty of her mother's childhood, the hard life in Okinawa before and during WWII, her mother's strong family ties. Regret, knowledge, gratitude: the emotions weave together, forcing the reader to think about her own family and connections, what we may think is happening, but what might really be transpiring, how we come to appreciate (after often being ashamed, too) of our families.)

Braiding Sweetgrass, Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants, Robin Wall Kimmerer (Robin Wall Kimmerer is a scientist from the Potawatomi nation. "Braiding Sweetgrass" is a book of essays delving into the relationship between humans and the rest of the world, plants, animals, water, air, fire, earth from both Indigenous and scientific perspectives. The essays are fantastic, educational, lyrical, a call to save the Earth using Indigenous principles. Like sweetgrass, Kimmerer braids together stories of creation, and Indigenous ideas of gratitude and reciprocity for and between all living things. She has hope that adopting ancient learnings about these interrelationships may help save the earth and all its living being from destruction, but is realistic in the severity of what we've lost due to greed, over-consumption, lack of giving thanks for the earth's bounty and gifts. Her essays on motherhood especially resonated with me, how we must treat our children and the earth with care,

respect, generosity of spirit. Plants can teach us humans to live wisely, to share our knowledge, to treat one another with care, to be gracious and grateful. Kimmerer's imagery of nature is brilliant, taking us into a world we too often ignore, to our collective peril.)

Castaway Mountain, Love and Loss among the Wastepickers of Mumbai, Saumya Roy (A journalist's reporting—and storytelling—of the wastepickers of Deonar township, which is the dumping ground (mountain) for Mumbai's waste. For 120 years the waste has been transported to the township, a mountain growing taller and wider, toxic and dangerous, internal fires, mud slides, smelly and sickening. Yet the wastepickers are drawn to the mountain to gather waste to resale or make into other goods, a meager living, on the edge of society, but a community of family, friends, and fellow workers. The author tells the true story of the struggles of extreme poverty, the lure of the garbage with the hope of finding that one treasure that might be enough to support a family, the negligence, indeed criminal irresponsibility, of the local municipalities to recognize the families, to follow court orders to take the waste elsewhere, to provide other jobs to the wastepickers. With nothing but life to lose, love and family take precedent even as sickness and devastation surround the pickers daily. A fascinating but disheartening account of one city's struggles with a universal problem of over-consumption, vividly seen in the daily garbage truck deliveries to the mountain.)

Racing the Clock, Running across a Lifetime, Bernd Heinrich (Heinrich, a biologist and ultrarunner, explores the connection amongst humans, plants, and humans, seeking answers to why we age, ways our metabolism, food choices, and exercise may affect our longevity. He weaves stories of his running, becoming a naturalist (insects, primarily), and his research into insect thermodynamics, flight patterns, and other behaviors. He believes that we humans have more capacity to expand our abilities even as we age; his curiosity for his "study of one" is inspiring and requires each of us to study our own behaviors if we want to make the best life we can. An ode to running and to biology, this short memoir is a delightful read. I preferred the more science-focused "Why We Run", which is probably one of his seminal works for non-scientists.)

I Live a Life Like Yours, Jan Gure (A brilliantly rendered essayistic autobiography from award-winning Norwegian author about his life in a vulnerable body. Gure was born with a muscle-deteriorating disease, diagnosed as spinal myopathy. He considered himself privileged in having family and friends who fought for him to live a full-life, although primarily confined to a wheel chair with some mobility, highly educated, traveled, married, one child. He studies the clinical notes of his condition from childhood in search for who he is as a human, what he feels and thinks about himself versus the seemingly universal *stigma* of his medical condition. Who are we? Do our limitations define us? Do how others see us define us? What is it to be a human being? Grief for the body he doesn't have yet grateful for what he is able to do, somewhat of a conundrum. Thoughtful, compelling perspective.)

*Vanderbilt, the Rise and Fall of an American Dynasty, Anderson Cooper and Kathrine Howe (The son of Gloria Vanderbilt, and descendant of Cornelius ("Commodore") Vanderbilt, the richest man in America at the time of his death, Anderson Cooper writes an account of the creation of great wealth and the passing of it from generation to generation. Edifices were built commemorating that wealth, positions in society were "purchased," marriages were made and dissolved, money and greed held up the "elite" of New York City and Newport, Rhode Island. Cooper and Howe, an historian, find treasure trove of information in archives, letters, newspapers, singing the praises and celebrating the downfall of the Vanderbilts. At times censorious and critical, with focus on certain of the family members, I found the information about New York in the late 1800s and early 1900s interesting, partly because of my personal family connections. While well-documented, the book read at times like a gossip column, imaging what the characters might

have said or thought. Perhaps a catharsis for Anderson of his family history and clarification (and redemption?) of his mother in her later years, still, I would have preferred a more precise accounting and more in-depth characters.)

