

Brett's Reading List

This is an attempt to keep track of the books I've read for recreation over the last several years. This does not include technical (statistics) books of course. The dates are either the date that I finished the book or the time period in which I read it.

1 Books Read in Australia (August, 1996 through July, 1998)

We didn't have a TV in Oz, so I did a lot of reading.

Fatal Shore Robert Hughes.

Australia's convict history, with a bit of a skeptic's angle (see "For the Term of His Natural Life" below).

The Road from Coorain Jill Ker Conway

Autobiographical book about Conway's growing up first on a sheep station in the Australian outback and then in Sydney.

Stormy Weather Carl Hiassen.

Very good Hiassen, good summer reading.

Native Tongue Carl Hiassen

Also good.

All the Pretty Horses Cormac McCarthy.

Beautiful, a great book.

The Eight Katherine Neville.

Lightweight page turner (chess, the desert, and various mystical stuff).

The Van Roddy Doyle.

Very good, funny book. Doyle is one of present-day Ireland's top authors (maybe he is Ireland's top author), though I suspect that most Americans would only know him, if they know him at all, from the film version of his book "The Commitments."

Cold Comfort Farm Stella Gibbons.

For the Term of His Natural Life Marcus Clarke.

Good book, much of it based on fact, though of course many of the events are as implausible as those in a Dickens story. Evidently this book played a large role in establishing the mythology of Australia's convict history that Hughes is bent on dismantling in "The Fatal Shore."

Longitude Author?

An interesting book about the clockmaker John Harrison.

Culture of Complaint Robert Hughes

Our Man in Havana Graham Greene.

One of Greene's humorous books. Excellent.

The Future Eaters Tim Flannery.

Interesting, but I'm skeptical about the conclusions drawn in many places. See my comments below on *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil John Berendt. Pretty good murder mystery set in Savannah, Ga.

Bosnia: A Short History Noel Malcolm.

I think I remember struggling to get to the finish line on this one. No quizzes please.

Yangtze Incident: The Story of H.M.S. Amethyst Lawrence Earl. The Amethyst was trapped up the Yangtze River by communist forces during the fight between the communists and the nationalists. An interesting true story.

The Tortilla Curtain T. Coraghessan Boyle. A very good novel concerned with the situation of Mexican immigrants (illegal) and their wealthy Anglo neighbors in Southern California.

A History of Warfare John Keegan.

How men fight.

I read at least one other of Keegan's books, *The Face of Battle* before this list was started. It's a fantastic book, the best I've ever read about the history of warfare.

The First Stone Helen Garner. A older feminist's look at "modern feminism" through the workings of a case of alleged sexual harassment in a Melbourne college.

I Claudius Robert Graves.

I really enjoyed this one and the next. Were things really this nasty in the Roman emperor's family?

Claudius the God Robert Graves.

Enigma Robert Harris (28 May 97). A novel built around the British code breaking effort in WWII.

The Language Instinct Steven Pinker (27 June 97). An entertaining and interesting discussion of modern linguistics and universal grammar for the non-expert.

Why the Professor Can't Teach (Mathematics and the Dilemma of University Education) Morris Kline (15 July 97). A scathing review of the state of mathematics teaching and research in U.S. universities, by a distinguished mathematician. Sort of work-related I suppose.

The Second World War John Keegan (10 August 97) A fairly comprehensive look at the battles and generals of the war in all theaters.

Moo Jane Smiley (16 August 97). A humorous look at life on a midwestern university (Iowa?) campus.

Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow Peter Hoeg (23 August 97). Very good and unusual murder mystery set in Denmark and Greenland.

The Mask of Command John Keegan (Sept 97). The historical progression of the nature of command through the general-ships of Alexander the Great, the Duke of Wellington, U. S. Grant, and A. Hitler.

The Price of Admiralty John Keegan (10 Oct 97). The battles of Trafalgar (wooden ships), Jutland (dreadnought battleships), Midway (carriers), and the Atlantic (submarines and their hunters).

Hannibal: A Novel Ross Leckie (27 Oct 97). Pseudo autobiography of Hannibal. Enjoyed this one.

A Journey Through Economic Time: A Personal View John Kenneth Galbraith (8 Nov 97). Interesting and entertaining.

Monstrum Donald James (9 Nov 97). Murder mystery set in Russia in 2015. Forgettable page turner.

The Rain Maker John Grisham (22 Nov 97). Lawyers and insurance companies in Memphis. Another forgettable page turner.

The Crossing Cormac McCarthy (28 Nov 97). Second book of the border trilogy. Wonderful book.

Bonfire of the Vanities Thomas Wolfe (20 Dec 97).

A Man Called Intrepid William Stevenson. British and American intelligence operations during WWII.

Kings in Grass Castles Mary Durack (15 Jan 98). Great book about the author's pioneer Australian pastoralist family.

A Fortunate Life Albert B. Facey (31 Jan 98). Autobiography of an Australian born in the late 19th century. His incredible childhood and young adult life take up most of the book.

The Samurai Shusaku Endo. 17th century samurai visit S.America and Europe. Nice book.

The Pleasures of Counting T. W. Körner. A layman's survey of mathematics and its applications. Very nice. There's a lot of statistics in here, especially in the first part of the book but I'm still counting this a recreational reading.

Darwin Adrian Desmond and James Moore (15 April 98). A wonderful biography of Darwin.

My Place Sally Morgan (9 May 1998). The story of an Australian (1/8) aboriginal woman and her family. Also the stories of grandmother, great uncle, and mother. Interesting, and sad at times.

How We Know Martin Goldstein and Inge F. Goldstein (30 June 1998). "An exploration of the scientific process." The material about John Snow's research on cholera outbreaks (essentially the founding of epidemiology) is good, but this book wasn't really worth reading.

The Bachelor of Arts R. K. Narayan (15 July 1998). A glimpse into the life of a young man in south India. Enjoyable reading.

2 Since August, 1998

Unfortunately my rate has fallen off with the return to America.

Ford Author? (5 August 1998). Story of the Ford Motor Company, and especially Henry Ford I.

Blood Meridian Cormac McCarthy (19 August 1998). Follows a gang of outlaw Indian hunters through Mexico and the Southwest. Very violent but excellent.

Cites of the Plain Cormac McCarthy (31 August 1998). Third volume in the Border Trilogy. Excellent, though not as good as the first two.

Timequake Kurt Vonnegut (13 Sept 1998).

Guns, Germs, and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies Jared Diamond (June 1999).

Not bad, reminded me a bit of "The Future Eaters", which is referenced here in fact. This kind of science always seems highly speculative to me, with one theory being just about as plausible as the next and the authors generally having a political ax to grind. In this case I am sympathetic with the author's politics, but skeptical about the science. Of course my qualifications in the field are nil, so I don't mean to suggest that anyone should necessarily agree with my view of the book.

