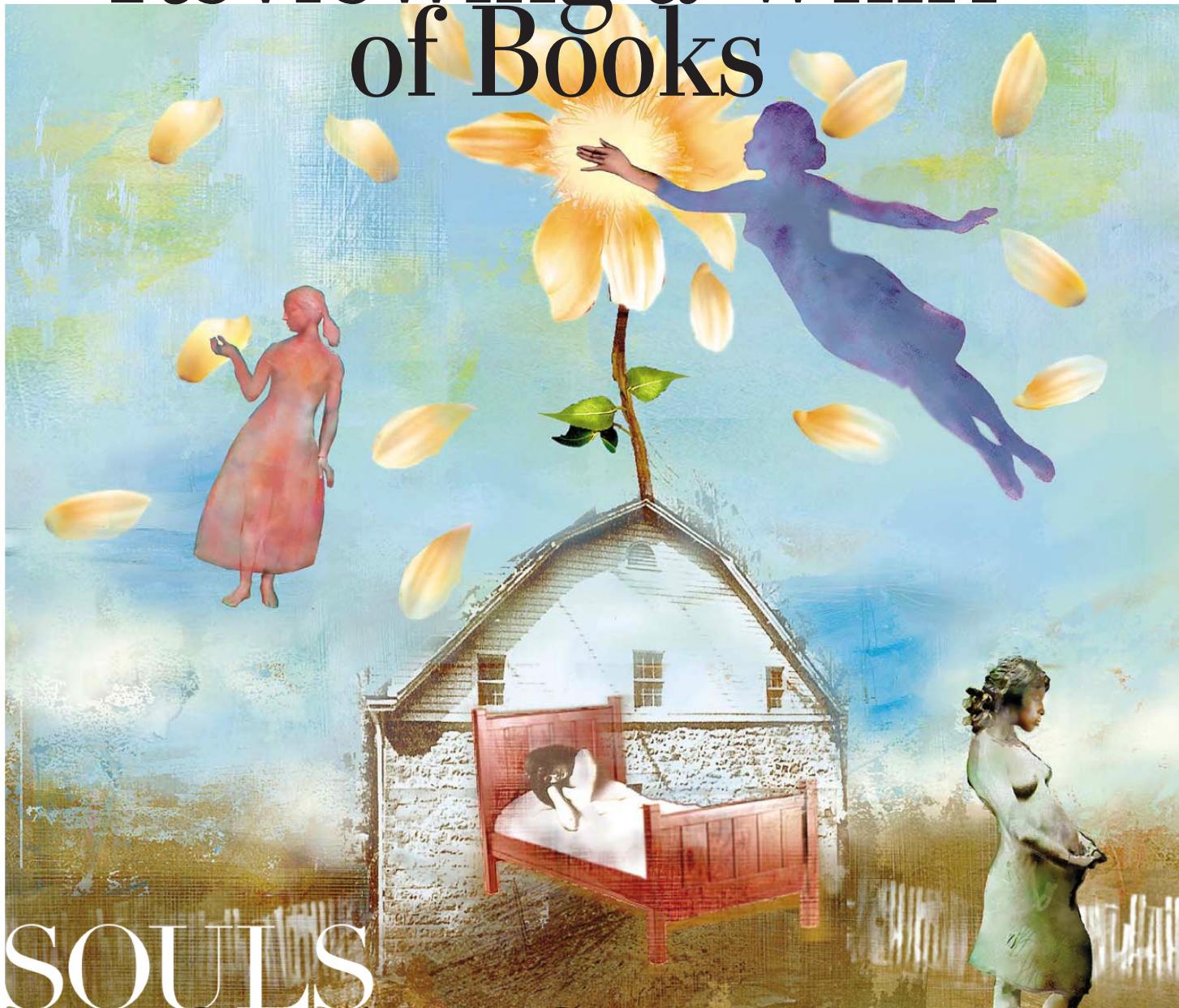


# Reviewing a Whirl of Books



CLEMENTE BOTELHO

## SOULS IN CHAINS

*Study and respond to an author's work from many perspectives – feature, interview and review.*

### INSIDE

**5** The Writing Life

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An Integrated Curriculum For The Washington Post Newspaper In Education Program

## About Reviewing a Whirl of Books

*Book World* is awhirl with possibilities. Book reviews appraise the latest releases and, occasionally, remind us of works that deserve dusting off for a second reading. Works for young adult readers, works of fiction and nonfiction, biography, global affairs, society, science and travel.

The *Book World* staff and guest critics direct busy readers to books that are excellent uses of their time or are questionable purchases. Books that would make great gifts, engage a child or please a Sinophile. Their reviews are mini-lectures, introducing new topics in history, culture, and the arts and sciences to be explored.

In *The Writing Life*, authors share insights, inspirations and demons they have confronted as writers. They tell how a phrase mesmerized, a good pen directed, a translator improved and style developed. *Book World* editor Marie Arana provides a short bio that reveals another dimension of each writer's life.

This guide's content includes book reviews to study as models, a close reading technique, guidelines to writing a book review, and exercises in reading charts and doing online research of publishing companies. *Book World* editors and reviewers chose their ten Best Books of the Year. Three of them are included in these activities — *A Mercy*, *2666* and *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer*.

 A reminder to *Post INSIDE* program teachers: If you plan to use articles in this guide in the e-Replica format more than three months after their publication date, remember to bookmark them to use this school year.

**Lesson:** Writing a book review enhances reading skills; critical thinking; analytic, evaluative and explanatory abilities; and composition fluency.

**Level:** Low to High

**Subjects:** English, Reading

**Related Activity:** Journalism, AP English Language and Composition

### NIE Online Guide

**Editor** — Carol Lange

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### Reviewing a Whirl of Books

Enter Book World where you will discover book reviews, a schedule of reviews to appear in the coming week in the Style section, and writers talking about writing. Online the Book World staff writes a "daily blog, Short Stack, a conversation about literary news, gossip, history and trends" and posts podcasts of interviews. Readers are encouraged to join Michael Dirda's Reading Room, an ongoing discussion of books ([washingtonpost.com/reading room](http://washingtonpost.com/reading room)).

#### Get Acquainted with Authors

Both *Book World* and the Style section of *The Washington Post* provide opportunities to get acquainted with authors through books about and by them, interviews, features such as The Writing Life, and reviews. Collect these for use with your students.

Older students should be encouraged to read the Style section and *Book World*. In addition photo galleries, podcasts and blogs found on [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) enrich the experience.

*KidsPost* includes interviews with authors of children's and young adult works to encourage students to begin the habit of reading and getting acquainted with authors. Two of these features are included in this guide: "Giving Girls a Voice in History," an interview with "American Girl" author Valerie Tripp, and "Inkheart' Comes to an Emotional End," an interview with Cornelia Funke.

The Literary Calendar in *Book World* indicates where and when authors will be reading from their recent works in the D.C. area, most at no cost. Also included are special events such as the annual PEN/Malamud Award Memorial Reading at the Folger Shakespeare Library. These can be great enrichment and beyond-the-classroom experiences for teachers, students and their families. Often students can engage

in dialogue with the author, asking questions and staying after to do a follow-up.