Facing the Mountain, a True Story of Japanese-American Heroes in World War II, Daniel James Brown (Author of "The Boys in the Boat," Brown passionately and intently shares the story of the Japanese-American soldiers of the 442nd Regiment, who valiantly represented America in World War II at the same time as their families were living in concentration camps, evacuated from their homes in Hawaii and the West Coast immediately after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The racism, the hate, the disrespect were overcome by these very brave and human men, wanting to show their loyalty as Americans, yet with their Japanese heritage their backbone and their love. The individual stories, the horrors of war, the battles both personally and militarily, help us to understand the true stories of these men and the unconscionable actions of many Americans. These men and their truly families faced many mountains, not just the Italian hills battling the angry guns of Germany. Many of the 442nd survivors worked tirelessly after WWII to bring justice and compensation to their fellow Japanese Americans, continuing to contribute by giving their time and heart to this country.

FICTION

Jack, Marilynne Robinson (Author of "Gilead," "Home," "Lila," and many other fiction and non-fiction works, Robinson tackles Jack, the prodigal son of Reverend Boughton of Ames, Iowa. A mischievous boy, a thief, a drifter, Jack is recently out of prison in post-World War II St. Louis. By chance, he helps a black woman and within moments, both fall deeply in love. Miscegenation laws in Missouri and Tennessee, the criminality of blacks and whites being together, the seemingly distinct lives of Jack and Delia, conspire to trigger all of Jack's internal reflections, which interfere with distinguishing his real life from what he believes it should be or what he can control. He aims for "harmlessness," but whether accidental or intentional, he does harm people, emotionally, sometimes with his fists. The book is rich with internal musings, contemplation, the inevitability of hurt because a white man and a black woman love one another.)

Betty, a Novel, by Tiffany McDaniel (Set in southern Ohio during the mid-twentieth century, this novel is a coming-of-age story of Betty, a child of a Cherokee father and Caucasian mother, who is exposed to external (poverty, racism, rape) and internal (the death of several siblings, incest) hardship. The author creates believable characters with human flaws and emotions, ties that bind and ties that destroy. The father, especially, is well-drawn, with a deep love for his family, his Cherokee heritage, but unable to provide more than a meagre living for them. His magical stories lift Betty, perhaps most of all among the children; yet, she also sees the hurt and harm among her family and the bullying from classmates and the town-folk, taking this hurt and writing stories and burying them in canning jars, unable to speak the truth without fear of retribution. The sense of place, southern Appalachian, imbues the book with beauty, grace and hope.)

*The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek, Kim Richardson (Similar to *"The Giver of Stars," JoJo Moyes. This historical fiction covers 1935-1943 when the Works Progress Administration ("WPA") funded "packhorse librarians" to provide jobs and to bring books and magazines to rural parts of eastern Kentucky, where illiteracy was over 30%. Cussy Mary, a blue-skinned Kentuckian (a rare genetic recessive disorder, the lack of oxygen in the blood causes it to be a chocolate color, and the skin to be blue), is one

of the librarians, riding her mule rugged miles each day to deliver books, magazines, and newspapers, to families, schools, who otherwise have little opportunity to read. The townspeople discriminate against her as a “colored” person; men attack her on her solitary routes; her father, a coal miner, tries to protect her while he also struggles to bring safety to the miners. The descriptions of rural Kentucky are captivating, the poverty and despair disheartening, the harsh treatment of women and people of color discouraging, the all-too-common suicides and homicides. “The Giver of Stars” is very similar to *The Book Woman*, the protagonist an English woman named Alice; however, the latter gave me a better sense of living in the hill country of Kentucky, including the story of the blue-skinned people, and while the protagonist in both books “finds” love, “The Giver of Stars” reads more like a romance novel with almost too much adversity.)

A Children’s Bible, A Novel, Lydia Millet (Millet’s allegory of descending into chaos due to climate change is subtle; a summer vacation, the children and parents disengaged from one another, the parents drinking, the children exploring, then leaving to find a better life with independence and innocence. A major hurricane disrupts all plans, but the children are creative and industrious, providing a semblance of safety while the adults are almost taken by the hand, given schedules, told what to do as if they are now the children. The writing is unique, at first minimal, then told by eleven-year-old Evie, with the pacing increasing over the arc, slowly at first, like a lazy summer, then hastening as the children realize their parents cannot save them, then fast-paced into an unknown future. Young Jack is given a children’s bible, which he reads and decides to equate religion with nature, imbuing a childish perspective onto the world.)

The Prophets, Robert Jones, Jr. (The debut novel of Jones, this love story of two young enslaved black men (Isiah and Samuel) living in a barn at an antebellum plantation in Mississippi undercuts much of what we think we know of black culture and lives. A culmination of years of research, personal history, seeking understanding of the professed “ideal” black man, Jones knits together a novel of heartbreak, abuse, tender love, friendship, the “knowing, deeply” of one person by another, amid the tragedy of the slavery system (whether abuse by white men or betrayal by other African-American, e.g., Amos) of the South. Families torn apart, the cruelty of man against man, the secrets, the magic, the gods (and the Prophets, who foretell the future and remind us of the past, “memories are not enough”), all find purchase in this book. Jones writing style is unique, moving forward and backward, both in time and space, imaginative, upending one’s beliefs and pulling one into the misery and unbidden happiness of humans.)

