

STAFF PICKS

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FICTION

- ***The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie***
by Alan Bradley

Staff Review:

To refer to 11-year-old Flavia de Luce as a prodigy is to make an understatement. What she does best is ferret out secrets, whether from her sister's diary or listening to her father's altercation with a mysterious midnight visitor. When she discovers that same visitor lying dead in the kitchen garden a few hours later, she goes into full detection mode. Set in northern England in 1950, this debut mystery is written for adults, although family appropriate language and lack of graphic violence make it suitable for younger mystery lovers.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

Fans of Louise Fitzhugh's iconic Harriet the Spy will welcome 11-year-old sleuth Flavia de Luce, the heroine of Canadian journalist Bradley's rollicking debut. In an early 1950s English village, Flavia is preoccupied with retaliating against her lofty older sisters when a rude, redheaded stranger arrives to confront her eccentric father, a philatelic devotee. Equally adept at quoting 18th-century works, listening at keyholes and picking locks, Flavia learns that her father, Colonel de Luce, may be involved in the suicide of his long-ago schoolmaster and the theft of a priceless stamp. The sudden expiration of the stranger in a cucumber bed, wacky village characters with ties to the schoolmaster, and a sharp inspector with doubts about the colonel and his enterprising young detective daughter mean complications for Flavia and enormous fun for the reader. Tantalizing hints about a gardener with a shady past and the mysterious death of Flavia's adventurous mother promise further intrigues ahead.

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- ***The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society***
by Mary Anne Schaffer

Staff Review (of audio edition):

Just after the end of WW2, London newspaper columnist Juliet Ashton is looking for book ideas. A letter from a fan in Guernsey leads to correspondence with a group of friends whose impromptu pork dinner resulted in the formation of an accidental book group that helped a group of friends survive the German occupation. Soon Juliet herself is in Guernsey to write a book about survival and the importance of ideas. Largely epistolary, the work is read by a full cast. This book well deserves the numerous literary and audio awards it has won, and can be downloaded from the NC Digital Library.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

The letters comprising this small charming novel begin in 1946, when single, 30-something author Juliet Ashton (nom de plume Izzy Bickerstaff) writes to her publisher to say she is tired of covering the sunny side of war and its aftermath. When Guernsey farmer Dawsey Adams finds Juliet's name in a used book and invites articulate—and not-so-articulate—neighbors to write Juliet with their stories, the book's epistolary circle widens, putting Juliet back in the path of war stories. The occasionally contrived letters jump from incident to incident—including the formation of the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society while Guernsey was under German occupation—and person to person in a manner that feels disjointed. But Juliet's quips are so clever, the Guernsey inhabitants so enchanting and the small acts of heroism so vivid and moving that one forgives the author (Shaffer died earlier this year) for not being able to settle on a single person or plot. Juliet finds in the letters not just inspiration for her next work, but also for her life—as will readers.

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- ***The Mystery of Grace***
by Charles de Lint

Staff Review:

This story was great. Although it is science fiction, it doesn't go so far out into the world of weird that it leaves you confused. The characters are almost real, and you connect with them quickly. I did not want it to end!

From *Publishers Weekly*:

Prolific Canadian fantasist de Lint, recently focused on YA (*Dingo*), returns to adult fiction with a supernatural love story set in the American Southwest and an odd afterlife. Following her death, auto restorer Altagracia "Grace" Quintero awakens in a timeless realm inhabited by her recently deceased neighbors. Briefly returned to our world during Halloween night, Grace falls in love with John, a young artist, and he returns the feeling even when he discovers her condition. As the obvious pun in the title indicates, this tale of attachments formed and relinquished is also about belief and hope. De Lint doesn't endorse any particular religious system, but he writes passionately about the individual's ability to discover an effective personal magic. The story develops through comforting, warm compassion to reach the inevitable, mostly satisfying solution.

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- ***The Ghost in Love***
by Jonathan Carroll

Staff Review:

This one was different – a little hard to follow at times, but overall was a good story.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

Death is not the end but rather the start of a series of madcap and sometimes moving adventures for characters in this spry novel about the un-afterlife. Events begin on a wintry day

in Connecticut when Ben Gould slips and hits his head on a curb. He should have died, but owing to a virus in heaven's computer system, Ben's body lives on. Soon, Ben and others in his life—including his talking dog, Pilot, and his own ghost (named Ling)—find themselves endowed with extraordinary and unpredictable talents, including time traveling, the ability to hobnob with multiple incarnations of their younger selves, and a capacity to see otherwise invisible forces of fate manifested in bizarre physical forms. Carroll (*Glass Soup*) tethers the series of loopy incidents that ensues and their shaggy-dog explanation to incisive and poignant observations about the wondrous possibilities of everyday life that are the hallmark of his flippant style of fantasy. Carroll fans will best appreciate this jeu d'esprit

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- **Swimsuit**
by James Patterson

Staff Review:

I was not impressed with this one. Almost too much violence and bad twists. I could have done without reading it.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

A serial killer with an urge to break into print propels this thriller from bestseller Patterson and collaborator Paetro (*4th of July*). Ben Hawkins, a former L.A. cop turned reporter and author, travels to Hawaii to look into the disappearance of model Kim McDaniels, who has fallen victim to a sadistic fiend who calls himself Henri Benoit. Ben meets with Kim's distraught parents, but the investigation soon runs into dead ends, even as the body count rises. Back in Los Angeles, Henri gets in touch with Ben, and offers the story of his life and the reasons he continues with his murderous spree. As part of the deal, Henri asks the reporter to write his tell-all book. Ben can't refuse given the killer's threat to his life as well as his girlfriend's. In just one of many clever twists, Henri proves to be the consummate storyteller. Patterson fans will devour this one in a single sitting.