Before or after attending one of these events, students could read the featured work and write a book review. The review might include comments made by the author in his or her opening remarks and Q and A.

In this guide, we provide a pairing that could be done by teachers with other authors that appear in *The Post*: a December 4, 2008, feature and the November 9, 2008, *Book World* review. Toni Morrison is the only living American Nobel laureate in literature. In "Window to the Soulful" *Post* writer Bob Thompson interviews Morrison who has published a new book, *A Mercy*.

To add another dimension to the study: On [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com), teachers can also download, the first chapter of the novel to do a close reading, discuss style and consider Morrison's establishment of time, setting and characters. Also use the podcast of a *Book World* interview and view a photo gallery.

#### Read a Chart

"Washington Area Bestsellers," near the back of *Book World*,

### The Write Word

Having a pool of words to consider when writing a book review can be very helpful. These terms were used more than once in Book World reviews.

- Accessible
- Attempt
- Competent
- Conventional
- Credible, credibility
- Discrepancy
- Droll
- Excruciating
- Exemplary
- Flaw, flawed
- Genre
- Imaginative, imaginable
- Inconsistent
- Interweaving
- Juxtaposition
- Lucid
- Miss, near-hit, winner
- Narrative
- Nuanced
- One-dimensional
- Ostensibly
- Over-simplification
- Protagonist
- Sentimental
- Setting
- Slow-paced
- Strategy
- Style, stylistic, stylist, stylings
- Syntax
- Trenchant

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charts ten bestsellers in each of four categories: Paperback Fiction, Paperback Nonfiction/General, Hardcover Fiction and Hardcover Nonfiction/General. Discuss the organization of the chart with students.

Before sending students to this page in the current *Book World*, you might use the reproducible found in this guide: "Focus on Washington Area BESTSELLERS," one of the four charts found in this standing column. Note the format and information provided. Teachers might also spend more time discussing the two- to ten-word teaser, a short note that captures an aspect of the book.

Give students "What Books Are People in the D.C. Metropolitan Area Buying?" Answers are found at the end of these lesson suggestions. This reproducible might be used to enhance reading or as a quiz following discussion of the charts.

In addition to the questions found in the reproducible, you could discuss:

- Distinguish "paperback" and "hardcover." Are books reprinted as paperback after being popular hardcover titles? Which types of books are more likely to begin as paperback books?
  - Some of the top sellers have been on the chart for many weeks and others are new. What factors might keep a book more than 90 weeks on the bestseller list?
  - Which three books have been on the Washington Area Bestsellers list more weeks than any others? Why might so many people in the D.C. area have purchased these titles?
- In what ways does the teaser provide information beyond what the title provides? (If the title and other information fill three lines, no teaser is provided.)
  - What information is provided in the key at the bottom of the chart? What validity is added to the information knowing the source is an outside company?
  - Why is the information provided in the charts helpful to busy readers?
- Before writing a book review, students could be asked to write a chart entry for the books they have read. This would be a lesson in brevity and finding the right word as well as following a format. After the entries are completed, students could determine the categories for the charts (or use *The Post's* categories) and classify their books.

### Learn More About Publishing

Use the information in the "Washington Area Bestsellers" charts or have students compile a list of publishers of the books reviewed in *Book World*. Do small publishing houses as well as large ones have titles on the lists?

Divide students into groups to complete a Web search to learn more about the publishing companies. Give each group three to four book companies to research. After completing the online inquiry, classify the publishers.

Contact a published author or a writers group in your community for a guest speaker. Topics would include how to get started as a published author, the benefits/ drawbacks of smaller versus a large publishing company and self-

### Read About It

Dillard, Annie

**The Writing Life**

Harper Perennial. 1990

Hass, Robert

**Now & Then: The Poet's Choice**

**Columns, 1997-2000**

Counterpoint. 2008

King, Stephen

**On Writing**

Pocket. 2002

Paris Review

**The Paris Review Interviews II**

Picador. 2007

Prose, Francine

**Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them**

Harper Perennial. 2007

*New York Times*

**Writers on Writing, Volume II: More**

**Collected Essays from The New York Times**

Times Books. 2004

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publishing/vanity press, and advice on overcoming writer's block.

### Compare and Contrast Bestseller Charts

Buy or go online to locate the best-seller book charts of other newspapers.

Compare and contrast the information found in the keys to their sales charts. For example, *The New York Times Book Review* key to its Best Sellers charts gives more information on the source of its national book buying data. This includes those books that are not included ("perennial sellers; required classroom reading; text, reference and test preparation guides," for example). *The Boston Globe* lists the Boston-area booksellers whose sales figures are used.

Group students to gather data from their particular assigned publication.

Discussion may include:

- Do the charts provide the same number of best selling books?
- Do some books appear in the top five of all charts?
- In what ways may demographics influence buyers' selections? Local authors or subject matter? Political or international issues? For example, why may Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals* make *The Boston Globe* bestseller list before other papers' lists? Why had *The San Francisco Chronicle* listed *The Kite Runner* months before any other paper?

### Introduce Book Reviews to Young Readers

The author interviews in *KidsPost* and "My Book Review," found in this NIE guide, help

students to think about a book's content and readers.

*Book World* provides a column, "For Young Readers," that gives short reviews of recent releases. These are often presented in a thematic grouping. Teachers who use the e-Replica format could bookmark these columns for students to read and select a book for a book talk. *Book World* also produces Children's Issues.

Many approaches could be taken with these books. For example, the November 30, 2008, For Young Readers column introduced four books on the theme of "teens tried by war, murder and prep school." Four to 12 students could select from these books to read, discuss the shared book and present their books to the whole class.

Teachers might also provide students with a list of young adult works from which to select a book to read. Students could be asked to follow the short review model for format, content and length.

### Study a Book Review

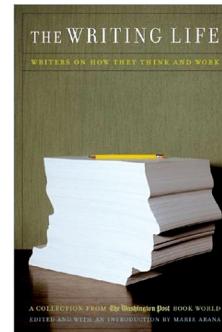
The purpose of a book review is to let the reader know if a book will be worth the price and the time to read it, based upon the reader's knowledge and interests. It provides a quick overview of contemporary considerations, a comparison with books on the same subject or genre and a sense of the writer's style.

Collect sample professional reviews from Sunday's *The Washington Post Book World* or from daily newspapers. For your convenience, several are included in this guide. In addition to the Toni Morrison book review referred to earlier, read reviews written by two of the best critics in the

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## The Writing Life

*Book World* editor Marie Arana conceived a column written by writers about their writing experience. The Writing Life is the first continuous series of its kind in an American newspaper.



Arana writes in the introduction to *The Writing Life*, a collection of selections from the column: "If you strive to become a real writer, an original, you need to be told clearly: There is no magic formula. ... But if readers carry away one lesson from this book it should be that writers learn their craft, above all, from the work of other writers. From reading."