**Hamnet, A Novel of the Plague*, Maggie O’Farrell (A second reading of this “shimmering wondrous” historical fiction with the themes: women, motherhood, family relationships, faith, twinning, nature, are captured in different levels through the lens of the various characters. This work is magical and sad, linking the death of William Shakespeare and Agnes (Anne) Hathaway’s eleven-year-old son, Hamnet (twin to Judith), with Shakespeare’s writing of the tragedy, “Hamlet.” O’Farrell never uses Shakespeare’s name, instead calling him the Latin Tutor or Agnes’ husband or Hamnet’s (and Susanna and Judith) father. The absent father, in London writing and performing plays, is almost a secondary character while Agnes, the mother, richly created from the few historical facts in existence, is the center of her family and the book. She is considered part-witch because of her use of herbs and flowers and weeds to cure ailments; she keeps bees; she doesn’t care for the normal conventions of life in late sixteenth century England. Yet her love for her children shines, keeping watch, understanding their every thought and movement. The twins, a boy and a girl, are inseparable, with the key element in the narrative Hamnet’s decision to trade places with his sister. The play, *Hamlet*, written four years after Hamnet’s death, may or may not be based on the family’s tragedy, but one could easily believe that Shakespeare did create in his play what

he couldn't do in life: the father losing his life to spare his son's life. O'Farrell's writing is rich, moving, sorrowful, bringing the reader into the heart of Agnes and her family.)

The Sense of an Ending, Julian Barnes (Winner of the Man Booker Prize. Tony is a middle-aged, retired, divorced Englishman when circumstances cause him to reflect back on his late teen-early twenties years. Part of a group of four friends, navigating coming-of-age, girls and sex, debating history, spouting philosophy without context. Tony's naivete and self-consciousness dominate his approach to life. As he reconsiders those years in light of current events, he tries to understand time, history and memory, the meaning of situations of little import at the time but large in hindsight. How does one change the past or at least one's reaction to and understanding of the past? Thoughtful, musings on time and memories, remorse and regret, when did our younger selves change and become our current selves?)

Wolf Hall, Hillary Mantel (Book 1 of a trilogy, Mantel's historical fiction focuses on Thomas Cromwell, a man from low background rising to friend and advisor to Cardinal Wolsey and eventually King Henry VIII. A lawyer, legislator, advocate, self-taught, brilliant strategist and tactician, Cromwell was a key figure in the reformation of England during the early-to-mid 1500s, crossing paths with Sir Thomas More, arguing for Henry's divorce/annulment of marriage from Catherine of Aragon and subsequent marriages to Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour (and eventually three other wives), in Henry's constant quest for a legitimate male heir. The depth and breadth of "Wolf Hall," the lively descriptions of characters, the constant pall of England's weather, the treachery and back-stabbing, and the politics of Henry's reign, are imagined in great detail and expression, pulling the reader into the horrors, darkness, and drama of sixteenth century England and its attempts to break away from papist Rome. Excellent read, the first two books in the trilogy are Man Booker Prize winners.)

The Vanishing Half, Brit Bennett (Mallard, an idea more than a place, where only very light-skinned blacks lived. Stella and Desiree Vignes, identical twin girls, each complementing the other, until they move away from home. Stella eventually passes for white, marries a white man and has a "white" daughter, never revealing the truth of her life. Desiree married a black man, had a "black blue" daughter and moved back home to Mallard. Stella: "you have to create who you wanted to be." The twins have unbreakable connection, each vanishing in her own way, living lives not as they expected. How does one create a life, live a lie, become comfortable with herself? The "gift of whiteness" as Stella's daughter considers her own privileged life. The gift is not always what it seems; what is lost by choices made?)

When We Were Orphans, Kazuo Ishiguro (Pulitzer Prize winning author of "Remains of the Day," "Never Let Me Go," "The Buried Giant," this book is disguised as a detective story, yet it is a tale of lost parents, faulty memories, reflections on life, and living in both pre-WWII Shanghai and post-WWII London. Christopher Banks, the protagonist, is orphaned in Shanghai, then raised by an aunt in England, before becoming a renowned detective. He adopts the British life-style yet remains somewhat aloof while engaged in society. He becomes obsessed with finding his parents more than twenty years after their disappearance, conflating those events with finding the cause (and stopping it) of the rumblings of war, both between Japan and China, and in Europe. Banks can be a frustrating character, without the empathy that would enhance his likability. The writing is pure Ishiguro, clear, not embellished, yet almost too formal, without descriptions or the phrasal verb to soften the narrative. The primary characters are defined by the loss of their parents even if they believe they have successfully recovered. Memory can be fleeting, confusing, and imperfect. Some surprises but nice resolution at the end.)

*Klara and the Sun, Kazuo Ishiguro (Ishiguro's eight novel, Klara is a solar-powered "artificial friend," who is bought to be a companion (and perhaps more as the novel progresses) to a sickly young girl, Josie. Like

most of Ishiguro's novels, the first person narrative has us seeing the world through the eyes and somewhat mechanical voice of Klara. She is deeply observational and non-judgmental, curious of the world and its workings, adoring of the Sun, which brings nourishment (solar power) to AFs. Ishiguro delves into concepts of the future, gene-edited children, AI, questions of the essence of humanness. This story, slow to start but with hard questions about our future, is quite different from others he's written, but with a tone and style that feels right for this subject about which we are still barely touching the surface.)

