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Recommended Books 2011

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Fiction

The Hottest Dishes of the Tartar Cuisine
Bronsky, Alina

In this black comedy, Rosa Achmetowna is the strong-willed and acid-tongued matriarch of a transplanted Tartar family. When her selfless daughter Sulfia gives birth to a daughter named Aminat, Rosa embarks on a long and inventive campaign to steal her granddaughter's affections away from Sulfia. Outrageous and wildly entertaining.

A Discovery of Witches
Harkness, Deborah

Diana Bishop is a witch who has rejected her magical heritage and is studying the history of alchemy in Oxford. She discovers a strange manuscript that has been lost for centuries and finds herself the focus of every supernatural being in England. Only her new relationship with vampire Matthew Clairmont may save her. But such cross-species affairs are strictly forbidden—and the penalty is death. Readers are sure to be hooked by both the centuries-old mystery of the lost manuscript and the forbidden love affair between the protagonists.

Madame Tussaud
Moran, Michelle

Marie Tussaud, née Grosholtz, lived a long and colorful life. A talented wax sculptress, she gained entrée into the glittering world of Versailles when hired by King Louis XVI's sister as a tutor. Meanwhile, her uncle's home served as a meeting-place for revolutionaries plotting the monarchy's downfall. Moran's novel depicts this oft-fictionalized time and place with depth and elegance.

The Tiger's Wife
Obreht, Tea

Natalia Stefanovi, a young doctor in a contemporary Balkan country, is preparing for a goodwill mission across the border when she receives the news that her beloved grandfather has died. Natalia is distracted from her work by memories of her grandfather, always coming back to two stories her grandfather often told her when she was a child: the story of Gavran Gaile, the deathless man who collected the souls of the dying; and the deaf-mute woman known as the tiger's wife. The seeming fairy tales of the deathless man and the tiger's wife hold surprising kernels of truth and reality. Vibrant, lyrical, and compelling.

The Buddha in the Attic
Otsuka, Julie

Narrated in the first-person-plural voice, a collective “we,” Otsuka’s slim novel tells the haunting stories of Japanese mail-order brides who came to America in the early 1900s seeking a better life but often found only prejudice, endless labor, and abusive husbands.

The Map of Time
Palma, Felix J.

In this elaborate time-travel genre-bender, Andrew Harrington becomes obsessed with turning back time to save his beloved from becoming Jack the Ripper’s final victim. H.G. Wells’ “The Time Machine” has captured the Victorian imagination, and the author himself may know more about real time travel than suspected. Intricately plotted with multiple twisty storylines, Palma’s thriller is engaging and great fun.

The Tragedy of Arthur
Phillips, Arthur

This complex meta-fictional romp is a faux-memoir framed as the introduction to a long-lost Shakespeare play entitled “The Tragedy of Arthur.” Ostensibly written by Arthur, the son of the play’s discoverer—who happens to be a noted forger serving time in prison for his crimes. As the authentication process wears on, Arthur becomes convinced the play is his father’s greatest scam.

The Two Deaths of Daniel Hayes
Sakey, Marcus

A man awakens naked on a deserted beach with no idea who he is or how he got there. Stumbling to a nearby car, he finds clothing in his size, a recently fired gun, money, and a car registration in the name of Daniel Hayes. Soon enough, he discovers that he is Daniel Hayes; that his wife, a famous actress, has been killed; and that he is the chief suspect. But he still remembers nothing. Gripping and riveting.

Please Look After Mom
Shin, Kyong-Suk

After Korean wife and mother Park So-nyo's disappearance in a crowded Seoul train station, her life is reconstructed by her eldest son, eldest daughter, and husband as they reflect upon her dedication and sacrifice. A moving and poignant portrait of a woman and a family.