### The Writing Life

#### Writers on How They Think and Work

A Collection from  
The Washington Post Book World  
Edited and with an introduction  
by Marie Arana  
Public Affairs. 2003

The collection is divided into six parts: On Becoming a Writer; Raw Material; Hunkering Down; Old Bottle, New Wine; Facing the Facts; and Looking Back. Authors include Joyce Carol Oates, Nadine Gordimer, Ntozake Shange, Julia Alvarez, Patricia Cornwell, Ray Bradbury, Umberto Eco, Richard Selzer, David Halberstam, Tracy Kidder, Bill McKibben, Frances Fitzgerald and Jane Smiley.

Encourage your students to collect this year's The Writing Life columns. At the end of the year, have them select their top ten to bind into their Best Insights on Writing From a Writer collection. Each student should write an introduction on being a writer.

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country: Michael Dirda's review of *The Journal of Hélène Berr* and Jonathan Yardley's reviews of *The Man Who Invented Christmas* and *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer*.

In addition to being models of review writing, the Dirda review introduces a book that would make an excellent companion to a study of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and the Holocaust; the Yardley interviews introduce works that provide insight into the life of Charles Dickens and self-publishing, and another perspective on Abraham Lincoln whose 200th birthday anniversary will be celebrated in 2009.

"Close Reading: Book Reviews" is provided to use as an introduction to book review writing and the content found in reviews. The opening and closing paragraphs of one work are given to call attention to setting up the review and how the evaluation of the author and his work can be re-enforced and expanded in the closing.

The second page of "Close Reading: Book Reviews" could be done in class using the symbols found in "Review a Book Review." This could also be used as a quiz or instrument to assess students' understanding of the components of a book review.

Give three to five students the same book review. Provide all students with a copy of "Review a Book Review." Students are to complete steps 1-5 on their own. Note: Teachers may have used the suggested markings in step 1 with "Close Reading: Book Reviews" in order to familiarize students with the symbols.

When the worksheet is completed, group students who have read

the same book review. They may discuss:

- The book's plot. Do they agree on the main elements?
- The theme, message and genre of the work. Is the reviewer clear in communicating this information?
- Which quotation from the book or paraphrase of the reviewer was most effective in communicating the book's theme, time period, or quality?

After students have read and discussed four or five reviews, have them list the components of the review or outline the review. Discuss these elements and the structure of the review.

After discussion, assign the book review.

### Compare and Contrast Book Reviews

Book reviews from other newspapers may be found online to compare and contrast how the same book is evaluated, which quotations were selected and how the reviewer organized the material. Book reviews may be found on these sites:

*ALA Booklist, Review of the Day* ([www.booklistonline.com/](http://www.booklistonline.com/))

*The Los Angeles Times* ([www.latimes.com/features/books/](http://www.latimes.com/features/books/)),

*The Oregonian* ([blog.oregonlive.com/books/book\\_reviews/](http://blog.oregonlive.com/books/book_reviews/)),

*San Francisco Chronicle* ([www.sfgate.com/books/](http://www.sfgate.com/books/))

*The Boston Globe* ([www.boston.com/ae/books/](http://www.boston.com/ae/books/))

*USA Today* ([www.usatoday.com/books](http://www.usatoday.com/books))

*The Washington Post* ([www.washingtonpost.com/books](http://washingtonpost.com/books))

This approach can also be used to prepare students to write their own book reviews.

## Pulitzer Prize in Criticism

*Awarded since 1970, the award for distinguished criticism covers a wide spectrum of subjects — from art, architecture, books, drama and film, to music and visual arts. The following writers have won recognition for their book reviews.*

*The newspapers listed indicate where they worked at the time of the award.*

1998 Michiko Kakutani,  
*The New York Times*

1995 Margo Jefferson,  
*The New York Times*

1993 Michael Dirda,  
*The Washington Post*

1987 Richard Eder,  
*Los Angeles Times*

1981 Jonathan Yardley,  
*The Washington Star*

1977 William McPherson,  
*The Washington Post*

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If the class is reading the same book, group students to give feedback to the first draft of the student-written book reviews. When all book reviews have received peer review, the group can discuss the different organizational structures, the effectiveness of selected passages and final evaluation of the book.

### **Write a Book Review**

Instead of the usual book report or literary analysis, ask your students to write a review of the books they are reading.

After using one or more of the

above approaches to familiarize students with the purpose, content and organization of book reviews, give students "Guidelines for Writing a Book Review." This handout should re-enforce what was discussed in class and discovered during the reading of book reviews. This sheet can also be used as a checklist for students as they write their book reviews.

To be sure students are writing for audience, teachers may specify or may ask them to specify the publication in which the review will appear. Require that students follow the same format for reviews used in the specified publication. ■

### **ANSWERS**

"What Books Are People in the D.C. Metropolitan Area Buying?"

1. The key indicates the "week ended" date. Have students provide the beginning through end dates.
2. Nielsen BookScan.
3. Number 1 has the highest sales in that period.
4. Title (publisher, price), author and brief summary.
5. Price influences whether a reader will buy a book or go to the library.
6. Answers will vary by week used.
7. Answers will vary.
8. Summaries typically are 8 to 10 words, but may be as short as 2 words.
9. Each entry has a three-line limit. The teaser is the first to go.
10. Number of weeks on the list.
11. Answers will vary.
12. D.C. is a political town, people are literate with varied interests.

### **The Reviewer**

The book reviewer loves books. And ideas.

Reviews require knowledge. Of the expectations of a genre, of other works by the author and of other author's books on the same subject. How the reviewer presents knowledge influences the tone of the reviews.

The writer does research. Reporting may be required to support the arguments presented.

He reads books, especially the books he is reviewing.

The reviewer is a guide. She selects quotations from the book to relate the rhythm of the work and author's style.

She paraphrases and summarizes ideas. He describes the plot, interprets a symbol or places it within the context of timeless themes. These passages support ideas, glimpse scenes and characters, and intrigue a reader to read more.

The reviewer uses concrete language.

The review writer uses figurative language and imagery.

The reviewer reveals herself. Her preferences, background, knowledge and reasoning.

The reviewer isn't hesitant to make an evaluation.

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# Giving Girls a Voice in History

## 'American Girl' Author Valerie Tripp Has Made Characters From the Past Come Alive for Young Readers



SUSAN BIDDLE — THE WASHINGTON POST  
**Author Valerie Tripp**

*As the author of more than 50 "American Girl" books, Valerie Tripp knows a lot about bringing characters to life. But the Silver Spring writer was not quite prepared for seeing the adventures of her character Kit played out on the big screen of movie theaters. With *Kit Kittredge: An American Girl* out on DVD next week, KidsPost's Tracy Grant caught up with Tripp to talk to her about the movie, her writing and her favorite American Girl.*

• Originally Published October 22, 2008  
**How did it feel to see your characters on screen?**

"It's a very strange experience. It's very unusual to hear words that you've heard in your head spoken and brought to life in motion, color and music on that giant screen."