*The Paris Library, by Janet Skeslien Charles (This historical non-fiction book is based on true events of the librarians at the American Library in Paris during World War II who used books as a form of resistance. The story follows Odile, a young French woman who works at the library during WWII, and Lily, a teenager living in Montana in the 1980s. The story toggles between the two places and times, with underlying themes of friendship, family, betrayal, the binding ties of literature and the lessons we can learn from books, to realizing how we can hurt people by our mere words. Descriptive and engaging, one of many stories of Paris, e.g., *The Paris Wife*, *the Lilac Girls*, this book shows us the depths of human cruelty as well as the healing powers of friendships.)

The Four Winds, Kristin Hannah (A "Grapes of Wrath" story, this book is set in Texas in 1930s as bountiful years turn into dust and wind, the loss of land, extreme hunger and poverty, and the movement of millions of people west to California. Hannah centers her story on Elsa and her family, a scared woman who is forced to become brave, to protect her children, to take risks, to do more than what she ever believed she could. The description of the storms, the tearing apart of families, the shattered dreams, the friendships made in the most dire of places, the farmworkers' plight picking cotton in California, resonate even today as people face hardship, unexpected separations, unemployment, and the loss of hope as a result of events outside their control, e.g., the pandemic.)

The Committed, Viet Thanh Nguyen (The Sympathizer, calling himself Vo Danh (the "nameless"), is now a refugee in Paris, having been a refugee and communist spy in America, attended a reeducation camp, and survived crossing the ocean in a small boat. He reconnects with his blood brother, Bon, while becoming a capitalist by selling drugs, waxing and waning philosophical (at times in streams of consciousness) about colonialism, racism, ideology, Vietnamese culture, French culture, revolutions, reactionaries, etc. The man of two minds—me, myself, and sometimes I—is reflective and mysterious, working with and against other refugees, e.g., Algerians, other Asians (or Asiatics as called by their counterparts), striving to assimilate into French culture while recognizing his still-gangster leanings. Nguyen's writing is brilliant, complex, undefined, like the nameless narrator, delving into topics of keen interest to both colonizers and those who were/are subject to their rules and practices. The narrator asks "what would you do," in various situations, providing thought-provoking scenes without necessary answers.)

The Mountains Sing, Mai Phan Que Nguyen (Her first fiction novel written in English, this Vietnamese poet uses her family history and life in Northern Vietnam to create the family saga covering 1930s-1970s. The time of the Great Famine, Land Reform, Japanese, French, then American occupations, revolutions, upheavals, families torn apart, the author toggles between decades as her characters reminisce and look forward to their changing lives. Alternating voices of the grandmother of the family and her granddaughter, the reader discovers a different perspective of this period than what we (Americans, at least) have traditionally been taught. The reader finds empathy and compassion in the protagonists, even as they struggle with conflicted feelings and beliefs.)

Infinite Country, Patricia Engel (Speaking from the voices of five family members, “Infinite Country” is a novel of immigration, deportation, and the separation of families. It contemplates what makes a “family” and a “home,” especially to those separated by borders and boundaries, dependent on the status of one’s documentation. Elena and Mauro, Columbians, with their infant daughter, travel to the US on temporary visas, overstay their six months, have two more children, eventually with husband deported back to Columbia. The infant daughter, Talia, is also sent back to Columbia to live with her grandmother. Over 15 years, the family lives separately, connected only by telephone conversations, with little hope of becoming whole again without one or more members continuing to live in one country illegally. Choices are made, no morality in one or another, but consequences last lifetimes.)

The Gospel According to Jesus Christ, José Saramago (A fictional, skeptical telling of the story of Jesus from his perspective. Jesus is a young man of his times, arguing with family, apprentice to a shepherd (not realizing the shepherd is the devil), a long-term loving relationship with Mary Magdalene (previously a prostitute), performing haphazard miracles in common settings. He meets God and is forewarned of his great power and glory, not to be revealed until after his death. He questions God as his father, eventually accepts his fate but in an attempt to avoid the bloodshed that will follow his death (God’s plan is to use Jesus to spread God’s influence throughout the world, to expand his empire so to speak), he tells Pilate that he is King of the Jews, not the son of God. Saramago weaves known and ironic stories, capturing an ordinary young man and his cohorts, challenging conventional Catholic religion and biblical history, including the devil as a central character, who offers repentance to God but is rebuked, for without evil why would people want to worship a God who characterizes himself as God?)

Other People’s Children, R.J. Hoffman (Jon and Gail, husband and wife, suffer miscarriages, but are chosen by Carli, a teenager, to adopt her unborn baby. Told from the perspective of the husband, wife, Carli, her mother, Marla, and the social worker, Celeste, we see how each individual life informs his or her choice about being a parent. While the story would seem formulaic, e.g., the two-parent family with the ability to financially care for the baby would in most cases seem to make the logical parents, the twists and turns and emotional bonds take the reader in unexpected territory.)