Bliss Peter Carey (July 1999).

Very entertaining book. An Aussie advertising executive somewhere in Northern Queensland (???) believes that he has died and gone to Hell.

The Great World David Malouf (July 1999).

A great book by another Aussie author. Mainly concerns the life and times of one man (Digger) or maybe two (what was the other fellow's name?), but in some ways the author is aiming to sum up the entire Aussie experience in this century.

Underworld Don DeLillo (August 1999).

Another really good book, this time by an American author. A long, strange trip through America in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Professor and the Madman Simon Winchester (Fall 1999?)

The writing of the Oxford dictionary. The book mostly concerns the true story of the involvement of a mad American who had served as a surgeon in the American Civil War and was later "institutionalized" for a murder committed in London. Interesting and entertaining.

A Man in Full Tom Wolfe (I must have read this sometime in 1998-1999).

Entertaining as usual with Wolfe. All the implausible connections remind me a bit of a modern Dickens story (or something like that).

Citizen Soldiers Stephen Ambrose (I must have read this sometime in 1999-2000).

I enjoyed this book because I enjoyed the subject, but it didn't make a lasting impression on me.

Team Rodent Carl Hiaasen (December 1999).

Hiaasen goes after Disney in this very short book. Not bad.

Noah's Garden: Restoring the Ecology of Our Own Back Yards Sara Stein (Spring 2000?).

I read this while considering what to do about our yard, so its qualification as recreational reading is a bit shaky. BTW, doing nothing seems to be the right answer at the moment.

The Killer Angels Michael Shaara (Spring 2000?)

The Battle of Gettysburg through the eyes of the generals. A very good book.

Undaunted Courage: Meriweather Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West Stephen Ambrose (June 2000)

I do not care much for Ambrose's writing, but his choice of subjects makes up for it.

Killing Mister Watson Peter Matthiessen (July 2000).

Great novel of life in southwest Florida around the turn of the century. Mr. Watson is an enigma, a great farmer and businessman, and maybe a ruthless murderer too.

Cryptonomicon Neal Stephenson (July-August 2000)

Novel about the adventures of a group of cryptologists and computer geeks and others in WWII and the present. Fun to read if this sort of thing interests you at all. Apparently has been compared to *Gravity's Rainbow* in some reviews, but I doubt that is justified. It's been a long time since I read *Gravity's Rainbow*, but I would rank this book as "lighter" reading (but easier going).

Statistics on the Table: The History of Statistical Concepts and Methods Stephen Stigler (30 Sept, 2000)

I promised not to include any "work-related" books in this list, but I really just read this one for pleasure. It's basically a collection of 22 (?) of Stigler's papers on the history of statistics. Pretty interesting, though probably less so to a non-statistician.

Lost Man's River Peter Matthiessen (11 Oct, 2000). Turns out that *Killing Mister Watson* was just the first in a trilogy. This one is the story of Watson's son and his search for the truth behind his father's death and life. I really enjoyed this book as well, though there seem to be some inconsistencies with its setting in time. Many things point to a time frame of mid-1970's or later, and late 1960's is a bare minimum. This would make the protagonist about 80, which just doesn't jibe with other things in the story. A reviewer on Amazon has also pointed out that the name of one of the main families has changed from Hamilton to Harden. This may be because the real family objected though, which is actually kind of interesting.

On the plus side, more of the story takes place in north central Florida, which is even more local for me. I also like Matthiessen's references to flora and fauna of the region. I'm looking forward to reading the last book in the trilogy.

Bone by Bone Peter Matthiessen (5 Nov, 2000).

The last book in the *Killing Mister Watson/Lost Man's River* trilogy. Here Mr. Watson's tells his own story. I think I liked this one best of all. A fascinating, if horrific story, and a fantastic book.

Ecology of a Cracker Childhood Janisse Ray (25 Nov, 2000).

Growing up in a junk yard in the longleaf pine country of south Georgia. I really liked this one: those of us of cracker descent need to learn to appreciate and preserve what little is left of the longleaf pine ecosystem before it's completely gone.

The Moor's Last Sigh Salman Rushdie (2 Jan, 2001).

I'm not sure how to summarize this book. The "Moor" is of "mixed descent" (his mother has Christian, perhaps Portuguese background and his father is Jewish and perhaps with perhaps a Spanish Moor thrown in), and grows up in Bombay, India. Besides having a somewhat dysfunctional family, he also has a deformed right arm/hand and worse, ages at twice the normal speed, so at 15 his body is 30, and so forth. Most of what happens revolves around the mother, who is a famous Indian artist, and the formative events of Indian history of the last half of the 20th century. Rushdie is pretty hard here on religious zealots, particularly the Hindu nationalists in India. In fact the book was banned in India, which seems a great shame to me.

I'm sure I missed some things here because I don't know enough about modern Indian history and culture, but nevertheless I really enjoyed this book.

Monsignor Quixote Graham Greene (6 Jan, 2001).

This is a great little book. Greene explores Catholicism (as usual), Communism, and life through the conversations and adventures of the parish priest Quixote (somewhat accidentally promoted to Monsignor) and the communist former mayor of the village (nicknamed Sancho by Monsignor Quixote). Funny and touching, I really enjoyed this one.

Gödel's Proof Ernest Nagel and James R. Newman (28 Jan, 2001).

I always wanted to read this and finally did.

The Snow Leopard Peter Matthiessen (11 Feb, 2001).

The author's journal of a trek into the Himalayas with a field biologist (studying the "blue sheep" of the region) and their troop of porters, cook, etc. I enjoyed this, but I wouldn't say it's one of my favorites. There's a lot of focus on the Matthiessen's Buddhist pursuits and his grief over the death of his (second) wife, but as a chronicle of a fairly extreme journey it's pretty engrossing.

Jack Maggs Peter Carey (25 Feb 2001).

Years after being transported to Australia and making his fortune, Jack Maggs illegally returns to London to meet his "son." In the process he falls in with the writer Tobias Oates who hypnotizes him in order to gather material for a novel. Oates apparently represents Dickens, and Maggs's story and encounter with him can be viewed as fictionalized background to Dickens creation of "Great Expectations." It's been so long since I read Dickens in high school that my reading of this book was not burdened by all of this, but I greatly enjoyed "Jack Maggs" as a stand-alone piece. I have to admit that I never really liked Dickens when I was young and had to read him (his stories always seemed far too contrived), but perhaps I'll go back and read "Great Expectations" again.

The First World War John Keegan (8 April 2001).

Another good book by Keegan. I probably still prefer *The Face of Battle* and *The Mask of Command* over his other books, but they are all very good.