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- **Black Hills**
by Nora Roberts

Staff Review:

This book was a good combination of mystery and romance. The plot focuses on animals and a refuge protecting them. It is a good read and very interesting.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

It's not just a sure-fire formula that's kept the crown atop the queen of romance, as this thriller proves. The gushy love-conquers-all story of South Dakota wildlife biologist Lil Chance and ex-cop/PI Coop Sullivan takes a back seat to the taut, gritty chase of a serial killer. There's never a doubt that Lil and Coop—childhood sweethearts who fall in love, drift apart and then reconnect—will help each other mend their wounded hearts: It was a good day, she thought, when you opened yourself to both the joys and the risks of love, Lil discovers. Nor is it surprising

that a crazed killer will meet his match in feisty Lil. But this premier storyteller proves an ordinary love story can still win your heart, and even an inevitable confrontation may scare you silly.

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- ***Vision in White***
by Nora Roberts

Staff Review:

This is classic Nora Roberts. Great characters that you can relate to as well as a great story and romance. This is the first of a four part series called the Bride Quartet. I can't wait for the other three!

From *Publishers Weekly*:

The frighteningly prolific Roberts kicks off a frothy series about four friends who form an all-inclusive wedding service called Vows. Mackensie "Mac" Elliot loves capturing happy and playful moments with her camera, but her own life is all about work—until she meets English teacher Carter Maguire. He's escorting his bride-to-be sister to a meeting with the Vows team and recognizes Mac as the girl he crushed out on in high school. Funny sparks fly: he's a geeky guy who quotes Shakespeare; she's a trendy workaholic who loves shoes. He's crazy about her, which makes him verbally clumsy and, to Mac, charming, though she's saddled with a needy mother, an absent father and difficulties with both that make falling in love complicated. Roberts pulls off a nice switch in making the woman afraid of saying I do, and her gentle humor and likable cast will immediately endear this series to readers.

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- ***Fatally Flaky***
by Diane Mott Davidson

Staff Review:

The 15th in the Goldy Schultz mystery series, this one is really a hoot! With her usual quirky characters, dead bodies, and delicious recipes, this is a great summer read. I laughed out loud!

From *Publishers Weekly*:

Colorado caterer Goldy Schulz doesn't have a moment to spare as she frantically tries to pull everything together for two upcoming wedding receptions, including last-minute venue and menu changes from a spoiled bridezilla, in bestseller Davidson's entertaining 15th culinary suspense novel (after *Sweet Revenge*). When Harold Doc Finn, Aspen Meadow's beloved retired doctor, dies under mysterious circumstances on his way to the first wedding ceremony, Goldy wonders if it was an accident or murder. When her godfather and Doc Finn's good friend, Jack Carmichael, is also attacked, it's obvious that Goldy will have to venture out of the kitchen and put her detecting skills to use once again. Stir in a slimy spa owner, rumors of a malpractice suit and the usual cast of supporting characters—including Goldy's patient cop husband, Tom, and her capable culinary assistant, Julian Teller—and you've got another winning entry in Davidson's mouthwatering series.

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- ***Hothouse Flower & the 9 Plants of Desire***
by Margot Bernwin

Staff Review:

This is a fast paced quirky fun read full of adventure, magic, potions, and plants. A New York City girl finds herself in the jungles of Mexico looking for the nine plants of desire that only show themselves to the 'worthy'.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

Starred Review. Berwin delivers a bangup debut packed with adventure, betrayal, love and, naturally, rare plants. New York ad woman Lila Nova, increasingly disillusioned with her job and the city, becomes enchanted by David Exley, a handsome guy selling plants at a green market. Soon, she's hooked on him, and her budding fascination with tropical plants leads her to a Laundromat that has a rare fern displayed in the window. Proprietor Armand quickly befriends Lila and gives her a trimming from the fern to take home, telling her if it forms roots, he'll show her the nine special plants he keeps in the back room. When Exley sees the fern trimming, Lila tells him about Armand's special plants, and soon the plants have been stolen and Exley has disappeared. Armand guilts Lila into coming to Mexico with him to find replacement plants, and there's magic, romance, greenery and greed as Lila and Armand venture through the Yucatan, hooking up with potential love-interest Diego and running into the devious Exley. It's a fun page-turner—escapist and wonderfully entertaining.