*A Million Aunties, Alecia McKenzie (“Lose a mother, gain a million aunties,” the story of family created by love and community, ties that are not necessarily blood. The book revolves around three primary characters, Chris, a black artist, who returns to Jamaica after the violent death of his wife; Stephen, a Jamaican orphan raised by Aunt Della, and agent for Chris; and Aunt Della, a single woman who raised Stephen. The chapters are told by different characters, in both third person (the older generation) and first person (Chris and friends). Broken by family tragedies, trying to rebuild lives, the friends embrace one another. The settings are rural Jamaica, New York City, and Paris, each place bringing some of the characters together. While interesting, the threads of underlying stories were often incomplete, the voices not always clear. Nice descriptions of place but story didn’t grab me, too undeveloped.)

My Husband’s Daughter, Emma Robinson (Light read but interesting perspective on what it means to be a mother. Why people decide not to have children; the angst and grief of knowing one is dying and leaving a small child behind; how to plan for another person to raise one’s child; perhaps a little too formulaic, but worked.)

*The Midnight Library, Matt Haig (There is a place between life and death, here the “midnight library,” where one can explore other possibilities of roads not taken during life. Nora is depressed and suicidal, not happy with her life, so on the night of a suicide attempt, she finds herself in a library (with her grade school librarian, Mrs. Elm) with endless books containing infinite life paths for her. She tries many, based

on her interests during her life, e.g., swimming, Artie, rock star, where she is reminded not to underestimate the little things in life, that could impact the direction one takes. The writing was “comfortable,” as a number of readers reported, but didn’t delve into the deep issues of mental health, suicidal tendencies, philosophy, instead having Nora flit through different possible “parallel lives,” not taking the time to really understand herself in each situation, but passing on quickly. Interesting concept but hoped it would be more substantive.)

Second Place, Rachel Cusk (The narrator (wife) is mesmerized as a troubled young woman when seeing L.’s paintings in Paris. After some years of turmoil (never quite elucidated), divorce, remarriage, and moving to an unnamed location with an old house at the edge of the woods and the marsh, she and her husband renovate the house, inviting various artists to come to create in their second place. “[W]hen we were building the second place, and had come to start calling it that in a way I knew would never change if we carried on doing it much longer, I said to him that ‘second place’ pretty much summed up how I felt about myself and my life – that it had been a near miss, requiring just as much effort as victory but with that victory always and forever somehow denied me, by a force that I could only describe as the force of pre-eminence. I could never win.] She decides to invite L to the second place, believing that she might find redemption or at least an understanding of her place in the world. After several false starts, he arrives with a young woman. The wife wants connection with L, who seems to repel her, wanting to paint portraits, not the marsh. The narrator’s internal imaginings of what might be never come to fruition. A traditional Cusk style, we are given shadings, slivers, never the direct actions of the characters. Her descriptions of place, as always, are superb.)

Whereabouts, a Novel, Jhumpa Lahiri (Lahiri wrote this novel in Italian, a learned language, and then translated it into English. Different in structure from her prior works, it contains a number of short entries, with the protagonist likely a mid-forties Italian woman who teaches at university. Although the actual facts are not revealed, the entries provide a window into a year in her life, alone but not always lonely, quiet with a few friends, experiencing but at some level superficially going through life. Each entry could be a short essay, not necessary to the whole. We are given glimpses, pieces, to develop for ourselves the entirety of the protagonist. Place isn’t important but occupies the narrator’s perspective. A new direction for Lahiri, the book is both complex and simple.)

When I Find You, John Irving (I did not finish this 800-page novel, a story of loss, deception and love, rendered in pieces that together form a melancholy web. An illegitimate boy, Jack, his tattooist mother, Alice, along with various characters along the way, seek to find Jack’s father. The early travels of the young boy and his mother foretell the book, but the two-dimensional characters, the not-yet-told (if ever) reason for why Alice, after a one-night stand with Jack’s father, is determined to find him, drag. While an easy read, after 200+ pages, I didn’t find it compelling enough to continue. Disappointed as other Irving books are a wonder.)

The Dictionary of Lost Words, Pip Williams (A novel based on the creation of the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary during the period 1880s-1920s. The contributors and editors of the dictionary were almost exclusively men. When young Esme, whose father was one of the contributors, finds words on “slips” (small pieces of paper upon which the meanings senses of words were recorded for consideration) that were not included in the dictionary, she begins collecting them. Over time as she learned that words that were not written, that the senses of some words seemingly more applicable to women or lower classes were missing, certain profane words were not included in the OED, she saved them in a trunk. She gathered words from market women, from housekeepers, from suffragettes, eventually creating a book of “missing” words. A love story to words and a fascinating account of how the

first dictionaries were created, the women characters are given voice, during the time of the suffragette movement and World War I.)

The Patron Saint of Liars, Ann Patchett (The story of Rose (a pregnant married woman from California), a home for pregnant, mostly unwed mothers run by a group of Catholic nuns, a worker at the home (Son), and Rose's daughter (Cecilia), and the sisters and pregnant women who come and leave the home. Rose is beautiful, capable, but untied to this life, a liar in her mind, not sharing her secrets. Son is a loner with a sorrowful past who accepts Rose as she is. Cecilia wants a mother to love her and to mother her in the normal sense, which Rose is incapable of doing. Deftly weaving different stories, different perspectives, Patchett creates a family of those chosen, not necessarily of blood.)

