

BOOK DISCUSSION 2011-2012

Help by Katherine Stockett

464 p.

September 10 - Gene Dattel

Jackson, Mississippi, in the early 1960s is a city of tradition. Silver is used at bridge-club luncheons, pieces polished to perfection by black maids who “yes, ma’am,” and “no, ma’am,” to the young white ladies who order the days. This is the world Eugenia “Skeeter” Phelan enters when she graduates from Ole Miss and returns to the family plantation, but it is a world that, to her, seems ripe for change. As she observes her friend Elizabeth rudely interact with Aibileen, the gentle black woman who is practically raising Elizabeth’s two-year-old daughter, Mae Mobley, Skeeter latches on to the idea of writing the story of such fraught domestic relations from the help’s point of view. With the reluctant assistance of Aibileen’s feisty friend, Minny, Skeeter manages to interview a dozen of the city’s maids, and the book, when it is finally published, rocks Jackson’s world in unimaginable ways. With pitch-perfect tone and an unerring facility for character and setting, Stockett’s richly accomplished debut novel inventively explores the unspoken ways in which the nascent civil rights and feminist movements threatened the southern status quo.

Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter by Tom Franklin

274 p.

October 1 -Anne Kremer (1ST SATURDAY)

Rural Mississippi in the 1970s was rife with racial tension, but skin color didn’t matter to boyhood companions Silas Jones and Larry Ott. Silas, the son of a poor, single black mother, and Larry, the child of white lower-middle-class parents, were both outsiders, Silas because of his color, Larry because he was quiet and a little odd, his nose always buried in horror novels. The young men’s bond strengthened over time, until the night a pretty local girl went on a date with Larry to the drive-in movies and was never heard from again. No body was found and Larry never confessed, but that didn’t keep the townspeople from suspecting him. Estranged from his friend, Silas heads off to college in Oxford, Mississippi, and more than 20 years later, returns to take a job as town constable. He sees no reason to contact Larry, who’s settled into a lonely existence as a mechanic, unable to escape the relentless whispers and dirty looks. The disappearance of another girl brings the two former friends back together, forcing them to come to terms with buried secrets and dark truths. The author manages to make the women’s disappearances the crux of the plot, but not the center of his story. He’s a lot more interested in the collateral damage of those crimes.

Just Kids by Patti Smith

287 p.

November 5 - Susan McQuillan

In this memoir, singer-songwriter Patti Smith shares tales of New York City : the denizens of Max’s Kansas City, the Hotel Chelsea, Scribner’s, Brentano’s and Strand bookstores and her new life in Brooklyn with a young man named Robert Mapplethorpe—the man who changed her life with his love, friendship, and genius. Beautifully written...More than a 1970s bohemian rhapsody, *Just Kids* is one of the best books ever written on becoming an artist—not the race for online celebrity and corporate sponsorship that often passes for artistic success these days, but the far more powerful, often difficult journey toward the ecstatic experience of capturing radiance of imagination on a page or stage or photographic paper.

Major Pettigrew's Last Stand by Helen Simonson

384 p.

December 10

Set-in-his-ways retired British officer, Major Pettigrew, tentatively courts charming local widow of Pakistani descent, Jasmina Ali. Unexpectedly entertaining, with a stiff-upper-lip hero who transcends stereotype, this good-hearted debut doesn't shy away from modern cultural and religious issues, even though they ultimately prove immaterial. Helen Simonson crafts an enchanting tale, brilliant in its simple yet profound insight into human nature - a light and crisp perfection. Her characters etch themselves into your head and heart, lingering long after the last page has been savored. *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* is refreshing in its optimism and its faith in the transformative possibilities of courtesy and kindness.

Room by Emma Donoghue

321 p.

January 14 - Len and Rachele Rosenberg

Told entirely in the language of the energetic, pragmatic five-year-old Jack, ROOM is a celebration of resilience and the limitless bond between parent and child, a brilliantly executed novel about what it means to journey from one world to another. To five-year-old Jack, Room is the entire world. It is where he was born and grew up; it's where he lives with his Ma as they learn and read and eat and sleep and play. At night, his Ma shuts him safely in the wardrobe, where he is meant to be asleep when Old Nick visits. Room is home to Jack, but to Ma, it is the prison where Old Nick has held her captive for seven years. Through determination, ingenuity, and fierce motherly love, Ma has created a life for Jack. But she knows it's not enough...not for her or for him. She devises a bold escape plan, one that relies on her young son's bravery and a lot of luck. What she does not realize is just how unprepared she is for the plan to actually work.

History of Love by Nicole Krauss

252 p.