**Kit Kittredge lives through the Great Depression. What lessons can kids today — given the uncertain economic times — learn from her?**

"Kit's story is very much my mother's story. ... Usually I just invent the characters, and their stories are shaped by the main problem of the time. In the case of Kit, I had been listening to my mother's stories for my whole childhood. Her father lost his job. To keep their house, my mother and her mother became cooks and maids and took in boarders. My mother had to move out of her room into the attic, which Kit did. But my mother found that the people who moved into her house ... changed and enriched her life in ways she had not foreseen. Sometimes something

that appears to be a loss actually leads to a gain that you never would have had.

"The absolutely crucial message of the Kit books is that ... the most important thing that you have ... is your family. Though the circumstances of your life may change, that most important thing — the love of your family and friends — won't change. It may strengthen."

**You write about girls who live during World War II (Molly), the American Revolution (Felicity), New Mexico during the 1800s (Josefina), who is your favorite — or at least what's your favorite time in history?**

"Whoever I'm writing about at the time! I get to live in that time and soak up the music, the fabric, the fashion of that time. Since I just finished a book about Ruthie, I'm very much into the period of the 1930s now. When you write, it allows you to have a personality that you wouldn't have. For example, Felicity is much braver than I would be. You can create your best self and send that self out into adventures."



CYLLA VON TIEDMANN  
**Abigail Breslin stars in *Kittredge: An American Girl*, based on Tripp's books about the Depression-era girl.**

**What's the hardest part of writing?**

"When I go to schools to talk to kids I bring a manuscript that I have that is filled with big Xs through whole pages, things circled in red, Post-it notes sticking out. It's hard when you've worked on something that hard and you hear that [the publisher] isn't going to use it ... but writing requires a lot of patience. You wouldn't stop playing soccer because you get tired or thirsty. Sometimes the things that are hard for us give the most back to us. But that moment is still very hard." ■

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# 'Inkheart' Comes To An Emotional End

*Cornelia Funke Hopes The Conclusion Of Her Trilogy Can Prepare Kids For Life's Sorrows*

• Originally Published October 8, 2008

It might surprise you to learn that Cornelia Funke doesn't want all her young fans reading her newest book, *Inkdeath*.

"I always meant it for an older audience," said the German-born writer, who lives in California. *Inkdeath* is the last book in her *Inkheart* trilogy.

"I think children should start with *Inkheart* when they're about 8, move on to *Inkspell* when they're 11 and wait until they're 13 for *Inkdeath*," she says.

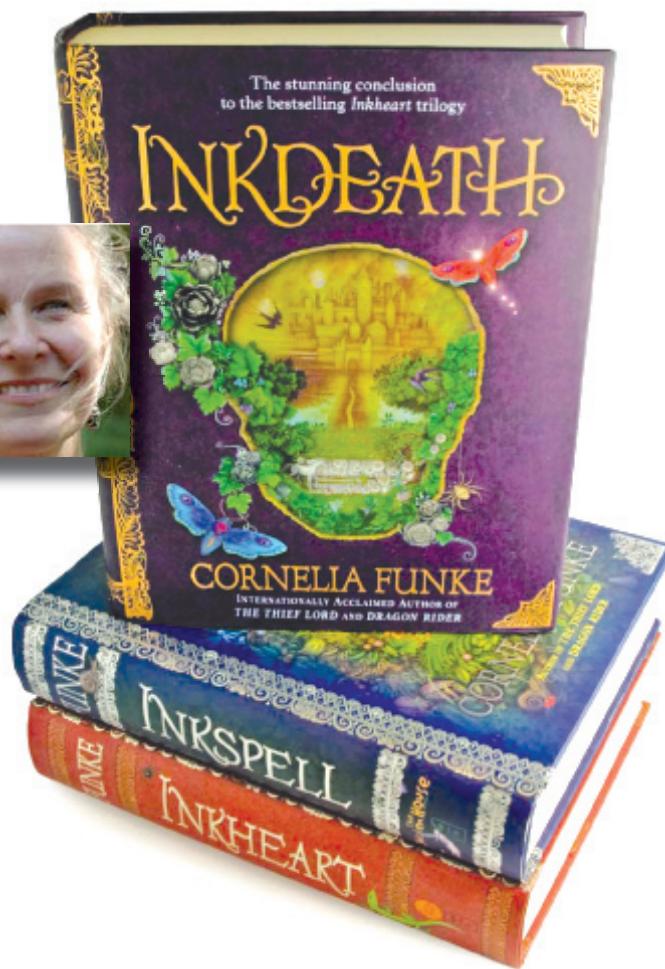
The trilogy tells the story of a girl named Meggie and her father, Mo, who share the unusual talent of being able to read themselves into stories. It's as magical as it sounds, but the outcomes aren't always the stuff of fairy tales.

When Mo reads from a book called *Inkheart*, some characters wind up in Meggie and Mo's world and some, specifically Meggie's mother, wind up in the Ink World.

Funke called the first book, which wasn't originally intended to be part of a series, "a love letter to all those readers as enchanted by books as I am." When *Inkheart* became a huge success and Funke realized she had more that she wanted the characters to do and say, she wrote *Inkspell*, which had a cliffhanger ending.

Readers delighted by Funke's fantasy world, with its horrible villains and fire-dancing heroes, have been eagerly awaiting the final installment.

So why is Funke warning young readers off? Well, the title gives a big hint. Death is a major theme in this book, and its plot and themes are more complicated than those of the earlier books.



SABINE HALBHEER  
Author Cornelia Funke, above.

"I have had 8- or 9-year-olds come up to me at book signings and tell me how much they love the book," Funke says. "So I don't want to say that no children that age can read it and understand it." But she says she prefers to think of the book as a way for older children to prepare for life's inevitable sorrows.

What happens in *Inkdeath*, she says, "is a shadow of what will come in life. They can practice on the pages."

Funke, 49, knows about sadness. Her husband, the father of her two children, died just before she finished the book.

"What I wanted to show is my concept of death. I was never in my life afraid of death," she says. "What's really hard is the loss of those we love. How can we

live with the fact that we may lose the most precious things we know in life? We never really lose them. ... They become layers of our heart."

The end of *Inkdeath* leaves open the possibility that Funke will return to the Ink World one day, but what she's really excited about is another series of books she's working on, featuring a character she calls Jacob Wreckless. The books start out in the real world but move quickly into the realm of fairy tales and gingerbread houses.

And for the youngest Funke fans not ready for *Inkdeath*, there's a long list of titles meant just for them. At the top of her list, and ours, is *Dragon Rider*. ■

— Tracy Grant

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## My Book Review

When you read a book, you meet characters, learn about other cultures and time periods, and go on adventures. If you liked the book, you want other students to read it. If you did not like the book, you will not recommend it.