Nightwoods, Charles Frazier (The author of "Cold Mountain" again tells a strong story placed in the hills of North Carolina, set in the 1960s. Luce lives alone in an old huge lodge above the lake and town, finding fulfillment in the "reimbursements" of Appalachian landscape, the trees, the birds, the occasional wild animal, not needing or wanting money. Her sister is murdered and Luce becomes the guardian to twins, perhaps mute, perhaps witnesses to their mother's murder, certainly scared and wild. Luce discovers a strength in herself that she didn't believe possible, that loneliness can be dampened by new friends, that courage and bravery might be buried but they become strengths when she needs them most. The landscape is as much as character of the book as the humans, holding them in, letting them go, as nature absorbs and absolves.)

*Anxious People, Fredrick Backman (A bank robber, a hostage situation at an apartment open house, a long ago suicide, loneliness, marriages, love, fathers and sons, and "idiots", a plethora of themes and emotions fill Backman's novel, "Anxious People." Alternating between first person narrator speaking to the reader and the confusion of the scene of a crime, peopled with apartment hunters, real estate agent, two policemen, a bank robber and a few hangers-on, this book delves into everyday emotions and feelings, one day at a time, getting through life, sometimes tied to the past, other times afraid to look to the future. An engaging story although the writing style (side comments to readers) and perspectives were annoying or even coy?)

There There, Tommy Orange ("In Tommy Orange's "There There," an ambitious meditation on identity and its broken alternatives, on myth filtered through the lens of time and poverty and urban life, on tradition all the more pressing because of its fragility, it is as if he seeks to reconfigure Oakland as a locus of desire and dreams, to remake the city in the likeness of his large and fascinating set of characters." New York Times review, 2018. Orange creates twelve characters, seeking to understand their "Indianness," their identify, their place in this world as they travel to the Big Oakland Powwow. The sometimes unknown interconnectedness among the characters, the different degrees of knowledge about their Native heritage, the "Urban Indian," whose life is vastly different than pre-colonial Native Americans or even those living on reservations, trying to find connection, spirituality, family, bring them to life. The chapters build around each character, some with more depth than others, ending with perhaps unexpected tragedy. A powerful book with questions relevant to all of us.)

*The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison (Morrison's first novel, re-read after many years, continues to yield deep sorrow at the portrayal of Pecola and her family, the narrator and her family, and the other African American characters of this novel. The mid-century American concept of romance, beauty, and family (reminiscent of "Dick and Jane" reading primers) does not include so many people, whether due to race, ethnicity, economic or social circumstances. The sadness of a black child wanting "blue eyes," because that's what she knows, deep inside, is what is acceptable beauty, is incredible damaging, discouraging and

disregarding so other measures of a person's worth. We teach our children our beliefs, both visually and by our actions, what we ourselves have learned and observed, often without regard to the pain and hurt they cause. Still so relevant—unfortunately—today.)

Fifty Words for Rain, Asha Lemmie (Nori is the bastard child of the only daughter of one of the last dynasties in Imperial Japan. Her mother left Nori at her grandparents' doorstep when she was four years, where she was kept in the attic, hidden away because of the color of her skin (her father was an African American), the family wanting to disown her but concerned about legacy even as the world of post-WWII Japan changes. Nori's half-brother, Akira, returns to the family home after the death of his father. The connection between the half-siblings is immediate, two children living in a house without love, the musically talented but withdrawn Akira and the lonely but resilient Nori. Torture, betrayal, lies, secrets, guilt, sadness weave throughout the narrative until Nori is brave enough to break free, living a solitary life, but finding a kind of peace in a few friends.)

Of Women and Salt, Gabriela Garcia (A multi-generational history of women and their mothers, starting in mid-1800s in Cuba; immigration, loss, trauma, choices made and those thrust upon them. Carmen, her mother, Dolores, and her daughter, Jeannette, all struggle with men, silence, violence upon them, while unintentionally inflicting pain and flight on Ana, a young Cuban neighbor. Toggling between the past and present, Garcia presents the women, not as victims, which they are, but also as survivors to the terrors of their lives as immigrants and children of immigrants, memories of a forgotten Cuba connecting them. While I enjoyed the book, the chapters were somewhat disjointed, not fully developed characters.)

Apeiogon, a Novel, Colum McCann ("Apeiogon" is a geometric shape with a countably infinite number of sides, perhaps as the title of this book, to represent the infinite number of perspectives on the Israeli/Palestinian situation. The two main characters, Rami Elhanan (Israeli) and Bassam Aramin (Palestinian) are real people, fathers whose daughters were killed by suicide bomber (Smadar) and rubber bullet (Arim). The book has 1001 cantos, similar to the "Thousand and One Arabian Nights," where here, the fathers, in their grief, tell the stories of their daughters and their senseless killings over and over to keep them alive in the families' hearts and in the countries' consciousness. A unique perspective, with almost random chapters about birds, or the Holocaust, or water—all important in one sense or another to the living closeness of Palestinians and Israelis and the devastation that years of conflict have wrought. The fathers are unlikely friends and allies, but together in their grief, as "combatants for peace," having hope that some solution will resolve the endless terror, bombings, checkpoints, illegal entries/exits, and power of one over another.)