In a Sunburned Country Bill Bryson (6 May 2001).

This is a very funny travel book about Australia.

The Mismeasure of Man Stephen J. Gould (3 June 2001).

A history/explanation of (western) attempts to measure intelligence and the associated misconceptions, biases, and abuses. Written well before *The Bell Curve*, it nevertheless serves to place the latter in its proper historical/cultural context while anticipating and "responding" to its various arguments. As a bonus, Gould is really a pleasure to read.

The March of Folly Barbara Tuchman (28 June 2001).

The Trojans bring the horse within their gates, the renaissance popes prompt the protestant reformation and the sacking of Rome, the British prompt the American revolution, and the Americans get entangled in Viet Nam. Most interesting to me were the chapters on the popes and Viet Nam. Not one of Tuchman's best books, but pretty good anyway.

Living on the Wind: Across the Hemisphere with Migratory Birds Scott Weidensaul (18 July 2001)

A very interesting book about bird migration in the Americas.

The God of Small Things Arundhati Roy (4 August 2001)

The story of twin brother and sister in India (Kerala), their family and its history, love, politics, caste, and tragedy. Very good.

Name-Dropping: From FDR On John Kenneth Galbraith (3 November 2001)

Not really up to Galbraith's usual standards, but interesting anyway.

Made in America Bill Bryson (13 January 2002).

American English. Full of interesting historical and etymological tidbits. Good book.

The Botany of Desire Michael Pollen (19 January 2002).

Apples, tulips, marijuana, and potatoes. How we shaped them and vice versa. Interesting book, especially the parts on marijuana (things have apparently come a long way) and potatoes (scary).

The Waterworks E. L. Doctorow (16 March 2002).

A different sort of mystery set in post Civil War New York City. Very good and a quick read.

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius Dave Eggers (14 April 2002).

Well, I don't know about all that, but this was quite a good book. An autobiographical piece about a young man (a "20-something") getting through his life while raising his younger brother, after their parents have both died young and at nearly the same time. That's a lousy summary.

The Book of Miracles: the Meaning of the Miracle Stories in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam

Kenneth L. Woodward (3 May 2002).

I thought that I'd never finish this thing, which I've been reading part time for months now. I hoped to learn a bit about all these religions and their beliefs, but I think my main conclusion is that people all over the world are ready to believe just about any load of rubbish in the guise of religion. I could hardly bear to read this book, partly because the author presents all of these bizarre tales almost as a believer would.

Benjamin Franklin, Politician: The Mask and the Man Francis Jennings (24 May 2002).

Sort of a biography of Franklin, but more about his political development and the politics of Pennsylvania in the years before the American Revolution. The author tries to strip away some of the glorification of the American icon and show his flaws as well as his strengths. I haven't read any other biographies of Franklin or histories of pre-revolutionary Pennsylvania politics, so I can't say how well he succeeds. Jennings does seem to have some axes to grind with other historians, which takes away from his writing and is distracting at times. Nevertheless, on the whole I enjoyed reading this book and found the contents interesting and apparently well-researched.

Sick Puppy Carl Hiaasen (8 June 2002).

Hiaasen goes after the developers and other trashers of the landscape here in Florida. Much of the action takes place around Cedar Key and Gainesville, so it's pretty close to home. As usual with Hiaasen, lots of fun except when you remember that he bases his books on real stories taken from the news (you mean this isn't fiction?).

The Battle Cry of Freedom James M. McPherson (28 June 2002).

A very well written history of the civil war era in the U.S. I enjoyed this so much that I'm thinking of re-reading it.

Single and Single John le Carré (3 July 2002).

Light summer reading, but not particularly wonderful. In outline, son (Oliver Single) goes state's evidence against corrupt financial house founded by father (Tiger Single), but goes back in to save father from Russian mobsters who plan to do him in.

The Code Book: Science of Secrecy from Ancient Egypt to Quantum Cryptography Simon Singh (12 July 2002).

A well written book on cryptography that manages to tell an interesting history and give some real insight without swamping the reader in technical difficulties. The same author has a book (*Fermat's Enigma*) about the history of Fermat's last theorem and its proof that is also supposed to be very good.

Midnight's Children Salman Rushdie (7 August 2002).

Saleem Sinai is born at midnight, August 15, 1947, simultaneous with the birth of Indian independence. A boy/man's life as a country's life (two countries really, if you include Pakistan, or even three if you count Bangladesh too) as a boy/man's life. Really a great book.

Lindbergh A. Scott Berg (8 October 2002).

A very interesting biography of a somewhat enigmatic figure. Lindbergh's family granted Berg full access to all his papers, journals, diaries, etc., and Lindbergh's wife also offered access to her own diaries and journals. There's a lot here that I didn't know about Lindbergh, such as his deep involvement in medical research.

White Noise Don DeLillo (24 October 2002).

A satirical look at American life, and especially of an American academic's life. Very good, though I preferred *Underworld* by the same author.

The Iliad Homer (translated by W. H. D. Rouse) (1 December 2002).

Well, you know the story. I don't think that I ever read the whole thing before, so I decided to redress this shortcoming by reading a prose translation.

Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West Wallace Earle Stegner (16 December 2002).

A collection of essays by Stegner, organized into autobiographical, land/place/environment, and his writings about other (western) writers. All concerning the American West of course. I enjoyed this, but wouldn't recommend it that strongly unless you're particularly interested in Stegner. I am looking forward to reading some of his novels.

A Reader's Manifesto: An Attack on the Growing Pretentiousness in American Literary Prose B. R. Myers (5 January 2003).

Well, it's exactly what it says that it is. Myers attacks four or five writers in particular, including Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy. Though I really enjoyed *Underworld*, and I loved *All the Pretty Horses*, Myers's criticisms do seem cogent and make me want to go back and look again. But there are too many other things to read, so I probably will never get around to it.

The Odyssey Homer (translated by R. L. Eickhoff) (12 January 2003).

Again, a prose translation of Homer. If you don't know the story you should probably read it yourself.

High and Mighty High and Mighty: SUVs—The World's Most Dangerous Vehicles and How They Got That Way Keith Bradsher (29 January 2003)

Everyone should read this book, especially anyone who is tempted to buy an SUV. I wish I could call it a shocking exposé, but unfortunately it's pretty much what we expect from business in collusion with government and supported by a selfish and self-centered buying public. Nevertheless, the revelations about the automakers' marketing studies of SUV buyers alone make this book worth reading, to say nothing of its exploration of safety, environmental, and fuel efficiency issues.

Proof: A Play David Auburn (1 February 2003).

This Pulitzer Prize winner was loaned to me by my colleague Bhramar Mukherjee. I suppose that I read it like a short story, but I certainly enjoyed it.

