

Santa Barbara Public Library System  
- Book Club in a Bag -

Fiction

*Ahab's Wife*, by Sena Jeter Naslund. (1999) 663p

At age 12, Una escapes her religiously obsessed father in rural Kentucky to live with relatives in a lighthouse off New Bedford, Mass. When she is 16, disguised as a boy she runs off to sea aboard a whaler, which sinks after being rammed by its quarry. Rescued, Una is wed to one of the young men by the captain of the Pequod, handsome, commanding Ahab, who has not as yet met the white whale that will be his destiny. Una's later marriage to Ahab, a passionate and intellectually satisfying relationship, the loss of her mother and her newborn son in one night, and her life as a rich woman in Nantucket are further developments in a plot teeming with arresting events and provocative ideas. Una is an enchanting protagonist: intellectually curious, sensitive, imaginative and kind. But Naslund also endows her with restlessness, rash impetuosity and a refreshing skepticism about traditional religion, qualities that humanize what verges on an idealized personality, and that motivate Una's search for spiritual sustenance.

*Atonement*, by Ian McEwan. (2002) 352p

On a hot summer day in 1935, thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis witnesses a moment's flirtation between her older sister, Cecilia, and Robbie Turner, the son of a servant and Cecilia's childhood friend. Briony becomes the victim of her own imagination, which leads her on a lifelong search for truth and absolution, but her incomplete grasp of adult motives—together with her precocious literary gifts—brings about a crime that will change all their lives.

*The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows (2008) 274 p.

Traditional without seeming stale, and romantic without being naïve" (*San Francisco Chronicle*), this epistolary novel, based on Mary Ann Shaffer's painstaking, lifelong research, is a homage to booklovers and a nostalgic portrayal of an era. As her quirky, loveable characters cite the works of Shakespeare, Austen, and the Brontës, Shaffer subtly weaves those writers' themes into her own narrative. However, it is the tragic stories of life under Nazi occupation that animate the novel and give it its urgency; furthermore, the novel explores the darker side of human nature without becoming maudlin. The *Rocky Mountain News* criticized the novel's lighthearted tone and characterizations, but most critics agreed that, with its humor and optimism, *Guernsey* "affirms the power of books to nourish people during hard times.

*Olive Kitteridge*, by Elizabeth Strout (2008) 304p

At times stern, at other times patient, at times perceptive, at other times in sad denial, Olive Kitteridge, a retired schoolteacher in Crosby, Maine, deplores the changes in her little town and in the world at large. But she doesn't always recognize the changes in those around her: a lounge musician haunted by a past romance; a former student who has lost the will to live; Olive's own adult child, who feels tyrannized by her irrational sensitivities; and her husband, Henry, who finds his loyalty to his marriage both a blessing and a curse. As the townspeople grapple with their problems, mild and dire, Olive is brought to a deeper understanding of herself and her life -- sometimes painfully, but always with ruthless honesty.

*Fahrenheit 451*, by Ray Bradbury (1953) 165 p

In *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury's classic, frightening vision of the future, firemen don't put out fires--they start them in order to burn books. Bradbury's vividly painted society holds up the appearance of happiness as the highest goal--a place where trivial information is good, and

knowledge and ideas are bad. Fire Captain Beatty explains it this way, "Give the people contests they win by remembering the words to more popular songs.... Don't give them slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with. That way lies melancholy."

*The Red Tent*, by Anita Diamant (1997) 321 p.

The life of Dinah is only hinted at in a brief and violent detour within the more familiar chapters of the Bible's Book of Genesis that are about her father, Jacob, and his dozen sons. This novel begins with the story of her mothers, Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah, the four wives of Jacob. They love Dinah and give her gifts that are to sustain her through a damaged youth, a calling to midwifery, and a new home in a foreign land. The red tent is the place where women gathered during their cycles of birthing, menses, and even illness. Like the conversations and mysteries held within this feminine tent, this sweeping piece of fiction offers an insider's look at the daily life of a biblical sorority of mothers and wives and their one and only daughter.

*Divisadero*, by Michael Ondaatje (2007) 288 p.

