

# RAPID REVIEWS 2014

Book reviews by Amy Howlett, Ernie Drown, and Selene Colburn,  
given May 20, 2014 at the Vermont Library Conference  
St Michael's College, Colchester, VT

## EDUCATION

Messud, Claire. *The Woman Upstairs*. Knopf, 2013, \$26. 978-0307596901. Paper, Vintage, 2014. \$15. 978-0307743763. A ferocious, angry woman sees her life challenged and changed. A writer to watch. AH

Ravitch, Diane. *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*. Knopf, 2013. \$27.95 978-0-35088-4. Ravitch exposes the charter school movement. It's not about what they say it's about. ED

Sokolove, Michael. *Drama High*. Riverhead, 2013. \$28. 978-1594488221. Paper, Riverhead Trade, 10/14, 978-1594632808. \$12. Teacher Lou Volpe has transformed the high school drama program in Levittown, PA. Sidenote: are the arts threatened? AH

Steiner-Adair, Catherine and Teresa Barker. *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*. Harper, 2013. \$27. 978-0-208242-8. The title says it all. Sensible guide to tech for parents of teens. ED

## HISTORY & LIVES

Hustvedt, Siri. *The Blazing World*. Simon & Schuster, 2014. \$26.00. 978-1476747231. This fictitious, literary equivalent of a biopic examines the complex mysteries of a female artist who, her career blunted by misogyny, staged an elaborate hoax in response. SC

Malcolm, Janet. *Forty-one False Starts: Essays on Artists and Writers*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. Paper. \$16.00. 978-0374534585 A career's-worth of reflections on the lives and practices of artists -- from Bloomsbury to Gossip Girl -- by a hyper-observant journalist and critic. SC

McCann, Colum. *Transatlantic*. Random House, 2013. \$27. 978-1-4000-6959-0. Paper, 5/14. 978-0812981926. Lyrical novellas of travelers who crossed the ocean: the first flight from Newfoundland to Ireland; Frederick Douglass in Dublin; George Mitchell, making peace. AH

Offill, Jenny. *Dept. of Speculation*. Knopf, 2014. \$22.95. 978-0385350815. Quick, sad, gorgeous, funny, observant, singular novel that retraces well-worn tropes of marriage, children, adultery, and a writer's stalled second book, as if they were all brand new. SC\*\*\*

Packer, George. *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*. FSG, 2013. \$27. 978-0-374-10241-8. Heartbreaking exploration of what went wrong, told through family histories. ED

Wilson, Robert. *Mathew Brady: Portraits of a Nation*. Bloomsbury, 2013. \$28. 978-1-62040-203-0. Interesting study of the great photographer's life and times, and his contributions to history and art. ED

Yoon, Paul. *Snow Hunters*. Simon & Schuster, 2013. \$20. 978-1-476714813. A Korean POW emigrates to Brazil, where he apprentices to a tailor. Quiet, poignant meditation on war. AH\*\*\*

## CURRENT EVENTS

Barber, Benjamin R. *If Mayors Ruled the World*. Yale University Press, 2014. \$22. Paper only. 978-0300209327. Barber posits that in the face of federal inaction on major world challenges such as climate change and inequality, the more nimble and accessible structures of municipal governments offer hope for real change. SC

Blumenthal, Max. *Goliath: Life and Loathing in Greater Israel*. Nation Books, 2013. \$28. 978-1-56858-634-2. The best book you never heard of about Israel's brutal mistreatment of Arabs and blacks. ED\*\*\*

Bradshaw, John. *Cat Sense: How the New Feline Science Can Make You a Better Friend to Your Pet*. Basic Books, 2013. 978-0-465-04095-7. \$27.99. Superb round-up of the latest research about cats. ED

Farrell, Michael. *The Sugarmaker's Companion: An Integrated Approach to Producing Syrup from Maple, Birch and Walnut Trees*. Chelsea Green, 2013. \$40. 978-1603583978. Research and reporting on all things maple—sharing sap with a neighbor, marketing product, what's happening to maple forests. Excellent updater for VT collections. AH

Lee, Chang-Rae. *On Such a Full Sea*. Riverhead, 2014. \$28. 978-1594486104. Paper, 12/14. 978-1594632891. Fan leaves B-Mor in search of her lover in a strange dystopian world where the storytellers are always we. AH

Lewis, Penelope. *The Secret World of Sleep: the Surprising Science of the Mind at Rest*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. \$27. 978-0-230-10759-5. Scientists have learned a lot about the importance of sleep and its role in healthy functioning. ED

Nichols, John and Robert McChesney. *Dollarocracy: How the Money and Media Election Complex Is Destroying America*. Nation Books, 2013. \$27. 978-1-56858-707-3. ED