*Next Year in Havana, Chanel Cleeton (Two stories, one of Elisa Perez in Havana in 1958 just before exile to Florida, the other of Marisol Ferrara, her granddaughter, in Cuba in 2017, taking her grandmother's ashes for burial to her beloved homeland. The two love stories are interspersed with the more recent history of Cuba, especially around the revolution and "dethroning" of Batista. There are many stories of Cubans and Cuba, depending on one's social and economic status, whether one's family left Cuba after Fidel Castro came into power, or stayed behind. The country has a very strong pull as a beautiful island with a shameful and destructive history. The recitations of historical events was too prescribed and professorial, lacking a natural tone for its speakers, Pablo (early revolutionary and lover of Elisa), and Luis (a later-day commentator on lack of freedoms and control) and Marisol's lover. Billed as "women's lit," it didn't resonate with me with the similar situations of Elisa and Marisol, especially that of Marisol, a 21st century journalist with Cuban roots, who seemed very naïve about the situation there. Wasn't clear that Luis would be satisfied living in Florida, but situation had become difficult in Cuba.)

Damnation Spring, Ash Davidson (The late 1970s in northern California, country of virgin Redwood trees, a dying timber industry, generations of families on the cusp of losing their livelihoods. Rich Gundersen and his wife, Colleen, have one son and eight miscarriages. Colleen's only family, a sister, has six children, a mean-spirited husband, another logger like Rich. The tale of many communities where industries die out and lack of other skills or education or opportunities cause people to turn on one another, and here, outsiders, environmentalists and "tree-huggers," are trying to stop logging and decades of herbicide spraying, the possible cause of childhood diseases and deaths, cancers, etc. Weaving the stories of several families, generations of history, a dying industry and betrayal, Davidson captures an area I lived when I lived there, seeing families scrapping by, children hungry, cold and rain and fog, taking risks, the need to balance an individual's livelihood with the broader idea of protecting precious resources. Some predictable twists and turns, the characters reflect the hardship of their lives.)

The Lost Wife and The Garden of Letters, Alyson Richman (Both novels center around World War II, "The Lost Wife" with the Jews in Czechoslovakia and "The Garden of Letters" with the Italian Resistance. Using themes of art (with real-life stories of artists hiding their work to document the lives and deaths at Terezin concentration camp) and music (Elodie's cello, where she hides codes for the Italian Resistance in cadenzas of classical music), Richman weaves stories of love, heartache, tragedy, and hope amongst the respective horrors of the Holocaust and the Resistance.)

The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane, Lisa See (A blending of the tradition of tea-making by the Akha ethnic minority in the mountains of China, the abandonment of a baby, and her adoption by Americans. See's research into tea-making was evident as was her understanding of the ethnic families, their rituals, and their beliefs, especially as they bridged the gap from poverty to wealth due to the international demand for tea. A moving story, focusing on the matrilineal connections of the Akha, and the importance of past and future generations to their culture and survival.)

Bewilderment, Richard Powers (From the Pulitzer Prize winning Author of "The Overstory," Bewilderment is intimate yet far-flung, a story with traces of "Flowers for Algernon." The opening lines of that book are words from Plato's "The Republic:" "Anyone who has common sense will remember that the bewilderments of the eye are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light, which is true of the mind's eye, quite as much as of the bodily eye." Grieving the death of his wife, the tight, intense love of an astrobiologist father for his nine-year-old son, with multiple diagnoses of ADHD, OCD, perhaps autism spectrum, shines. The father refuses psychoactive medications for his son, instead, trying to help him with time in nature and stories of far-away planets (both imaginary and real), when he is offered opportunity to try a new type of neurofeedback, using patterns from his wife's brain to calm his son. Over time, the experiment works, as the boy becomes calmer, integrates his mother's thoughts and emotions, becoming lucid, less shy, challenging the world and its destructiveness, hurting as the earth's animals and plants are slowly dying and becoming extinct due to both human and natural causes. Ultimately, like Algernon, the meditative powers disappear as funding goes away and the experiment is challenged for its "inhumane" treatment of the child. The father, like most parents, is at a loss for how to tell his son that our beautiful planet may not survive. Intimate, magical, sad, this book has layers of observations to consider about love, our responsibilities as parents and humans, climate change, what is most important, the inner or outside world?) [Booker short list]

Harlem Shuffle, Colson Whitehead (Harlem in the 1960s, the city seething, crooks and families living side by side, hot summer nights. "Carney was only slightly bent when it came to being crooked," trying to make a decent living running a furniture store, doing crooked deals with his cousin on the side, isn't

everyone? A novel about society and racism, different worlds living mere blocks apart, one man's attempt to make do when his world is racked with crime, family commitments, being black in the 1960s America. Considered a "love affair" to Harlem, humorous and sad, this latest novel by Whitehead didn't grab me like "The Underground Railroad" and "The Nickel Boys.")

