

LAUGHING OYSTER BOOKCLUB NIGHT 2018

REVIEWED BY SUSAN LOCK

Every Note Played by Lisa Genova

This book is Lisa Genova's poignant description of the ravages of ALS/amyotrophic lateral sclerosis/Lou Gehrig's Disease. But, like all her previous works, this is about much more than the disease itself.

Richard has been an acclaimed concert pianist with an enviable career, when he begins losing control of one arm, knowing the other will come soon. He & Karina divorced 3 years ago, not amicably, & Karina has yet to move on. She is also a talented pianist but has not realized her potential, blaming Richard largely for that failure.

Together with their daughter Grace, they dance around each other, caught by the realities of Richard's condition & hobbled by their entangled past resentments. This push & pull is delicately traced, as each person struggles in what he/she knows is limited time to find ways of connecting, apologizing & forgiving not only each other, but also themselves & their pasts.

"While undeniably formulaic, Genova's latest is one of her strongest – more internalized, sometimes slow, but an eloquent and touching imagining of how a peaceful terminal place might be reached." – Kirkus Review

Published April, 2018 Paperback due end Jan, 2019

Our Homesick Songs by Emma Hooper

It is Newfoundland, 1992. In the small fishing village of Big Running the cod fishery has suddenly disappeared and little by little the village is doing the same, as people & families head East to look for work.

The Connor family is close: to the land, the sea & each other. But eventually Aidan & Martha, as parents, decide to alternate working East, passing only as the ferry arrives to deliver one & carry away the other. Ten year old Finn & his older sister Cora struggle, along with their parents, to hold on & find their way, with the sometimes assistance of the reclusive Mrs Callaghan who teaches Finn the accordion, along with Irish melodies, folktales & wisdom.

This is a lyrical, charming, ethereal story of sadness & hope in the face of great odds, filled with mysticism, folklore & music. As a non-Newfoundlander, it seems to me that the lyricism & mystery inherent in the land & the culture inform this book, while the telling of the story reinforces Newfoundland's magic.

Longlisted for the 2018 Scotiabank Giller Prize
Published Aug 2018 Paperbook edition due Aug 2019

URSULA K. LE GUIN

Ursula K Le Guin died earlier this year. She was a writer. Brilliant. Thoughtful. Compassionate. Generous. She entertained us, made us think, made us question, delighted us, riled us up, taught us there was always time for more exploring.

She wrote for us all, at all ages. Short stories, novellas, novels, fiction, fantasy, science fiction. She wrote for herself, always asking, looking, examining.

She gave speeches, wrote forwards to other writers' works.

In her later years she wrote poetry...because it was something she hadn't done before.

She embraced blogging.

I first encountered her years ago through *The Wizard of Earthsea* and never looked back.

Two years ago, while recuperating from an illness, I reread her 5-book 'Earthsea trilogy' & was enchanted all over again. Amongst her many offerings, I love some more than others, but have never been disappointed.

Recently, some of her earlier writing has been re-packaged in various collections.

Of particular delight to me are the recent publications of her essays, thoughts, blogs, etc, as well as an interview about writing done with David Naimon.

Conversations on Writing

The Wave in the Mind

No Time to Spare

Late in the Day (poetry)

"We need writers who know the difference between production of a market commodity and the practice of an art. Developing written material to suit sales strategies in order to maximise corporate profit and advertising revenue is not the same thing as responsible book publishing or authorship." Ursula K Le Guin (From "Freedom" A speech in acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.)

REVIEWED BY OLA WHITE

Macbeth by Jo Nesbo

Macbeth is part of the *Hogarth Shakespeare Project. It is a re-imagining of the famous work by [William Shakespeare](#) for a more modern audience. Set in 1970 in an unidentified place with Scottish/Scandinavian connections, the main character, Macbeth, leads a paramilitary Swat unit. He is a man of the people, unnaturally strong, with a thing for daggers.

Duncan is the chief commissioner of the police and Malcolm is his deputy. Rather than Shakespeare's queen of the witches, Hecate is the town's untouchable drug lord, an old man also known as the "Invisible Hand".

