

STAFF PICKS

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FICTION

- ***Serena***
by Ron Rash

Staff Reviews:

- This book is the Community Read selection for 2010. I enjoyed the North Carolina setting and the background details about how the depression-era mountain folks survived. *Serena* is an unforgettably mythic and evil character!
- *Serena* is someone you don't want to cross! The book was a little slow for me at times, and a bit violent. It was interesting to read.

From *Booklist*:

Starred Review Rash's short stories and previous novels are all set in Appalachia and enriched by the region's unique history. This is his most gripping work yet, a sweeping saga of unfathomable greed and revenge that grabs the reader's attention from the first page. The Depression-era tale is centered on newly married George and Serena Pemberton, owners of a logging company in the mountains of North Carolina. Their operation is aimed strictly at maximizing profits, with no regard for either the safety of their workers or the future of the land they're pillaging. The tragic result of environmental disregard looms large in all of Rash's fiction, and the Pembertons are his worst villains to date in that respect—leaving behind a "wasteland of stumps and slash and creeks awash with dead trout." Side plots involve the drastic means, including murder, the couple employs to avoid losing land to environmental groups and Serena's unflagging pursuit of the young girl who bore George's son shortly after he and Serena were married. With a setting fraught with danger, and a character maniacal in her march toward domination and riches, *Serena* is a novel not soon forgotten.

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- ***The Girl Next Door***
by Patricia MacDonald

Staff Review:

Patricia MacDonald is a great "readalike" for fans of Mary Higgins Clark. Very suspenseful, and there's usually a romantic interest waiting in the wings for the main character.

From *Booklist*:

Nina Avery is taking a break from her acting "career" (she survives on bit parts in soaps and the occasional commercial) so that she can help her father adjust to life on the outside. Nina was only 16 when she found her mother dead, stabbed with a kitchen knife. But Nina's father, Duncan, a doctor, found her first, and he was implicated, charged, and eventually convicted of murdering his wife. Nina never thought he was guilty, unlike her older brother,

Patrick. Nina's other brother, Jimmy, is only now recovering from the drug and alcohol abuse that gave him solace after losing his mother to death and his father to jail. Duncan insists on returning home, but the small town isn't ready to forgive and forget. Then more tragedy forces Nina to dig further into the death of her mother. MacDonald, the master of the small-town tragedy, delivers another sure winner.

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- ***Where the Money Went***
by Kevin Canty

Staff Review:

I thought this was a good short story collection. His characters seem real with very few false notes. I especially enjoyed *The Emperor of Ice Cream*.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

In *The Birthday Girl*, one of nine tales of ruined or decaying relationships in Canty's third collection, a divorced father reaches out to a woman in a bar to help, if he can, for just one night, her loneliness. This yearning for companionship resonates throughout, though the choices and consequences are far from uniform. *They Were Expendable* sees a man turning to the comforts of television following the death of his wife, to whom he wants to remain faithful; an unexpected romance gives him new clarity. In *No Place in the World for You*, the volume's most memorable entry, a real estate agent and his harried wife cope with a bite-happy child while the agent's clients deal with their own marital drama. *The Emperor of Ice Cream* tracks two adult children of separated parents, the younger of whom has just been released from the hospital after a drunken car crash involving his older brother; conflicts reignite and place them in a new and dangerous situation. Canty exposes the cracks and seams in ordinary marriages, skillfully examining infidelity and the range of directions life can take once the relationship has ended.

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- ***Garden Spells***
by Sarah Addison Allen

Staff Review:

This reminded me of Alice Hoffman's *Practical Magic* because it's about two very different sisters, and it has that magical realism element to it. I liked it very much.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

Two gifted sisters draw on their talents to belatedly forge a bond and find their ways in life in Allen's easygoing debut novel. Thirty-four-year-old Claire Waverley manifests her talent in cooking; using edible flowers, Claire creates dishes that affect the eater in curious ways. But not all Waverley women embrace their gifts; some, including Claire's mother, escape the family's eccentric reputation by running away. She abandoned Claire and her sister when they were young. Consequently, Claire has remained close to home, unwilling to open up to new people or experiences. Claire's younger sister, Sydney, however, followed in their mother's footsteps 10 years ago and left for New York, and after a string of abusive, roustabout boyfriends, returns to Bascom, N.C., with her five-year-old daughter, Bay. As Sydney reacquaints herself with old friends and rivals, she discovers her own Waverley

magic. Claire, in turn, begins to open up to her sister and in the process learns how to welcome other possibilities. Though Allen's prose can lean toward the pedestrian and the romance subplots feel perfunctory, the blending of horticultural folklore, the supernatural and a big dollop of Southern flavor should find favor with a wide swath of readers.