From the author of *The English Patient* comes a new novel which begins in the 1970s in Northern California, near Gold Rush country. A father and his teenage daughters, Anna and Claire, work their farm with the help of Coop, an enigmatic young man who makes his home with them. Theirs is a makeshift family, until it is shattered by an incident of violence which changes the rest of their lives. From then on the narrative moves back and forth in time and place following Coop, Claire, and especially Anna who becomes immersed in the life and the world of a writer from an earlier time—Lucien Segura. The divergence and final convergence of the different story lines is brilliantly handled. "Every sign of the author's genius is here: the searing imagery, the incandescent writing, the calm probing of life's most turbulent and devastating experiences."

*Stoner*, by John Edward Williams (1965) 278 p.

A deceptively simple novel, *Stoner* tells the story of an outwardly undistinguished assistant professor of English at the University of Missouri who is determined to resist a charlatan student despite the great political and personal cost to himself. Stoner's attempt to defend his intellectual ideals leads inexorably to the collapse of his personal happiness, which revolves around his love affair with a former student, Katherine Driscoll. The emotional intensity of the affair contrasts sharply with Stoner's failed marriage to Edith. As the public world of university politics begins to press in on the lovers it becomes clear that Stoner has been unable to transcend his circumstances. However, the author makes it clear that Stoner has lived an honorable and compassionate life. Williams's encompassing sympathy for the noble failure makes *Stoner* a small masterpiece of moral literature.

*The Inheritance of Loss*, by Kiran Desai (2006) 357 p.

In a crumbling, isolated house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas, lives an embittered judge who wants only to retire in peace from a world he has found too messy for justice, when his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, arrives on his doorstep. The judge's cook watches over her distractedly, for his thoughts are claimed by his son, Biju, who is hopscotching from one gritty New York restaurant to another, trying to stay a step ahead of the INS on an elusive search for a green card that "was not even green." When an Indian-Nepali insurgency in the mountains interrupts Sai's exploration of the many incarnations and facets of a romance with her Nepali tutor, and causes their lives to descend into chaos, they are forced to consider their colliding interests. The cook witnesses the hierarchy being overturned and discarded. The judge must revisit his past, his own journey and role in their intertwining histories.

*Out Stealing Horses*, by Per Petterson (2007) 250 p.

Trond Sander, a man nearing 70, has just moved in self-imposed exile to the eastern edge of Norway in a primitive cabin. Trond's peaceful existence is interrupted by a meeting with his only neighbor, who seems familiar. The meeting pries loose a memory from a summer day in 1948 when Trond's friend Jon suggests they go out and steal horses. That distant summer is transformative for Trond as he reflects on the fragility of life while discovering secrets about his father's wartime activities. "Artful interplay of Trond's childhood and adult perspectives. Loss is conveyed with all the intensity of a boy's perception, but acquires new resonance in the brooding consciousness of the older man."

*The Birth of Venus*, by Sarah Dunant (2004) 448 p.

Called "an arresting tale of art, love and betrayal," this historical novel set in 15th-century Florence during the tumultuous era dominated by the mad monk, Savonarola, tells the story of Alessandra, the talented and beautiful daughter of a wealthy cloth merchant, and her search for fulfillment and love. She first agrees to an arranged marriage to an older man who promises to allow her the freedom she craves. After the real reason for her husband's generosity is revealed on their wedding night, she is drawn to the young artist commissioned to paint her family's chapel. Their liaison becomes fraught with danger and intrigue as they seek each other through the increasingly turbulent streets of a city on the verge of chaos. Durant evokes all the colors, sights and sounds of Renaissance Florence while creating a gripping love story with an unexpectedly bizarre ending. Readers who liked *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* will find this novel equally engaging.

*The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy (2006) 256 p.

A searing, postapocalyptic novel: A father and his son walk alone through burned America. Nothing moves in the ravaged landscape save the ash on the wind. It is cold enough to crack stones, and when the snow falls it is gray. Their sky is dark. Their destination is the coast, although they don't know what, if anything, awaits them there. They have nothing; just a pistol to defend themselves against the lawless bands that stalk the road, the clothes they are wearing, a cart of scavenged food—and each other. An unflinching meditation on the worst and the best that we are capable of: ultimate destructiveness, desperate tenacity, and the tenderness that keeps two people alive in the face of total devastation.

*The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini (2003) 400 p.

*The Kite Runner* follows the story of Amir, the privileged son of a wealthy businessman in Kabul, and Hassan, the son of Amir's father's servant. As children in the relatively stable Afghanistan of the early 1970s, the boys are inseparable. They spend idyllic days running kites and telling stories of mystical places and powerful warriors until an unspeakable event changes the nature of their relationship forever, and eventually cements their bond in ways neither boy could have ever predicted. Even after Amir and his father flee to America, Amir remains haunted by his cowardly actions and disloyalty. In part, it is these demons and the sometimes impossible quest for forgiveness that bring him back to his war-torn native land after it comes under Taliban rule.

