

Season's Readings 2017

Memoir, Biography, and History

Lit, Mary Karr © 2009

11 CDs. Read by Renee Raudman

Mary Karr does a masterful job of describing her life—in this case her early adulthood: her relationship with her husband (called Warren in the book, but actually Michael Milburn) and her son Dev, her AA meetings, her early attempts at prayer. This memoir about how she learned “not to prove myself worthy but to refine the worth I’m formed from, acknowledge it, own it, spend it on others.” Very worth the time.

When Breath Becomes Air, Paul Kalanithi © 2016

5.5 hours, audio, read by Sunil Malhotra. The epilogue is written (after his death from lung cancer) by his wife Lucy and is wonderfully read by Cassandra Campbell. Lucy ends the epilogue, “I was his wife and a witness.” Paul Kalanithi is of Ezra’s generation (b. April, 1977; d Mar 2015). He managed a lot in the two years left to him after his diagnosis: continuing his work as a Stanford neurosurgeon, becoming a father, and writing this book. All gave him purpose. I doubt this will be the best book I’ll ever read on end of life or facing illness, but I am glad I read it.

Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood, Trevor Noah © 2016

8 hours, read by the author. A book well worth reading, and listening to Trevor read his story enhanced it. “If ever this comedy thing doesn’t work out, I’ve got poverty to fall back on.”

My Grandfather’s Gallery: A Family Memoir of Art and War, Anne Sinclair © 2014

Translated from the French. 6 hours, audio, narrated by Kate Reading, who wonderfully pronounced all the names with a great French accent. I am a sucker for memoirs where the author plunges into a family archive of letters, and tells us the best parts. Her grandfather, Paul Rosenberg (1881-1959), was “an apostle of modern art.” He represented Pablo Picasso, Braque, Matisse, and Leger. He opened his gallery in Paris’s 8th district, at No.21 Rue La Boétie, in 1911. (That address is repeated often in the book; in fact, that is the name of the book, in the original French edition.) This book was not a must-read. The details of how the Rosenberg’s recovered their art after the war are interesting, but are summarized in a 2013 *New York Times* article.

A Long Way from Tipperary: What a Former Irish Monk Discovered in His Search for the Truth, John Dominic Crossan © 2000

I liked this book, but there were places where my marginal note says, “I have NO idea what he’s talking about.” Years ago, I heard the author in a memorable Fresh Air interview, and now one can probably get that as a podcast. Crossan (b. 1934) is a Jesus scholar and taught at DePaul for 26 years, retiring in 1995. One of his books is *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (“accessible to the layman,” says Bob, speaking for himself). Crossan still identifies as a Christian but no longer belongs to an organized Christian denomination.

Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place, Terry Tempest Williams © 1991

I finally got around to reading this, inspired by having heard TTW when she spoke in Rochester this year. I am surprised

that this book is beloved by so many (a 25th year edition came out in 2016). It doesn’t rank with my favorite memoirs. I was moved by the parts of the book that were about her mother’s death, but not by the natural history parts. It didn’t spark in me a desire to see her beloved Great Salt Lake Basin.

Boys in the Trees: A Memoir, Carly Simon © 2015

11 CDs, read by the author. Also browsed the book on paper, for the photos, and to reread favorite parts, of which there were many. Carly gives credit to her editor, Peter Smith, who “made me, as any good teacher will do, better than before—more honest, more explicit, more literate.”

Shen Fu, compiled by Patrick Guinan © 2017

Self-published by my cousins Patrick Guinan (1936-2017), Marion Casey and Jimmy Gillcrisp (and available on Amazon). Memories were also solicited from the rest of us Casey cousins about our uncle Fr. Dan, the youngest of my father’s siblings (1912 - 2000). He was ordained a priest in 1938, and loved being a Dominican his whole life. He volunteered to be a chaplain in WWII, but didn’t get to do that. What he did get to do was become a missionary in China, though that was cut off abruptly for obvious reasons in 1949. Much of this book recounts those years, pieced together from the wonderful letters he wrote to his family back in Chicago. I recommend this to all nieces, nephews, great-nieces and great-nephews.

Great Masters: Beethoven—His Life and Music, Robert Greenberg © 2001

8 lectures, 45 minutes each. This is good for the likes of me, trying to get my feet wet with classical music. Prof. Greenberg is enthusiastic and witty.

Not My Father’s Son, Alan Cumming © 2014

eAudioBook. Read by the author (b. 1965). I was not familiar with this Scottish actor, but now I am very interested in him. (I guess he plays Eli Gold, “the suited politico,” on *The Good Wife*, but is more famous for his stage roles.) The book goes back and forth between his childhood and the present. Well told and worth reading. After reading this book you will understand Cumming’s quote (below, in Miscellany) about Scotland’s bid for independence.

