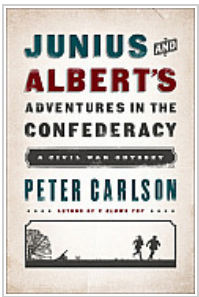


Books: My Favorite Books of 2013 Revealed! #LastMinuteGifts

Posted: 12/24/2013 1:17 am

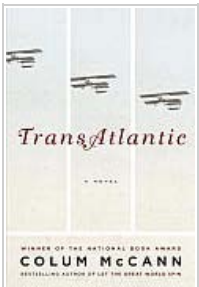
No one person can create a best of the year list covering books. Maybe one type of book, like mystery or sci-fi. Maybe. But so many hundreds of thousands of books come out that covering all of them is nigh on impossible. So keeping in mind that there are many great titles I wanted to read but haven't tackled yet, here is a list of my favorites from the books I read in 2013. Rather than breaking them down in fiction and nonfiction, kids and sci-fi and so on, I'll just present them essentially in the order I read them. If you're looking for a gift or something great to read and you enjoy the genre, give it a shot!



JUNIUS AND ALBERT'S ADVENTURES IN THE CONFEDERACY

By Peter Carlson
\$26.99; PublicAffairs

Here's a great example of a fun book falling through the cracks. This nonfiction romp tells the true-life story of two Northern journalists - knights of the quill, as they and their friends jokingly dub themselves -- who head off to cover the Civil War. After many (mis)adventures, they are captured and imprisoned. Drawn from the exploits they published, letters and other documents, this book details their hijinks and the remarkable tale of their escape and journey back to safety. It's a funny, fascinating look that reveals the varied points of view that colored the war (sympathetic Southerners, indifferent Northerners, patriots risking their lives, men hoping just to survive and on and on). No wonder the two men became wildly famous in their time. I await the film version starring Tobey Maguire (at least that's who I would cast) with anticipation. A prison escape classic.



TRANSATLANTIC

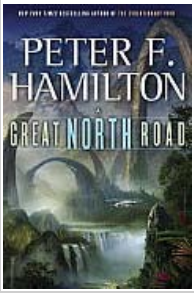
By Colum McCann
\$27; Random House

Colum McCann had a dreadful task: to follow up the universal acclaim of *Let The Great World Spin*. He accomplished it with ease in this elegant novel that tracks the lives of people flitting back and forth from the US to Ireland, ranging from daring aviators in the early days to journalists (them again!) to freed slave Frederick Douglass on a lecture tour and even Senator George Mitchell on his quixotic mission to bring peace to that nation. McCann ties these various strands together with a light touch and the novel as a whole simple glides by with pleasure and insight. Of course, now McCann has an even harder task: to follow both these modern gems with yet another one.

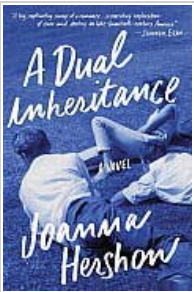
GREAT NORTH ROAD

By Peter F. Hamilton
\$30; Del Rey

This sci-fi mystery novel is ideal for fans of both genres and may well lure reluctant mystery buffs to explore sci-fi or send sci-fi buffs



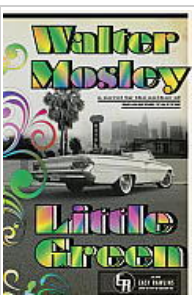
toward some great detective novels. In this thriller set one hundred years in the future, a detective must investigate the death of a member of the North family. Problem number one: They're the most powerful family in the world(s) and not terribly cooperative; they want the crime solved but with minimal fuss. Any unpleasant details may get swept under the rug along with the detective. Problem number two: They're clones. Yes, the wealthy North family has had the rare funds available to clone themselves for generations, which makes even telling them apart damn hard, not to mention parsing out motives and whereabouts. Toss in a woman wrongly convicted of murdering a North years ago, signs of alien life on a colony world and enough nifty ideas for futuristic police work to make your head spin and you've got a doozy of a story that handles both genres with satisfying results.