*Away*, by Amy Bloom (2008) 256 p.

Lillian Leyb, the 22-year-old Jewish immigrant protagonist of Bloom's fifth novel, is the survivor of a Russian pogrom that separated her from her three-year-old daughter, Sophie. The novel follows her quest to find Sophie. The journey—through Chicago by train, into Seattle's African-American underworld and across the Alaskan wilderness—elevates Bloom's book from familiar immigrant chronicle to sweeping saga of endurance and rebirth encompassing prison, prostitution and poetry, Yiddish humor and Yukon settings. Bloom was a finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

*The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, by Kim Edwards (2005) 432 p.

In 1964, when a blizzard forces Dr. David Henry to deliver his own twins, he immediately recognizes that one of them has Down Syndrome and makes a split-second decision that will haunt all their lives forever. He asks his nurse to take the baby away to an institution and to keep her birth a secret. Instead, she disappears into another city to raise the child as her own. "A tale of regret and redemption, of honest emotion, of characters haunted by their past."

*Suite Française*, by Irene Nemirovsky (2007) 448 p.

Published more than sixty years after the author's death at Auschwitz, this novel is a remarkable story of life under the Nazi occupation. The novel consists of two parts -- "A Storm in June," set amid the chaotic 1940 exodus from Paris on the eve of the Nazi invasion, and "Dolce," set in a German-occupied provincial village rife with jealousy, resentment, resistance, and collaboration. "*Suite Française* is a singularly piercing evocation—at once subtle and severe, deeply compassionate and fiercely ironic—of life and death in occupied France, and a brilliant, profoundly moving work of art."

*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, by Lisa See (2005) 288 p.

This novel set in remote 19th-century China, details the deeply affecting story of lifelong, intimate friends (*laotong*, or "old sames") Lily and Snow Flower. Beginning with a detailed and heartbreaking description of Lily and her sisters' foot binding ("Only through pain will you have beauty. Only through suffering will you have peace"), the story widens to a vivid portrait of family and village life. See's in-depth research into women's ceremonies and duties in China's rural interior brings fascinating revelations about arranged marriages, women's inferior status in both their natal and married homes, and the Confucian proverbs and myriad superstitions that informed daily life. The novel's strength lies in its depiction of Lily and Snow Flower's friendship, its depths, its deceptions, and its strengths.

*Water for Elephants*, by Sara Gruen (2006) 350 p.

This novel is narrated in the first person by the cantankerous, still-sharp 93-year-old Jacob Jancowski. Frustrated at being trapped in an old man's body, Jacob recalls his incredible life and adventures with the Benzini Brothers Circus, which he joined at 23 when the Depression forced him out of veterinary school. Gruen skillfully humanizes the midgets, drunks, rubes and freaks who populate her book and even the animals are given complex personalities that make them a pivotal part of the story. There is something in the novel for everyone: it is equal parts adventure, mystery, fictional memoir, love story, and historical account.

*The Time Traveler's Wife*, by Audrey Niffenegger (2004) 560 p.

This tale works on three levels: as an intriguing science fiction concept, a realistic character study and a touching love story. Henry De Tamble is a Chicago librarian with "Chrono Displacement" disorder; at random times, he suddenly disappears without warning and finds himself in the past or future, usually at a time or place of importance in his life. The book alternates between Henry and his wife, Clare's, points of view, and so does the narration. Clare ably expresses the longing of the one always left behind, the frustrations of their unusual lifestyle, and above all, her overriding love for Henry. Likewise, Henry evokes the fear of a man who never knows where or when he'll turn up, and his gratitude at having Clare, whose love is his anchor. Niffenegger's storytelling is bold and entrancing. Her prose is warm and inviting and her characters are created with heartfelt sincerity.

*Gilead*, by Marilynne Robinson (2004) 247 p.

