

Dear, Dear Writers,

These books are particularly good for writers to read AS WRITERS. If I were still teaching graduate-level writing courses, one or more of these books might be required texts for such a course in Fiction, Memoir, or Poetry Writing. All of the references are for Print versions. Most of these are novels, but if they are not, then I have labeled them otherwise for you. An asterisk (*) marks my Top Ten . . . so far (Okay, so I know that there are already eighteen * . . .).

Abé, Kobo. *The Woman in the Dunes*. [1924]. Trans. E. Dale Saunders. New York: Vintage, 1964. An allegory.

Adams, Richard. *Shardik*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974. Powerful characters (especially, the bear) and descriptions.

—. *Watership Down*. New York. Avon Books, 1972. A classic story with unforgettable characters. Reading it will make you glad you can read. And think. And be.

Adamson, Gil. *The Outlander*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. Outstanding use of time and place. Strong loops and visual language and poetic use of language. Two examples: “This was the locus of fear for her, a worm in the heart, where hope rotted in its dark whorls, where unwanted visions leaped out – the darkness of her own mind” (65), and “The sun was sharp on the corded water, dancing like pennies on a blanket” (204).

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. New York: Anchor Books, 2006. Beautifully written. Characters are alive, carefully crafted, and painfully real, and through them the story of Biafra’s struggle to become an independent republic in Nigeria during the 1960s is told. (This author also wrote *Americanah*, which I have not yet read.)

To my Nigerian student who recommended this book to me, thank you for sharing this book and for reminding me that the world round is full of great writers who can tell the world’s stories so that I can understand so much more than I ever knew even existed.

Benioff, David. *City of Thieves*. New York: Plume (Penguin Group), 2008. Disturbing because of what it portrays about humanity in its historical setting of the people of Leningrad fighting and starving to death against the invasion of the Germans in WWII.

Yet. Reaffirming as well.

Protagonist is male; he is seventeen at the beginning of the novel (178). The characters are described by their actions (2). Poetic use of language: “Like the shrews that kept scavenging while the dinosaurs toppled around them, I was built for deprivation” (8); “When a Junkers went down, the plane’s burning carcass falling like an angel cast from heaven . . .” (11); “headlights stabbing toward us” (15); “had me locked in death’s waiting room” (19); “words were stuck inside my head like salt in a caked shaker” (19); and “We were a band of enchanted mice, marching beneath the chalked moon on the blackboard sky” (159). Uses short sentences for emphasis: “They made us stay” (132); “Not after tonight” (133); this last sentence is a complete paragraph, and it ends a

chapter. The pacing and the specific details aren't just good, they are haunting. The writer doesn't tell the readers what to feel or think; he treats the readers as though they are intelligent, caring humans, and he then gives us the descriptions in such a compelling way, we are forced to feel pain and sadness, disgust and despair, and yes, a glimmer of hope which sustains the protagonist and the readers alike.

- *Berry, Wendell. *Farming: A Handbook*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970. **Poems** and a **play** (*The Bringer of Water*). (Out of print, but available on Amazon.com.). Read the Mad Farmer poems and understand what hearing the siren song of individuality sounds like. Read his other poems and know what caring about the planet feels like. A Kentucky writer.

- . *Jayber Crow*. Washington, D. C: Counterpoint, 2000. Wonderful for pacing and introducing many characters. This is one of his novels which focus on a single character from Port William, KY.

- . *The Memory of Old Jack*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974. A fast read, only 223 pages. Story of Jack Beechum, a ninety-two-year-old man whose life has been spent being a farmer, a man whose life was about living off the land and with the harmony that that encompasses. For me, there was a “knowing” about this book, like walking down a familiar path or street and knowing what is coming next, like the expectation of meeting my best friend and knowing we'd talk about our kids, husbands, and daily things. And it is about the circle of time, spinning round and round for generations. Berry's descriptions sink deep and last long.

- . *A Place on Earth*. San Francisco: North Point, 1983. The protagonist is a place: Port William, KY. The story is centered around a multi-generational family who live and work, dream and struggle there. It is the patterns of the story which etch themselves on the reader: patterns which are both universal to all of us and particular to the characters. Plan to read this 317 page book slowly; let it simmer to get all of its flavors.

- . *Remembering*. San Francisco: North Point, 1988. One of his novels which focuses on a single character from Port William, KY: Andy Catlett, who, near the end of the novel, “sees these are the membership of one another and of the place and of the song or light in which they live and move” (123). A mature novel which says so much in so few words.

- . *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997*. Washington, D.C: Counterpoint, 1998. As Berry writes in the “Preface”: “These Poems were written in silence, in solitude, mainly out of doors. A reader will like them best, I think, who reads them in similar circumstances—at least in a quiet room. . . . I am an amateur poet, working for the love of the work and to my own satisfaction—I belong to no school of poetry, but rather to my love for certain poems by other poets. . . . The poems are about moments when heart and mind are open and aware” (xvii-xviii).

- . *A World Lost*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996. “The dead rise and walk about/The timeless fields of thought” (v). Read for the self-knowledge this gem will give to you and

remind you of the memories which are still irreconcilable in your own life; those that walk back through your memories and dreams, raising more questions than answers . . .

“The dead remain in thought as much alive as they ever were, and yet increased in stature and grown remarkable near. The older I have got and the better acquainted among the dead, the plainer it has become to me that I live in the company of immortals” (Andy Catlett, narrator, 150). “I imagine the dead walking, dazed, into a shadowless light in which they know themselves altogether for the first time. It is a light that is merciless until they can accept its mercy; by it they are at once condemned and redeemed. It is Hell until it is Heaven. Seeing themselves in that light, if they are willing, they see how far they have failed the only justice of loving one another; it punishes them by their own judgment. And yet, in suffering that light’s awful clarity, in seeing themselves within it, they see its forgiveness and its beauty, and are consoled. In it they are loved completely.

“That light can come into this world only as love, and love can enter only by suffering . . . I have learned that my true home is not just this place but is also that company of immortals with whom I have lived here day by day. I live in their love, and I know something of the cost. Sometimes in the darkness of my own shadow I know that I could not see at all were it not for this old injury of love and grief, this little flickering lamp that I have watched beside for all these years” (150-151).

Brooks, Geraldine. *March*. New York: Viking, 2005. Historical novel, based on the father from *Little Women*.

Capuzzo, Michael. *The Murder Room*. New York: Gotham, 2010. **Nonfiction**. Heirs of Sherlock Holmes gather to try to solve cold cases. Don’t read this alone after midnight. Because it tells tales too awful to be true but which are true, the images will grip your mind and chill your soul. And yet. And yet . . . the stories of these three, real men and their skills and dedication to crack cold cases will keep you reading through the dark, dark night and into the dawn as they solve one after another grimy, evil murders.

The writing is masterful, sometimes poetic: “The eyes and voice now went flat as prairie” (262) and “coils of a nightmare” (348, 356). There is a great window and loop on pages 356 and 364. In spite of evil so bad that as a reader I could taste metallic fear as I read, there were truths which were as pure as a silver bell: “The eternal things, the good, the true, the beautiful, must be unbreakable” (320). Fiction writers, study how Capuzzo relates the characters of the Vidocq Society and the three criminal profilers: Frank Bender, artist; Richard Walter, forensic psychologist; and Bill Fleisher, federal agent and genius at organization (141). As you read about the murders, notice the patterns, such as how each of these humans (a term which really doesn’t belong to some of these flesh and blood embodiments of evil) is broken.

This book is not just about evil; it is also about how humans working together can conquer evil. The Vidocq Society “investigated more than 300 unsolved murders” and solved 90 percent of them (406). The Society grew from three men to “82 full members, one for each year of E. F. Vidocq’s life, to more than 150 total members, including associates” (406). “Truth was their client” (407).

The themes of the book give insight: Bender told a group of high school students that “the trick to ‘putting a face on a faceless skull’ was to feel the invisible harmonies in the Universe.” Walter added that “when one faced these things as he and his partner did, when one acknowledged true evil, life became very precious. . . . Remember, life is grand . . . Life is wonderful!” (416).