A DUAL INHERITANCE

By Joanna Hershon
\$26; Ballantine

Here's another gem that seemed to get lost in the shuffle this year. Hershon tells a deceptively familiar tale about two young men from wildly different backgrounds who become friends. Hugh is a Kennedy-esque child of privilege; Ed is a rough and tumble kid desperate to make a buck. They join up in college and while they soon drift apart, their lives are forever linked. These men are fascinating but the women in their lives are equally compelling. And Hershon cleverly shows the children of one guy seeming to inherit traits from his one-time friend with the same happening to the other. It's a subtle, fascinating way to show ideas and rebellions and strains hidden in our character that come to life in our kids. But most of all it's simply a compelling story about lives stretching from the early 1960s to the stock market collapse.

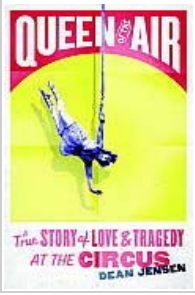


LITTLE GREEN

By Walter Mosley
\$26.95; Doubleday

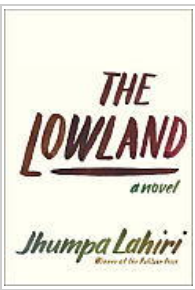
First Mosley brought Mouse seemingly back from the dead. Now he's done the same for Easy Rawlins in *Little Green*, the latest in his wildly entertaining and insightful depictions of both one man and a city over the years. Race always dominates in subtle, engaging fashion -- Easy Rawlins' place in the world, his desire to push up against boundaries and yet to recognize them when others would play dumb is the undercurrent throughout these novels. But Mosley is never didactic. The world he brings to life is real enough to burn and that it does. Here it's 1967 and Mr. Rawlins is asked to track down a young man in 1967 LA who has disappeared during an acid trip. There is more; there is always more and Mosley does not disappoint. Like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes, Mosley might as well just accept that Rawlins and Mouse are here to stay.

QUEEN OF THE AIR



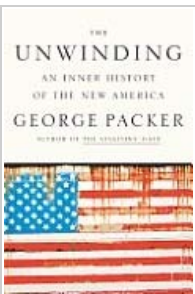
By Dean N. Jensen
\$26; Crown

My favorite biography of the year, this is one of those true-life tales so over the top it makes fiction pale in comparison. A little girl rises from near poverty to become Leitzel, the most famous star of the circus back in the era when that meant being one of the most famous stars in the world. A little boy who is besotted with her determines to become worthy of her love and devotes himself to mastering the most dangerous, death-defying stunt on the trapeze. Years later, he does so, wins worldwide fame and her heart (for a time; she's rather fickle). This is just the beginning of a tale with ups and downs and the glamour of the circus and the pain of broken hearts and indifferent homes. The coincidences, the celebrities, and the calamity of the Depression result in one of the most jaw-dropping and entertaining lives you'll read about. I'm convinced the ugly cover is what kept this one from breaking out. Don't miss it.



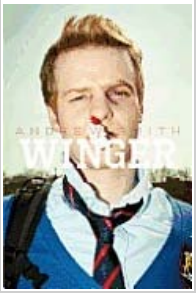
THE LOWLAND
By Jhumpa Lahiri
\$27.95; Knopf

Lahiri's boldest and most ambitious work yet, *The Lowland* is a thoroughly satisfying novel with a broad sweep. It follows two brothers throughout their lives and it's a credit to the book that no matter which brother we're reading about or which era (Calcutta in the 1960s to America in the decades that follow), we are caught up in the story. One brother becomes a radical devoted to revolution; the other becomes a scientist doing quiet research in the US. The woman that links them both is even more fascinating and here Lahiri pulls off a real triumph by making a mother who leaves her child behind empathetic and understood. This didn't seem to have quite the pull for readers of some of her earlier work, but they're missing a nuanced, mature effort that bodes well for the future of this acclaimed author.