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- ***Blood from a Stone***
by Donna Leon

Staff Review:

Right now I'm listening to a detective mystery *Blood from a Stone* by Donna Leon. It is part of a series featuring Venetian detective Commissario Guido Brunetti that I have not read before. I'm enjoying the details of the setting in Venice, with a little bit of Italian dialog, and a social commentary on illegal immigration woven into the story. We have a few others in the series and some, including this title, are available as downloadable audios.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

Starred Review. In this stunning novel, the 14th to feature the dogged, intuitive Venetian police detective Guido Brunetti (after 2004's *Doctored Evidence*), Leon combines an engrossing, complex plot with an indictment of the corruption endemic to Italian society. The murder of an anonymous African street vendor, an inoffensive, possibly illegal Senegalese immigrant, explodes into a many-layered conundrum. Italian attitudes toward "Senegali" range from the bargain shoppers' approval of their harmless efforts to earn money selling knock-off accessories to legitimate merchants' outrage at competition from the cheaper goods. After Brunetti discovers uncut diamonds hidden in the victim's spartan room and evidence the room was searched, the Interior and Foreign Affairs Ministries take over the case and all of Brunetti's pertinent files, papers and computer disappear. Enraged, Brunetti sidesteps normal police procedures and taps into personal and professional sources, uncovering evidence linking the victim, the Angolan civil war, the Italian secret service and an industrial giant with government connections. Many of Leon's favorite characters appear, including the gourmand Brunetti's family, the obsequious Vice-Questore Giuseppe Patta and Patta's irreverent secretary, Signorina Elletra. They balance this dark, cynical tale of widespread secrecy, violence and corruption.

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- ***The Signal***
by Ron Carlson

Staff Review:

Part love story and part adventure, this novel takes place in the mountains of Wyoming and is about a young rancher who makes many mistakes and tries to find a way back to his roots.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

Starred Review. The dense Wind River Mountains of western Wyoming is where Carlson (*Five Skies*) sets his brooding latest, a tale of expired love and desperate measures. Mack, son of a longtime rancher, has made many missteps in life, culminating in a recent stint in jail where he'd rusted like an old post when the weather turned. While he's in jail, his

recently ex-wife Vonnie agrees to join him one last time on their annual ritual of backpacking through the Wyoming wilderness to fish, camp and rediscover each other. Mack, though, has a hidden motive: a friend/technical genius has hired him to retrieve a valuable drone that's crash-landed in the forest. Carlson describes the couple's six days wandering the wooded terrain in delicate, measured prose, careful to miss neither the lush scenery nor the incrementally amplified tension as Mack edges closer to his prize and shady characters from the past appear. Carlson has produced a work of masterful fiction, combining the sad inevitability of a doomed relationship with sheer nail-biting suspense.

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- ***The Bride's Farewell***
by Meg Rosoff

Staff Review:

This is about a young woman who in the 1850's runs away from a domestic life leaving her groom at the altar. She takes her young brother with her and when they are separated she is fierce in her efforts to find him.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

Pell Ridley is the adventurous heroine in this serviceably told tale, the fourth novel for London-based Rosoff, who has written successfully for the YA market. On her wedding day, Pell leaves town on her faithful horse, Jack, grudgingly bringing along her mute younger brother, Bean. Pell shirks expectations and jilts her childhood beau, Birdie, with an oddly modern defiance of 1850s England convention. No matter that Birdie seems a nice enough man, unlike her abusive preacher father—Pell is stubborn in her desire to flee the domestic life in Nomansland that mires her mother in a sea of children and overwork. Pell arrives at the Salisbury horse fair and her adventures begin. She is separated from Bean and her horse but meets a poacher she dubs Dogman (he travels with a pack of dogs) and together they wander the countryside living on bread crusts and flickering hope. Pell's love and knowledge of horses factors largely in her fight for survival, but it's human love—romantic and familial—that drives plucky Pell and leads us to this simple but satisfying story's happy if unsurprising conclusion.