Wayne, Teddy. *The Love Song of Jonny Valentine*. Free Press, 2013. \$25. 978-1476705859. Paper, Simon & Schuster, 2014. \$15. 978-1476705866. Prescient coming-of-age novel told from the point of view of 11-year old pop star Jonny Valentine (who bears a striking resemblance to Justin Bieber) hints at the demons that will be his undoing. SC

## A SENSE OF PLACE

Adler, Renata. *Speedboat*. NYRB Classics, 2013 (reprint). \$14. 978-1590176139. *New Yorker* magazine writer's first novel, published in 1976, burns through the page line-by-line, with stunning originality. Wisely brought back to life along with Adler's second novel, *Pitch Dark*. SC

Bulawayo, NoViolet. *We Need New Names*. Reagan Arthur Books, 2013. \$25. 978-0316230810 Back Bay Books, 2014 (paperback). \$15.00. 978-0316230841. Narrator Darling reports from the frontlines of displacement, first as a child playing with her peers amid the wreckage and wonder of a Zimbabwe shantytown, and then as a New American navigating adolescence in Michigan. Bulawayo is a fierce, new talent. SC

Byrne, Monica. *Girl in the Road*. Crown, 2014. \$26. 978-0804138840. First novel with major buzz (Neil Gaiman calls it "glorious"); a wildly inventive puzzle that intersects the stories of two young women traveling through futuristic India and Africa. SC\*\*\*

Darling, Lynn. *Out of the Woods: A Memoir of Wayfinding*. HarperCollins, 2014. \$26. 978-006171024-7. Bereft mother moves from New York to Woodstock to find herself in isolation. Compare to *Mud Season*? AH

Fu, Ping. *Bend Not Break: A Life in Two Worlds*. Portfolio, 2012. \$28. 978-159184552-2 Paper, 11/13. Portfolio, \$16. 978-159184681-9. The Chinese cultural revolution and the US immigrant experience, told through the remarkable lens of a female exec in 3D digital reality. AH

Mina, Denise. *The Red Road*. Little, Brown, 2014. \$26. 978-031618851-7. Two Glasgow stories unfold over time, a fourteen year old girl murderer and years later the cop Alex Morrow investigating a fingerprint mystery. The price society pays for poverty and corruption? Mina is slated to write the graphic novels for Stieg Larsson's Girl with a Dragon Tattoo series. AH

Ricker, Andy. *Pok Pok: Food and Stories from the Streets, Homes and Roadside Restaurants of Thailand*. Ten Speed Press, 2013. \$35. 978-1607742883. Part travelogue and part cookbook, this gorgeous book will appeal to both adventurous home chefs and drive-by lovers of southeast Asian food. SC

#### JUST FOR FUN

Faulks, Sebastian. *Jeeves and the Wedding Bells*. St. Martin's Press, 2013. \$25.99. 978-1250047595. Faulks gets it just right in this homage to comic genius P.G. Wodehouse: visiting the delightful language and ridiculous scrapes with enough of a twist to assure us that the author would never allow himself to be genuinely confused with the master. SC

Fox, Margalit. *The Riddle of the Labyrinth: The Quest to Crack an Ancient Code*. Ecco, 2013. \$28. 978-0062228833 Paper, Ecco, 2014. \$17. 978-0062228864 Crack a secret language without knowing how to read it or where it's from? Yup! AH \*\*\*

Klara, Robert. *The Hidden White House: Harry Truman and the Reconstruction of America's Most Famous Residence*. Thomas Dunne, 2013. \$27. 978-1-250-00027-9. Evocative story of the complete gutting of the White House. No one under 60 knows this bit of Americana. ED

Koerner, Brendan I. *The Skies Belong to Us: Love and Terror in the Golden Age of Hijacking*. Crown, 2013. \$26. 978-0307886101. In this sprawling true story from the late 1960's, lovers Roger Holder and Cathy Kerkow successfully pull off one of the most spectacular hijackings in American history. SC

Leibovich, Mark. *This Town*. Penguin, 2013. \$28. 978-0-399-16130-8. Paper: Blue Rider, 2014. \$16. 978-0399170683. Hilarious send-up of the egocentric nuts and dolts who run things in Washington. ("...the Sir Edmund Hillary of social climbing.") ED

Taibbi, Matt. *The Divide: American Injustice in the Age of the Wealth Gap*. Spiegel & Grau, 2014. \$27. 978-0-8129-9342-4. In his zesty way, Taibbi writes about our two-tiered justice system. Gazillionaires go to Palm Beach, poor folk go to jail. ED\*\*\*

Zevin, Gabrielle. *The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry*. Algonquin Books, 2014. \$25. 978-1616203214.  
An episodic novel with old fashioned appeal: a grumpy bookseller is transformed by love and time. AH

\*\*\* indicates the two top books for each reviewer.

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SC Selene Colburn, Assistant Library Professor, University of Vermont

For an electronic copy of the list, contact Amy.Howlett AT state.vt.us. The reviewers are delighted to have the list recycled as a news article, bookmarks, or other local Vermont vehicle.



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