Chekhov, Anton. *Seven Short Novels*. Trans. Barbara Mekanowitzky. New York: Norton, 1963. These novels are concerned with the individual and with the social framework of Russia during the late nineteenth century. As we write our fiction and creative non-fiction, we too write of our framework of history and country—time and place. Go into the writings of others with minds open to such contexts to observe which details create the context of your work. How many details are needed? And how many details are too much? I don’t know. But read your work out loud to another person and with new ears determine that balance between enough and not enough. Oh, and trust yourself as the writer to know.

Chevalier, Tracy. *Girl With a Pearl Earring*. New York: Plume [Penguin Group], 1999. Excellent use of a historical setting.

Conroy, Pat. *South of Broad*. New York: Dial Press Trade Paperbacks [Imprint of Random House], 2010. To those of us who lived through desegregation somewhere in the South in the 1960s and onward, this novel, set in Charleston, SC, captures the pain, challenge, and celebration of that time. It also depicts the beauty and intoxication of that place. But much greater than those two powerfully written aspects of this book, the maturing of the protagonist’s understanding of the granite certainty of what matters most in life and how to endure and to overcome its unimaginable cruelties, which can crush us if we let them, is masterful: “We understand the power of accident and magic in human affairs”(511).

Read the entire novel, which will drive those of you who prefer your prose lean and mean to begroan (for those of you who don’t know this word, it means “bemoan”!) its southern tendency to overly describe, well, everything, to wish you hadn’t started it; but read on, and let the plot unfold and the understanding as it is conveyed in its organic fullness help you to understand the strength of time and place and other deterministic influences.

Davenport, Kiana. *Shark Dialogues*. New York: Plume [Penguin], 1994. The loops are powerful, and the use of several characters telling the story over several generations is strong.

Dillard, Annie. *The Maytrees*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007. Poetry, philosophy, fiction, literary allusion, and the poem on page 206—it answers all the questions the book raises.

*Doerr, Anthony. *All the Light We Cannot See*. New York: Scribner, 2014. A story of love. About layers of love. About types of love which cannot be named or captured in a single word. A story of overcoming. Overcoming all that people, place, history, oppositions would have a person know he/she could be defeated, both within and without. About

seeing the truth and knowing one has seen it. Incredible characters and memorable descriptions. A perfect title for this book.

Doig, Ivan. *The Whistling Season*. Orlando: Harvest, 2006. Outstanding characterizations and descriptions: “A Nile of vein stood out on her frail temple as she worked herself up. What was behind such ardor? Rage of age? Life’s revenge on the young? Or simply Aunt Eunice’s natural vinegar pickling her soul?” (18); “People are always telling me they wish they could remember exactly what their dreams were about, but I wonder if they have any idea what that means. Only the few persons closest to me know anything of the quirk that causes the roamings within my sleep to live on in me intact in every incised detail and every echoing syllable. My wife learned, in our first nights together, that my mind does not shut down at midnight; it goes visiting the neighborhoods of imagination and recapitulation and other nocturnal regions that do not quite have names” (23); “As often as anyone else, I lose track of my fountain pen somewhere between the ink bottle and whatever awaits signature on my desk. But I never forget a dream” (24); and “‘it’s just too--’ She let that trail off to wherever things too sad to talk about end up” (37).

Poetic language: “Father more than once had warned us not to get our hopes up too high, although plainly his were elbowing the moon” (16); and “The Rembrandt Light of memory, finicky and magical and faithful, at the cheaper tint of nostalgia never is. Much of the work of my life has been to sort instruction from illusion, and, in the endless picture gallery behind the eye, I have learned to rely on certain radiance of a detail to bring back the exactitude of a moment. Perhaps it might be the changeling green of a mallard’s head in a slant of sun . . .” (152). Science: “Halley’s comet” (332), and incredible pacing (269).

Eire, Carlos. *Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy*. New York: Free P, 2010. This **Memoir** begins when an eleven-year-old Carlos and his older brother arrive in Miami in 1962 from Havana. He was one of 14,000 children who came to the U.S. on Operation Pedro Pan; their parents had sent them unaccompanied to this country and thought they would be joining their children here very quickly, but history and chance prevented their parents from coming. Carlos’s mother eventually got to the U.S.; his father didn’t.

His beautifully written story moves from the past to the future and back again multiple times in the way our reflections and memories intertwine. The insights are painful recollections of foster homes run by people who don’t care or even like children juxtaposed with generous foster parents who share the little they have with children adrift in a foreign country. This book takes the reader inside a period and place in history as well as inside the understandings of the child who grew into a man who can write of those times and places with honesty and without sentimentality.

*Erdrich, Louise. *The Blue Jay’s Dance: A Birth Year*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

Nonfiction: A Memoir of Early Motherhood. Read when you think you don’t have enough time to write: “We have a baby. Our sixth child, our third birth. During that year, our older, adopted children hit adolescence like runaway trucks. Dear grandparents

weaken and die. Michael Dorris [her husband and a writer—read about his life and weep] rises at four in the morning, hardly seems to sleep at all. To keep the door to the other self—the writing self—open, I scratch messages on the envelopes of letters I can't answer, in the margins of books I'm too tired to review. On pharmacy prescription bags, dime-store notebooks, children's construction paper, I keep writing.

“This book is a set of thoughts from one self to the other—writer to parent, artist to mother. For me, as for many women, work means necessary income. For a writer, work is also emotional and intellectual survival: it is who I am. I don't stop working, and reworking, and publishing fiction. No matter what life throws at me—and I've had far more difficult obstacles than the intense experience of having children—I expect and offer no excuses. That's not at all what this book is about.

“These pages are a personal search and an extended wondering at life's complexity” (4-5).

And it is so-o much more.

—. *The Master Butchers Singing Club*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Of all of her novels that I have read, this is the one I consider the strongest. Strong characters, poetic descriptions.

Eugenides, Jeffrey. *Middlesex*. New York: Farrar, 2002. Written with the power of a timeless master: how the sins of family . . . can never be escaped. The density of facts, the poetics of descriptions, and the inevitability of truth blend to create the unforgettable.

*Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. New York: Vintage House, 1929. The dialog and dialect set time and place. The characters are as complex as people you've known all your life; read the “Appendix” and learn about the Compsons. As a writing exercise, I think a person might write such a fictitious Appendix and then tell the characters' stories, write the plot.

Ford, Jamie. *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*. New York: Ballantine, 2009. Setting: 1940s Seattle's Japantown. The pain and the shame of the internment camps; poetic descriptions; split-narrative; descriptions and loops; as well as compelling characters and relationships are captivating.

Hannah, Kristin. *The Nightingale*. New York: St. Martin's, 2015. France in 1939. Two sisters, each with her specific way of surviving and fighting the Nazis. Fighting war. Fighting the unacceptable. Carefully written, rich with details. This novel reveals the degradations of war.

Heaney, Seamus. *The Haw Lantern*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987. **Poetry**. By capturing the passing and the choices in specific details, he explores the universal and makes it imaginable. And felt.

Hesse, Hermann. *Steppenwolf*. Trans. Basil Creighton. New York: Bantam, 1963. In the “Author's Note—1961,” Hesse writes of this book “[it] is the one that was more often and more violently misunderstood than any other . . . [it] was written when I was fifty years old and dealing . . . with the problems of that age This book, no doubt, tells of griefs and needs; still it is not a book of a man despairing, but of a man believing the story of the Steppenwolf pictures a disease and crisis—but not one leading to death and destruction, on the contrary: to healing” (vii-viii).

Enter this world (“Magic Theater/ Entrance Not for Everyone”) created by Hesse in the main section of the book, “Harry Haller’s Record,” which was entitled “For Madmen Only,” and remember it. And decide if you too will “One day . . . learn how to laugh”? (248).

*Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003. The setting and loops are outstanding. Some of the scenes burn themselves in the reader’s mind, and they are created with tiny details.