Great Circle, Maggie Shipstead (With the feel of an historical fiction novel, Shipstead creates a story about family, or the lack thereof, loneliness, the undefinable pull of something (here, Marian's desire to circumnavigate the world in an airplane, from the Arctic to Antarctica), women pilots, and love, in all its shapes and permutations. While the novel is structured like many current books with toggling between two primary characters, early 20th century Marian Graves, a twin/orphan/pilot, and current day actor, Hadley, who is to play Marian in a modern movie about Marian's life and crash into the southern ocean during her around the world flight, it captures the ruggedness of Montana during Prohibition, the use of female pilots as plane ferriers during World War II, and the superficiality of Hollywood. The characters were well-developed and the descriptions of flying exquisite. Marian and her twin, Jamie, and ultimately their friend, Caleb, have unbreakable bonds, something that carries them throughout their lives.) [Booker shortlist]

Let the Great World Spin, Colum McCann (A unique approach to a 9/11 story, McCann uses the tightrope walker, Phillipe Petit, who in 1974 strung a wire from the World Trade Center towers and walked/danced/leaped/ran across the wire, astounding the New Yorkers watching below, and the world, as the connection among 12 individuals, telling their stories of life in New York City. With deep detail, compassion, and a variety of characters (an Irish monk, hookers, Fifth Avenue matron, artists, orphans), we are brought into the magic of NYC, its presence in the world as a place of poverty, danger, wealth, sadness, despair, and hope. The people make the city while it carves their lives in unimaginable ways. McCann's writing is brilliant, expansive, and moving, perhaps like the tightrope walker, not knowing whether he will succeed or fall, as each character, with flaws and brilliance, moves forward in ways the characters likely would not have imagined.)

Apples Never Fall, Liane Moriarty (A story of family, intense love, competition (tennis), secrets, a mystery, a stranger in the house. A fun read, with twists and turns, including a little bit of the Australian bush fires and ending with COVID-19 pandemic. Don't we all (if we have siblings) wonder how we remember our childhoods differently? And don't we all think one or another of us is the favorite of one of our parents? Good character development.)

*Cloud Cuckoo Land, Anthony Doerr ("Anthony Doerr, best known for his Pulitzer-winning bestseller All the Light We Cannot See, returns with a sweeping page-turner about individual lives caught up in war and conflict, from 15th-century Constantinople to a future spaceship in flight from the dying earth. Cloud Cuckoo Land (4th Estate) is a love letter to books [library theme: Anna and the Urbino men who plan on building a library large enough to hold every book ever written] and reading, as well as a chronicle of what has been lost down the centuries, and what is at stake in the climate crisis today: sorrowful, hopeful and utterly transporting." The connection amongst primary characters throughout the book is the fable/story/magic of "Cloud Cuckoo Land," a story told by Aethon (name meaning "burning" or "hunger") to his dying niece, about a shepherd who becomes a donkey who becomes a crow, who seeks a city in the clouds. The novel weaves among Zeno, an orphan and Korean War veteran, in mid-1950s-2020 in Idaho, who translates "Aethon's" story; Seymour, a young boy in Idaho with learning disabilities, who becomes drawn to climate change/terrorism, and tries to bomb the library where five children are putting on play written by Zeno about Aethon. Omeir is young boy with hairlip living outside Constantinople in mid-1400s

who is forced to join Sultan's army in goal to burn down city. Anna is young girl living in convent in Constantinople, who discovers parts of Aethon's text, and later escapes city and finds and lives the rest of her life with Omeir. Konstance lives in Argos, a space ship created to send selected humans off the planet, eventually to return in 500+ years, who finds scrapes of story of Aethon told by her father as she explores the Atlas and the all-important library with everything (but perhaps not) in the world in it.

Pg. 568 (Seymour: "But as he reconstructs Zeno's translation, he realizes that the truth is infinitely more complicated, that we are all beautiful even as we are all part of the problem, and that to be a part of the problem is to be human...In a child's cursive, beneath the crossed-out lines, Aethon's new line is handwritten in the margin: "The world as it is is enough.")

Elegant, organic, the novel slowly grows into a flourishing, marvelous, tale of hardship, of filaments of history that bind generations of people, of mistakes made, of magic discovered, of acceptance and redemption--)

*The Personal Librarian, Marie Benedict and Victoria Christopher Murray (A fictionalized account of Belle da Costa Greene, the personal librarian to J. Pierpont Morgan in his establishment of the Pierpont Morgan Library of rare manuscripts, early Gutenberg Bibles, "...incunabula and manuscripts that together tell the history of the written word and its power to life humanity...". Based on the true story of Belle, a young black woman passing as white and the stress and consequences of that secret. She was personal librarian to Morgan, becoming one of the most successful women in the early to mid-1900s, especially in the art world. An insight into the world of the ultra-rich in US but also about disguising who we are, making very hard choices to escape one's past, then, severe segregation, the impact of being black. While not a lot is known about Belle's personal life, the authors create a credible story for her struggles, her choices, her losses.)