

for San Jose Mercury-News book page

1806 words

Ivan's Book Club

by Ivan Doig

Call me a dreamer, but in this champagne vision there I am on the old *You Bet Your Life* show with Groucho smirking encouragingly across the microphone at me and putting the question, "All right, bookbrain, for the chance to tell a celebrated audience what to read, not that *our* audience is anything to celebrate--what phenomenon do you get when you spell a Marx Brother backwards?"

Basic nomenclature instinct warns me that Chico, Zeppo, or for that matter Groucho in reverse probably isn't the way to go. Instead I triumphantly utter the key word:

"Oprah!"

The book club example set by Her Airness has been a marvel of sales and readership for deserving novels that were not exactly household titles until Ms. Winfrey spake, "This month, read *this*." In that spirit, here is a suggested twelve-month's worth of literary achievements, some from authors in corners of the world we don't ordinarily look to, some from wordsmiths quietly practicing their magic here among us, but in all dozen cases, remarkable adventures of the written word.

Regeneration, Pat Barker. "Poor old Sass," says one of his fellow soldier-poets early in this fresh imagining of a chapter of history we thought we knew all too well, the mental blight brought on by the stalemated slaughter of World War One.

Siegfried Sassoon, officer and gentleman as well as one of the most renowned of the British war poets, has declared himself "finished with the war," and in a 1917 version of *Catch-22* his act of willful defiance lands him not in the brig but in the medical hands of a psychiatrist, Dr. William Rivers, who has his own doubts about the war.

Novelist Barker tellingly pulls us into the world of this reluctant explorer of the mind, making his rounds of the mentally wounded, mulling his own duty as a humane being: how can he keep sending these men back to the Hell of trench warfare? Yet as a doctor sworn to "cure" them, how can he not?

Balsamroot, Mary Clearman Blew. Just before the current spate of best-selling memoirs that resort to, let us say, accouterments of imagination that used to mark such books as first novels, there appeared this quiet but bone-honest narrative by a ranch-born professor of writing.

The archeology of the niche between generations, call it. Blew tells of finding herself, middle aged and amidst trying to bring about a reconciliation with her adult daughter, abruptly responsible for a favorite aunt with clouds settling on her mind. Blew's piercing details--how do you keep an eye on the sale of a helpless relative's house from hundreds of miles away?--and the simultaneously unfolding story, from family letters, of her aunt's fate-swerved life make this an account that hits home to every grown child.

The Commitments, Roddy Doyle. Warning: dirty words, irrepressible fizzes of them. Doyle's Dublin slum kids use them as unblinking punctuation in this deliriously gabby tale of a wannabe band's attempts to unloose soul music into Ireland. The

conjunction of would-be impresario Jimmy Rabbitte with the delphic trumpeter Joey the Lips Fagan, the amazingly foul-mooded but thunderously vocal-corded singer named Deco, those feisty heartbreakers The Committmentettes, Imelda, Natalie and Bernie, and other incipient soulsters is, as the characters often say in quite a different context, a ride. Doyle can be as much fun to watch as any writer at work today, as when he lays musical energy onto paper in this sample from a Committments rehearsal:

"Derek got to sing too. He'd growl:--WELL DON'T YOU KNOW before Deco sang:

--THAT'S THE SOUND O' THE MEN--

WORKIN' ON THE CHAIN--

GA--EE--ANG...

--HUH, went the girls.

--HAH, went the girls.

--HUH, went the girls.

Derek wrapped it up.

--WELL DON'T YOU--

KNOW."

The Jump-Off Creek, Molly Gloss. If westerns had taken this road, some Louisa L'Amour would have sold a bazillion copies of fiction with a genuine tang of the frontier experience and without gratuitous bang-bang.

In this gritty but beguiling telling, the diarist and homesteader who comes to the Blue Mountains of Oregon in the 1890's is a lone woman named Lydia Sanderson, who has a habit of standing with "her hands up inside her coat sleeves so she looked like a cat that was mad." While there are men around to complicate things, this toughly imagined little novel is very much Lydia's own hard-faceted story.

July's People, Nadine Gordimer. Before the coming of President Mandela and some racial common sense, South Africa's Nobel laureate of literature wrote novel upon novel about the consequences of *apartheid*, her land's accursed "laws made of skin and hair." Some Gordimer works are complicatedly moral, some dauntingly dense (I believe I have been reading *Burger's Daughter* all my adult life), but this one she started like a house afire:

"You like to have some cup of tea?--

July bent at the doorway and began that day for them as his kind has always done for their kind."

As the country goes up in racial smoke the white Smales family take refuge in their black servant July's home village. Misunderstandings and torn loyalties immediately abound, and philosophies of life are jerked down to the level of a struggle over who shall have the keys to the off-road vehicle. It's a political chiller.

The All Of It, Jeannette Haien. Seldom have secrets been so sweetly revealed as in this tale of a trouble-weary County Mayo priest and his most exemplary couple of parishioners, who upon the death of one of them are found not to have been married. Short but exhilarant of language, this is one that tugs at the heart, you betcha, but at the sinews of the heart, the lines of unrequited love and gallant endurance.