—. *And the Mountains Echoed*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2013. The characters are people the reader gets to know, not just the professional, societal side of them, but the internal workings of their hearts and minds. Tiny details of self-awareness reveal the depth and complexity of the characters’ feelings. A reader also feels the immediacy of actually being *there* and seeing the people doing ordinary activities, chopping okra or making a camera out of a shoe box.

The characters search and struggle: “I go for long, aimless walks around the city,” and he observes and thinks “as I meander down a cat’s cradle of narrow alleyways,” and “sense something deep inside me drawing me in, tugging at me like an undertow. I want to give in to it, be seized by it” (329-330). The truth of the internal self-knowledge gained is eyes-wide-open honest, without any garnishes to make it pretty.

“They say, [f]ind a purpose in your life and live it. But, sometimes, it is only after you have lived that you recognize your life had a purpose, and likely one you never had in mind” (134).

Read pages 356-359 for some of the strongest writing I’ve ever read—smile!

—. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. Absolutely the very best loop in a book I’ve ever read: the last sentence.

*Hurston, Zora Neale. *Mules and Men*. New York: Harperperennial, 1935. **Ethnography. Folk Tales. Hoodoo.** Enter a world not entered before because of race or history or not listening. Strong dialect and dialogue. Powerful writing. Honest writing. This is a foundational piece of writing for writers—all writers, regardless of our race or generation or country of origin or gender or any of those other deterministic factors over which we have no choice. The choice she chose in her writing was to tell the truth she gathered and to tell it with the joy of being. When you read this book, see for yourself if you don’t listen to your world with new ears and see with new eyes, and then, write those stories, those truths.

—. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper, 1937. Read the “Foreword” to gain insight into the controversy her writing faced during that historical time for reinforcing naïve, racial stereotypical ideas, (Richard Wright’s) which by 1968 was beginning to be celebrated for its gentle, female voice which expressed the strength of the female protagonist who was searching for her own path, her own life, and her own joy while framed within black cultural traditions. Read its strength of dialogue, insight into male-female and female-female relationships, and geographic location. And when you don’t

have enough time to write, remember she wrote this book from September-March 1937 in Haiti, in **seven weeks** (“Chronology” 204).

*Jahren, Hope. *Lab Girl*. New York: Knopf, 2016. **Memoir and Science**. Thinking and Passion. “Prologue”: “As a rule, people live among plants but they don’t really see them. . . . look out your window. . . . Did you see something green? If you did, you saw one of the few things left in the world that people cannot make. What you saw was invented more than four hundred million years ago near the equator. . . . [the] tree was designed about three hundred million years ago. The mining of the atmosphere, the cell-laying, the wax-spackling, plumbing, and pigmentation took a few months at most, giving rise to nothing more or less perfect than a leaf. . . . People don’t know how to make a leaf, but they know how to destroy one. . . . Every ten years, we cut down 1 percent of this [the earth’s] total forest, never to be regrown. That represents a land area about the size of France. . . . And it seems like nobody cares. But we should care. We should care for the same basic reason that we are always bound to care: because someone died who didn’t have to” (3-4).

Notice how she writes with logic and facts, and notice how she uses the language to invite we non-scientists to understand and to become engaged with this topic. Notice how she uses the power of a very short sentence to deliver a punch to the reader.

Chapter 5: In just two pages, which begin with “No risk is more terrifying than that taken by the first root,” I learned about the life of a root.

This book is about the life of our green (and not-so green) brothers and sisters—their value and their importance; it is also about her personal and professional struggles and about her relationships with other humans; it moves from the inside of being to the outside and back again.

As Hope writes near the end of this book, “It takes a long time to turn into what you’re supposed to be” (265).

Read this book at least once during that long time.

Jones, Edward P. *The Known World*. New York: Amistad, 2003. Won the 2004 Pulitzer Prize AND was his first novel. The details of slaves and slave owners and slavery are interwoven layers that evoke immediacy of “being there”. From page 1, when Moses “took a pinch of the soil and ate it,” a reader could almost taste it and, more importantly, understand why Moses had eaten it. As a reader sees with Moses’s eyes and feels with his emotions that which is so painful, knowing and understanding are seared into the reader’s memory.

The fiction and the history which birthed the fiction go beyond the reader’s mind and into the spirit. The pacing, dialogue, and character development of Barnam Kinsey and Caldonia and Oden Peoples and Celeste—all of the book’s characters—blend to make them breathe and walk and become more than characters. Their individual stories weave into a tapestry like one’s own ancestry.

Kafka, Franz. *Parables and Paradoxes*. In German and English. (Nancy’s Note: Many of the individual pieces have individual translators listed on page 190.) New York: Schocken,

1958. **Parables.** Kafka rewrote basic mythologies from our world in these short pieces. Study the original myths to have a stronger understanding of these writings. Rewriting a classical story is one way to change perspective and to change understandings.

I was given this book by my favorite high school teacher when I graduated from high school; perhaps she knew I would grow in my understanding as I grew older; I'm still growing in that understanding. It is the struggle to understand that is my life-companion to learning.

Kent, Kathleen. *The Heretic's Daughter*. New York: Back Bay-Little, Brown, 2009.

A fictional re-telling of the Salem Witch Trials and of the family of Martha Carrier. The book is grounded in careful research and writing. Strong descriptions: “hooked death of an owl” (28); “a man’s past is like his own shadow” (107); “Nothing of the greater good comes without struggle and sacrifice in equal measure . . .” (175); and “Scorch my reason and makes me mad” (183). Window of Tom (233-236), followed by a loop to the window (242).

Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Secret Life of Bees*. New York: Penguin, 2002. Strong, compelling characters, placed within a specific setting, strong use of a specific activity.

—. *The Invention of Wings*. New York: Penguin, 2014. Loved it! The three main fictionalized characters, Sarah and her sister and Hetty (Handful)— a young slave girl who was given to Sarah for her eleventh birthday—are powerfully portrayed, as are many other lesser characters.

However, it is the historical research of the book that is annotated most fully here. The novel is based on the lives of two, real women Sarah and Angelina Grimké. These sisters from Charleston, SC, were in the late 1830s “the first female abolition agents and among the earliest major American feminist thinkers” (“Author’s Note” 361). They had been born into the wealth and mind-set of southern aristocracy of that time and place. “They underwent a long, painful metamorphosis, breaking from their family, their religion, their homeland, and their traditions, becoming exiles and eventually pariahs in Charleston” (362). They actually became crusaders “not only for the immediate emancipation of slaves, but for racial equality, an idea that was radical even among abolitionists . . . [and] were fighting a bruising battle for women’s rights” ten years before the Seneca Falls Convention (262). Sue Monk Kidd did considerable research from primary sources to ground the character of Sarah. The sisters last act of “public defiance” was in Hyde Park, Massachusetts, “when [Sarah] and Angelina lead a procession of forty-two women to the polls amid a town election” in 1870 (365). “They marched through a driving snowstorm, where they dropped their illegal ballots into a symbolic voting box” (365-366).

But this book is mostly fiction, even though it blends in a considerable amount of truth. If it had all been fiction, it would be worth the study of the poetic descriptions, the character development, the pacing, and the looping.

Kingsolver, Barbara. *Flight Behavior*. EPub Edition. New York: HarperCollins, 2013. Strong descriptions of characters and setting. Powerful, poetic descriptions of butterflies. Excellent research on butterflies. The theme captures the protagonist's growth and the importance of a dream larger-than-the-self.

* —. *The Lacuna*. EPub Edition. New York: HarperCollins, 2009. A book I must re-read. **A book every writer must read!** The historical settings (Mexico, 1929-1931, WWII, U.S. 1950's—Washington, D.C. and Asheville, NC) and the historical persons involved (Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Trotsky, Stalin, Cortes, and Joseph P. McCarthy) and the research which undergirds them, make this one of the most densely detailed books I've ever read, so far (I read this the Summer of 2015). The way the story is told with the intersection of art, history, politics, fiction, and the finesses of two main narrators flipping back and forth makes it pure writing excellence.