Told through the eyes of a Midwestern minister nearing the end of his life, *Gilead* unfolds in the form of a letter. As Reverend Ames writes to his young son, we learn of the family's legacy, a heritage steeped in abolition, economic hardship, and conflicting views on religion and war as each generation comes of age. The 1950s find John Ames comparing his grandfather, a fiery Union Army chaplain, to his devoutly pacifist father while a gentle turn of events poses the question of racial equality in new terms. Throughout the novel, he recalls a life shaped by love for his faith, his vocation and his church, for prayer, for his town and all it has meant, for his father and grandfather, for his books, for baseball, for his lifelong friend, for his physical life and the splendors of the physical world, for his memories, and for the young wife and infant child to whom he remains loyal over solitary decades.

*Housekeeping*, by Marilynne Robinson (1980) 219 p.

A modern classic, *Housekeeping* is the story of Ruth and her younger sister, Lucille, who grow up haphazardly, first under the care of their competent grandmother, then of two comically bumbling great-aunts, and finally of Sylvie, their eccentric and remote aunt. The family house is in the small Far West town of Fingerbone set on a glacial lake, the same lake where their grandfather died in a spectacular train wreck, and their mother drove off a cliff to her death. It is a town "chastened by an outsized landscape and extravagant weather, and chastened again by an awareness that the whole of human history had occurred elsewhere." Ruth and Lucille's struggle toward adulthood beautifully illuminates the price of loss and survival, and the dangerous and deep undertow of transience.

*Beloved*, by Toni Morrison (2004) 352 p.

This Pulitzer Prize winning novel transforms history into a story as powerful as Exodus and as intimate as a lullaby. Sethe, its protagonist, was born a slave and escaped to Ohio, but eighteen years later she is still not free. She has too many memories of Sweet Home, the beautiful farm where so many hideous things happened. Sethe's new home is haunted by the ghost of her baby, who died nameless and whose tombstone is engraved with a single word: Beloved. Morrison presents scenes in a seemingly random order, each scene revealing some aspect of life for Sethe, her boys, her dead baby, and her new baby Denver, both in the past and in the present. Moving back and forth, around, and inside out through Sethe's recollections, she gradually reveals Sethe's story to the reader. "

*Middlesex*, by Jeffrey Eugenides (2002) 544 p.

"I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974." And so begins *Middlesex*, the mesmerizing saga of a near-mythic Greek American family and the "roller-coaster ride of a single gene through time." The odd but utterly believable story of Cal Stephanides, and how this 41-year-old hermaphrodite was raised as Calliope, is at the heart of this novel. Eugenides weaves together a kaleidoscopic narrative spanning 80 years of a stained family history, from a fateful incestuous union in a small town in early 1920s Asia Minor to Prohibition-era Detroit; from the early days of Ford Motors to the heated 1967 race riots; from the tony suburbs of Grosse Pointe and a confusing, aching adolescent love story to modern-day Berlin. The strange and often unsettling story is told with intelligence, insight, and generous amounts of humor.

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, by Mark Haddon (2003) 240 p.

Haddon's award-winning debut novel was chosen as a *Santa Barbara Reads* pick. The narrator is Christopher John Francis Boone, an autistic 15-year-old math whiz who interprets the world in painstakingly literal terms. When he discovers that his neighbor's poodle has been brutally killed, Christopher decides to solve the murder, to the dismay of his father, and write a book about his inquiry into the dog's death. Filled with off-beat illustrations and Christopher's one-of-a-kind observations on astronomy and mathematics, this humorous and poignant novel traces the course of his investigation—a remarkable quest that reveals some disturbing facts about Christopher's parents and his own past. Though Christopher insists, "This will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them," the novel brims with touching, ironic humor. The result is an eye-opening work in a unique and compelling literary voice.

*Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett (2005) 352 p.

Patchett's novel begins when a group of terrorists invade an embassy birthday party in an unnamed Central American country. The guests and kitchen workers held hostage come from all walks of life and many countries. As the hostage situation extends from hours into days distinguished guests at the party are revealed as weak and self-serving, whereas several in menial positions are generous and courageous. Even the terrorists display strengths as well as weaknesses. Linking the stories within the story, are the performances of a soprano whose bel canto arias inspire and entertain in the face of mounting fear and violence. In the skilled hands of veteran novelist Ann Patchett, what starts out as a hostage tale seemingly lifted from current headlines, evolves into a touching, uplifting story of love, self-sacrifice, and simple humanity in the face of adversity.

## Non-Fiction

*Enrique's Journey*, by Sonia Nazario. (2007) 291 p.