The Big Rock Candy Mountain Wallace Earle Stegner (2 March 2003).

Stegner's first novel, apparently largely autobiographical. Tells the story of his mother and father and his youth. The father is always looking for "the big rock candy mountain," dragging his family around the west in pursuit of his next get-rich-quick scheme. Good book.

Angle of Repose Wallace Earle Stegner (5 April 2003).

This is an really fine book. A retired professor is writing a biography of his grandparents. Mostly this is the story of the grandparents, and their lives in the west. A fascinating look at life in mining camps in the west in the late 1800s, and at the personal relationship between the cultured grandmother and the plain, mining engineer grandfather, and their friends and acquaintances. I think that the book might actually have been better if it was just this story, unadorned by the story of the writer professor and his more modern concerns, but it is still very good.

The Advent of the Algorithm: The Idea that Rules the World David Berlinski (10 June 2003).

Traces the development and importance of the notions of computability, completeness, etc. Visits with the usual suspects in this area, including Cantor, Gödel, Russell, and Turing, as well as Leibniz, Hilbert, Alonzo Church (who I didn't know about but who was apparently the author's PhD advisor), and others. Entertaining and enjoyable reading, not dry at all.

Mason & Dixon Thomas Pynchon (17 August 2003)

I took too long to read this one, so I never got into it the way I should have. Kind of an interesting mix of humor (not of the "laugh-out-loud" variety) with a bit of melancholy (at least I found it so). But, as with other Pynchon books I've read, I got lost at times and was unable to follow things. Still, I have the feeling that this would make a great movie if the right director took it on.

Update: In the years since I read it, I find that I think of this book at least as often as any I have read, and I think of it very fondly. I may have to read it again (rare for me).

John Adams David McCullough (4 October 2003)

Very good book. I didn't know much about John Adams before reading it, but McCullough certainly portrays him as an admirable man who lived a very interesting life.

Closing Time Joseph Heller (3 November 2003)

Heller's follow up to *Catch 22*, set in the 1990s. Things haven't gotten any less strange, but somehow it's all so close to reality that it's more depressing and less funny. Maybe melancholy is the word. It's a good book – I remember enjoying *Catch 22* more, but that was so long ago that I can't say how I would feel about it now.

The Lady Tasting Tea: How Statistics Revolutionized Science in the Twentieth Century David Salsburg (19 November 2003)

A layman's history of statistics that looks in on many of the important figures in the field and tries to explain their ideas and contributions without any technicalities. Not a great work of literature or history, but still enjoyable.

Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right Al Franken (12 December 2003)

Franken exposes the lies and liars of the right, and the ridiculous myths about the so-called liberal media. Unfortunately it's all true, which makes it hard to laugh. Everyone should read this book.

Dude, Where's My Country? Michael Moore (25 December 2003)

Good, but I preferred Franken's book.

Eclipse John Banfield (18 January 2004)

Beautifully written book, exploring the inner world of a stage actor who has dropped out of his life. Interesting twist at the end that ties many things together. I'll be looking for more by this (Irish) author. Our friend Robin Wilkinson has written a review/analysis of this book for the Irish Review (or possibly another Irish literary journal?).

Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance Noam Chomsky (23 March 2004)

The double standard of America's state sponsored terrorism (no, we don't call it that, it's "freedom fighters" or a "police action" or it's hidden altogether) versus the terrorism of anyone who opposes America's government and cooperate interests. Chomsky challenges our conventional way of thinking about the world, and should be read whether you agree with him or not.

A House for Mr. Biswas V.S. Naipaul (20 May 2004)

This is a wonderful book. The bittersweet story of a poor Indian's (as in Indian subcontinent) life in Trinidad, dominated by his in-laws and his own poverty. This is supposed to actually be a fictionalized biography of Naipaul's father and the story of his own upbringing.

Against All Enemies Richard Clarke (29 May 2004)

An insiders look at the "war on terror." Very interesting and a damning indictment of the Bush administration.

True History of the Kelly Gang Peter Carey (13 June 2004)

Great novel about the famous Australian bushranger (outlaw) Ned Kelly. Written as a pseudo-autobiography. Apparently very well researched and certainly written in a very interesting style (the outlaw's own hand).

Great Expectations Charles Dickens (20 July 2004)

I finally got around to this (see "Jack Maggs" above) and I really enjoyed it. The third part of the novel is filled with the implausible coincidences that so turned me off to Dickens when I was young, but somehow they don't bother me so much anymore (perhaps I'm becoming a doddering old fool). Now, I have to decide whether to reread "Jack Maggs."

Jack Maggs Peter Carey (3 August 2004).

So I did decide to reread this one. Indeed, the character Tobias Oates is based on Dickens, who apparently really was in love with his live-in sister-in-law, who actually died in his arms at age seventeen (not that I have read anything to indicate that she was pregnant by him at the time). I probably won't take the time to look more deeply into this, but I imagine that Carey takes much or most of the Oates character directly from Dickens's own character and experiences. Assuming that the details he provides are accurate, Carey seems to have also done a great deal of research into 19th century London, the city and life in it.

Of course rest of the story must be imagined. The idea is that the encounter between Oates and Maggs, a transported criminal who has illegally returned from Australia, provided the background material for Oates's novel "The Death of Jack Maggs" (or Dickens's "Great Expectations"). Like Magwitch, Maggs has made his fortune in Australia, and has returned to meet the young man who as a boy did him a kindness, while Maggs was a prisoner, and who Maggs has since sponsored in the life of a gentleman. This would be Henry Phipps here, though this character actually has very few of the redeeming qualities of Dickens's Pip. Similarly the character Sofia here, long dead before the novel's story commences, might be imagined to have inspired Dickens's Estella, though the characters and the roles they play in the story could not be more different.

Anyway, this is an excellent book, fun to read, especially having recently read "Great Expectations."

Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? Beverly Daniel Tatum (20 Sept 2004).

This was the first book in a "Faculty Reading Initiative" proposed by the new incoming president of the University of Florida. I had hoped to attend the faculty roundtable discussion and the lecture by the author that were to held as part of the inauguration activities, but between Hurricane Frances and work that had to be done, I was unable to make it.

My wife is rather expert on this literature, and in fact it is her copy of the book that I read. She told me from the outset that there were better books in this area, but I decided to go ahead with it anyway, mainly because of the proposed inaugural activities.

In any case, I found the book very disappointing. Mostly it consisted of an extended discussion of the increasing self awareness associated with growing up, and the increasing stress of peer and other relationships, as they apply to people of color. Moreover, all, or nearly all of the evidence offered to support the authors positions was anecdotal, often gathered from comments in students' papers or in class discussions — and of course one might suspect that such comments are often intended to please the instructor. Nothing about any of this seemed very surprising or insightful to me, just a collection of rather trivial observations, sometimes wrapped in sociological/psychological jargon.