—. *The Poisonwood Bible*. New York: Harper Flamingo [HarperCollins], 1998. I first read this novel years ago, and it is even stronger the second time through. If you want several characters telling the same story, adding depth and perspective to the over-all novel, then read this.

—. *Prodigal Summer*. New York: Harper, 2000. Three protagonists tell their individual stories; any one of them could be a novel, but the interplay of all three is amazing. The descriptions are poetic; the characters memorable; and the setting cradles the characters and their lives. This novel also makes a political statement.

—. *Small Wonder*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002. Illus. Paul Mirocha. **Essays**. "To treat life as less than a miracle is to give up on it" as Kingsolver quoted Wendell Berry on this page all to itself right after the copyright information.

Then in the book's "Foreword," she wrote, "I learned a surprising thing in writing this book. It is possible to move away from a vast, unbearable pain by delving into it deeper and deeper—by 'diving into the wreck,' to borrow the perfect words from Adrienne Rich. You can look at all the parts of a terrible thing until you see that they're assemblies of smaller parts, all of which you can name, and some of which you can heal or alter, and finally the terror that seemed unbearable becomes manageable" (xiii).

Read these essays to listen to the spirit of a great writer struggle with the terrors and foibles of modern humanity. Note: Kingsolver began to write these essays, the day *after* 9/11.

Krueger, William Kent. *Ordinary Grace*. New York: Atria, 2013. The pacing is wonderful; it ripples like water on a pond in the summer—quiet and timeless. The characters speak the truth that lives and struggles within each of them; because of this, they feel authentic.

*Lightman, Alan. *Einstein's Dreams*. New York: Pantheon, 1993. **Poetry and science**. I taught this book at least twenty times in a course on Time at two different institutions of higher learning, and each time I saw and celebrated new details. Each chapter is an example of a theory of what time is, or what it was perceived to be, at a precise moment in time. One chapter is the current theory.

*Lopez, Barry. *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*. Toronto:

Bantam, 1986. **Nonfiction. Documentary and more.** Beautiful and affirming and about the inner landscape of an individual's dreams and the outer landscape of nature.

This is one of the two books of my life that I haven't allowed myself to finish because I don't want it to end. As I typed that last sentence (in 2018), my breath literally stopped because this book describes the Arctic as it was, not as it is or as it is becoming.

Read this book and see and feel: "Time pools in stillness here and then dissipates. The country is emptied of movement. . . . The coming and going of the animals during the short summer gives the Arctic a unique rhythmic shape, but it is to be felt only in certain places. . . . Time here, like light, is a passing animal. Time hovers above the tundra like the rough-legged hawk, or collapses altogether like a bird keeled over with a heart attack, leaving the stillness we call death. In a thin film of moisture that coats a bit of moss on a tundra stone, you can find, with a strong magnifying glass, a world of movement buried within the larger suspended world: ageless pinpoints of life called water bears migrate over the wet plains and canyons of jade-green vegetation. . . ." (154).

"Lying flat on your back on Ellesmere Island on rolling tundra without animals, without human trace, you can feel the silence stretching all the way to Asia. The winter face of a muskox, its unperturbed eye glistening in a halo of snow-cruled hair, looks at you over a cataract of time, an image that has endured through all the pulsations of ice. . . . You can sit for a long time with the history of man like a stone in your hand. The stillness, the pure light, encourage it" (155).

I could have copied most of this book for you to read here because I heard and felt so much of what he wanted his readers to experience, and he wrote it so beautifully.

—. *Lessons from the Wolverine*. Illus. Tom Pohrt. Athens, U Georgia Press, 1997. A haunting story; brief in words, thick in meaning. Read and feel the 30 pages, like a stone you carry in your pocket, a phantom message.

Maguire, Gregory. *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. New York: ReganBooks, 1995. A new look at an old story.

Maine, David. *An Age of Madness*. Pasadena: Red Hen, 2012. A successful psychiatrist, Dr. Regina Moss, is haunted by her past, which in so many ways has infected her current life. This novel unfolds itself so skillfully that the suspense of Regina's earlier life is both surprising and predictable. Marvelous pacing.

*Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi*. Orlando: Harvest Book, 2001. One of the strongest books I have read in ten years! Masterful weaving of individual scenes. I make references to it in my mind. A question to ask yourself (my friend asked it of me, so this is not my question) **after** you have read this book: What if there were no tiger?

*Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Signet, 1987. Written with all of the power language can convey: characters carrying the weight of history—Sethe's mother (78); Halle (84, 86); Paul D (86, 88); Sweet Home men (89, 154); Baby Suggs' and her wish (222); and Denver, Sixo, Thirty-Mile Woman, Sethe, and Beloved.

Once you've read this book, then go to Court Houses in the slave-holding counties, which were not burned during the Civil War, and read the wills and deeds before and immediately after slavery in the US was supposed to have ended to understand how this fiction conveys the blue flames of that history.

- . *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Washington Square, 1970. Powerful. Great dialogue and characters. The tension is amazing: the juxtaposition between the inside dreams and the outside realities.
- . *Jazz*. New York: Plume, 1992. Dorcas. Writers, please note: The subtext is in the language of jazz—its longing and understanding, its frustration and acceptance. Read the book with jazz playing to understand Joe and Violet, and yes, even Felice.
- . *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage International, 2009. A story of the strongest of needs and the strongest of human ties all told in emotional glimpses not in linear time. It is a novel to be experienced not expressed. A must read for the mind and the spirit.

Morton, Kate. *The Forgotten Garden*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2008. A combination of Dickens and fairy tales. Wonderful setting, loops, and descriptions.

Nguyen, Kien. *The Unwanted: A Memoir of Childhood*. New York: Little, Brown, 2001. Beautiful “the same expression I saw on countless lonely faces every day. It was the homesick look of the children who were lost in the chaos of warfare, witnessing death and disaster, longing for a meaningful touch” (70). The author is one of fifty thousand Amerasian children whose childhoods were lost because they were children of mixed race, usually American fathers and Asian mothers, born in Vietnam during war and left in Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975. It is also the story of a mother's love and the price she was willing to pay for her child to survive.

Niffenegger, Audrey. *The Time Traveler's Wife*. Orlando: A Harvest Book, 2003. “Clock time is our bank manager, tax collector, police inspector; this inner time is our wife.” J. B. Priestly, *Man and Time*.

This book loops forward and backward in time; occasionally with the main character meeting himself in a future or past time. The “Prologue” opens with “CLARE: It's hard being left behind. I wait for Henry, not knowing where he is, wondering if he's okay. It's hard to be the one who stays.” And then I was hooked for the rest of the 537 pages.

Oates, Joyce Carol. *Black Water: The Senator. The Girl. The Accident*. New York: PLUME, 1993. Uses a known historical event and then takes a perspective which is fictitious.

- . *Son of the Morning*. New York: Vanguard, 1978. The main character, Nathan, felt the call to evangelism as a child. This book asks (and I think, *answers*) the universal question about what is good and what is evil: hint, the book's title (I asked a retired Eureka College chaplain, and he did some research and told me what it meant!)

Patchett, Ann. *State of Wonder*. New York: Harper, 2011. The descriptions are strong, “a boat . . . taking her down a river into the beating heart of nowhere” (165), and they expand “an unnamed river in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night” (185) becoming very interesting and unique loops.

The setting is frightening: “The jungle, with its screeching cries of death and slithering piles of leaves, was hardly a place to go walking alone in the afternoons . . . The scientists all agreed that they had never been deep into the jungle for more than eight minutes without thinking they would give everything they owned to be led safely out” (213). The location and its lab are surreal. The wisdom is sometimes timeless: “Never be so focused on what you’re looking for that you overlook the thing you actually find” (246). The jungle research is fascinating, and the plot is worthy of discussion.