Based on the Los Angeles Times series that won two Pulitzer Prizes, this is a timeless story of families torn apart. When Enrique was five, his mother, too poor to feed her children, left Honduras to work in the United States. The move allowed her to send money back home so Enrique could eat better and go to school past the third grade. She promised she would return quickly, but she struggled in America. Without her, he became lonely and troubled. After eleven years, he decided he would go find her. He set off alone, with little more than a slip of paper bearing his mother's North Carolina telephone number. Without money, he made the dangerous trek up the length of Mexico, clinging to the sides and tops of freight trains. He and other migrants, many of them children, are hunted like animals. To evade bandits and authorities, they must jump onto and off the moving boxcars they call the Train of Death. It is an epic journey, one thousands of children make each year to find their mothers in the United States.

*Devil in the White City*, by Erik Larson (2003) 447 p.

Not long after Jack the Ripper haunted the ill-lit streets of 1888 London, H.H. Holmes (born Herman Webster Mudgett) dispatched somewhere between 27 and 200 people, mostly single young women, in the churning new metropolis of Chicago; many of the murders occurred during (and exploited) the city's finest moment, the World's Fair of 1893. Larson's breathtaking new history is a novelistic yet wholly factual account of the fair and the mass murderer who lurked within it. Readers will be glad for the frequent escapes to the relative sanity of Holmes's co-star, architect and fair overseer Daniel Hudson Burnham, who managed the thousands of workers and engineers who pulled the sprawling fair together. This book is everything popular history should be, meticulously recreating a rich, pre-automobile America on the cusp of modernity, in which the sale of "articulated" corpses was a semi-respectable trade and serial killers could go well-nigh unnoticed.

*River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey*, by Candice Millard (2005) 432 p.

Candice Millard, a former staff writer for *National Geographic*, chronicles the 1914 expedition of Theodore Roosevelt and his Brazilian co-commander down one of Amazon's last unexplored tributaries, the River of Doubt. The ill-fated 400-mile river trip, taken after Roosevelt had lost his bid for a third term as President, tested every ounce of the ex-president's intellect, courage, and physical stamina. Millard nails the suspense element of this story perfectly, but equally important to her success is the marvelous amount of detail she provides on the wildlife that Roosevelt and his fellow explorers encountered on their journey, as well as the cannibalistic indigenous tribe that stalked them much of the way. "There are far too many books in which a travel writer follows in the footsteps of his or her hero -- and there are far too few books like this, in which an author who has spent time and energy ferreting out material from archival sources weaves it into a truly gripping tale."

*The Glass Castle*, by Jeanette Walls (2005) 288p.

Walls chronicles her upbringing at the hands of eccentric, nomadic parents--Rose Mary, her frustrated-artist mother, and Rex, her brilliant, alcoholic father. To call the elder Walls's childrearing style laissez faire would be putting it mildly. As Rose Mary and Rex, motivated by whims and paranoia, uprooted their kids time and again, the youngsters (Walls, her brother and two sisters) learned to support themselves, eating out of trashcans at school or painting their skin so the holes in their pants didn't show. Walls' removed, nonjudgmental stance is initially startling but Walls respects her parents' knack for making hardships feel like adventures, and her love for them--despite their overwhelming self-absorption--resonates from cover to cover.

*Ethics for the new Millennium*, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama (1999) 237 p.

Though the Dalai Lama is himself a practicing Buddhist, his approach to life and the moral compass that guides him can be of use to each and every one of us – Muslim, Christian, Jew, Buddhist or atheist – in our quest to lead a happier, more fulfilling life. According to the Dalai Lama our survival has depended and will continue to depend on our basic goodness as human beings. In the past, the respect people had for their religion helped maintain ethical practice through a majority following one religion or another. Today, with the growing secularization and globalization of society, we must find a way that transcends religion to establish consensus as to what constitutes positive and negative conduct, what is right and wrong and what is appropriate and inappropriate.

*Three Cups of Tea*, by Greg Mortenson (2006) 368 p.

One man's campaign to build schools in the most dangerous, remote, and anti-American reaches of Asia: in 1993 Greg Mortenson was an American mountain-climbing bum wandering emaciated and lost through Pakistan's Karakoram. After he was taken in and nursed back to health by the people of a Pakistani village, he promised to return one day and build them a school. From that rash, earnest promise grew one of the most incredible humanitarian campaigns of our time--Mortenson's one-man mission to counteract extremism by building schools, especially for girls, throughout the breeding ground of the Taliban. In a region where Americans are often feared and hated, he has survived kidnapping, fatwas issued by enraged mullahs, death threats, and wrenching separations from his wife and children. But his success speaks for itself--at last count, his Central Asia Institute had built fifty-five schools

*Eat, Pray, Love*, by Elizabeth Gilbert (2006) 352 p.