February 11 - Susan McQuillan

The last words of this haunting novel resonate like a pealing bell. "He fell in love. It was his life." This is the unofficial obituary of octogenarian Leo Gursky, a character whose mordant wit, gallows humor and searching heart create an unforgettable portrait. Born in Poland and a WWII refugee in New York, Leo has become invisible to the world. When he leaves his tiny apartment, he deliberately draws attention to himself to be sure he exists. What's really missing in his life is the woman he has always loved, the son who doesn't know that Leo is his father, and his lost novel, called *The History of Love*, which, unbeknownst to Leo, was published years ago in Chile under a different man's name. Another family in New York has also been truncated by loss. Teenager Alma Singer, who was named after the heroine of *The History of Love*, is trying to ease the loneliness of her widowed mother, Charlotte. When a stranger asks Charlotte to translate *The History of Love* from Spanish for an exorbitant sum, the mysteries deepen. Krauss ties these and other plot strands together with surprising twists and turns, chronicling the survival of the human spirit against all odds. Writing with tenderness about eccentric characters, she uses earthy humor to mask pain and to question the universe. Her distinctive voice is both plangent and wry, and her imagination encompasses many worlds.

Nothing to Envy by Barbara Demick

336 p.

March 10 - Barbara Jacquette

Nothing to Envy follows the lives of six North Koreans over fifteen years—a chaotic period that saw the death of Kim Il-sung, the unchallenged rise to power of his son Kim Jong-il, and the devastation of

a far-ranging famine that killed one-fifth of the population. Demick takes us deep inside the country, beyond the reach of government censors. Through meticulous and sensitive reporting, we see her six subjects—average North Korean citizens—fall in love, raise families, nurture ambitions, and struggle for survival. One by one, we experience the moments when they realize that their government has betrayed them. There's a simple way to determine how well a journalist has reported a story, internalized the details, seized control of the narrative and produced good work. When you read the result, you forget the journalist is there. Barbara Demick, the Los Angeles Times' Beijing bureau chief, has aced that test.

Faithful Place by Tana French

416 p.

April 14 - Claudia Cayne

Frank Mackey, head of the Garda's Dublin undercover unit, left home at 19. He and Rosie Daly, madly in love, had plans to adopt one of the only career paths available in Ireland in the 1980s: immigration. They planned to meet at midnight and take a ferry to England and forget their dysfunctional families on Faithful Place. But Rosie never showed up. Frank assumed that she'd left without him and joined the police. Twenty-five years later, Rosie's suitcase is discovered in an abandoned house, and Frank must return to the "bubbling cauldron of crazy" that is his family and his street. Rosie's remains are soon found, and the tightly wound cop is immediately sucked back into the violence, hatred, alcoholism, and ignorance he's been trying to forget. Mackey's unraveling in the face of family and neighborhood feuds and animosities is riveting and humanizing. French revisits, evocatively and lyrically, themes she's used before: love, loss, memory, murder, and life in modern Ireland. French's writing remains brilliant, and her dialogue is sharp, often lacerating, and sometimes mordantly funny.

Madonnas of Echo Park by Brandon Skyhorse

224 p.

May 12 - Susan McQuillan

Skyhorse maps in his vivid debut the spirit of L.A.'s Echo Park, where Mexican-Americans define themselves either in alignment with or in opposition to their barrio. Each story-like chapter tells the tale of a character who has grown up in, moved to, or fled Echo Park, such as an itinerant construction worker hired to dispose of a murder weapon, a woman who converses with the Virgin Mary, and a hustler who swears he's going to stay out of prison this time. These lives coalesce around a random shooting that claims the life of a young girl. Family epics also emerge, notably the story of Aurora Esperanza, whose absent father narrates the opening story and whose mother was at the center of a tragedy. Aurora herself closes out the book, drawing together threads of homecoming that weave throughout the novel. In the footsteps of Junot Díaz and Sherman Alexie, Brando Skyhorse in his debut novel gives voice to one neighborhood in Los Angeles with an astonishing—and unforgettable—lyrical power.

State of Wonder by Ann Patchett

368 p.

June 9 - Barbara Roth

In *State of Wonder*, pharmaceutical researcher Dr. Marina Singh sets off into the Amazon jungle to find the remains and effects of a colleague who recently died under somewhat mysterious circumstances. But first she must locate Dr. Anneck Swenson, a renowned gynecologist who has spent years looking at the reproductive habits of a local tribe where women can conceive well into their middle ages and beyond. Eccentric and notoriously tough, Swenson is paid to find the key to this longstanding childbearing ability by the same company for which Dr. Singh works. Yet that isn't their only connection: both have an overlapping professional past that Dr. Singh has long tried to forget. In finding her former mentor, Dr.

Singh must face her own disappointments and regrets, along with the jungle's unforgiving humidity and insects, making *State of Wonder* a multi-layered atmospheric novel that is hard to put down. Indeed, Patchett solidifies her well-deserved place as one of today's master storytellers. Emotional, vivid, and a work of literature that will surely resonate with readers in the weeks and months to come, *State of Wonder* truly is a thing of beauty and mystery, much like the Amazon jungle itself.