- Quindlen, Anna. *Thinking Out Loud: On the Personal, the Political, the Public[,] and the Private*. New York: Random House, 1993. (Op-Ed columnist for *The New York Times*, starting in 1990). **Nonfiction. Essays** about being a woman. Read it to understand the two-tiered gender system which has defined being a woman in America and to understand the struggle women have/had (I hope!) in being more than a culturally defined/limited/restricted person. If you want your characters to be true-to-life, you need to read this book for historical accuracy of the inner terrain of a thinking woman during this time period.
- Richmond, Michelle. *The Year of Fog: A Novel*. New York: Bantam Discovery, 2008. Great use of esoterica in surfing, photography, memory, and time. This is a great example of using that area of knowledge that you love and have studied, which really doesn’t usually fit into the plot of a novel, but does fit in developing a character. The pacing of the overall book is outstanding, and especially the pacing on pages 339-349.
- Rosnay Tatiana de. *Sarah’s Key*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2007. Historical setting, Paris, 1942. Painful. Beautiful descriptions: (38, 44, 72, 271). Short sentences: (44, 45, 46, 48, 55, 58, 73, 93). Characters: (85, 112, 114, 135, 137, 203). Window: (104-106). Poetic descriptions: (155, 158, 268). My comment: Nothing is ever really forgotten.
- . *A Secret Kept*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2009. Good suspense. Overt sexual descriptions. A fast read. Strong use of flashback windows. Poetic language, for example, “Fragments of memories, like butterflies escaping from a net” (34). Powerful description of a character, Grand-mère (228-229). Written by a female, but the protagonist is a male; read book’s notes and interview with author concerning this writing experience.
- Russo, Richard. *Bridge of Sighs*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2007. Male protagonist. Historical and geographical setting, one example: “He didn’t have to explain the rest. A job at General Electric in Schenectady meant your ticket out. Out of the tannery. Out of perpetual low wages. Out of the Gut. Out of the whole West End” (175). Extraordinary loop of a “dream cathedral” (470-471) which helps define a man, a relationship, and a place. Mostly, the characters are people that the reader comes to know and to care about. While the beginning of the book seems to have very slow pacing, it is necessary to introduce the characters and the place and the time. This is the novel this Pulitzer Prize winner wrote after his well-known *Empire Falls*.
- *Sendker, Jan-Philipp. *The Art of Hearing Heartbeats*. Trans. Kevin Wiliarty. New York: Other, 2006. This is one of the very best books I’ve ever read!

Smiley, Jane. *Ordinary Love & Good Will: Two Novellas*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1989. In the first novella, Smiley speaks in simple language of some of life's complex truths; examples, "but reunions are fraught with echoes" (8) and "When people leave, they always seem to scoop themselves out of you" (40). The plot relates the reunion of the protagonist's/the mother's twin sons as young men after a three-year separation and how this reunion reawakens the family's relationships, including the mother's and daughter's, whose "incidental bumping on the couch of mother and daughter, this expectation of conversation like silk running through your hands" (50). Smiley's descriptions are often succinct as well as poetic "Fairy tale logic" (85), a "presence [who] negated me" (88). The last line of this poignant story is breath-taking in its honesty . . . its truth.

The second novella is equally strong and for the same reasons. It is a story of the inside of humanity and what we celebrate as individuals and how such is both a person's strength and weakness. These are quiet novels but ones I remember long after having read them.

*—. *A Thousand Acres*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991. Story of a wealthy family who own land so vast it should protect them and nourish them beyond the boundaries of the ordinary. The characters and the relationships are richly written; the specifics so vividly written that they have the feel of truth.

Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr [Alexander] I. *Cancer Ward*. Trans. Nicholas Bethell and David Burg. Toronto: Bantam, 1968. The visual image and the symbolic importance of the apricot trees in bloom are etched in my reader's memory and in true Russian form, it is the tiny vignettes which never fade (universal windows).

—. *For the Good of the Cause*. Trans. David Floyd and Max Hayward. New York: Praeger, 1964. Enter a world both in time and place and thought that you have not entered. And grow to understand . . . please, read the Introduction and the Appendix.

—. *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956. An Experiment in Literary Investigation*. Trans. Thomas P. Whitney. New York: Harper, 1973. **Nonfiction**. "I dedicate this to all those who did not live to tell it. And may they please forgive me for not having seen it all nor remembered it all, for not having divined all of it" (v). From the Author's Notes, "In this book there are no fictitious persons, nor fictitious events. . . . it all took place just as it is here described" (vi).

This book contains the stories of those individuals who collectively were the victims of Stalin's *purge*: lives "brought in for torment, for dismemberment, and then for burning" (137). Solzhenitsyn writes, "I had tried to write down everything I saw . . . also . . . everything I heard from other people" in his notebooks for his *War Diary*. But his notebooks were "cast into the hellish maw of the Lubyanka furnace, where they burst into flame—the red pyre of one more novel which perished in Russia—and flew out of the highest chimney in black butterflies of soot" (136).

"I became aware of the work of . . . [an] internal sensor relay as a constant, inborn trait. The years passed and I lay on the same bunks, marched in the same formations, and worked in the same brigades with hundreds of others. And always that secret sensor relay, for whose creation I deserved not the least bit of credit, worked even before I

remembered it was there, worked at the first sight of a human face and eyes, at the first sound of a voice—so I opened my heart to that person either fully or just the width of a crack, or else shut myself off from him completely. . . . the sensor relay helped me distinguish those to whom I could from the very beginning of our acquaintance completely disclose my most precious depths and secrets—secrets for which heads roll. Thus it was that **I got through eight years of imprisonment, three years of exile, and another six years of underground authorship**, [bold is my emphasis] which were in no wise less dangerous . . . (I have never read about this trait anywhere, and I mention it here for those interested in psychology. It seems to me that such spiritual sensors exist in many of us, but because we live in too technological and rational an age, we neglect this miracle and don't let it develop)" (186).

Solzhenitsyn began to write this book in 1958, using "what I myself was able to take away from the Archipelago—on the skin of my back, and with my eyes and ears" and material given to him "in reports, memoirs, and letters by 227 witnesses," (xi) unaware of memoirs of works of literature dealing with the camps. But he eventually read such works as well as the works of thirty-six Soviet writers whose work glorified slave labor (xii). A number of other individuals gleaned bibliographical research material from books, difficult to obtain (xi).

I have yet to read *The Gulag Archipelago Two or Three. Why? Book One's* details were so vivid and scratched themselves so deeply within my subconscious that I had nightmares for years after reading it.

Aside from Nancy: I have also visited only one (Dachau) of the two dozen plus German holding/forced labor/concentration/death camps sites from World War II. Seeing/feeling/knowing of humankind's most despicable acts to other humans is important to inform and to motivate us to stop even small acts of aggression, violence, and injustice, and to become involved in our world, so we can do what we can to prevent these nightmares from becoming current realities.

*—. *The Oak and the Calf: Sketches of Literary Life in the Soviet Union*. New York: Harper Colophon, 1975. **Memoir**. Solzhenitsyn wrote in a 1966 letter, "I spent many years as a working writer with no readers at all, or fewer than you could count on your fingers" (457). And still he wrote.

In the same letter, he also wrote: "The fight for peace is only part of the writer's duties to society. Not one little bit less important is the fight for social justice and for the strengthening of spiritual values in his contemporaries. This, and nowhere else, is where the effective defense of peace must begin—with the defense of spiritual values in the soul of every human being" (458).

To read more of my comments about this book, read Issue 48 of the VWG. FYI: This is the second book I will not allow myself to finish reading because I don't want it to end.

—. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Trans. Max Hayward and Ronald Hingley. New York: Bantam, 1963. Read this book as the novel was written and not the sanitized version found in some high school text books.

I think this book changes lives: it did mine. It is one of the few books that I was willing to place my job on the line to teach to high school students because I thought it was worth

the extra battles I had to fight for my students to read it and to understand through a work of fiction the real world of prisoners of conscience.

Solzhenitsyn was willing to lose his life to write and to publish this book.