After the Lost War, Andrew Hudgins. If the thought ever for a moment crossed your mind that the PBS version of *The Civil War* was somewhat too much the civil anecdotes of Shelby Foote, here is the bracing antidote of art.

Yes, it's poetry. No, it's not highfalutin, obscure, namby-pamby or any of that. What Hudgins achieved in this cycle of poems is a narrative "based on the life of the Georgia-born poet and musician Sidney Lanier." As a young soldier for the Confederacy, Lanier fought in terrible bloodlettings (the poem "Burial Detail" about helping to handle the

multitude of dead on the killing field of the Wilderness reminds us that the unpleasantness between the states was a civil war) but ultimately managed to make verse, music, a loving marriage and a family out of the tricky hands dealt him by life, all the way to facing his final tubercular fate:

“For so long I have thought of us as nails
 God drives into the oak floor of this world
 it’s hard to comprehend the hammer turned
 to claw me out.”

Chronicle in Stone, Ismail Kadare. Let us just listen:

“Outside the winter night had wrapped the city in water, fog, and wind. Buried under my blankets, I listened to the muffled, monotonous sound of rain falling on the roof of our house. I pictured the countless drops rolling down the sloping roof, hurtling to earth to turn to mist that would rise again in the high, white sky. Little did they know that a clever trap, a tin gutter, awaited them on the eaves. Just as they were about to make the leap from roof to ground, they suddenly found themselves caught in the narrow pipe with thousands of companions, asking ‘Where are we going, where are they taking us?’ Then, before they could recover from that mad race, they plummeted into a deep dark underground prison, the great cistern of our house.”

Kadare is one of the recovered treasures out of the Cold War, a world-class writer who for most of his career was sealed away behind the totalitarian boundaries of Albania. The boy who penetrates the life of raindrops and his beleaguered old city that is a chronicle in stone are a rare kind of lyrical imagination.

The Three-Arched Bridge, Ismail Kadare. Kadare is also one of the few writers who can drop into various periods of the past and write their way out. This parable is set in medieval times on a strategic river in the Balkans when a mysterious outfit called “Boats

and Rafts” buys up all the ferries. And then comes an equally mysterious opposing plan to build a bridge. The monk Gjon, pressed into service as translator in these murky doings, recognizes that the tussle is humanity’s endless one, change.

But then Kadare rings in one of his thought-provoking sub-plots: the theft of legends. Who owns a society’s stories, and how are they bent for nefarious purposes? The genesis of the modern Balkan horrors throbs in this story of a very small conflicted place.

The Playmaker, Thomas Keneally. In 1789, the penal colony of Sydney (captives and captors alike dropped Down Under through “an enormous sieve of latitudes and longitudes”) undertakes to celebrate the king’s birthday with a production of “The Recruiting Officer” (“the one play of which two copies existed”).

The cast is of course convicts of varying degrees of duplicity and for that matter literacy, the in-over-his-head director is a homesick young lieutenant of the Royal Marines, the one onlooker who seems to get the play is an Aborigine who doesn’t understand English, on and on this one unfolds, a rich, funny, and serious retelling of history by the prodigious novelist best-known for *Schindler’s List*.

Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller, Judith Thurman. At 495 pages and published 15 years ago, this biography is the longest of this book batch and predates such Dinesen-based movies as *Out of Africa* and *Babette’s Feast*. It remains an exceedingly smart piece of work, cannily following the failed coffee-grower and minor aristocrat Karen Blixen as she takes up pen and pen name and, in that breathtaking moment, finds a timeless voice and begins telling us of her Kenya life where her tame bushbuck Lulu would appear on the lawn and do a darting dance “which looked like a brief zigzagged prayer to Satan.”

Cloudstreet, Tim Winton. Warning: Aussie words. But no harder to translate than, say, the Hucktalk of Mark Twain, whom Tim Winton--now thirty-something--was reading for lingual exuberance and character vitality while his peers were starting to write pale interior reflections of themselves.

Winton's big novel of two unruly families--"mob" indeed seems the proper bit of slang for them--who end up all living together in a sprawly house in Perth is playful, tragic, and chockablock with stuff we never thought of before. Like life is, and literature.

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END

13 Nov. '97

Carol Muller
Book Editor
San Jose Mercury News
750 Ridder Park Road
San Jose CA 95190

phone (408) 920-5825
fax " 271-3786

Dear Carol--

The good news, I hope, is that I was able to crank this out for you in a couple of days at the start of this week. The slightly less good from an editor's point of view is that I haven't been able to get out and check the Marx Bros. bit in the lead. I hope you can run a computer check, maybe on an obit of Groucho, and ~~check~~ verify what we both think we know--

--Groucho's tv quiz program was You Bet Your Life.

--the brothers were indeed Chico, Zeppo, Groucho and Harpo.

The only other favor is to do what you can, please, in rendering the Roddy Doyle quote ~~homewhat~~ as I (and he) have it strung out on the ~~page~~ page; a couple of flush rights, on GA***EE--ANG and the final KNOW, maybe?

I hope this does it for you. When the Ridders reach for their checkbook, my Social Sedurity # is [REDACTED], and please send me a couple of tearsheets, humm?

best wishes,