It's not long until the murders start, with Macbeth egged on by his paramour, here known simply as "Lady". There follows much edgy paranoia within the police department and some excellent action sequences involving cars and guns. There are odd touches of the supernatural, sometimes with a naturalistic alternative explanation. One of the pleasures of reading this book is watching Nesbo meet the formidable challenge of assimilating elements of the play unsuited to realistic crime fiction,

especially the supernatural: the witches, prophecies and visions.

The main effect of all the differences between this book and a standard modern potboiler is to remind you how weirdly nightmarish the original play is: what Shakespeare brewed up is still almost too over-the-top for modern, ultraviolet mass entertainment.

*Shakespeare's works have been performed, read and loved throughout the world for 400 years. The Hogarth Shakespeare project sees Shakespeare's works retold by acclaimed novelists of today. The series launched in October 2015 and includes Jeanette Winterson on *The Winter's Tale*, Howard Jacobson on *The Merchant of Venice*, Anne Tyler on *The Taming of the Shrew*, Margaret Atwood on *The Tempest*, Tracy Chevalier on *Othello*, Edward St. Aubyn on *King Lear* and Gillian Flynn on *Hamlet* (2021 publication)

American War by Omar El Akked

American War is the first novel by Canadian-Egyptian journalist Omar El Akkad. It is set in a near-future United States of America ravaged by climate change in which a second Civil War has broken out over the use of fossil fuels. It was one of the finalists in the Canada Reads 2018 contest. The author has been a war correspondent and attended in many places like Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay and the middle east.

The story is set in the future and the physical condition of the world has changed as there has been much flooding and reshaping of the continents due to extensive climate change. All across the US, millions have become refugees, living wherever they can find shelter. We meet the main character, Sarat, as a six year old living with her family in an abandoned shipping container. The story follows her through her adolescence in a refugee camp where she is groomed to a cause.

It is an extremely intense and eerily timely political comment on war in general. El Akked has taken the horrors he's seen as a journalist and presented us a story that is all too possible and hits all too close to home.

The DreadfulWater series by Thomas King, author of *Inconvenient Indian*

The first book in the series currently is titled *DreadfulWater* but has also been published as "DreadfulWater shows up" and credited to Hartley Goodweather which is King's alias. Thumps DreadfulWater is a Cherokee ex-cop trying to make a living as a photographer in the small town of Chinook, somewhere in the northwestern United States. He doesn't count on snapping shots of a dead body languishing in a newly completed luxury condo resort built by the local Indian band but he can't help getting involved.

In the second novel, titled *The Red Power Murders* and the third one titled *Cold Skies*, Thumps is again pulled into situations requiring cop skills rather than photography. Smart and savvy, blessed with a killer dry wit and a penchant for self-deprecating humour, DreadfulWater just can't manage to shed his California cop skin. Before long, he is deeply entangled in the mystery and has his work cut out for him.

Words like cozy and comfortable should never go together with a word like murder but that is the best way to describe the DreadfulWater series. Entertaining, sometimes humorous, with a generous cast of loveable characters and even with some biting social commentary, this series is a delightful, well-written distraction.

REVIEWED BY JANE MASUTANI

Where I Live Now By Sharon Butala

“It was a terrible life; it was an enchanted life; it was a blessed life. And, of course, one day it ended.”

I can't imagine a woman in her thirties taking an interest in this book, but the appeal of a book like this that speaks to the heart of what it feels like to be a widow or in a long marriage is undeniable to an older reader. It reminds me of Nuala O'Faolain's wonderful memoir *Are You Somebody*, because Sharon is also speaking to us in total honesty, like a close friend, about the reality of being an older woman dealing with life's disappointments and a life in retrospect.

Her descriptions of the ranch where she lived with her husband for 31 years in southwest Saskatchewan are very moving. When I read her book, *The Perfection of the Morning* when it came out years ago I found her descriptions of the landscape a bit purple. Either she has improved her craft or I have developed more appreciation for descriptions of meadow grass glinting in the sun. I feel like I know Sharon after reading this heartfelt book.

Theft by Finding: Diaries 1977-2002 by David Sedaris

David has written eleven books so far and this is his tenth. People seem to have strong reactions to his writing, either they love him or hate him, like cilantro. I love him, but even I can find his humour a bit too waspish at times. This collection is fascinating because it gives us the back story to writings that would later be honed into his many short stories.