*Complete the following sentences to tell other students about the book you read. When you are finished, you will have written a book review.*

1. The name of the book is \_\_\_\_\_.

2. The author of the book is \_\_\_\_\_.

3. A character you would like/not like in the book is \_\_\_\_\_.

4. I think this about him/her because \_\_\_\_\_

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5. The main idea of the book is \_\_\_\_\_

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6. The most interesting part of the book takes place when \_\_\_\_\_

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7. I liked/did not like the way the author wrote the book. A good quotation from the book to illustrate this is \_\_\_\_\_

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8. I think you would/would not like reading this book. I state this because \_\_\_\_\_

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**WASHINGTON AREA BESTSELLERS**

# What Books Are People in the D.C. Metropolitan Area Buying?

*The Washington Post Book World* each Sunday has a standing column called Washington Area Bestsellers. It charts the ten top books purchased in each of four categories: Paperback Fiction, Paperback Nonfiction/General, Hardcover Fiction and Hardcover Nonfiction/General.

*Find and read this column in Book World. Answer the following questions.*

1. The figures represent sales over what dates?
2. What company provides *The Post* with the sales data?
3. Titles are ranked from 1 to 10. What number is the top seller of the specified week?
4. What information is provided for each book?
5. Why is it important to list the price of the book?
6. Which of the publishers has the most titles on the charts?
7. Review all four charts. Does any author have more than one bestseller? If yes, name him/her/them and the book titles.
8. What is the average word count in the book note or “teaser”?
9. Why might a book not have a note or “teaser”?
10. What information does the right-hand column of numbers provide?
11. Which three books have been on the “Washington Area Bestsellers” charts more weeks than any others?
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
12. Why might so many people in the D.C. area have purchased these titles?

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**WASHINGTON AREA  
BESTSELLERS**

What is the impact of getting a positive review? It might not sell more than ten more books or it can increase awareness to encourage 100 people to buy the book. Most of Oprah's TV Book Club selections rapidly joined the bestseller lists.

Getting on a bestseller list may require being a known author (think Stephen King, John Grisham and David Baldacci), having a TV or movie tie-in or winning an election. Receiving word-of-mouth recommendations often reflects an original subject, an appealing adventure or animal, or a glimpse into an unknown world.

Whatever the reason, placement on a bestseller list encourages an author and pays the bills.

*Label the components  
of a bestseller listing.*

Paperback

NONFICTION/GENERAL

1	<b>THREE CUPS OF TEA: ONE MAN'S MISSION TO PROMOTE PEACE</b> (Penguin, \$15) By Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin	57
2	<b>EAT PRAY LOVE: ONE WOMAN'S SEARCH FOR EVERYTHING ACROSS ITALY, INDIA AND INDONESIA</b> (Penguin, \$15). By Elizabeth Gilbert	66
3	<b>THE AUDACITY OF HOPE: THOUGHTS ON RECLAIMING THE AMERICAN DREAM</b> (Three Rivers, \$14.95). By Barack Obama	23
4	<b>DREAMS FROM MY FATHER: A STORY OF RACE AND INHERITANCE</b> (Three Rivers, \$14.95) By Barack Obama. The senator's 1995 memoir.	98
5	<b>MARLEY &amp; ME: LIFE AND LOVE WITH THE WORLD'S WORST DOG</b> (Harper, \$13.95) By John Grogan. For the love of an unruly Labrador.	10
6	<b>EINSTEIN: HIS LIFE AND UNIVERSE</b> (Simon & Schuster, \$17.95). By Walter Isaacson An incisive look at the man behind the science.	1
7	<b>ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MIRACLE: A YEAR OF FOOD LIFE</b> (HarperPerennial, \$14.95) By Barbara Kingsolver et al. Homegrown joys.	3
8	<b>JOHN ADAMS</b> (Simon & Schuster, \$20) By David McCullough. The movie tie-in edition (HBO Films) of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book.	16
9	<b>LONE SURVIVOR: THE EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF OPERATION REDWING ...</b> (Back Bay, \$15.95) By Marcus Luttrell et al. The Navy SEALs' Team 10.	3
10	<b>OBAMA: FROM PROMISE TO POWER</b> (Amistad, \$14.95). By David Mendell A Chicago Tribune reporter takes a hard look.	1



Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Review a Book Review**

1. Do a close reading of the book review with markers in hand.

- Mark quotations with one color.
- In another color, highlight where the reviewer paraphrases or summarizes the author's ideas. Label as "paraphrase" or "summary."
- Underline where a comparison is made with another author's work or another work by the same author
- Box direct statements of positive evaluation.
- Bracket statements of negative evaluation.

2. List words with which you are unfamiliar on a separate sheet. Define the words.

3. Using the information provided by the reviewer, summarize the book's plot

4. Using the information provided by the reviewer, state the message, a theme or the place of this work in its genre.

5. Do you think you would like to read this book? Why or why not?

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Close Reading: Book Reviews

### **2666**

By Roberto Bolaño

Translated from the Spanish by Natasha Wimmer

Farrar Straus Giroux. 898 pp. \$30

Reviewed by Steven Moore

#### **OPENING PARAGRAPH**

The Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño died in 2003 at the relatively young age of 50, but since then a steady stream of English translations has introduced American readers to the Gabriel García Márquez of our time: politically engaged, formally daring and wildly imaginative. *The Savage Detectives*, a huge novel published last year to wide acclaim, looked like his masterpiece, but now comes a monstrous novel twice as long and daring, and one that should cement his reputation as a world-class novelist.

#### **CLOSING PARAGRAPH**

With *2666* Bolaño joins the ambitious overachievers of the 20th-century novel, those like Proust, Musil, Joyce, Gaddis, Pynchon and Vollmann, who push the novel far past its conventional size and scope to encompass an entire era, deploying encyclopedic knowledge and stylistic verve to offer a grand, if sometimes idiosyncratic summation of their culture and the novelist's place in it. Bolaño has joined the immortals.

.....

### **BLOOD RIVER**

#### **A Journey to Africa's Broken Heart**

By Tim Butcher

Grove. 363 pp. \$25

Reviewed by Kira Salak

#### **CLOSING PARAGRAPH**

What we don't learn about, however, is Butcher's own inner experience. "The reader of a good travel book is entitled not only to an exterior voyage ... but to an interior, a sentimental, or temperamental voyage," wrote travel writer and novelist Norman Douglas. *Blood River* succeeds admirably as reportage, but not as essay. If the author comes to any personal revelations by the end of his grueling trip, we're not privy to them; the result is disappointingly one-dimensional. Readers must decide what they want from a travel book, and whether this one's thorough interweaving of history, geography and politics makes up for its lack of introspection.

#### **ABOUT THE REVIEW WRITERS**

Steven Moore, the author of several books and essays on modern literature, is writing a history of the novel.

Kira Salak is the author of the novel *The White Mary* and the nonfiction travel book *The Cruelest Journey: 600 Miles to Timbuktu*.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Close Reading: Book Reviews | *continued*

In the following excerpt from a book review find and label the following:

Context    Evaluation    Summary    Thesis of work

Author's background    Reviewer's credentials    Quotation

**BEYOND TOLERANCE**  
**Searching for Interfaith**  
**Understanding in America**

By Gustav Niebuhr

Viking, 218 pp. \$25.95

Review by Matt Welch,  
*editor in chief of Reason magazine*

The thesis of Gustav Niebuhr's book could fit on an index card: In order to build a more peaceful world, humans need to move beyond mere tolerance of one another's differences and engage in direct, open-minded acts of interfaith dialogue and understanding. Extending that simple insight over 218 pages is challenge enough. But doing so without lapsing into either ecumenical banality or religious favoritism proves too daunting a task, even for a writer of Niebuhr's talents.