I am sympathetic to the author's views and I wanted to like this book, but I didn't find anything here that was very compelling or helpful to me as an educator or a citizen, beyond exhortations to "speak out," "embrace cross-racial dialog," and so forth.

American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune, and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush Kevin Phillips (13 Oct 2004)

A damning portrait of the Bushes and a warning about dynasties from the man who wrote *The Emerging Republican Majority* in 1969, the book that became the blueprint for Republicans' "Southern strategy." In other words, the author is not exactly a flaming liberal. It's a bit of a tough slog at times, but this book should be required reading for every American.

Intelligence Matters: the CIA, the FBI, Saudi Arabia, and the Failure of America's War on Terror Senator Bob Graham (3 Nov 2004).

Reminiscent of Richard Clarke's *Against All Enemies*, this book reveals, among other things, the sponsorship of the 9/11 terrorists by the Saudi government, the many cover-up efforts of the Bush administration (many successful), and their lying about intelligence to lead us into a war in Iraq that predictably devastated our efforts to combat terrorism. A well written book, highly recommended.

A Mathematician Plays the Stock Market John Allen Paulos (13 Nov 2004)

An amusing and interesting look at the stock market through the eyes of a mathematician (who lost big on WorldCom). Paulos gives a lively tour of fundamental market concepts, measures, and methods,

and describes their shortcomings in a way that should be understandable to anyone. He also focuses heavily on the psychology of investing, which is probably the most interesting aspect of the book.

Nickel and Dime: On (Not) Getting By in America Barbara Ehrenreich (21 Nov 2004)

To understand the plight of the working poor, Ehrenreich leaves her comfortable, upper middle class life behind and joins the ranks of the working poor, first in Key West (Florida), then in Portland (Maine), and finally in Minneapolis (Minnesota). Even though she does not live for more than a month in each setting, and even though she has a car (and even though, unknown to her employers, she is highly educated), it is clear that she would not be able to “get by” in the kind of jobs that at least 30 percent of the workforce holds (making less than \$8/hour). In fact, she was not able to make it while holding two full time jobs. Everyone should read this book.

Cataclysm: the First World War as Political Tragedy David Stevenson (14 March 2005)

Stevenson examines in depth the military, diplomatic, economic, and societal causes and effects of WWI. Why the sides fought, how they fought, and what enabled them to fight; the causes and consequences of the war; and so forth. At times I felt lost in some of the details, but overall I enjoyed this book. If you want to go beyond the usual platitudes about this war and its causes, this is a good place to start.

Eats, Shoots, & Leaves Lynne Truss (29 March 2005)

In spite of all evidence to the contrary, I’m a stickler about punctuation, at least relative to today’s standards. So I enjoyed this short book. I had hoped for something funnier, but it is an amusing and informative look at English and American punctuation and its present-day decline.

The Kite Runner Khaled Hosseini (2 April 2005)

Amir grows up as a privileged Afghanistan boy, coming of age just before the Russian invasion. The story turns around an act of cowardice by which he betrays his best and most loyal friend, the son of his father’s Hazara servant. This is a really fine novel that I enjoyed immensely.

Right Hand, Left Hand: The Origins of Asymmetry in Brains, Bodies, Atoms, and Cultures Chris McManus (8 May 2005)

A fascinating book on exactly what it says: symmetry and asymmetry, especially in biology. Very enjoyable reading.

The Known World Edward P. Jones (22 May 2005)

A very good historical novel concerning a bit of history that I knew nothing about: black slave owners in the antebellum South.

A Short History of Nearly Everything Bill Bryson (21 July 2005)

A wonderfully readable survey of the history of science and of the current state of scientific knowledge, ranging across physics, astronomy, geology, biology, and anthropology.

Prime Obsession: Bernhard Riemann and the Greatest Unsolved Problem in Mathematics John Derbyshire (11 August 2005)

A very good book about the Riemann conjecture, its history, and the various attempts to solve it. Derbyshire actually explains enough of the mathematics that one can understand the general ideas and introduces many of the most interesting mathematicians of the past century in the process. The chapters mostly alternate between history and mathematics, so one never gets the feeling of just reading a math text.

Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life Stephen Jay Gould (17 August 2005)

Gould argues for NOMA (nonoverlapping magisteria): separation of the domains of science and religion, with proper respect from each side for the role of the other. While discussing many of the violations of NOMA both from sides, Gould emphasizes that this principle has nevertheless been followed by the vast majority of both scientists and religious leaders and takes care to debunk some myths of supposed violations (e.g., no one seriously tried to argue that Columbus would sail off the edge of a flat earth; the only controversy was whether he had underestimated the distance west from Europe to the Orient, which indeed he had).

Star of the Sea Joseph O'Connor (23 August 2005)

Sort of a murder mystery set on a ship going from Ireland to America in the midst of the potato famine; but much more than that. An excellent book.

The Satanic Verses Salman Rushdie (5 February 2006)

After the passenger plane they're on is blown up by a terrorist bomb, Gibreel Farista and Saladin Chamcha fall from the sky into the English Channel and survive, but with some strange side effects: Gibreel has a halo and other characteristics of the archangel (Gabriel) and Saladin grows goat's horns, hoofs, tail, etc.

There's really too much to tell here. The book a broad exploration and critique of religion (Islam in particular), ethnic/racial prejudice, and much else. And the usual fantastic Rushdie story telling, obvious from the paragraph above. Actually, it's a lot of stories (many of them connected through Gibreel's dreaming as the archangel), and it can be a bit hard to keep track of all the characters, particularly if, like me, you're somewhat ignorant of Islam and the Koranic stories. I found it quite helpful to keep a copy of Paul Brians's notes handy while reading (go to <http://www.wsu.edu/~brians> and look under the "Course Materials" link).

I really enjoyed this book. I think *Midnight's Children* is better, but Rushdie is really fun to read and this is a wonderful book.

Our Endangered Values : America's Moral Crisis Jimmy Carter (26 Apr 2006)

Carter charts how far off course the we have been taken by the Bush administration and its fundamentalist allies. Torture, intolerance, an unjust war, the growing divide between rich and poor, violation of the separation of church and state, and all rest. It's a sad true story, but it is good to hear from a real christian, instead of the usual crowd of noisy charlatans.