The diary begins in 1977 with 21-year-old Sedaris hitchhiking around the United States and sleeping variously in a dried-out riverbed, on a golf course and under a bridge. He smokes pot and takes acid and, to earn money, picks and packs fruit and washes dishes. In Knoxville, Ohio, a drunk pickup driver tries to assault him, prompting him to jump out of the truck while it's still moving. Afterwards he flags down a car whose occupants offer to take him to Cincinnati. Throughout the journey they throw cans out of the window and say that all black people should be slaves. “Oh boy. What a day,” Sedaris sighs. There's a lot that happens between then and his mid-forties in 2002. This is great bedtime reading.

Homesick for Another World by Ottessa Moshfegh

On the back of the book it says, “This book will scorch you like a blowtorch.” I don't know about that, but this book is certainly different. I have never met such a collection of unlikeable characters as the ones found in these short stories. If they're not hooked on crystal meth they're on heroin or they drink all the time, or they steal just for the hell of it. I don't really know what is going on with these people, I'm still trying to figure them all out, but in an odd way I found it refreshing to encounter them. It is very tiresome finding the same stock characters in book after book, the strong silent noble cowboy, the young career woman or middle-aged woman with never an unorthodox thought in their heads. This writer may be the next big thing. I felt like a saint after reading this book!

REVIEWED BY SUSAN SIMSON

Rough Beauty - Forty Seasons of Mountain Living by Karen Auvinen

This book is really about one woman, living her life through the seasons in the wilderness. Determined

to live her life on her own terms, she moves alone to a cabin in the Rockies to live in solitude as a writer and experience all of the beauty and harsh reality that nature offers. When a fire incinerates everything she has, including all of her writings, she realizes that she must learn how to balance her need for solitude with her need for community.

She moves to another less remote cabin, with her dog Elvis & writes about her days. Camping & hiking with just Elvis for company, encounters with wildlife, just everything and minor things. Then, in an effort to engage with community, she joins the local art organization and starts hosting a poetry night at the town restaurant.

The characters are fun, the descriptions amusing and engaging. I enjoyed reading her comments and descriptions of the simple bits and pieces of her life, her friends, her family and of course, her dog Elvis.

"This book stands as an antidote to the hurried ways we rush through our days." David Gessner, NYT

The Amazing Story of the Man Who Cycled From India to Europe for Love by Per J Andersson

This book is about Jagat Mahandia, or PK as he is commonly known. He was born in a small village in India in the 1970's into a family of untouchables. His place in the caste system determined everything in his life in India - how he was treated at school, where he could work, even how he could worship. And even though discrimination based on caste was officially abolished, it still remained common practice.

Determined to live a better life, PK leaves his village and goes to New Delhi to become an artist. Despite setbacks and hardships he managed to make a name for himself drawing portraits. During his early childhood a prophecy predicted that PK would marry a woman from far away, perhaps even another country. One day while sketching portraits on the street in New Delhi, he meets Lotta, a Swedish backpacker. They have a brief encounter, fall in love, but then Lotta goes home.

A year later, PK decides to go to Sweden to find her. Having no money for plane fare, he buys a second hand bike and sets off to cycle to Sweden to find her. A 7,000 mile journey, 5 months, across many continents, all for love. His adventures on route are extraordinary but completely believable. He follows the "hippie trail" of the 70's which was full of young travellers.

The book is full of history of India, the caste system, and Mahatma Gandhi's efforts to raise the status of the untouchable people.

The Sun Does Shine-How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row by Anthony Ray Hinton

In 1985 Anthony Ray Hinton was arrested and charged with two murders in Alabama. He was 29 years old. And even though he was at work, on night shift in a warehouse, signed in by a security guard, when a restaurant manager 15 miles away was abducted and shot, he was still charged with capital murder.

The restaurant manager survived and misidentified Hinton as his assailant and then the state of Alabama faked ballistic evidence to tie Hinton to two other similar murders. Hinton knew he had an airtight alibi and believed that the truth would come out and he would be freed. But a black man with no money gets trapped in a justice system that systematically accused both black men and women of crimes they did not commit.