The Madonnas of Echo Park
Skyhorse, Brando

Skyhorse’s affecting novel-in-stories offers unsentimental, clear-eyed tribute to the working class LA neighborhood of Echo Park and the Mexican Americans who live, work, and die there. Lurking at the center of all of the stories is a tragedy: a young girl, shot and killed in a drive-by on the streets of Echo Park. Her death is the stone in the pond, and the stories presented here are the ripples. Haunting and vibrant,*The Madonnas of Echo Park* is recommended those with a taste for thoughtful, character-driven stories.

The Informationist
Stevens, Taylor

Vanessa Monroe, or Michael as she is known by her clients, left her missionary parents at the age of fourteen and lived by

her wits among gun runners in Africa, developing the skills to make a comfortable, if sometimes dangerous living for herself. When she takes on the unusual but lucrative assignment of tracing an oil executive's daughter who disappeared in Africa four years earlier, she must work frantically to find the missing girl while keeping herself safe from enemies old and new. Highly recommended for suspense fiction fans looking for something a little different.

We the Animals
Torres, Justin

This novel-in-stories delves deeply into the lives of a family balanced on the edge. The seven year-old narrator and his two older brothers enjoy a freedom uncommon to children their age, roaming the streets day and night while their mother works the graveyard shift and their father disappears for days at a time. What the boys fail to see is that their freedom is really neglect, their mother's deep love for her children is also desperation, and their parent's relationship is volatile and dangerous. This slim novel packs an emotional punch that will stay with you long after you have finished it.

Rules of Civility
Towles, Amor

It's New York City circa 1938 and friends Eve and Katey meet the mysterious and wealthy Tinker Grey, changing their lives completely. Catapulted into the social jungle of the elite upper-class, the two compete for Tinker's affections. When a horrible car crash leaves Eve disabled and Tinker becomes Eve's caretaker, Katey is left to fend for herself in her new and unfamiliar social circle. While she climbs the New York social ladder, she is unable to forget Tinker and Eve. This is a smart novel with plenty of drama.

Deathless
Valente, Catherynne

Young Marya Morevna is surprised when Koschei the Deathless, the mythical Tsar of Life, shows up at her door to take her as his bride but soon finds herself at home as his wife. But Marya inadvertently ignites war between Koschei and his brother the Tsar of Death and spends years leading Koschei's troops. When finally she returns home, she finds that the city of her birth is in the grip of famine and terror—the Siege of Leningrad. And when Koschei comes for her again, the power balance between the two shifts as Marya asserts her own control over her immortal husband. Author Valente seamlessly blends 20th century Russian history with Russian folklore in this unique novel.

Among Others
Walton, Jo

Fifteen-year-old Morwenna and her twin sister fought a magical battle of wills against their evil mother, preventing her from threatening the order of the world. The girls won, but Morwenna, or Mori, is permanently crippled and her sister was killed. Mori seeks shelter with her father, who sends her off to a British boarding school where she is a social outcast due to her disability, her Welsh accent, and her love of sci-fi and fantasy novels. She finds a haven in books and a few like-minded friends, but knows another conflict with her mother is brewing and that this time she's on her own. This novel is a love letter to genre fiction and to every sci-fi and fantasy fan who's ever felt like a refugee from reality.

Before I Go to Sleep
Watson, S.J.

Chrissie awakens in a strange bed, with a strange man sleeping beside her. A look in the bathroom mirror reveals a woman some 20 years older than she last remembers. Having only a few fragmented, disconnected memories, Chrissie soon discovers that she has a rare form of amnesia resulting from head trauma suffered years earlier and that she has been

keeping a detailed journal of events for the past few weeks. It is this journal that we read, following along as Chrissie makes unsettling discoveries about her past and present.

Out of the Mountains
Willis, Meredith Sue

All of the stories in this slender collection are set in the same part of West Virginia, high in the Appalachian mountains. Willis's decidedly modern, contemporary voice lacks the over-sentimentality so common to stories set in this region, being instead focused on the very real problems faced by convincingly textured and flawed characters. Many of the stories feature the same characters at different points in their lives, showing how things have changed—or not—and interweaving the lives of these diverse, three-dimensional people in intricate ways that reward careful reading.