Crossing to Safety Wallace Stegner (5 June 2006)

The intertwined lives of two couples from the 1930s through the present (1980s?). They meet as the husbands join the faculty of the English Department at the University of Wisconsin during the depression. The narrator (Stegner I suppose) is not retained after one year, but is successful as an author of novels and short stories and on the side as an editor/reviewer of books. The other husband sacrifices writing poetry in order to write boring academic papers, but still fails to get tenure. Many summers are shared at the "compound" of the latter couple, where the wife of the narrator develops polio early on. Basically this is hard to sum up in just a few words, but it is a very good book (though not quite as engrossing as "Angle of Repose" by the same author).

Out Natsuo Kirino (17 July 2006)

Engrossing story of murder in Japan. There's a strong underlying theme of the oppression of women in Japanese society, and the book is gory to say the least, but it's all carried along by the engrossing

story and characters, particularly the main character. This probably falls into the category of a fun summer read, but the quality is high for that category.

Absurdistan Gary Shteyngart (7 August 2006)

Misha Vainberg (aka “Snack Daddy”) is a young and hugely fat Russian Jew, with a bachelors degree from “Accidental College” in the midwest of the US, and an intense love for everything American (or at least for American pop culture). His oligarch father having killed an Oklahoma businessman, the INS refuses to allow him to return to America. Misha is deeply unhappy in Russia, and pines over his Puerto Rican/Bronxian girlfriend, Rouenna, and relationship with his father, who has been killed by a rival oligarch. His only friend in Russia seems to be his college buddy and American expatriate, “Aloysha Bob”. Financed by his father’s killer, Misha travels to Absurdistan (and oil-rich republic on the Caspian) to obtain a Belgian passport that will at least allow him to immigrate to Brussels. He becomes embroiled in local politics, such as it is, and all sorts of insanity ensues. Funny and enjoyable.

Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explains the Hidden Side of Everything Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubbner (1 Oct 2006)

Interesting, short, and very readable. Incentives, intended and otherwise, and their consequences. How standardized testing encourages teachers to cheat, and how to catch them. Why the homes of real estate agents houses stay on the market longer and sell for more. Why crack dealers live with their moms. How obsessive “parenting” doesn’t help kids to succeed (though it does sell a lot of books, carseats, and other gizmos). How Roe v. Wade caused the huge drop seen in the U.S. crime rate during the 1990’s. And other interesting tidbits that may contradict the “conventional wisdom.”

American Pastoral Philip Roth (11 Nov 2006)

Seymour “Swede” Levov is handsome, athletic, kind and considerate to all, and a successful businessman with a beautiful wife and a home in the country. But his seemingly perfect American life flies apart in 1968 when his radicalized teenage daughter sets off a bomb in the local general store. I’m not sure that I would rate it as highly as do the critics who make it one of the two or three best American books of the last twenty or fifty years, but it is very good and worth reading.

Beloved Toni Morrison (24 Dec 2006?)

Finished this while away on break, and I forgot to record it (and maybe another too?). Sethe, formerly an escaped slave (the setting is post civil war), lives in a house in Cincinnati along with her daughter Denver, the recently arrived Paul D, a recently arrived friend from the old days, and the ghost of another daughter. Before Paul D’s arrival, her mother-in-law has died and her young sons have left, having had enough of the ghost and everything else. After Paul D chases the ghost away in a fiery confrontation in the kitchen, she returns in physical form, as Beloved. This is a fascinating book, full of ghosts and many cruelties, and a few kindnesses.

Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid Jimmy Carter (31 Dec 2006)

An insightful analysis of the problem of Palestine by our greatest ex-president. Very few punches are pulled here and Americans should read this book to understand the real nature of the problem.

The Spectator Bird Wallace Stegner (4 Feb 2007)

Reminiscences of a retired literary agent about a sabbatical spent 20 years ago in Denmark with his wife, and particularly about unravelling the rather tragic story of their well-to-do (minor royalty) Danish hostess. Told through the device of reading his diaries from the period in the present, and

hence also revealing the story of his own past and present, and the pain of growing old. Of course this is very similar to the device used in *Angle of Repose*. I enjoyed this book, but *Angle of Repose* still seems by far the best of Stegner's work.

Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books Azar Nafisi (14 Apr 2007)

An Iranian woman, educated in Europe and America, Nafisi is a professor of English literature in Tehran. Frustrated with the omnipresent influence and oppression of the Islamic Republic, she resigns her position, and starts a private class or reading group of seven female students who meet in her apartment on Thursdays. For some reason I found this book, or at least my interest in reading it, to be pretty uneven (particularly the first quarter or so of the book), but this really is a fascinating story, and well worth reading. Much of the book is actually concerned with her time teaching in a university setting in Tehran, and this part is also very interesting.

Dream State (Eight Generations of Swamp Lawyers, Conquistadors, Confederate Daughters, Banana Republicans, and Other Florida Wildlife) Diane Roberts (2 August 2007)

Diane (DK) Roberts wrote for the Florida Flambeau (FSU's former independent student newspaper) while I was in school there. She's always had a very witty take on things, as is aptly demonstrated in this book. Much or most of the book is about her extended family's history in North Florida and her own experiences in Florida (and as a Rhodes Scholar and PhD student at Oxford). "My people" come from the same part of the country (one of my cousins, former Speaker of the Florida House James Harold Thompson, rates a mention in the book), and DK and I had several friends and acquaintances in common from the Flambeau and elsewhere in the Tallahassee scene (though I don't remember ever meeting DK), so I enjoyed this book a lot. I would recommend it to anyone wanting humorous look at the "other Florida" (i.e., not South Florida).

Redemption Falls Joseph O'Connor (9 August 2007)

From the same (Irish) author as *Star of the Sea*. Our friend Robin brought this over from Britain; it won't be available in the U.S. until October, 2007. The characters are mostly either Irish or of immediate Irish descent, with action of the story taking place mostly in the "Mountain Territory" just after the Civil War. Almost by coincidence, Robin and then I read this book while on vacation in Montana, and on a visit to Virginia City we determined that the Mountain Territory is Montana and Redemption Falls is Virginia City. The central character, Con O'Keefe, a.k.a., the Irish General, is based on "the" real Irish General, Thomas Francis Meagher, who really was a (well-educated) Irish revolutionary who escaped from exile and imprisonment in Tasmania, became famous as a public speaker in America for the Irish republican cause, organized and led the Irish Brigade for the Union army in the American civil war, and later served as governor of the Montana territory. The vigilantes in the text really existed as well and feature prominently in the folklore of Virginia City. Similarly for the outlaws and other types.

The story revolves around O'Keefe's relationships with the territorials (including a good number of ex-Confederates, some of Irish descent); his high-class wife from New York; his own past and drinking problems; and with an Irish boy who has made his way to Redemption Falls, presumably on his way to Canada after having served as a child for the Confederate forces. He is followed by his older sister, who is his only living relation. To say that these kids encountered some hard times would be a severe understatement, and the story of their individual struggles in America constitutes the other main line of the story. I don't know whether such a boy really did exist, but I may try reading *The Irish General: Thomas Francis Meagher* by Paul R. Wylie to find out.