A former religion reporter for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, now an associate professor of religion and media at Syracuse University, Niebuhr experienced something of a slow-motion revelation a few months after Sept. 11. Sent to cover what he and many others feared might become a wave of "backlash attacks" against Muslims and brown-skinned people, he slowly realized that something closer to the opposite was taking place. ...

As one of the country's most experienced religious commentators and the grandson and great-nephew, respectively, of the legendary theologians H. Richard Niebuhr and Reinhold Niebuhr — Gustav Niebuhr came to this moment of spontaneous cross-faith communication with an impressive historical grounding and reportorial rigor. "It is a new activity in the world, and entirely new phenomenon in our history," he writes. "It is a social good, a basis for hope, and a tendency that ought to be nurtured and cultivated."

*Beyond Tolerance* is at its best detailing acts of kindness and exploration between members of putatively competing religions. ... [The reviewer lists examples from the book and then summarizes Neibuhr's two examples of "two under-appreciated events in October 1965 that dramatically increased pluralism in the country that made religious freedom famous.]

Niebuhr, who writes with an elegant, almost anguished austerity, clearly intends .... But he has no room in this discussion for another group of people who decry militant fundamentalism: atheists and agnostics. ...

The author's biggest and most frustrating blind spot, though, is his propensity to blame, rather than credit, President Bush for his role in shaping the tone of the debate after Sept. 11. ...

... Niebuhr has made an important contribution by observing that America, through good-faith exchange between liberty-loving believers, has come a long way indeed. ■

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Guidelines for Writing a Book Review**

The purpose of a book review is to let the reader know if a book will be worth the price and the time to read it, based upon the reader's knowledge and interests. It provides a quick overview of contemporary issues, a comparison with books on the same subject or genre and a sense of the writer's style.

*When writing the book review, consider the following:*

1. Determine the audience for whom the book review is intended. Is this book for young readers, a general audience or someone in a very specific discipline or area of interest?
  
  
  
  
2. Provide most of the basic elements of the review:
  - Name of the book and author
  - Cost of the book (hardcover or paperback)
  - Publisher
  - Brief summary of the work. Do not disclose the ending if this information will ruin reading the work.
  - Author's education and/or family background
  - Author's experience or expertise that would make him a reliable or believable author for this particular genre (an astronaut or former President, sixth generation Bostonian, 12th mystery written by this best selling author)
  - Comparison with the author's other works or books of the same genre by other authors
  - Expectations of readers of this genre
  - Carefully selected quotations from the work that reveal the author's style and level of language as well as support the reviewer's claims
  
3. Clearly establish your evaluation of the book
  
  
  
  
4. Meet the purpose of a book review
  
  
  
  
5. Does the author use figurative language or allusions? For example, if reference is made to "the Gabriel García Márquez of our time" or "the original Transjordan was an afterthought in the redistribution of the Ottoman Empire's Arab territories," what are the historic roots of these allusions? What do the allusions add to the flavor of the review when quoted or used in the review? Do they support one of the concepts presented by the author?
  
  
  
  
6. Consider the author's use of diction. What level of vocabulary is used? Is it appropriate for the intended audience? In addition to words that might appear in a SAT-prep list, what if the reviewer uses idiomatic terms?

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**FICTION**

# Souls in Chains

**A MERCY**

By Toni Morrison

Knopf. 167 pp. \$23.95

Reviewed by **Ron Charles**

• *Originally Published Sunday,  
November 9, 2008*

Toni Morrison's new novel, *A Mercy*, makes a spellbinding companion to *Beloved*, her 1987 tour de force that transformed our understanding of slavery and won the Pulitzer Prize. Her old themes rise up in *A Mercy* like a fever dream: the horrible sacrifice a mother makes to protect her child, the deadly vanity of benevolent slaveholders, the abandonment of a past too painful to remember. But this is a smaller, more delicate novel, a fusion of mystery, history and longing that stands alongside *Beloved* as a unique triumph in Morrison's body of work.

The lush poetry and amorphous structure of *A Mercy* reflect the story's distant setting in the mist of America's creation, when independence and the three-fifths compromise of the Constitution were still a century away. The four abandoned women at the center of this novel — one white, one Native American and two black — are all enslaved in some way, struggling to maintain their precarious life together on a failing farm in the late 17th century when the New World's traditions of slavery are fresh and fluid.

Summarizing the plot does a certain amount of violence to the novel's self-conscious obscurity, its determination to keep us off balance amid dazzling impressions. The opening chapter, in particular, is a swirl of references to people and events we can't comprehend. (*Beloved*, remember, began with the



TIMOTHY GREENFIELD-SANDERS

enigmatic words, "124 was spiteful.") Morrison relies heavily on the allure of her imagery, perhaps even on the deference afforded by her Nobel Prize. At this point in her career, she doesn't have to give up meanings any more easily than Faulkner or Joyce did, and like their work, *A Mercy* conveys powerful emotional effects even when it leaves us struggling for sure footing. "Don't be afraid," a narrator begins. "You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments

when a dog's profile plays in the steam of a kettle."

Jacob Vaark, a small-scale trader who was raised in an orphanage, inherited 120 acres in upstate New York from an uncle he'd never met. He considers slavery "the most wretched business" and insists that "flesh was not his commodity," but he works out a moral equation that allows him to make money as a financier to slaveholders. As we've seen before, Morrison writes with the kind of psychological nuance that turns her

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characters' souls to clear glass: An early scene shows Vaark sneering "at wealth dependent on a captured workforce," even while he profits from it. He eventually makes a fortune, all the while imagining that he's kept himself above "whips, chains and armed overseers." It's a brilliant portrayal of the expedient allowances people make to preserve their sense of purity and self-reliance.

When he began farming, Vaark purchased a 14-year-old Native American named Lina who lost her village to a smallpox epidemic. She's a determined survivor, traumatized first by the death of her family, then by the Presbyterians who "civilize" her. "Terrified of being alone in the world," Morrison writes, "Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies. She learned that bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them was theft; that to eat corn mush with one's fingers was perverse."

Morrison turns the issue of servitude over and over in fascinating ways. This was, after all, a time before the spectrum of slavery had resolved into black and white. Almost everyone is for sale, and their relations with one another are bound by customs and laws still evolving. Together, Vaark and Lina manage his farm as best they can with an odd kind of mutual respect, but it is "an unrewarding life" until Vaark buys a wife from England, and again the results are surprising. "Rebekka's sheer good fortune in a husband stunned her," Morrison writes. "Already sixteen, she knew her father would have shipped her off to anyone who would book her passage and relieve him of feeding her ... the stubborn one, the one with too many questions and a rebellious mouth." Vaark also takes in a strange young woman named Sorrow, and as partial payment for a debt, he acquires a slave girl named Florens. The only character who narrates

her own chapters, Florens serves as the emotional engine of the novel and the mystery at its core.