THE UNWINDING
By George Packer
\$27; Farrar, Straus and Giroux

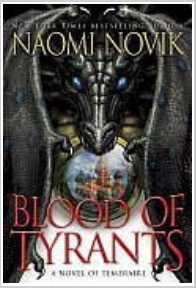
Packer's magisterial work looks at life in the United States during the "unwinding," that era of the past few decades when the American dream began to tarnish; when the promise that if you worked hard you'd get ahead and your kids would have a chance to do even better than you was broken; when absolutely nothing seemed to work for the worker, the small businessman, the idealist or the dreamer. He tells this story by focusing on people who represent a wide swath of America, from Silicon Valley entrepreneurs to factory workers, from innovators in green technology to an evangelist for God and an evangelist for whomever is hiring (also known as a lobbyist). Packer brings to life liberals and conservatives, the heartland and the coast and again and again he finds people who've been knocked silly by the changing times and aren't sure if they'll be able to pick themselves up, much less dust themselves off and start all over again. As much as any work I've read, this book illuminates what's been going on behind the headlines of real estate busts and tech booms and jobs going overseas. Essential and gripping.



WINGER

By Andrew Smith
\$16.99; Simon & Schuster

I hate, hate, hate the ending of this book. But it's too intriguing and fresh before that for me to dismiss it entirely. Smith has a fresh voice and ably captures the spirit of Ryan, a small-ish but tough as nails 14 year old who lives and breathes rugby when he's not patiently waiting for his best friend Annie to stop thinking of him as a little kid and let him kiss her already. Boarding school, gay pal, unrequited (or is that requited?) crush -- it's familiar territory. But Smith has a clever way of breaking up the text in believable bursts of graphic novel silliness or lists written by our hero that are very funny and convincing. Plus it's hard to imagine any kid not wanting to sign up for rugby once you get immersed in its crazy, self-glorifying traditions. Too bad Smith seemed to pull the finale straight out of those "problem" young adult novels of the 1970s. Still it has the coolest cover of the year and Smith is one to keep an eye on.



BLOOD OF TYRANTS

By Naomi Novik
\$26; Del Rey

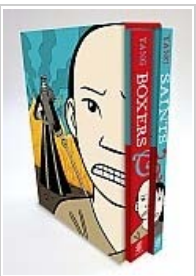
Novik's clever blending of fantasy and Horatio Hornblower manages to recreate the Napoleonic era -- but an era transmuted by the presence of talking dragons and all that might mean for warfare. Her series started off very imaginatively indeed, with this genre-crossing author having as much fun showing the dragons gain a nascent sense of personhood as it does with imagining fascinating ways those creatures might change the balance of power. The series lost its footing in the last book or two, I must admit. But Novik has recovered very well with this rip-roaring eighth entry that delivers everything this series is best at as she sets up the action for the climactic ninth and final book in the franchise. I tingle to think of Peter Jackson turning these into movies (he optioned the books) but boy would it be expensive. You can enjoy them right now and don't even have to bother with 3-D glasses; just use your imagination.



MORE THAN THIS

By Patrick Ness
\$19.99; Candlewick

I was new to the very talented Patrick Ness. So I jumped on his haunting, wonderful earlier novel *A Monster Calls* and that primed me for this new sci-fi-ish adventure. A teenage boy commits suicide but then wakes up in an almost abandoned world. Did some freakish accident occur? Is he dead? Is this limbo? Can he return home? The boy soon finds other people -- some dangerous, some friendly -- and together with kids just as lost as he they try and figure out what the heck is going on. Intriguing, sad, and evocative, it may not be the instant classic that is *A Monster Calls*, but it's further proof he's one of the strongest authors. A fresh and imaginative voice.