The Family Fang
Wilson, Kevin

Siblings Annie and Buster Fang have been a part of their performance artist parents' works since early childhood. As art world darlings, the elder Fangs (Caleb and Camille) instigated and recorded public chaos in the name of art. Now they have disappeared, apparently the victims of a serial killer. But Annie, now an actress, and Buster, now a failed novelist, don't buy it. They're convinced it's just another performance of the Family Fang. A mix of black humor and tragedy, this is the madcap chronicle of a most dysfunctional family.

Nonfiction

Blue Nights
Didion, Joan

Didion, known for her touching memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, meditates on tragedy again in this meditation on the life and untimely death of her adopted daughter, Quintana. Didion's thoughts on parenting and aging become an examination of her own mortality. (814 D556b)

Moonwalking with Einstein: the art and science of remembering everything
Foer, Joshua

Journalist Foer examines the nature of human memory and the history of memorization as he prepares to compete in the U.S. Memory Championship alongside other "mental athletes" who are dedicated to preserving the ancient skill of memorization in a culture which has greatly externalized knowledge accumulation through the development of first printing, then computerization. (153.14 F654)

The Swerve: how the world became modern
Greenblat, Steven

Shakespeare scholar Greenblat traces the roots of the Renaissance to one nearly-forgotten classical Latin text, *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) by Lucretius. Considered a dangerous book for its strangely progressive ideas about atomic structure; natural selection; and a philosophy free of religion and superstition the book only exists today because 15th century bibliophile Poggio Bracciolini found the last extant copy and had it reproduced. Greenblat's theory credits this chance event with sparking the Renaissance—causing a "swerve" toward our modern world. (940.21 G798)

Steve Jobs
Isaacson, Walter

When Steve Jobs died in 2011, the ensuing outpouring of emotion from those touched by his inventions pretty much assured this biography would be in demand. Luckily, Isaacson is up to the task. His insightful biography gives Jobs' adoring public the inside scoop on this temperamental, complex, and at times very unlikeable genius who changed the face of technology and American culture. (338.761004 J62i)

Maphead: charting the wide, weird world of geography wonks
Jennings, Ken

Record-making Jeopardy! winner Jennings is a self-professed "maphead;" that is, he loves and collects maps and atlases of all kinds. And he is not alone. Cartophiles are a colorful and diverse community with wide-ranging interests and associated hobbies, including world travel and geocaching. Along with introducing his fellow mapheads, Jennings takes the reader through the history of cartography and the larger role of the map in human civilization. (912 J54)

Jacqueline Kennedy: historic conversations on life with John F. Kennedy, interviews with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. 1964
Onassis, Jacqueline Kennedy

In these interviews, conducted shortly after the Kennedy assassination in 1964 and presented here in both transcript and on audio CD, Jacqueline Kennedy speaks candidly about the details of her life with John F. Kennedy, revealing the often ugly truth behind the glitter and glamour of "Camelot." This intimate perspective is an invaluable and fascinating part of the historic record. (973.922 On58)

In the Garden of Beasts: love, terror, and an American family in Hitler's Berlin
Larson, Erik

Larson examines Berlin circa 1933-1934 from the unlikely perspective of two Americans—William Dodd, an academic historian and liberal serving as Roosevelt's ambassador to Germany; and Dodd's free-spirited daughter Martha, who initially found Nazism's zeal invigorating. As the family moved through the glamorous social strata of the Nazi ruling elite, however, they soon began to see the ugly brutality beneath the glitter and passion. Vivid and nuanced, offering an important perspective on the period. (943.086 D639L)