English, August: An Indian Story Akhil Sharma (25 August 2007)

Agastya Sen (a.k.a., August), is leaving his privileged school life in Dehli (and Calcutta) for a year of training as an IAS (Indian Administrative Service) district administrator in the remote town of Madna. Agastya is a stoner, and as mentioned in the introduction (by Akhil Sharma) this is a sort of slacker coming of age novel. Agastya spends most of his time avoiding meetings; getting stoned alone in his room (or elsewhere with other young stoner bureaucrats that he meets in Madna); exercising, running, or walking about; getting himself invited to lunch or dinner in order to avoid the horrible food at the Rest House where he is staying; and lying needlessly about almost everything, just for fun. In spite of himself, he learns something about administration as it is actually practiced, though he never becomes reconciled to his fate.

I truly enjoyed this book, though not in the way that I expected. The comments on the back cover suggest that this novel is laugh-out-loud funny, but I didn't read it that way for the most part; it's funny, but mostly not in the way that makes me laugh out loud. In any case, I liked it at least as well as anything that I have read in the last year or two.

Hawksmoor Peter Ackroyd (9 September 2007)

Nicholas Dyer is an architect and assistant to Christopher Wren in early 18th century London, entrusted with the task of building seven (six?) new churches in the city. He is a satanist, and plans the locations and other aspects of the churches accordingly. In particular there must be a human sacrifice at each church, usually a child, and usually (always?) buried in or near the foundation. In modern times, detective Nicholas Hawksmoor is investigating a series of murders occurring at these same churches.

The rest of this deserves a SPOILER ALERT. I didn't intend to go on so long, but I'm trying to understand the book myself.

Interestingly, the actual architect of these churches in London was named Nicholas Hawksmoor, and in the novel, Hawksmoor seems to be a sort of reincarnation of Dyer, or otherwise connected to him in ways both concrete and mystical. Dyer throughout expresses his rejection of the Age of Reason, and of the idea that all this can be understood through reason and experiment. Dyer's assistant, Walter Pyne, is troubled by his mentor's ideas and apparent mental breakdown, and worried about how these will reflect upon himself, and he tries surreptitiously to get Dyer to resign from his position (Dyer mistakenly concludes that the surveyor Yorick Hayes is actually behind these efforts and kills him at one of the churches; Walter Pyne suspects him of at least this killing, but goes insane because he feels at fault for the murder and even believes that he may have committed it himself).

Hawksmoor's second is named Walter Payne, and also believes that his mentor's methods are "old fashioned" and that the mentor's failure to solve the case will reflect badly upon him. Dyer has a landlady named Best, Hawksmoor has a landlady named West, and I think that they live in the same location, in very similar circumstances. And on and on like this.

At some point a mysterious notebook appears is delivered to Hawksmoor. Meanwhile, in the 18th century, Dyer's notebook disappears from a locked box in his room, and he worries that it could ruin him. In many ways, near the end of the novel in particular, the present is not only a reflection of the past, but the two seem to bleed into one another.

I was not sure exactly what to make of the end, although it seems that Dyer has died and reawakened in modern times, and I suppose that he is literally supposed to be the source of the murders, although this is not at all clear. Of course one might also conclude that Hawksmoor and Dyer are the same person, though I don't think that there was anything to suggest that Hawksmoor committed the murders. On the last page or two suggests that Hawksmoor actually meets his double/opposite in one of the churches (after having been removed from the case and send on vacation) "and who could say where

one had ended and the other had begun?" The last paragraph suggests that Hawksmoor even becomes the next (and last) victim in the modern series of murders.

Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod Gary Paulsen (27 December 2007)

This was a fun book to read as my last book of the year. I had no idea that the Iditarod was so insanely dangerous, and parts of the book are just hilarious too, particularly the descriptions of the author's mishaps while "training" his dogs. At times he veers a bit too much into the mystical zen-dog stuff for my taste, but otherwise I really enjoyed this book.

Rabbit Angstrom, The Four Novels: Rabbit Run, Rabbit Redux, Rabbit Is Rich, Rabbit at Rest John Updike (14 August 2008)

Updike's four Rabbit Angstrom novels collected into one volume chronicle the life and times of one Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, born in the late 1930's, at roughly 10-year increments, from young adulthood to a fairly early death. These are very good and deserve to be read together in spite of the length, though I don't know if I would rank this opus as one of the best two or three novels of the last 25 years, as did a panel of experts convened by the *New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/21/books/fiction-25-years.html>). The flavor here is reminiscent of another work on the same list by an author of the same generation, Phillip Roth's *American Pastoral*.

Unfortunately I don't have time right now for a summary (which means I may not ever get around to it).

Eclipse John Banville (sometime between 2004 and 2007?)

I've just realized that I neglected to enter this one. Beautifully written, melancholy book. The main character is a stage actor whose personal life is a wreck. He returns to his childhood home in a small seaside town to try to find himself. He falls into a rather strange relationship with a caretaker and the caretaker's daughter, there are ghosts, and generally the story is somewhat hard to describe. Suffice it to say that Banville does not rely on a lot of "action" to move his stories along.

The Sea John Banville (2008)

Again, I forgot to enter this one at the time I finished it. In *The Sea*, which won the Booker prize in 2005, Banville gives us another melancholy return to a seaside town, this time by a grieving widower to the place where he spent childhood vacations with his (working class) family. The story interweaves memories of those visits (and his relationship with a vacationing family of better means), memories of his wife, and his current interactions with the proprietress of the house, the other resident, and his daughter. Banville is in no hurry here: writing is an art, and the reader should enjoy every carefully chosen word along the way to the story's resolution.

Recapitulation Wallace Stegner (Nov 6, 2008)

Stegner comes back to his autobiographical character, Bruce Mason, from *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, later in life. Mostly remembering and coming to terms with first loves, old friendships, and his relationship with his wayward father. Good book, fairly typical of the mature Stegner.

Christine Falls Benjamin Black (Nov 14, 2008)

Benjamin Black is John Banville's pen name for his (three so far) mystery novels whose main character is pathologist Quirke (does he have a first name?). Here Quirke pursues the coverup of the death of a young woman in childbirth and the disappearance of her child, a coverup in which his own obstetrician stepbrother is evidently involved. I didn't enjoy the book much in the beginning, but I did eventually get into it and stayed up half the night finishing it, even though I was able to guess the

main culprit very early on. I suppose that “I stayed up half the night finishing it” is a pretty good recommendation.