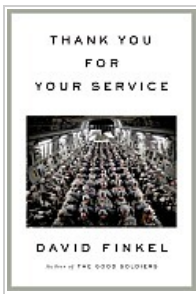


BOXERS & SAINTS

By Gene Luen Yang
\$34.99; First Second

Everyone loved these graphic novels, but let's be clear: Gene Luen Yang's two volume series was conceived this way for a reason. *Boxers*, the story of a boy caught up in the Boxer Rebellion in China is good. *Saints*, the story of a girl who converts to Christianity and is on the wrong side of that rebellion is good. But it's the convergence

of these two stories, the way they play off and inform one another that makes this work as a whole genuinely satisfying. I wasn't a huge fan of Yang's visual style at first, but as the novels progressed and I became drawn into the story more and more, that became less of an issue. An ambitious work that accomplishes what it attempts.



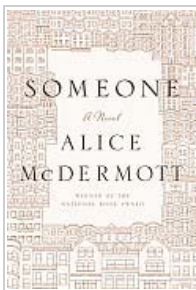
THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE

By David Finkel

\$26; Sarah Crichton Books

I celebrated July 4th by reading Finkel's previous book *The Good Soldiers*. My choice seemed a very modest attempt to honor the sacrifice of our troops -- I would try and gain some modicum of understanding about what they go through when sent to war. Finkel was embedded with the men of a battalion during the "surge" in Iraq. Finkel had no agenda and didn't try to paint a picture of the

war in general. He simply depicted as honestly as possible the conditions these particular men fought in, the turmoil and moral challenges they faced, the physical and psychic damage, the triumphs and tragedies and the price paid by their families back home. It was gut-wrenching and I waited weeks before reading *Thank You For Your Service*. This sequel catches up with the people in the first book several years later. Some are in rehab while others struggle with veteran services. Marriages are frayed or destroyed or sometimes -- rarely -- strengthened. Their bodies are wracked, their lives battered, their worlds both smaller and bigger than when they were in battle. The focus is even more on their families and it seems like a miracle at the end that any of them are still functioning, given the strain they are put under. You'll become angry, upset, fearful about the ever-present specter of suicide and genuinely astonished that some of them can even muster the courage to get up again in the morning and try to make sense of their lives. The burden of tour after tour, the way the job of soldiering falls on an ever-decreasing military class rather than the country as a whole, the impact of what it really means to go to war is all brought fearfully home in easily one of the best books of the year and required reading for anyone who ever wants to talk blithely about invading this or that country. Finkel is in deep now. He's almost obliged to return to these people five or ten years from now, when we'll be seeing the children of some of these men gearing up and heading off to wars of their own. Devastating.



SOMEONE

By Alice McDermott

\$25; Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Well, I'm a fool. I knew I needed to read Alice McDermott and just hadn't gotten around to it yet. I finally began with her newest novel and it was so effortless in its brilliance that I immediately went out and bought a handful of McDermott's other works because I realized I owed it to myself to read them as well. It's a deceptively simple story about a simple life led by Marie. Without any stylistic

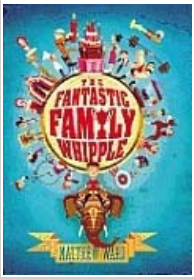
flourishes or bells and whistles, McDermott gives us this woman. She's not remarkably clever or bold or simple or sad; she's just a woman who has heartbreak and happiness, just like anyone else. But what drama in a "normal" life, from the death of parents to the lost sheep of a brother to children, those marvelous creatures that astonish and amaze parents every single day. You might be confused into thinking this novel was a modest effort, much like Marie. But in fact, it's wildly ambitious in capturing a life and doing so with a transparency and ease that is breathtaking.

THE FANTASTIC FAMILY WHIPPLE

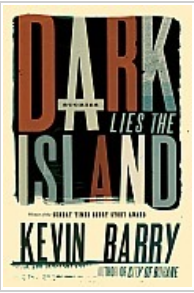
By Matthew Ward

\$16.99; Razorbill

I just liked this silly novel the more I thought about it. The first of what is sure to be a series, *The Fantastic Family Whipple* is about the world-famous Whipples, a family devoted to setting world records in every conceivable category. Their one misfit but beloved



child has yet to set a world-record, but everyone is rooting for him, certain he'll do so any day now. After all, he's a Whipple! Meanwhile they have records to set, competitions to enter, a rival family to grimacingly welcome to the neighborhood, media demands to satisfy and a million and one other things to attend to. It's wittily told with inventiveness galore. Great fun.