"They were orphans, each and all," Morrison writes. The real triumph of *A Mercy* is its portrayal of the moral ambiguity of these relationships. There are no easy judgments here. Vaark may be compromised by his financial entanglements with slavery, but he's a benevolent patriarch who gives safety to a cast of women who would have no security elsewhere in this place, surrounded by howling wilderness and settlements of religious zealots.

What's happened and what's happening become clear only as several chapters confirm the scrambled chronology of these events: Jacob Vaark has died of smallpox and now his wife, Rebekka, is close to death, too. The farm, their little Eden in the lawless forest, is suddenly threatened with collapse, which can only mean something far worse for its female residents. Morrison depicted the plight of an isolated women's compound in *Paradise* in 1997, but in this more impressionistic novel she captures the state of powerless women contending for survival in a civilization that would not stabilize for decades. Without a master, they are all at risk; without even a white mistress, they would have no chance.

"Sir and Mistress believed they could have honest free-thinking lives," Lina thinks with a sigh. "Their drift away from others produced a selfish privacy and they had lost the refuge and the consolation of a clan. ... Pride alone made them think they needed only themselves, could shape life that way, like Adam and Eve, like gods from nowhere beholden to nothing except their own creations." Most of the novel takes place as Rebekka lies dying, Lina cares for her, and Sorrow asserts herself — all three women remembering their lives before and with Vaark. But the heart of the novel is young Florens. She's sent off to find a blacksmith, a free black man who once worked on Vaark's property and may be able to heal

Rebekka. For Florens, it's a chance not just to escape but to reunite with him. She propels herself through a frightening travail in the wilderness with an ardent, irrepressible monologue, much of it directed to her absent lover. Her voice is the most demanding but rewarding in the novel, thick with raw poetry and passion. "I never before see leaves make this much blood and brass," she says. "Color so loud it hurts the eye and for relief I must stare at the heavens high above the tree line."

She's sometimes unhinged — sympathetic one moment, animalistic the next. "These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves," Florens says, and in the most mesmerizing sections of the novel, all we can do is listen to her incantations, the voice of a young woman consumed with yearning. "I dream a dream that dreams back at me," she says. "Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. ... I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last."

What a strange, affecting story, flowing through an astonishing range of emotions. And consider that all this takes place in just 167 pages, shorter than her far less complicated first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Morrison, who has written so powerfully of catastrophe, cruelty and horror, here adds to that song of tragedy equally thrilling chords of desire and wonder, which in their own way are no less tragic. Whereas *Beloved* ends with the cathartic exhaustion of an exorcism, *A Mercy* concludes with an ambiguous kind of prayer, redolent with possibility and yearning but inspired by despair. This rich little masterpiece is a welding of poetry and history and psychological acuity that you must not miss. ■

Ron Charles is a senior editor of Book World. He can be reached at charlesr@washpost.com.

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# Windows to the Soulful

*In a New Book as in Life, Toni Morrison's Probing Goes Well Below Surface*

By BOB THOMPSON  
*Washington Post Staff Writer*

• Originally Published December 4, 2008

NEW YORK

Toni Morrison has a little trick for judging character. She's tried it on Tiger Woods, on the Mona Lisa and — why not? — on Barack Obama, too.

"You know, he's got a very pleasant,

even disarming smile," the novelist says of the incoming president, whose candidacy she endorsed in January, a few weeks after he politely called to ask. Then she holds up a hand, at mouth level, to show how she edits out that telegenic smile's effects.

"I do this all the time. Just look at his eyes."

What did she see? She'll get there in

a moment. First, she wants to tell you what she saw in the eyes of the world's greatest golfer.

"Death," she says. There's a burst of laughter, abruptly cut off. "He wants to win. And he will destroy all." How about the Mona Lisa, with whom Morrison got up close and personal in the Louvre?

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BY NIKKI KHAN—THE WASHINGTON POST

The only living American Nobel laureate in literature, Toni Morrison has plans for two more novels, one set in the 50s, the other with a modern setting.

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"Everybody talks about her smile, that little mystery," Morrison says. "And I went over there and I did like that" — she holds up her hand again — "and I literally jumped back."

She lowers her voice.

"There's nothing but evil there. Pure, distilled."

The only living American winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature is sitting at the kitchen table in her Manhattan apartment, a skylight silvering her braided gray hair. She's mostly talking about her latest novel, *A Mercy*. But the name Obama keeps coming up.

So what did she make of those smile-free presidential eyes?

"Steely. I would say steely."

Which is a good thing, she thinks, given these "interesting times."

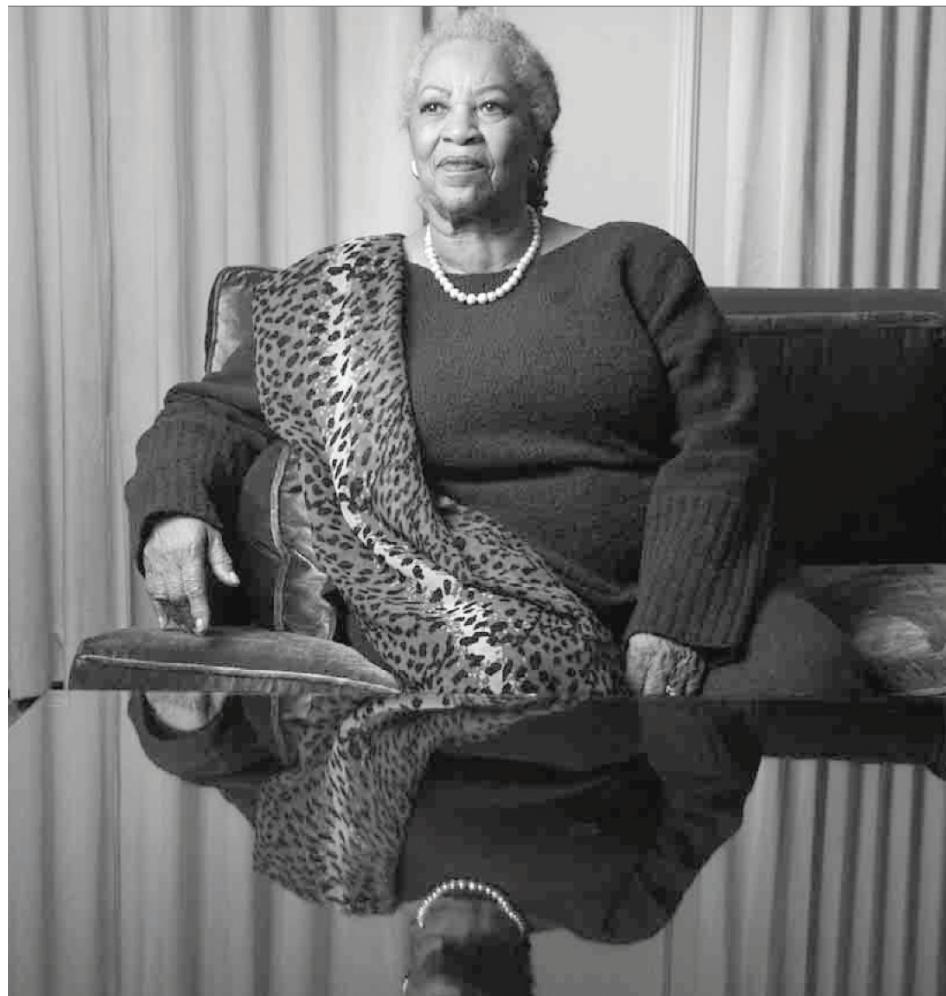
Interesting they are. But Morrison's new book evokes an America at least as fascinating as today's. Set in the late 17th century — before race-based enslavement became such a central American institution — it serves as a thought-provoking bookend to the era we are entering.