At the age of thirty-one, Gilbert moved with her husband to the suburbs of New York and began trying to get pregnant, only to realize that she wanted neither a child nor a husband. Three years later, after a protracted divorce, she embarked on a yearlong trip of recovery, with three main stops: Rome, for pleasure (mostly gustatory, with a special emphasis on gelato); an ashram outside of Mumbai, for spiritual searching; and Bali, for "balancing." These destinations are all on the beaten track, but Gilbert's exuberance and her self-deprecating humor enliven the proceedings: recalling the first time she attempted to speak directly to God, she says, "It was all I could do to stop myself from saying, 'I've always been a big fan of your work.'"

*True Notebooks: A Writer's Year at Juvenile Hall*, by Mark Salzman (2004) 352 p.

Salzman (*Lying Awake; Iron & Silk*) tells of his volunteer work teaching creative writing at Central Juvenile Hall, a Los Angeles County detention facility for "high-risk" juvenile offenders. Most of these under-18 youths had been charged with murder or other serious crimes, and many would end up in a penitentiary, some for life. While their writing themes are somewhat predictable--their anger and violent impulses, their relationships with parents and gangs, plus a tedious dose of "pussy, bullets, and beer"--the discussions these essays provoked were personal and often explosive. Salzman keeps his focus squarely on the boys, their writing and their coming-to-terms with the mess their lives had become.

*The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*, by Bill Bryson (2006) 289 p.

Bill Bryson re-creates the life of his family in his native Des Moines, Iowa in the 1950s in all its transcendent normality—a life at once completely familiar to us all and as far away and unreachable as another galaxy. It was, he reminds us, a happy time, when automobiles and televisions and appliances (not to mention nuclear weapons) grew larger and more numerous with each passing year, and DDT, cigarettes, and the fallout from atmospheric testing were considered harmless or even good for you. He includes affectionate portraits of his father, a gifted sportswriter for the local paper and dedicated practitioner of isometric exercises, and of his mother, whose job as the home furnishing editor for the same paper left her little time for practicing the domestic arts at home. “Bill Bryson’s laugh-out-loud pilgrimage through his Fifties childhood in heartland America is a national treasure. It’s full of insights, wit, and wicked adolescent fantasies.”

*The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, by Michael Pollan (2006) 464 p.

Pollan’s book is really three in one: The first section discusses industrial farming; the second, organic food, both as big business and on a relatively small farm; and the third, what it is like to hunt and gather food for oneself. Each section culminates in a meal -- a cheeseburger and fries from McDonald’s; roast chicken, vegetables and a salad from Whole Foods; and grilled chicken, corn and a chocolate soufflé (made with fresh eggs) from a sustainable farm; and, finally, mushrooms and pork, foraged from the wild. “To Pollan, the omnivore’s dilemma is twofold: what we choose to eat ...and how we let that food be produced. His book touches on a vast array of subjects, from food fads and taboos to our avoidance of not only our food’s animality, but also our own. Along the way, he is alert to his own emotions and thoughts, to see how they affect what he does and what he eats, to learn more and to explain what he knows. His approach is steeped in honesty and self-awareness. His cause is just, his thinking is clear, and his writing is compelling.”

*Mountains Beyond Mountains*, by Tracy Kidder (2003) 336 p.

At the center of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* stands Paul Farmer. Doctor, Harvard professor, renowned infectious-disease specialist, anthropologist, the recipient of a MacArthur “genius” grant, world-class Robin Hood, Farmer was brought up in a bus and on a boat, and in medical school found his life’s calling: to diagnose and cure infectious diseases and to bring the lifesaving tools of modern medicine to those who need them most. This book shows how radical change can be fostered in situations that seem insurmountable, and it also shows how a meaningful life can be created, as Farmer—brilliant, charismatic, charming, both a leader in international health and a doctor who finds time to make house calls in Boston and the mountains of Haiti—blasts through convention to get results. “*Mountains Beyond Mountains* unfolds with the force of a gathering revelation,” says Annie Dillard, and Jonathan Harr says, “[Farmer] wants to change the world. Certainly this luminous and powerful book will change the way you see it.”

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