—. *“We Never Make Mistakes”*: *Two Short Novels*. Trans. Paul W. Blackstock. New York: Norton, 1963. The underlying concepts/themes and the main characters will haunt your mind for a very long time. I first read these novels perhaps three decades ago, and I still remember them.

Toole, John Kennedy. *A Confederacy of Dunces*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1980. Ignatius Reilly, an original character, his humanity—his sheer humanness—inscribes his antics in New Orleans in the bold gestures which fit the originality of the city itself.

Laugh out loud and understand on a visceral level the definition of “black humor”; appreciate the dialogue, the secondary characters, the visualization of description, and how place molds the characters of this novel.

Umrigar, Thrity. *The Space Between Us*. New York: Harper, 2005. A strong use of specific Setting, told in two perspectives, outstanding loops, poetic descriptions, and sensory images. "So this is how history gets rewritten, she thought. This is how it begins, with exaltation. Now it is not enough for a man merely to have been a man; now the etiquette of grief demands that we change him into a prince, a king. Now the flaws of a man have to be ironed out like creases in a suit, until he is spread out before us as smooth and unblemished as the day he was born. As if the earth would refuse to receive him, as if the vultures at the Tower of Silence would refuse to peck him, unless he was restored to his original glory. In death, all men become saints, she thought, and she both welcomed and rebelled against the thought. Perhaps it was better this way—this erasing of bad memories, this replacement with happier ones, like changing a dirty tablecloth. But if this was true, what to do about this heavy, lumpen body of hers, this body that cried out its true history, this body that wanted to testify, to bear witness to what had been done to it? This battered, bruised body that had been punished for other people's crimes . . . Would this body—this knitted sweater of muscle and bone and nerve endings—would this body have to be dead, would its blood have to freeze into immobility before anyone sang its praises and called it the body of a princess or a queen?" (262).

*Verghese, Abraham. *Cutting for Stone*. New York: Vintage-Random House, 2009. Powerfully researched and written. Strong details on surgery, Ethiopia, conjoined twins. Complex characters who reveal insight, read page 349 for beautiful writing of such insight, and the simple language of pure insight, “The only skill I had was to keep going” (312). For all who have twins, a must read. For all who are a twin, a book to read together.

Vreeland, Susan. *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. New York: Penguin, 1999. Wonderful use of historical setting and an imagined painting by Vermeer.

—. *The Passion of Artemisia*. New York: Viking, 2002. Wonderful use of historical setting.

*Walls, Jeannette. *The Glass Castle*. New York: Scribner, 2005. **Memoir**. Honest, clear writing. Vignettes small pieces of stained glass which create an honest and powerful mosaic. The story teller remembers the details from her childhood which could have crushed her spirit but which made her self-reliant and strong.

Warren, Robert Penn. *Wilderness: A Tale of the Civil War*. New York: Random, 1961.
Powerful descriptions; photos of memory.

Note: His poetry is also fantastic; he was the first U.S. Poet Laureate and won (earned!) three Pulitzer Prizes: a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and two Pulitzer Prizes for Poetry (1957 and 1979).

*Wolfe, Thomas. *Look Homeward Angel*. 1929. One of Wolfe's two, long novels which were published during his lifetime. I can no longer tell you which one of the three books listed here is my favorite: each blurs into my memory as a whole. Thomas Wolfe's novels opened my eyes to writing and to seeing details for/in writings as few authors' works have done.

— *You Can't Go Home Again*. New York: Perennial Library, 1940, 1968, 1973. This book (all 576 pages of it) captured my imagination and my inner writer like few others have ever done. I saw the inner workings of the outer world (which begins in April 1, 1929, for the protagonist George Webber), and also saw the outer world in poetic descriptions.

— *The Web and the Rock*. New York: Perennial Library, 1939. This story begins with George Webber's (protagonist) birth in 1900 (*The Hills Beyond*, 303).

Happy reading, nancy

Supplemental: These are insightful reads, educational reads, fast reads, discussed reads, or fun reads, but not what I would call classics—at least, not yet. However, if I were still teaching graduate-level writing courses, these are books which I would include in my lectures for various reasons which I've mentioned in the annotations.

Abbott, Alysia. *Fairyland: A Memoir of My Father*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2013. This book does what this genre does so well: it takes a personal story and contextualizes it in the broader story of a specific historical time. Alysia's story is the story of a girl being reared mostly by her father after her mother was killed in a car accident when Alysia was only two. And that story alone is worth the reading. She recalls the pain of being different in her private school even at the age of 5½, and she expresses it in a mathematical way: "In math class we learned about shapes and were encouraged to find shapes in our environment. The clock was a circle. The door, a rectangle. At pick-up time, I noticed each family formed a shape of some sort. Three kids and two parents formed a pentagon. Two parents and two kids formed a perfect square. Even an only child with two parents formed a triangle. But Dad and I were just two points. A line. Not even a shape" (63).

The personal story deepens to another layer: her father was a writer, a poet, and after his wife's death, he moved with his toddler daughter from Atlanta to San Francisco in 1974.

The third layer of the personal story is that the father had told her mother when they first met as graduate students at Emory University that he was bisexual to which her mother had replied, "That means you can love all of humanity instead of just half of it" (3). But, of course, none of life is really that simple.

The personal story becomes intertwined with the historical story of poetry, poets, San Francisco, the '70s and '80s, gay liberation, personal freedom, and AIDS. AIDS—the

disease which blazed through the US in 1985 with 15,527 reported cases, and by 1988 “had swelled to 82,764” cases (206). While the US discussed, studied, and came to grips with gayness—people died horrible deaths.

Alysia grew up with a father who came out early (5) and was involved in the fabric of the times in San Francisco —sex, drugs, and no boundaries . . . and he contracted the HIV virus and then AIDS. He gave her a parent’s love—“wholly and without condition”. She by the age of twenty-two had returned his love: she had nursed her father a year and then watched “him take his last breath” (xv). “[T]hrough it all he never gave up his passion for community . . . did all of this while struggling to keep me in bilingual school and pursuing life as an openly gay man. He was a pioneer” (94).

Twenty years after his last breath, she shared with her readers, that life in this memoir: “San Francisco was our world, our fairyland, and beyond it, Dad was gone. . . , I didn’t know what was missing, but I couldn’t escape that feeling of missingness” (75); “If he was sometimes a failure as a parent, he was always a noble failure” (94).

This book also contains an outstanding list of Sources used to inform this book.

Albom, Mitch. *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. New York: Hyperion, 2003. A fast read, good for loops.

Alexander, Eben. *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife*. New York: Simon, 2012. **A researched memoir**. An interesting blending of case studies and religion. Such a blending of diverse understandings.

Allison, Will. *Long Drive Home*. New York: Free Press, 2011. Well done: a reminder of how our current lives can change in a second, and then in the next second, we have to decide . . . and nothing is ever the same again. Strong pacing.

Backman, Fredrik. *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She’s Sorry*. New York: Atria, 2015. A delightful story. It takes the reader inside of a child’s logic: pages 196, 201, 206-209, 211-213, 217, and other places. Wonderful descriptions: “Fears are small, fiery creatures from the Land-of-Almost-Awake, with rough pelts that coincidentally look quite a lot like blue tumble-dryer fluff, and if you give them the slightest opportunity they jump up and nibble your skin and try to scratch your eyes. Fears are like cigarettes, said Granny: the hard thing isn’t stopping, it’s not starting” (230). And what I’d call truths: “For no stories can live without children listening to them” (231). And it also reminds those of us who are almost grown-ups that sometimes “there’s just too much reality” (255). And we need to read books like this to laugh and to cry!

Barry, Brunonia. *The Lace Reader*. New York: Harper, 2006. A quirky, fun read. Takes place in Salem, MA; the more you know about what happened in Salem, the more you can appreciate this novel. It has a gothic novel feel to it; when you believe that by “reading” lace, you can read the future, ah-h, then you are ready to enjoy this novel. It has great mystery and passion. The loops are strong.