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NON-FICTION

- ***Catfish and Mandala***
by Andrew Pham

Staff Review:

I LOVED THIS ONE! Andrew Pham was born in Vietnam in 1965 and fled the country with his family when he was 9 years old. Never feeling at home in the US, he decides to ride his bicycle to and through Vietnam.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

In narrating his search for his roots, Vietnamese-American and first-time author Pham alternates between two story lines. The first, which begins in war-torn Vietnam, chronicles the author's hair-raising escape to the U.S. as an adolescent in 1977 and his family's subsequent and somewhat troubled life in California. The second recounts his return to Vietnam almost two decades later as an Americanized but culturally confused young man. Uncertain if his trip is a "pilgrimage or a farce," Pham pedals his bike the length of his native country, all the while confronting the guilt he feels as a successful Viet-kieu (Vietnamese expatriate) and as a survivor of his older sister Chai, whose isolation in America and eventual suicide he did little to prevent. Flipping between the two story lines, Pham elucidates his main dilemma: he's an outsider in both America and Vietnam. In the former for being Vietnamese, and the latter for being Viet-kieu. Aside from a weakness for hyphenated compounds like "people-thick" and "passion-rich," Pham's prose is fluid and fast, navigating deftly through time and space. Wonderful passages describe the magical qualities of catfish stew, the gruesome preparation of "gaping fish" (a fish is seared briefly in oil with its head sticking out, but is supposedly still alive when served), the furious flow of traffic in Ho Chi Minh City and his exasperating confrontations with gangsters, drunken soldiers and corrupt bureaucrats. In writing a sensitive, revealing book about cultural identity, Pham also succeeds in creating an exciting adventure story.

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YOUNG ADULT FICTION

- ***City of Bones & City of Ashes***
by Cassandra Clare

Staff Review:

Great stories, interesting characters and a new spin on vampires, werewolves, and added a new type of character. I enjoyed them both and can't wait to read the next one (*City of Glass*, I think).

From *Publishers Weekly*:

Clare's debut novel, first in the Mortal Instruments series, is a sprawling urban fantasy packed with just about every type of creature known to the genre, and still spacious enough to hold more. Fifteen-year-old Clary Fray witnesses a killing in an "all-ages club"; when she confronts the attackers, she learns that they are spectral Shadowhunters, charged with killing demonic creatures called Night Children. Clary returns home to find her apartment vandalized and her mother missing, apparently kidnapped by creatures in the service of someone named Valentine. An attack by a slithering beast sends Clary to the infirmary at the Institute, hidden home of the Shadowhunters. There she befriends the hunter Jace, who tells her of Valentine's intention to find the Mortal Cup, one of three Mortal Instruments the Angel gave to the first Shadowhunters (the others are a mirror and sword). Great secrets abound both in Clary's past and in her own head--secrets that are gradually revealed to her about her mother, her mother's eccentric friend Luke, her relationship with Jace and, eventually, about Valentine himself. Clare's atmospheric setting is spot-on, informed equally by neo-gothic horror films and the modern fantasy leanings of Neil Gaiman. Werewolves, vampires, angels and fairies all fit in this ambitious milieu. At the core, though, this is a compelling story about family secrets and coming-of-age identity crises. Fans of the smart/chic horror typified by Buffy the Vampire Slayer will instantly fall for this new series.

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- ***House of Night series***

by Kristin Cast

Staff Review:

This exciting series puts a new spin on Vampire stories... excellent characters and plots. There are 6 books in the series:

1. Marked
2. Betrayed
3. Chosen
4. Untamed
5. Hunted
6. Tempted

From *School Library Journal*:

In 16-year-old Zoey Redbird's world, vampires not only exist but are also tolerated by humans. Those whom the creatures "mark" as special enter the House of Night school where they will either become vampires themselves, or, if their body rejects the change, die. To Zoey, being marked is truly a blessing, though she's scared at first. She has never fit into the human world and has always felt she is destined for something else. Her grandmother, a descendant of the Cherokee, has always supported her emotionally, and it is she who takes the girl to her new school. But even there the teen stands apart from the others. Her mark from the Goddess Nyx is a special one, showing that her powers are very strong for one so young. At the House of Night, Zoey finds true friendship, loyalty, and romance as well as mistrust and deception. She realizes that all is not right in the vampire world and that the problems she thought she left behind exist there as well. Readers will identify with many of the characters, especially the protagonist.

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