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- ***The Crowning Glory of Calla Lily Ponder***
by Rebecca Wells

Staff Review:

A good beach read about family and home. It's a coming of age story about Calla Lily Ponder, her choices, loves, and how life will sometimes come full circle.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

Wells (*Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*) weaves more of the magic that made her a bestseller. At first, Calla Lily Ponder appears to be just like any other young woman growing up in the small town of La Luna, La., where life is simple and Calla Lily is supported by a loving, tightly knit family and a colorful cast of locals. But after a series of hometown heartbreaks, Calla Lily sets out for New Orleans to attend a prestigious beauty academy with dreams of one day opening her own salon. Calla Lily soon learns that while the Big Easy offers a fresh start, adventures and exhilarating new friends, it also presents its own set of tragedies and setbacks. The novel is chock-full of Southern charm and sassy wisdom, and despite its sugary sweetness, it benefits from a hearty dose of Wells' trademark charisma. Calla Lily's story may not be as involved or satisfying as that of the Ya-Yas, but she's sure to be a crowd-pleaser thanks to her humble aspirations, ever hopeful heart and perseverance no matter what fate throws at her.

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- ***Original Sin***
by P. D. James

Staff Review:

P. D. James is the reigning queen of mystery fiction! This one, set in a publishing house, was particularly good and creepy. There was a good twist at the end—a couple, actually.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

A sprawling paean to the Thames River and its London environs, James's 12th novel and latest mystery to feature New Scotland Yard Commander Adam Dalgleish is set in the modern publishing world where traditions may crumble but where such timeless emotions as grief, rage and love prevail. Peverell Press, which occupies the magnificent Innocent House, modeled on the palaces of Venice and built by the firm's founder in 1792, has been plagued by the misdeeds-misplaced manuscripts, lost illustrations-of an unknown "office menace" since the death, nine months earlier, of managing director Henry Peverell. The stakes are upped when a senior editor, recently sacked by the new director Gerard Etienne, kills herself. When Etienne is found dead in the same room, Dalgleish is called in to investigate. He discovers that plenty of people, including the four other partners in the firm and various employees whose jobs are threatened by Etienne's plans to sell Innocent House and modernize the firm, had reason to wish Etienne dead. James (*Devices and Desires*) gives pride of place here to lush, leisurely descriptions of waterside London and the landscape of the Essex coast; Dalgleish and his assistants seem more observers than participants in this plot that ticks along on its own momentum, driven by the various suspects' motivations and actions to the credible, if not fully prepared for, resolution.

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- ***The Map Thief***
by Heather Terrell

Staff Review:

This was a very exciting read with a lot of depth to it. The chapters go back and forth from the 13th century to the 21st. A great thriller for an armchair traveler!

From *Booklist*:

Art sleuth Mara Coyne goes in search of a rare Chinese map in Terrell's follow-up to *The Chrysalis* (2006). At the behest of right-wing power broker Richard Tobias, Coyne travels to Europe and the Far East in pursuit of the map, which dates from a fifteenth-century expedition led by Admiral Zheng He. The document, which was stolen from an archaeological dig, is precious, indeed; it is reportedly the first map in history to represent the entire world. Mysterious circumstances seem to have landed the map in Portugal, where Vasco da Gama used it to find a sea route to India. Lots of bad guys want to prevent Mara and her cohort, archaeologist Ben Coleman, from recovering the map. The unlikely pair (chic, well-dressed Mara and scruffy academic Ben) always seems a step ahead of the villains, but it's only a matter of time before their luck runs out. Terrell, a Pittsburgh-based attorney, presents a clever premise, but her novel is short on momentum and suspense, shifting awkwardly between Coyne's investigation and the historic journeys of da Gama and Zheng He.

NON-FICTION

- **1421: The Year China Discovered America**
by Gavin Menzies

Staff Review:

This book is the historical and somewhat controversial account upon which the novel *The Map Thief* (reviewed above) is based. Fascinating.

From *Publishers Weekly*:

A former submarine commander in Britain's Royal Navy, Menzies must enjoy doing battle. The amateur historian's lightly footnoted, heavily speculative re-creation of little-known voyages made by Chinese ships in the early 1400s goes far beyond what most experts in and outside of China are willing to assert and will surely set tongues wagging. According to Menzies' brazen but dull account of the Middle Kingdom's exploits at sea, Magellan, Dias, da Gama, Cabral and Cook only "discovered" lands the Chinese had already visited, and they sailed with maps drawn from Chinese charts. Menzies alleges that the Chinese not only discovered America, but also established colonies here long before Columbus set out to sea. Because China burned the records of its historic expeditions led by Zheng He, the famed eunuch admiral and the focus of this account, Menzies is forced to defend his argument by compiling a tedious package of circumstantial evidence that ranges from reasonable to ridiculous. While the book does contain some compelling claims—for example, that the Chinese were able to calculate longitude long before Western explorers—drawn from Menzies' experiences at sea, his overall credibility is undermined by dubious research methods. In just one instance, when confounded by the derivation of cryptic words on a Venetian map, Menzies first consults an expert at crossword puzzles rather than an etymologist. Such an approach to scholarship, along with a promise of more proof to come in the paperback edition, casts a shadow of doubt over Menzies' discoveries.

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