Clarke, Arthur C. *Childhood’s End*. New York: Ballantine, 1953. If you like science fiction, you must read this book. It is a precursor to so many of the later books of this genre (Read Asimov’s and Bradbury’s books too!). It is also the only book I’ve ever read which states

on the top of copyright page the following: “The opinions expressed in this book are not those of the author.”

- Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa. New York: HarperOne, 1993. Wonderful for encouraging writers to follow our dreams. ““What is a personal calling? It is God’s blessing, it is the path that God chose for you here on Earth. Whenever we do something that fills us with enthusiasm, we are following our legend. However, we don’t all have the courage to confront our own dream. . . . There are four obstacles. First, we are told from childhood onward that everything we want to do is impossible. . . . [T]he second obstacle: love. We know what we want to do, but are afraid of hurting those around us by abandoning everything in order to pursue our dream. . . . [T]he third obstacle: fear of the defeats we will meet on the path. . . . Then comes the fourth obstacle: the fear of realizing the dream for which we fought all our lives. . . . But if you believe yourself worthy of the thing you fought so hard to get, then you become an instrument of God, you help the Soul of the World, and you understand why you are here” (Rio de Janeiro, November 2002 “Preface” viii).
- Edwards, Kim. *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005. A beautifully written book. It is about a lie and how that forever changes . . . everything.
- Flagg, Fannie. *A Redbird Christmas*. New York: Random House, 2004. The loops are strong, and sometimes, it is so-o good to believe.
- French, Tana. *In the Woods*. New York: Penguin, 2007. Great tension, but the ending feels as though it just stops.
- Godwin, Gail. *Evensong*. New York: Ballantine, 1999. The tone is excellent.
- Horan, Nancy. *Loving Frank*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2008. Mamah Borthwick Cheney was the married lover of Frank Lloyd Wright; it was for her that he designed and built Taliesin in Wisconsin. I admire Wright’s work, loved Taliesin, and thought I knew its story, but I didn’t. Nor did I know hers. To know her story and know more about her Frank, read and then re-read to see what the historical research does for this piece of fiction.
- House, Silas. *Clay’s Quilt*. New York: Ballantine, 2001. Descriptions/poetry: “Night does not come quickly, does not even give a hint of its coming, and for a while, there is just cool, when there is no night and no day, only time, stretched out like ice. . . .” (29); “Dusk came earlier and touched the leaves with sharp breath” (93); and (120-121). Loop last line, (247); mythical, third paragraph, (249); window, (250-251); time sequence, first line, (287); wonderful dialect throughout and in “Reader’s Guide.” Strong use of a specific setting, Appalachia.
- Silas House’s writing process: “Writing has always been my catharsis. When I am unable to write, I become depressed. It is like an addiction. I have a strong desire to tell my stories for other people. I pour myself out on the page, and I hope the reader can feel that. I want readers to be as intrigued by the characters as I am.” “And I never revise while I’m writing. Otherwise, I would get bogged down and never get the story finished.

I have to get the whole thing out on paper before me, then I go back and rewrite and revise.” “My mind is always writing.” “Passion can lead us to a heap of trouble, or make us get the fullness of life.” (Nancy’s Note: Sorry, no page numbers. I must have loaned out the book and taken these notes before then . . . but I don’t want to leave out his advice to you writers.)

—. *A Parchment of Leaves*. New York: Ballantine, 2002. Again, strong use of a specific setting and of regional dialogue. Writers, please notice: His use, or lack thereof, of quotation marks in dialogue.

James, E. L. *Fifty Shades of Grey*. New York: Vintage-Random House, 2011. A “new” type of super-market romance, some S&M; young innocent willing to not think, just be sexually involved with handsome, wealthy man. It is the first, I’ve read, of this new sub-genre called “mommy porn”. Included on this list for writers because? It has made a lot of money: author figured out what would sell and wrote it. Movie. The commercial part of writing.

No, I didn’t read the other books in this sequence. Why? I really didn’t care what happened to any of the characters. And I made myself finish reading this first book, just so I could tell my Book Group I had read it, sigh. And, no, I didn’t see the movie either. So much to see and do, and never ever is this one lifetime enough to do what all I want to do, so if I don’t like the first book of a series, I don’t read any of the sequels.

Elizabeth. *The Swan Thieves*. New York: Back Bay, 2010. This novel is intriguing in that it is told not through the voice of the main character but by others who know this artist, this painter: his psychiatrist-painter and his young, artist-lover. It tells of the main character’s obsession with one well-known (albeit fictional) painting, which he had tried to damage. Since I love art museums (who doesn’t, right?), I could understand the ambience of them and the intensity of the painter. The book is mesmerizing and a delightful read.

Landay, William. *Defending Jacob*. New York: Delacorte, 2012. While I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book, I must admit part of the reason is because it is set in a geographical area with which I am familiar. Strong suspense and a male protagonist. I found the ending to be rushed. When/if you read it, see if you agree that the pacing felt hurried at the end.

Larsson, Stieg. *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. Trans. Reg Keeland. New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 2005, 2008. Amazing pacing and protagonist. Lisbeth Salander will stomp through your memory after finishing the book. This is the first book of the Millennium Trilogy.

—. *The Girl Who Played with Fire*. Trans. Reg Keeland. New York: Knopf, 2006. Note: Larsson was an activist whose life work and passion informed his novels. This trilogy was first published as individual books, and then a unifying thread, including the titles, tied the three together.

—. *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest*. Trans. Reg Keeland. New York: Knopf, 2007, 2009.

Terrifying! I couldn't even leave my chair to check the locks on the doors to make sure they were all locked. Note about the author: He lived in Sweden, was the editor-in-chief of *Expo*, and was considered to be an "expert on antidemocratic, right-wing extremist and Nazi organizations" (Back jacket cover).

Lee, Harper. *Go Set the Watchman*. New York: Harper, 2015. I so wanted this to be well-written . . . alas . . . sadly; this is not so. It was written in the "mid-1950s" (Front jacket cover) and reads like a rough draft with its plot way too predictable and none of the characters very compelling. There are glimpses of her most wonderful 1960 book *To Kill a Mockingbird* in some of its vignettes. But the contrast between these two books, the only ones she ever published, is painful. Yes, I have read other books that I didn't think were well-written, but I wouldn't take up your time to read about them in my list of recommended readings to you. But I thought I should let you know that not all books, even highly acclaimed ones when they are being advertised before their release date, will enhance your writing skills.

Logsdon, Loren. *The Moon Was Big and Yellow and I Was a Little Chicken Myself: A Collection of Postmodern Folk Tales, Deconstructed and Reconstituted*. Eureka, IL: Loren Logsdon, 2016. **Short Stories**. Logsdon's stories exist in a magical cross-genre between memoir, fiction, and philosophy. They celebrate beings, characters as memorable as Bubby Love and "A Tribute to Ray Bradbury" (220-224); and being; and events mostly true on some level. This humble writer has met/meets all with his heart wide open and in appreciation, wonder, and awe at the complexity and the simplicity of being.

As Bradbury wrote, "The good writers touch life often." To read and to reflect upon Loren's vision is to "touch life" and to see this world with joyful eyes.

McCarten, Anthony. *Show of Hands: A Novel*. New York: Washington Square, 2009. Fast read. Male protagonist. Strong thread holding diverse characters together. Modern theme. Wonderful loops. Excellent dialogue. Nice switching between internal observation and narrative analysis. Fresh character descriptions. Original use of how the protagonist "edited" himself.

Historical reference to Lincoln as character's personal reference: ". . . lost job, 1832; defeated for legislature, 1832; failed in business, 1833; elected to legislature, 1834; defeated for speaker same year. Sweetheart died, 1835; had nervous breakdown, 1836; defeated for nomination for Congress, 1838; elected to Congress, 1846; lost renomination, 1848; rejected for land officer, 1849; defeated for Senate, 1854; defeated again for Senate, 1858; but in 1860 Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States. This story was a prayer in the life of Thomas Shrift, and he prayed it now in a public mall . . ." (193). There are these little gems of information sprinkled throughout the book.