The Omnivore’s Dilemma Michael Pollan (Dec 25, 2008)

The Uncommon Reader Alan Bennett (Feb 14, 2009)

The Queen of England takes up reading. Very short and very entertaining.

Dust Bowl: the Southern Plains in the 1930s Donald Worster (Feb 28, 2009)

Interesting history of the dust bowl and its cultural and economic causes and effects.

Lucky Jim Kingsley Amis (Mar 2, 2009)

A young man is rescued (or rescues himself) from an academic life in 1950s England. Short, funny, and fun to read.

Don Quixote Miguel De Cervantes, translated by Edith Grossman (Apr 10, 2009)

I came across this at Pat and Vic’s beach house and decided to give it a go, having only read excerpts in high school. Don Quixote is often deemed be the first true novel. There were actually two books, and this translations contains both. They’re long, and so far I have only read the first, and plan to return to the second.

The basic outline is familiar to all I suppose. Cervantes’s main intent seems to be to parody and poke fun at the chivalric books of the time, but Don Quixote is broadly humorous and full of subplots involving the various folks he and Pancho Sanchez encounter during their “adventures”. However, these stories with the story are somewhat repetitive and reading through them is a bit of a slog at times.

The White Tiger Aravind Adiga (Apr 15, 2009)

An Indian “entrepreneur” tells his own story. Quick and interesting, gives yet another angle on modern India.

The Enchantress of Florence Salman Rushdie (Apr 26, 2009)

A silver-tongued Florentine calling himself Mogor dell’ Amore and wearing a magician’s multicolored coat arrives in the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar (the Great) with an elaborate tale that makes him the emporer’s uncle. Great story telling, woven through Indian, central Asian, middle Eastern, and Italian/European history. Niccollò Machievelli, Andrea Doria, the Medici’s, Vlad the Impaler (Dracula), and many others make appearances. Machievelli is actually an important character in the story, as is Mogor dell’ Amore (aka

Akbar is the central and the most interesting character in the book. He gathers men of ideas and encourages debate among them, he practices religious tolerance while questioning the value of religion, considers various notions of self, modes of governance, fantasy versus reality, etc., but he is also a conqueror and a man of power and sometimes cruelty.

Rushdie continues to be one of my favorite authors. I’m sure I missed many underlying ideas and even themes in this book, but even as entertainment only it’s great fun.

Netherland Joseph O’Neill (July 3, 2009)

A really good and relatively short novel. Dutchman Hans van den Broek works as an oil-markets analyst in the financial industry in London and then New York, the latter during a period that includes

2009-09-11. The story chronicles the dissolution of his marriage and his subsequent reunion with his wife Rachel, and his association with “Chuck” Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian with dreams of opening a world-class cricket ground in New York. This novel is an ode to New York, particularly its broad acceptance or at least absorption of anyone and everyone, and a tale of our modern disaffection/disconnection from work, family, friends, and meaning.

Night Soldiers Alan Furst (August 13, 2009)

Starting some vacation reading here. This novel is about Soviet spies (and German and Allied) spies in the era of the late 30’s (think Spanish revolution) through WWII. Good but not great.

A Dirty Job: A Novel Christopher Moore (August 16, 2009)

Hilarious book. Guy somehow becomes a “death merchant”, i.e., someone who collects objects that hold the souls of the dead and passes them on (through his thrift shop) to the living folks to whom there are supposed to go. Ends up fighting the forces of evil in a climactic battle, but this is a comedy, so it’s all funny. Be ready to blow off a day or two, because you won’t want to put this down until you’ve finished it.

Stick Elmore Leonard (August 23, 2009)

Light and enjoyable summer reading.

The Ministry of Special Cases Nathan Englander (September 20, 2009)

Kaddish Poznan mother was a prostitute who belonged to the Society of the Benevolent Self, a circle of Jewish pimps and whores in Buenos Aires which reached its height in the 1920s and whose male members had colorful nicknames like Talmud Harry, Hezzi Two-Blades, Coconut Burstein, Hayim-Moshe One-Eye Weiss, and Shlomo the Pin. Not surprisingly, Kaddish was anonymously fathered, so his last name was made up by a Rabbi and adopted by his mother.

Kaddish grew up outside acceptable Jewish society and rejects it in adulthood. In fact, he makes his living by chiseling the names from the headstones of forebears of other descendants of the Benevolent Self who wish to erase their connections to this questionable past. His wife Lillian, herself “respectable” until she married Kaddish, works in an insurance office, and their son Pato is a university student who is often forced to accompany Kaddish on his nocturnal business. The action takes place in the mid-1970s, and eventually revolves around Pato’s “disappearance” by the government/police and Kaddish and Lillian’s attempts to retrieve him.

It’s a bit slow at first, this is a very good book. Kaddish in some ways reminds me of Naipaul’s main character in “A House for Mr. Biswas”.

The Great Gatsby F. Scott Fitzgerald (Sept 28, 2009)

I read this in high school, but that was a long time ago and I had forgotten the story for the most part. It’s a short and fairly engrossing story, though it could also be taken as an indictment of the upper classes and the American class system in general, perhaps reflecting Fitzgerald’s own disillusionment with the wealthy classes, though I wouldn’t know much about that.

My Ántonia Willa Cather (Oct 11, 2009)

A story of growing up on the Nebraska plains in the early days of settlement and development. The story is told by “Jim Burden”, who like Cather herself, came to Nebraska from Virginia as a child. The story focuses more or less on Ántonia, a slightly older girl and daughter of a “Bohemian” family (i.e., from Bohemia, in what is now the Czech Republic), but more generally on the people and

families in those early days and their trials and tribulations and joys. Like *The Great Gatsby*, this is a story of unrequited love, and has something to say about society, though in this case the target for approbation would be small-minded and conventional-thinking small town types. The book seems a bit “old fashioned”, for want of a better term, and until I got near the end, I found that enjoyed reading it more in small pieces rather than big chunks.

The Devil in the White City Erik Larson (Oct 18, 2009)

The Chicago’s 1893 World’s Fair (officially the World’s Columbus Exposition, a celebration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s voyage to America) was meant to top the Paris exposition of 1889. This book interweaves the story of the design and construction of the fair and the story of a serial killer, Herman Webster Mudgett, alias H. H. Holmes, who carried out most of crimes in a building he owned adjacent to the fair. Both stories are fascinating. The design and construction of the fair was supervised by Chicago architect Daniel H. Burnham, leading a team of renowned architects from around the U.S., including the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of New York’s Central Park. The “White City” was constructed in an amazingly short period and in the midst of an economic crash, but the fair was nevertheless an enormous success. The giant Ferris wheel, designed by the steel engineer George Ferris, was a late addition, meant to rival Eiffel’s famous tower from the Paris exposition. Entertaining, interesting, and certainly worth reading.