DARK LIES THE ISLAND

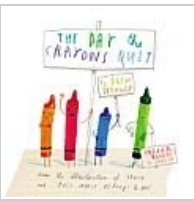
By Kevin Barry

\$24; Graywolf Press

Okay, so I missed Barry's first collection of short stories and didn't quite get around to his debut novel. And yet for some reason, I felt the pull of this new collection of short stories...and was promptly blown away by one of the strongest voices I've heard in years.

Everyone is raving about *Tenth Of December* by George Saunders (I know! I know! I'll get to it!) but surely Barry's work deserves as

much attention. I loved the two little old ladies who prowl tourist sites in hopes of abducting a child from inattentive parents. I laughed over the lad who clumsily kisses the girl but knows it will go nowhere. I was thoroughly caught up in the gang of beer fanatics who go on elaborate day trips to suss out the competition of far-away pubs and have elaborate ranking systems for the various ales they imbibe. Ribald, sad, cutting, and real -- these stories cover a lot of ground and there's not a weak one in the bunch.



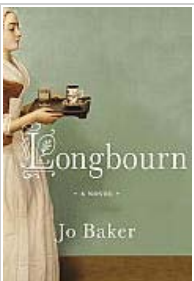
THE DAY THE CRAYONS QUIT

By Drew Daywalt (author) and Oliver Jeffers (Illustrator)

\$17.99; Philomel

If you've ever wanted to create a picture book, you might read *The Day The Crayons Quit* and just kick yourself. What a clever concept! Why didn't you think of it? Here, a little boy wants to do some

coloring but opens up his crayon box to find only a pile of letters from the various crayons. They're all going on strike for various reasons. Some feel over-worked, others feel unappreciated (can't Black be used for something other than drawing outlines?) and still others are bitter enemies (like Orange and Yellow, who are both convinced that they and they *alone* are the proper color of the sun). The letters from the various colors are hilarious and clever and each one leads you to amusingly anticipate the next. What will Green gripe about, you wonder? Perfectly executed with deceptively casual illustrations from Jeffers, this is an instant classic sure to spark the imagination of children and frustrated picture book authors everywhere. (And it's great fun to read aloud.)



Longbourn

By Jo Baker

\$25.95; Knopf

I don't know why I'm so wary of books that play off the classic works of authors. Sure, there are plenty of duds but there are enough genuine treats to prove this genre needn't be the purview of the unimaginative. Indeed, Baker's *Longbourn* is a very satisfying spin on Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*. It's told from the servants' point of view, but it's far more than an *Upstairs/Downstairs* bit of fun.

Baker takes advantage of our modern times to reference things like a woman's period and gays and the unpleasant sloshings in a chamber pot without ever going modern just to shock. It just represents the reality a servant must deal with while their privileged betters

can worry about marriage prospects and which frock to wear. Certainly, anyone who has read *P&P* (especially recently) will appreciate this work even more (the servants rush around doing work when in Austen's novel there is simply the pleasure of a dinner party) and it's amusing to know how exhausted and relieved the help is when the family goes out for an evening. But it stands on its own as the story of Sarah, a housemaid who struggles for a sense of self, is drawn to the handsome and worldly servant of the Darcy family but finds true love elsewhere, though not without struggle. Yes, the finale is rather rosy, but that's an homage to Austen, as well.