Excellent use of esoterica.

McLain, Paula. *The Paris Wife*. New York: Ballantine, 2011. Extremely well-researched and historically accurate. This is a story centered on Hadley Richardson who was Ernest Hemingway's first wife; it is of their life in Paris and the others of the Lost Generation in

Paris: F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein. Fast paced and well written. A love story, sort of. Good for a writer to read about the all-consuming dream, and need, to be a writer, and what that means when it is obtained (195).

The “Epilogue” feels like a summary.

Martin, David. *Little Birds with Broken Wings*. N.p. WriteLife, 2012. **Essays**.

David’s essays about writers and teaching would-be writers ignite the imagination, challenge the gloom, rekindle the awe, and invite all of us, ALL of US, to see the world with the celebration of the heart. He shares with readers the truths and wisdoms he has unearthed in the writings of others and the writings yet to be written within us. To read his truths is to smile at a stranger across distances of place, talent, years, and cultures. Read his essays and be glad TO BE—a part of this world, this time, this place.

Picoult, Jodi. *Nineteen Minutes*. New York: Washington Square, 2007. The opening half-page of this novel had me hooked as a reader. I knew that the premise of this novel would be difficult to read: a small town in New Hampshire is shattered by an act of school violence. What I didn’t know was how masterfully Picoult would write this story; the chaos of the event’s details and then “Chaos was blood melting pink on the snow; it was the drip of parents that turned into a stream and then a raging river, screaming out the names of their missing children. Chaos was a TV camera in your face, not enough ambulances, not enough officers, and no plan for how to react when the world as you knew it went to pieces” (21). There are a perfect window and loop and foreshadowing on pages 78-79. The trial and insights that are covered in the 450 page novel should be slowly contemplated, but the need for answers make this a-stay-awake-all-night book.

This novel is more than the screeching headlines and non-stop news coverage and pain which can never heal: this novel delves into our culture and into the characters for an emotional understanding that I had not expected.

Roseboro, Anna J. Small. *On Zion’s Hill*. Charleston, SC: Anna J. Small Roseboro, 2015.

Anna J. Small Roseboro’s first novel is a story of truths conveyed through fiction. Zion’s Hill is a real place in the hills of Western Pennsylvania; its founders, the Brothers and Sisters of Love, were devout Christians, some of whom mortgaged their own homes in the 1920s to help purchase the land so that people of faith from across the nation could gather each summer “to rekindle their faith and renew their friendships . . . where families could spend a week with other Christians, singing, praying and hearing sound preaching, and sharing fellowship” (15). The novel conveys these truths with the attention to details Zora Neale Hurston used in her *Mules and Men*. These compelling details were gathered by someone immersed in the culture of that time and place and were enriched by her reflections over several decades.

Her fictional characters also convey truths—truths about love. Young readers will be enchanted by the traditional love story of girl-meets-boy, Angie-meets-Ken. More experienced readers will be enamored by the ever-widening, ever-welcoming circles of love revealed in the interlaced vignettes: Angie’s grandparents, Ken’s parents, Angie’s

employer, and Ken's campers to name but a few. A broader circle of love includes those who came before and those who will come after, those who share similar history, dreams, and mores: the people not known by name but understood by experience.

The widest circle of all is also the inner-most core of this novel: shared, personal Christian faith. This is the bedrock truth which threads through each character and includes the readers who may not have participated in the other truths but who can vicariously experience them. Roseboro's novel is an invitation to experience this joy of the love of God that is writ large in the universe of time and place.

Rubio, Gwyn Hyman. *Icy Sparks*. New York: Penguin, 1999. Setting: 1950s Appalachia. Icy's Tourette Syndrome torments and defines her life. Years after I've read this book, I remember it—painfully!

Russell, Karen. *Swamplandia!* New York: Vintage, 2011. Descriptions are poetic. Read page 1 to see how a well-written opening can capture a reader.

Shaffer, Mary Ann and Annie Barrows. *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. New York: Dial, 2008. Introduces so many characters, clearly and unmistakably distinct. Excellent use of a region and a historical context which allows/makes diverse characters interact. Interesting use of correspondence. One part, I thought, was too predictable for such an outstanding piece of writing. Poetic descriptions.

Smiley, Jane. *Moo*. A satirical novel of today's academic setting. As a sometimes academic, I laughed out loud at many of the scenes. The characters and situations are often pure archetypes, yet written with gentle humor not biting sarcasm. A well-written fun read.

Stockett, Kathryn. *The Help*. New York: Amy Einhorn, 2009. Historical setting: 1962, Mississippi. Beginning is very stereotypical but perhaps necessary for those who don't understand (or didn't live) the history. Then the characters and the action are riveting.

Tyler, Anne. *Digging to America*. New York: Ballantine, 2006. Enjoyable.

Walls, Jeannette. *Half Broke Horses*. New York: Scribner, 2009. **True-Life Novel**. The author tells the story of her grandmother's early life, filling in the truth with imagined truth, making the novel-part of this book's definition. Read *The Glass Castle* first and come to understand the actions of Rosemary, Jeannette's mother, with more empathy and understanding. The details transport the reader to ranch life in Arizona and its dusty, sweat-filled, daily life.

—. *The Silver Star*. New York: Scribner, 2013. This novel fills in some of the parts of the lives of the sisters found in the earlier books. For those of you who have written short stories, don't you know how characters keep coming back and telling you more of their stories? So then you write some more about them? This has that feel to it. The characters now are telling the story and the author is letting them.

Wallner, Michael. *April in Paris*. Trans. John Cullen. New York: Anchor, 2007. A book whose

plot and characters are controlled by the history of WWII.

Wingate, Lisa. *Before We Were Yours*. New York: Ballantine, 2017. This novel is based on the ugly truth of Georgia Tann and the Tennessee Children's Home Society in Memphis. From 1924-1950 this person and group took children, often babies, and sold them to adoptive parents. Sometimes the children were actually taken from their parents and then placed for adoption. The novel tells the reality through one family of fictional children. As fiction, it is painful; as truth, it is unimaginable. This book exemplifies how fiction can tell the truth of history in an emotionally cognizant way. And as writers, it reminds us of our responsibility to write such truths.

Wolff, Isabel. *A Vintage Affair*. New York: Harper Weekend, 2009. Takes about two hours to read. Pure escapism. A good example of a romance novel: a clever hook (vintage clothing), two-dimensional characters, and predictable outcome. Note: The author has seven other novels which are published in 29 languages. Study her techniques to write this type of novel.

Wolfe, Thomas. *The Hills Beyond*. New York: New American Library, 1941. A short novel and a number of short stories gleaned from his unpublished, and sometimes incomplete, writings ("more than a million words" (271)) at the time of his untimely death at the age of thirty-seven.

His editor, Aswell, writes of Wolfe in the "Afterword": "Questions that did interest him—and he was passionately concerned about them—were whether his writing was good, honest, straight, and true; whether it said what he wanted it to say; whether his readers would understand it as he meant it; and they would be moved by it and finish it saying to themselves: 'Yes, that is the way life is.' He did not know what more could be asked of any book" (280). "[Wolfe] . . . was deeply involved with life, and that fact is what gave the true shape to his writing. For it has a natural form, an elemental form, the vital form of which all other forms are but variations on a theme—the form of life itself. Tom believed with all his soul that the most that could be expected of a writer, or of any artist for that matter, was that he observe life closely and see it as it really is—not just the surface, but the inner reality as well—and then that he depict it in all its lights and shadows just as he sees it, and do it so faithfully, in such exact colors, that even those of us who go from cradle to grave half-blind (which means most of us) cannot fail to see it also" (281).

Wolfe "spent weeks and months trying to put down on paper the exactitudes of countless fragments—what he called, 'the dry, caked colors of America' how the entrance to a subway looked, the design and webbing of the elevated structure, the look and feel of an iron rail, the particular shade of rusty green with which so many things are painted in America" (282).

Young, Wm. Paul. *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity*. Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007. Inspiring and affirming. Good for discussion.