The police gave Hinton five reasons why he would be convicted.

One- You're black.

Two- A white man gonna say you shot him.

Three- You're gonna have a white District Attorney.

Four- You're gonna have a white judge.

Five- You're gonna have an all white jury.

He was found guilty and sentenced to death by electrocution. He spent the next thirty years on death row and finally with the help of Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, lawyer and author of *Just Mercy*, he was released in 2015.

This book is an extraordinary testament to the power of hope and forgiveness. To quote Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison for opposing a racist system in South Africa. Anthony Ray Hinton spent 30 years on death row because a racist system still exists in America. Both emerged from their incarceration with a profound capacity to forgive. They are stunning examples of how the most horrendous cruelty can lead to the most transcendent compassion. *The Sun Does Shine* is both a cautionary tale for all who think that a great nation can easily forget its past and inspiring proof of the inability to condemn a man's capacity for hope, love and joy. An amazing and heartwarming story. It restores our faith in the inherent goodness of humanity."

REVIEWED BY PAUL EDGINGTON

The Strange Case of the Alchemist's Daughter by Theodora Goss

This novel has its roots in a question Goss posed while working towards her PhD, which was "Why did so many of the mad scientists in 19th century narratives create, or start creating but then destroy, female monsters?" She later explored this in her short story "The Mad Scientist's Daughter". For a fuller exploration of her question Goss gives us Mary Jekyll, Diana Hyde, Beatrice Rappacini, Catherine Moreau, and Justine Frankenstein, all daughters of mad scientists created by Stevenson, Shelley, Hawthorne, Wells.

With the addition of Holmes and Watson from A.C. Doyle, Goss constructs an integrated and entertaining story of the adventures and misadventures of these daughters of mad scientists as they attempt to solve the Whitechapel murders and mysteries from their own pasts. This main story is layered top of a rich background which explains their past history, how they meet, how they adjust to each other and how they cope in Victorian society as single women..

An added dimension and what sets this book apart from other novels of this type is Goss's inclusion of an ongoing dialogue between the Catherine, and the other principal as Catherine attempts to write the novel we are reading. At first I found this distracting, but very quickly I came to enjoy this "piercing of the fourth wall" and the added insight it gave into the personalities of the characters..

In my opinion this is not a standard mash-up of characters from past fiction. Rather it is a fresh and entertaining novel, which I thoroughly enjoyed reading.

The Displaced, Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen

In "The Displaced" Nguyen presents essays from 17 fellow refugee writers who offer their thoughts and experiences on leaving their homelands for life in a new country. The writers are from different countries and backgrounds, different time periods and perspectives and when they undertook their journey some were infants, some were children and others much older. What their stories share is an

insight into what it means to leave one's family, one's home, one's culture in hopes of finding a safer life someplace else.

In addition to chronicling journeys to safety, these stories touch on what it means to adjust, fit in and be accepted, what can go into choosing a name and how it is like to cope in a new country where despite how they are treated one is expected to express continued gratitude.

This is an excellent snapshot of what it means to be a refugee and good starting point to inform yourself about the human side of the current immigration issues. This book gives voices to the mass of people seeking a safer existence and should serve as reminder that most of us who enjoy living in Canada are all daughters and sons of immigrants and refugees.

21 Lessons for the 21st Century by Yuval Noah Harari

In a series of essays, grouped under the themes *Technological Challenge*, *Political Challenge*, *Despair and Hope*, *Truth* and *Resilience*, Harari examines 21 issues confronting the world today. Harari does not profess to have simple answers, nor does he claim his work is exhaustive. Rather he “aims to stimulate further thinking” and “help readers participate in some of the major conversations of our time.”

On both counts, I believe Harari has succeeded. In each of the “lessons” Harari addresses the topic head-on, in a manner which provides insight, challenges our perspective and beliefs and stimulates further thinking. Though I found some chapters stronger than others, I found that collectively the 21 essays are very thought provoking and form a very good starting point for examining today's topical world issues.