Subcategory: Graphic Memoirs

The Arab of the Future: A Childhood in the Middle East, 1978-1984, Riad Sattouf © 2015

Riad’s mother is French and his father is a Syrian Sunni (from a small village near Homs to which they returned when Riad was about five). This nicely captures a young child’s view of his confusing world. Two more volumes have already been published in English, covering more of Riad’s childhood.

Other Non-Fiction

The View from Castle Rock: Stories, Alice Munro © 2006

When my cousin Kathy was giving away those of Tom McCann’s books that she couldn’t take to her new house, I was delighted to add this one to my library. In the first half of this book, beloved Canadian author Munro imagines the details of her great-great-grandfather’s life, based on

Season's Readings 2017

genealogical facts that she has, and certain scraps of written record that have survived. (Think *Half-Broke Horses* and *Cane River*—other books I have loved that also mined this vein.) Then she gets to lives she actually knew—her grandmother and great aunt, her parents, and her own life. I have not put this under memoir because Munro tells us in her Forward that she has altered some details (and she gives a few examples of what those details are).

Fiction Worthwhile

Atonement, Ian McEwan © 2002

According to the *New Yorker*, when Martin Amis was asked to name McEwan's greatest achievement, he replied: "The first 200 pages of *Atonement*." In the second half of the book, Briony becomes a nurse, and tends to the battle-scarred (WWII). That (and the book she writes) will be, she hopes, atonement for the damage she caused as a 13-yr-old in 1935 (details of which are recounted in the first 200 pages). Was Martin Amis disappointed in the last half of the book? I wasn't. That's the part where you find out how things turned out.

Not To My Taste

Short stories

This year I read Poe's *The Black Cat* (1843), Chekhov's *Ward No. 6* (1892), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Bernice Bobs Her Hair* (1920) and *The Jelly-Bean* (1922), Joyce Carol Oates' *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* (1966) and Donald Barthelme's *Game* (1996). I was led to read the Chekhov story when Cynthia Ozick named it as a favorite short story. Well, I hated it. (Though Bob read it too, and he liked it.) Wouldn't recommend the Poe story, either. The Fitzgerald stories were OK, and the Oates was pretty good. The Barthelme story was forgettable. I had to look it up a month or so after I read it, to remind myself what it was about. (Which was: "Shotwell and the narrator must work together as partners to fire the missile, yet don't trust each other.") See Daniel Menaker's comment for what led me to read Barthelme.

The Gathering, Anne Enright © 2007

11 hours, audio. The nine surviving children of the Hegarty clan are gathering in Dublin for the wake of their wayward brother, Liam, drowned in the sea. The book begins, "I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother's house when I was 8 or 9. But I'm not certain if it really did happen." I didn't like the book, but I see that *The New Yorker* loves this author (see review section). The version I had (Recorded Books) was narrated by Terry Donnelly. My cousin Marie loved this book, but hers was narrated by Fiona Shaw, whom she thought was great.

Christine Falls, Benjamin Black © 2006

Set in 1950s Dublin. First in a series of crime novels by Benjamin Black, nom de plume of the Man Booker Prize-winning Irish novelist John Banville. *The New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books* liked these right from the start, and right to the most recent, the seventh, published in 2015. I, however, was derailed by details I found confusing or unexplained.

Reading and Writing

"Trump is really something of an outlier with this idea that knowing things is almost a distraction. He doesn't have a historical anchor, so you see his gut changing on issues from moment to moment."

- Allan Lichtman, a political historian at American University, comparing Trump unfavorably to even the likes of Warren Harding and Lyndon Johnson (leaders who scoffed at academics and other experts)

"In Trump's case, his attitude toward reading is hardly unprecedented, but when you combine it with the vulgarity and the authoritarian style, it shows a locker-room, business-world machismo that pervades his persona."

- David Greenberg, a presidency historian at Rutgers University

Jeffrey Eugenides had been enamored of Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf and decided to be a writer because "it seemed to promise maximum alertness to life. It seemed holy to me, and religious." - *The Writer's Almanac*, March 8, 2017

"[My memoir is] about all the ways I got lit—by language, booze, et cetera, till I got lit by baby Jesus. I was a natural skeptic, and it's about that journey from black cynicism into awe." - Mary Karr, on her book *Lit*

"Besides medicine, my wife, I have also literature—my mistress." - Anton Chekov

"No one writing serious and accomplished literary fiction then or later will escape his [Donald Barthelme's] influence. Even if you've never read a word by him or never even heard his name, he is in the air you breathe as writer of fiction. Same goes for Lorrie Moore, I think."