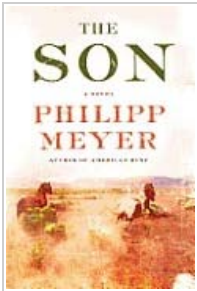
A BOY AND A BEAR IN A BOAT

By Dave Shelton

\$6.99 paperback; Yearling

Technically, this came out in 2012, but I picked up the paperback almost casually off a table at the Strand. I read a few lines and was immediately drawn in. It was stocked in the kid's section but this is a boldly imaginative work. Some mention *Waiting For Godot* and no wonder -- it has an existential, fable-like quality that is positively hypnotizing. But don't get me wrong. Even kids can read the journey

of a boy and a bear in a boat with glee over their grudging cooperation, rivalry, head-butting, and coming to terms. It's almost impossible to describe because the story is both more and less than it seems. A boy gets in a boat, the bear steers it away with aplomb and they're off. But to where? Do they even know? It's witty, amusing, scary and just plain...odd, in the most delicious way possible. Never stooping to offer lessons or aphorisms or gentle meaning, it simply is what it is. A cult classic if ever there was one and if you leave it to the kids, why they'll be thrilled, but it deserves a wider audience than that. Indeed, parents are likely to start reading it with their kids, then finish it in one night after the tykes are asleep and wonder just what the heck it was about and whether it's too dangerous or strange for the young-uns. No, it's not, though adults might need and love it even more.



THE SON

By Phillip Meyer

\$27.99; Ecco

An epic tale of Texas oil and cattle, a family saga that captures a state and a nation, a timespan covering 150 years of American history? As advertised. Author Phillip Meyer achieves on every level what he set out to do in this engrossing story of the McCulloughs, the dynasty that makes a fortune in cattle, another fortune in oil and enough enemies to fill up the Gulf of Mexico. Sprawling is my idea of

fun when it comes to a novel like this. But McCullough keeps the narrative taut as he jumps back and forth from young Eli McCullough taken captive and going native with Comanches to the tough as nails matriarch holding her own in the man's world of oil. Filled with convincing detail, unexpected twists and quiet moments of power, *The Son* is an exceptionally smart book that is thoroughly satisfying as a modern, sophisticated *Giant*, but also perceptive about this country and the eternal push and pull between the old and the new, the established and the immigrant, the rich and the poor, the pioneer and the businessman. Don't hesitate.



AMSTERDAM: A HISTORY OF THE WORLD'S MOST LIBERAL CITY

By Russell Shorto

\$28.95; Doubleday

Finally, this delightfully eccentric history looks at Amsterdam. For many, the first thing that comes to mind is marijuana, but Shorto ably demonstrates how Amsterdam is generally more conservative and far more influential than the lax drug laws (or rather, lax

enforcement of drug laws) imply. Amsterdam is truly the birthplace of democracy and specifically the liberalism that is such a feature of the US and New York City in particular. Ranging over centuries, Shorto captures everything from his own connection to the city to the excitement of Spinoza's bold thinking. With vivid tales from history, he shows how and why Amsterdam became such a unique and fertile ground for capitalism as we know it. (For one thing, it was literally created out of swampland by pounding log after log into the ground until a base was formed that could be built on. God made the world but man made Amsterdam and that land built by sweat wasn't already controlled by a monarchy or other ruling class.) Shorto brings to life everyone from a survivor of the Nazis who played with Anne Frank as a child to truly eccentric characters that prove "crazy" is a virtue in this city. Eye-opening and entertaining, it's popular history of the best sort.