The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris
McCullough, David

Pulitzer winner McCullough chronicles the experiences of a dozen young Americans who traveled to Paris in the 19th century, demonstrating the many ways in which Parisian education and culture proved transformative to an entire generation of American minds. McCullough's popular history of this time and place is a rich fabric woven together from the diaries and memoirs of his subjects. (944.361 M133)

Catherine the Great: portrait of a woman
Massie, Robert

She started life as minor German princess Sophia of Anhalt-Zerbst but ended up becoming Empress Catherine, called the Great, sole ruler and benevolent despot of Russia. Massie ably depicts the life of this fascinating and powerful woman from her comparatively unremarkable beginnings through dethroning her husband Peter and becoming an able and powerful Russian ruler who imported European culture and philosophy and attempted to reform her country according to Enlightenment ideals. (947.06 C361m)

Destiny of the Republic: a tale of madness, medicine, and the murder of a president
Millard, Candice

Often forgotten today, 20th US President James A. Garfield held office for only 200 days—the second shortest term of any president. Elected as a dark-horse candidate, Garfield was a teacher, Union army general, and congressman and would likely have been an effective and influential President. The bullet of a crazed assassin put an end to that, however. Not killing the President outright, the bullet became lodged in Garfield's body and he lingered for months before inadequate or inept medical care led to infection and death. Millard ably and unpacks the politics and medical science of the era, while also providing a vivid portrait of not only President Garfield but his assassin as well. (973.84 M645)

MetaMaus
Spiegelman, Art

Spiegelman's groundbreaking 1986 book-length comic*Maus* was wildly influential, establishing the critical respectability and literary merit of what we now call "graphic novels." It remains the only graphic narrative to have won a Pulitzer Prize, in fact. For the 25th anniversary of *Maus*'s publishing, Spiegelman has compiled this fascinating companion volume containing concept art, family photos and history, and background on the whys and hows of putting together an unsentimental but moving Holocaust tale starring mice. In addition, an accompanying DVD provides exhaustive multi-media material. (741.5 Sp75m)

Confidence Men: Wall Street, Washington, and the education of a president
Suskind, Ron

Pulitzer-winning journalist Suskind spent hundreds of hours interviewing US administration members, including POTUS, to put together this assessment of President Obama's handling of the financial crisis. Ultimately, Suskind believes Obama was out of his depth and did not know to whom he should turn for advice, instead finding himself pulled between advisors calling for sweeping reform and advisors who wished to maintain the status quo. (330.973 Su96)

Written in Stone: evolution, the fossil record, and our place in nature
Switek, Brian

Switek ably presents what might be called "the evolution of evolution" in this popular-science work. Each chapter traces a path from scientists' early understanding of a particular species and its place in nature through to current views, explaining the importance of transitional fossils while not losing sight of areas in which science's understanding is still limited. Written for the layperson, the book nevertheless does not "dumb down" its topic, instead laying out the facts clearly and allowing careful readers to make their own connections. Fascinating portraits of early naturalists and evolutionary theorists fill out this able survey of the history of evolutionary science. (599.938 Sw97)

Quite Enough of Calvin Trillin: 40 Year of Funny Stuff
Trillin, Calvin

Humor writer Calvin Trillin here collects the best "funny stuff" from his forty-year career and arranges it roughly into categories like finance, criminal justice, the literary life, and New York City life. In this definitive collection, Trillin is insightful, cutting, wise, and always hilarious. (818 T829q)

Lost in Shangri-La: a true story of survival, adventure, and the most incredible rescue mission of World War II
Zuckoff, Mitchell

In 1945, an American transport plane carrying 24 servicemen and women on a sight-seeing tour of a remote valley in New Guinea crashed into the jungle, leaving only three survivors. As they waited for rescue, they faced possible death from untreated injuries or at the hands of possibly-hostile local tribespeople who had never seen a white person before. It is these cultural interactions and misunderstandings which will hold a reader's interest, though the entire situation is drama defined.

That the story is true makes it only the more gripping. (940.544973 Z94)

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