No one person is an expert in all things, Harari included, but some are what I called skilled generalists, a trait often missing in our age of specialists. It is Harari's skill as a generalist which makes this a book worth reading and one I have added to my bookshelf.

REVIEWED BY EVELYN GILLESPIE

Dear Evelyn by Kathy Page

How could I resist a book with this title! Inspired by letters written from her father to her mother during WWII, Kathy Page has created an extraordinary narrative of ordinary lives and a marriage lasting 70 years. This very British story weaves together the personal and the political – war, class and the drive for “success” impact the meeting and the lives of poetry loving scholarship student Harry Miles and Evelyn Hill – “she who will not be taken advantage of” on the steps of the Battersea Library.

During Harry's wartime service their marriage consists of “islands of cohabitation in an ocean of separation” - but when war ends it becomes “an everyday actual thing instead of a frenzied week trying to make up for lost time”. But it is just this proximity that, over the years, leads to friction and eventually contempt. Harry would have wished for an unsettled life – reading for hours and hiking for weeks on end. Evelyn requires order and security and planning for the future. The frictions are completely predictable – strong mindedness becomes intolerance, poetry becomes weakness. Both characters arouse our admiration and our empathy - we would wish for them to overcome the impasse that the years have bred.

But Harry thinks “Evelyn. Evelyn. He had loved her all his adult life, long after the gloss of their youth and illusions had been worn away and left them with the essentials of who they were, along with a collection of sometimes contradictory memories.” Letters were their sweet connection at the beginning

of their marriage and one final letter brings it full circle.

This tender novel gives me pause to think about my own life and marriage and that the ordinary routines of life can contribute to an extraordinary story.

Melmoth by Sarah Perry

Sarah Perry always wanted to create a female monster – and she did in the form of Melmoth the Witness – a barefoot woman, shrouded in black, condemned to walk the earth alone. Melmoth had been among the company of women who saw the risen Christ – but denied it. Because of her denial she is cursed to wander the earth bearing witness to humanity at its worst.

Helen Franklin is a 40ish English exile living in Prague working as a translator of instructional manuals. Early on we see that she is denying herself any type of comfort and come to suspect that there is a story behind her self imposed exile and her self punishment. A friend gives her a sheaf of documents that another scholar had been working on – old letters, diaries – that reveal the common presence of a black shadow, a shrouded woman haunting the writers. Fantasy? Superstition? But soon Helen feels herself followed, watched, and knows that Melmoth has come for her.

Foggy Prague in winter, jackdaws (in the raven family) everywhere, the slow reveal of man's cruelty time after time, Helen's self denial, shrouded figures following - contribute to a growing sense of dread. What is Helen trying to atone for? And will she take the hand of Melmoth?

After reading Sarah Perry's *Essex Serpent* – my favourite novel last year – I was excited to see another Gothic novel from her pen. It is atmospheric, poses difficult questions of humanity and offers hope. A perfect read for this time.

Washington Black by Esi Edugyan

The year is 1830, the location is a sugar plantation in Barbados. And the old master has just died. 11 year old slave boy, Washington Black (“Wash”) is awaiting the arrival of two brothers – his new master and younger brother “Titch” - a man of science and invention. Titch “borrows” Wash to work with him on his experiments – turns out that Wash is just the right size to provide ballast for the Cloudcutter – Titch's hot air balloon. And it also turns out that Wash is a gifted illustrator and careful assistant in Titch's experiments. Titch is a closet abolitionist and the two strike a kind of friendship – so that when Wash is associated with the death of a white man, Titch knows they must flee and do so in the midst of a storm, firing up the Cloudcutter.

And so begins the escape - their journey takes them to a ship, to a stage of the Underground Railroad, to the Arctic. Here Titch finally abandons Wash – and here Wash – who no longer belongs to anybody, starts to come to terms with his own identity and what it means to be free.

But the journey does not end here. To Nova Scotia, to London – Wash's work as a naturalist and illustrator leads him to an opportunity to design the first institutional aquarium. And throughout he continues to look for Titch, to whom he is fundamentally bound – tracking him to Morocco.

Although this novel covers only a period of 8 years it has the epic quality of *Book of Negroes* and the discovery reminiscent of Elizabeth Gilbert's *Signature of All Things*.