BOOKS I READ IN 2013

1. A Natural History Of Dragons by Marie Brennan ***/
2. Mother's Milk by Edward St. Aubyn *** 1/2
3. Junius And Albert's Adventures In The Confederacy: A Civil War Odyssey by Peter Carlson *** 1/2
4. Why Priests? by Garry Wills ** 1/2
5. The Black Country by Alex Grecian ***
6. Toms River by Dan Fagin ***/
7. Breakfast At Tiffany's by Truman Capote *** 1/2
8. The Art Of Hearing Heartbeats by Jan-Phillip Sendker ** 1/2
9. London Falling by Paul Cornell ***
10. Transatlantic by Colum McCann *** 1/2
11. Matilda by Roald Dahl **
12. Maggot Moon by Sally Gardner **
13. Great North Road by Peter F. Hamilton *** 1/2
14. A Dual Inheritance by Joanna Hershon *** 1/2
15. Little Green by Walter Mosley *** 1/2
16. Masqueraders by Georgette Hayer *** 1/2
17. Life After Life by Kate Atkinson ***
18. The Vatican Diaries by John Thavis ***
19. Island Of Bones by Imogen Robertson ***
20. Circle Of Shadows by Imogen Robertson ***
21. Queen Of The Air by Dean Jensen *** 1/2
22. His Majesty's Hope by Susan Elia MacNeal ** 1/2
23. The War Below by James Scott ** 1/2
24. Bad Monkey by Carl Hiaasen ***
25. The Lowland by Jhumpa Lahiri ****
26. The Unwinding by George Packer ****
27. Winger by Andrew Smith *** 1/2
28. Hickory by Palmer Brown ***
29. Soulless by Gail Corriger ***
30. Revolutionary Summer by Joseph Ellis ***
31. The Longest Way Home by Andrew McCarthy *** 1/2
32. The Cleaner Of Chartres by Sally Vickers ***
33. The Man Who Was Poe by Avi ** 1/2
34. Openly Straight by Bill Konigsberg ** 1/2
35. The Bone Season by Samantha Shannon *
36. Blood Of Tyrants by Naomi Novik *** 1/2
37. White Butterfly by Walter Mosley *** 1/2
38. Black Betty by Walter Mosley *** 1/2
39. The Mouse With The Question Mark Tail by Richard Peck ** 1/2
40. Proxy by Alex London ***
41. Delilah Dirk and the Turkish Lieutenant by Tony Cliff ** 1/2
42. A Monster Calls by Patrick Ness *** 1/2
43. More Than This by Patrick Ness *** 1/2

44. Dissident Gardens by Jonathan Lethem ***
45. The Good Soldiers by David Finkel ****
46. Fallout by Todd Strasser ***
47. Boxers by Gene Luen Yang *** 1/2
48. The Boy Who Swam With Piranhas by David Almond ***
49. The Heart Of Everything That Is by Bob Drury and Tom Clavin ***
50. A Little Yellow Dog by Walter Mosley *** 1/2
51. Gone Fishin' by Walter Mosley ***
52. Thank You For Your Service by David Finkel ****
53. Bad Boy Brawly Brown by Walter Mosley ****
54. Elect H. Mouse State Judge by Nelly Reifler * 1/2
55. Six Easy Pieces by Walter Mosley ***
56. Someone by Alice McDermott *** 1/2
57. A Blind Goddess by James R. Benn ** 1/2
58. Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert Persig *
59. Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut ***
60. A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith *** 1/2
61. The Apothecary by Maile Meloy ***
62. The Mark Of Zorro by Johnston McCulley **
63. Valdez Is Coming by Elmore Leonard ****
64. The Fisher King by Paule Marshall *** 1/2
65. The Fantastic Family Whipple by Matthew Ward ***
66. Bambi: A Life In The Woods by Felix Salten ****
67. Invasion by Walter Dean Myers ** 1/2
68. Seeing Red by Kathryn Erskine ** 1/2
69. Dark Lies The Island by Kevin Barry ****
70. Duke: A Life Of Duke Ellington by Terry Teachout ***
71. The Double by George Pelecanos **
72. Beatles Vs. Stones by John McMillian ***
73. Moonday by Alex Ross ***/
74. American Mirror: The Life and Art Of Norman Rockwell by Deborah Solomon ***
75. A Massacre in Memphis by Steven V Ash ***
76. Revolutionary by Alex Myers ***\
77. Farthing by Jo Walton ***
78. The Returned by Jason Mott ** 1/2
79. Lincoln's Boys by Joshua Zeitz ** 1/2
80. The Fault In Our Stars by John Green ***
81. A Boy and a Bear in a Boat by Dave Shelton *** 1/2
82. Dominion by C.J. Samson ***
83. Little Scarlet by Walter Mosley *** 1/2
84. Hombre by Elmore Leonard *** 1/2
85. The House Of The Scorpion by Nancy Farmer *** 1/2
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