- Daniel Menaker, fiction editor for *The New Yorker*, in his book *My Mistake*

Excerpts

Lit

Mary Karr talks about sitting her mother down to read the manuscript of her first memoir, Liar's Club:

"Occasionally, she hollers out, How'd you ever remember all this crazy crap? She laughs a lot. Once she says, This is your daddy to a T. I can smell him. ... She absorbs the material—maybe as she did being our mother—as if it were a novel she'd already seen the film of, though like any mother, she's inclined to heap on undiluted praise. No more convincing cheerleader ever shook a pom-pom."

When Breath Becomes Air

"Lost in a featureless wasteland of my own mortality, and finding no traction in the reams of scientific studies, intracellular molecular pathways, and endless curves of survival statistics, I began reading literature again: Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*, B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, Tolstoy's *Ivan Ilyich*, Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos*, Woolf, Kafka, Montaigne, Frost, Greville, memoirs of cancer patients—anything by anyone who had ever written about mortality. I was searching for a vocabulary with which to make sense of death."

Season's Readings 2017

The Jelly-Bean

“‘Jelly-bean’ is the name throughout the undissolved Confederacy for one who spends his life conjugating the verb to idle in the first person singular - I am idling, I have idled, I will idle.”

Refuge

[*Terry Tempest Williams, describing her mother's deathbed scene*] “Our father offered a prayer for the release of her spirit and gave thanks for her life of courage, of beauty, and for her generosity, which enabled us to be part of her journey. He asked that her love might always be with us, as our love will forever be with her. And with great humility, he acknowledged the power of family. In the privacy of one another's company, we openly celebrated and grieved Mother's passing.”

Boys in the Trees

[*Carly Simon, describing the time when her Freudian therapist told her it was time to graduate*] “Looking back, I assume he must have caught a whiff of that pungent, sour aroma of future bounced checks, the scent of a patient on the cusp of exhausting her funds.”

[*And describing her evening with Jack Nicholson*]

“Thankfully I was a little stoned as well as drunk enough not to be too nervous, and Jack and I ended up in my living room. ... Jack lingered in the living room as I prepared a pot of coffee. When I returned holding two cups, I took a seat on the couch, across from Jack, who was perched on the piano stool. We chatted for a few moments and then he said, offhandedly, ‘Do you ever drink coffee in your bedroom?’”

A Long Way from Tipperary

[*John Dominic Crossan talking*] “I make this suggestion for the future of the church I love: ... In a solemn public ceremony in St. Peter's Basilica, they all implore God to take back the gift of infallibility and grant them instead the gift of accuracy. ... I maintain that the mode of authority, the style of leadership, the primacy of obedience demanded by the Roman Catholic hierarchy is a crime, if not against humanity, then at least against divinity.”

...

“There are questions about my mother's youth I was once too young to ask, then too absent to ask, and finally too late to ask. There are also questions about my own youth, about her and myself, that I did not know enough to ask.”

The View from Castle Rock: Stories

[*After Alice Munro's mother died in 1959, her father remarried and then took up writing in his retirement.*] “Irlma honors the writing that my father has taken up in his old age. ‘His writing is very good excepting when he gets too tired,’ she has said to me. ‘Anyway it's better than yours.’ It took me a moment to figure out that she was talking about handwriting. That's what ‘writing’ has always meant around here. The other business was or is called ‘making things up.’ ‘It keeps his head working,’ she says. Playing cards, she believes, would do the same.”

...

[*And talking about the town where she grew up*] “The town stays very much the same. Nevertheless it has changed for me. I have written about it and used it up. Here are more or less the same banks and hardware and grocery stores and the barbershop and the Town Hall tower, but all their secret, plentiful messages for me have drained away.”

Shen Fu

“By the fall of 1948, Dan seemed to have become more aware of the virulent Civil War between the nationalists and the Communists for dominance in China. In a sentence the family quoted for years afterwards, he reported ‘The Reds are coming and I don't mean Cincinnati.’ This sentence took its place in family lore. ... A Chinese truck driver and a mechanic, parishioners from Kienow, arrived at the Hangchow rail station in Zhejiang Province driving the truck which Dan and Doc had once brought from Shanghai. They loaded up the supplies from the train platform and gave the keys to Dan, who would do all the driving the rest of the way. Sometimes there were some needy Chinese women and their children on board. There was Sister Theresa, a Salvadorian Sister who needed to get to her mission. It was hard for Dan to refuse if there was room in the back of the truck, and people begged for a ride. One by one they jumped out as they got near their destination. One night he paid the room and board for eleven travelers, which totaled to 65 cents, U.S. money. Dan had bought two fifty-gallon drums of gasoline and also some long four-by-four pieces of lumber. Many times, on his initial trip, Doc and he had to put four-by-fours across a river so the truck could get across.”

Reviews and Commentary

“The passing centuries have hidden its charms.”

- *Paris Review* had that to say about the first American novel, *The Power of Sympathy*, published 1789

Born a Crime

“As a child, he became a chameleon fluent in multiple tongues: He learned to speak not only English, but the Xhosa of his family, tribal dialects like Zulu and Tsonga that whites and coloreds seldom deigned to learn, and Afrikaans. It was through mastery of language that he figured out how to bridge the vast distances between himself and others imposed by his skin. His worldliness was a lifeline, another gift from Patricia. ... He has written a son's tribute to the courageous woman who shaped him. In a world still distorted by the indignities of race, Noah knows where the real story lies.”

- Thomas Chatterton Williams, *New Republic*

Atonement

“Ian McEwan's penchant for dark material has earned him the nickname ‘Ian Macabre’ in the British press.”

The Arab of the Future

“For all his rants against Jews, Africans, and, above all, the Shia, he [Abdel-Razak, the author's father] remains strangely endearing, a kind of Arab Archie Bunker.”

- Adam Schatz, *The New Yorker*

Christine Falls

“...[T]his is a story in which women die, seemingly a punishment not only for their sexuality but also for their gender. Arguably, they die of being female.”

- *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, Mar 25, 2007

“Though most intrigued with the mysteries of the mind, [Benjamin] Black succeeds brilliantly in delivering piquant social satire and chilling revelations of the church's unholy power over the justice system and the press.” - *Booklist*

Season's Readings 2017

Boys in the Trees

"If I were Carly Simon, I'd be insulted by reviewers who sounded surprised at how well she can write. Good grief, she's Carly Simon."

- David Hare (in *NY Times* "Year in Reading")

The View from Castle Rock: Stories

"When Munro emphasizes that "these are stories," she is, at least in part, defending the prerogative of fiction as a vehicle for truth-telling against the literal-minded incursions of genealogy and memoir."

- A.O. Scott, *New York Times*, Dec 10, 2006

The Gathering

"More than most contemporary writers, the Irish novelist Anne Enright finds it hard to escape the tidal pull of the family. In a series of funny, bleak, radically unsentimental novels, she has examined the engrossments of such life and has pored over the social genetics of family inheritance—the unhappiness we bequeath, the pleasure we inherit, the tyranny of biological contingency."

- James Wood, *The New Yorker*, May 25, 2015

Miscellany

"On November 10 *The New York Times* reported that nearly seven in ten Republicans prefer America as it was in the 1950s, a nostalgia of course entirely unavailable to a person like me, for in that period I could not vote, marry my husband, have my children, work in the university I work in, or live in my neighborhood. Time travel is a discretionary art: a pleasure trip for some and a horror story for others. ... If some white men are more sentimental about history than anyone else right now it's no big surprise: their rights and privileges stretch a long way back."

- Zadie Smith, *On Optimism and Despair*, *The New York Review of Books*, Dec 22, 2016

Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?

"The character Connie meets the ending that she does in the story because of her insecurity, her low self-esteem, and her fear of intimacy. Using psychoanalytic theory, it is possible to see how her possession of these classic psychological disorders eventually led to her leaving with Arnold Friend. It is unclear where the mysterious man with the gold jalopy is taking her, but it is safe to say that it is a place that Connie is destined to go due to these three issues. The reader doesn't know where Connie is going, but they do know where she has been, and that makes all the difference."

- It's All Over Now, *Baby Blue: Psychoanalyzing Connie in Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"* by Nicole Holman, 2010

Ward No 6

"The committal of the disillusioned, lazy, but perfectly sane Ragin to a psychiatric ward eerily foreshadows the Soviet practice of diagnosing critics of the regime as "mentally ill" and imprisoning them in psychiatric institutions."

- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>

The Arab of the Future

"My father was a living paradox, that's what I want to show in the book. He was torn: [on one] side, he was for modernity and education, and at the same time he believed in Satan and black magic. He was for education, but he wasn't for

democracy. ... The children of these villages never [have] access to testimony. They never tell their stories. I am very happy to have seen what I have seen and to be able to tell it now."

- author Riad Sattouf, quoted in *The Atlantic*, Sept 21, 2016

Christine Falls

"Quirke is a character that came from the damaged recesses of my Irish soul. I sympathise with Quirke; he is a very damaged person, as many Irish people are from their upbringing."

- John Banville, talking about the main character in his series of mystery novels

Shen Fu

The Chinese characters 神父, or Shen Fu, can be translated as Spiritual Father. Fr. Dan often signed his letters home from China "Shen Fu."

Not My Father's Son

"He [Alan Cumming] was a vocal supporter of Scotland's recent [failed] bid for independence. At times, his advocacy has hinted at something more personal. A week before the vote, he tweeted: 'Scotland! Fed up of being told you're not good enough, that you'll fail, by people who are not good enough and have failed you? Yes, me too.'"

- Michael Schulman, Oct. 3, 2017 *New York Times*