*"A Mercy* was sort of pre-racial to me," Morrison explains. And though she's not ready to call the present day post-racial, it does promise "something else, something different, a new slant on all that."

A Toni Morrison novel usually begins as a question in the author's mind. What was it with this book?

"How might it feel," comes the prompt reply, "to be a pitch-black slave girl in a time when slavery was not associated with racism? How's that?"

The notion of a bound population — whether called serfs, peasants or something else — used to be commonplace, Morrison says. Yes, there were African slaves in North America in 1690, but the continent also was filled with white indentured servants



BY NIKKI KHAN—THE WASHINGTON POST

***A Mercy*, the most recent best-selling work by Morrison, is set in the late 17th century.**

who'd signed up for years of bondage in return for transportation and the basic necessities. What's more, in the days before laws explicitly divided the races, "indentured servants and black slaves and free whites and free black people worked on those plantations together."

What came next, after she had her central question?

"I get the narrative and the ending. I have to know where I'm going. I don't always know how to get there."

And how did this particular narrative start?

"Well, I have this needy girl. She's going

to go on a journey. By herself. Usually, guys go on journeys in narratives and the women stay home."

"I wanted her to go somewhere, endangering herself."

The girl is a 16-year-old slave named Florens, living on a farm in Upstate New York. She's needy because her mother, or so Florens believes, has thrown her away. Her journey is a rescue mission — her mistress is sick and asks her to track down a man who might help — but it's personal, too,

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because Florens is desperately in love with the man she seeks.

"You alone own me," she tells him. She has not yet learned to look inside herself for what Morrison has called "the beloved — the part of the self that is you, and loves you, and is always there for you."

How might it feel to be Florens?

As Morrison fleshed out her answer, other characters emerged.

First came Jacob Vaark, Florens's owner, who accepted her from a far worse master in payment for a debt. Morrison found Vaark's name on a ship's manifest and thought "that's lovely." The character's Dutch ancestry was a necessary result.

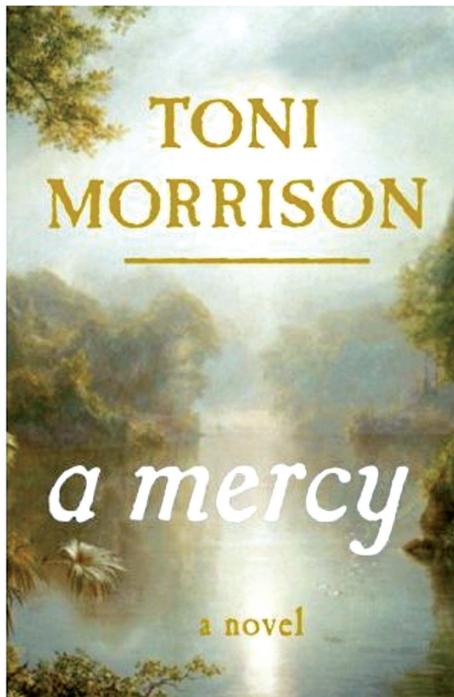
Next she conjured Jacob's wife, Rebekka, whose prospects in England were "servant, prostitute, wife" and who thought it a blessing when her father shipped her across the Atlantic to marry an unknown man.

Lina, a young Native American woman, gave Morrison pause. "Oh God, now I've got to know all about these tribes," she says she thought. But she didn't, she soon realized, because Lina's people were all dead from disease.

Late in the game, a mysterious, mixed-race girl named Sorrow slipped in, solving some structural problems for Morrison. Then there were Willard and Scully, white servants who began with bit parts and ended with a chapter of their own.

"I was so pleased with them," Morrison says, in part because she liked Scully's sharp insights and in part because the pair made clear the nature of indentured servitude.

Meanwhile, she needed to see her characters' worlds, both new and old. William Cronon's 1983 study *Changes in the Land* showed her America before the Europeans arrived: "how tall the



trees were, and the fish, the weather, the flies." Emily Cockayne's recent *Hubbubble: Filth, Noise & Stench in England 1600-1770* helped her understand why the Europeans came.

Questions of race and servitude, the search for a true self, life-shaping encounters with a new world: All that adds up to a novel that has drawn mostly raves. Washington Post critic Ron Charles called it "a fusion of mystery, history and longing that stands alongside *Beloved* as a unique triumph in Morrison's body of work."

John Updike was less enthusiastic. In the *New Yorker*, he complained that it was hard to know what was happening in the opening pages. Perhaps "the pernicious influence of William Faulkner" was to blame?

Morrison shrugs this off.

"That was kind of funny. But I like being reviewed by writers," she says.

At 77, she is old enough to have acquired one of those plastic organizers that reminds you what pill to take when. She is also old enough to have discovered

— after a hospital letter informed her that "we have declined your Medicaid or Medicare or whatever because you are an illegal alien or incarcerated" — that it's impossible to reach a human being at a Medicare phone.

"Sixty minutes' wait!" she says. "I finally had to go to a congressman, because I thought it was identity theft. And I got it straightened out, but not by doing what they tell you to do, which is call and push buttons."

The good news is, there's no retirement age for writers. Morrison has two more novels in mind already, one set in the 1950s, one in the present.

"I'm getting better," she says.

And that means?

"I get there faster. I don't have to write badly."

Chloe Ardelia Wofford (the name Morrison's parents gave her) wrote her first words on the sidewalks of Lorain, Ohio, in the mid-1930s. "My sister probably taught me. I was about 3," she recalls. Her mother and father told a lot of stories "and I lived in the library, down on the floor, because they had all the little children's books down there."

At 12, she became a Catholic and took the baptismal name Anthony, soon shortened to "Toni." She went to college at Howard, got a master's in literature from Cornell. When her brief marriage to Jamaican architect Harold Morrison ended, she was left with two young sons and a name she had no intention of putting on a book.

"I was going to be Chloe — Chloe Wofford," she says. But in 1970, when she saw "Toni Morrison" on the galleys of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and said, "I don't want to use this name," she was told, "Sorry, it's already in the Library of Congress."

She remains annoyed that she didn't put her foot down. "I said, 'Oh, four

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people are going to read this book' — oh, man."

It's true that *The Bluest Eye* didn't sell immediately. (Much later, an Oprah pick would help.) But nearly four decades after she published it, Morrison's impact is hard to overstate. She helped shape a wave of African American literature that has yet to crest.

As an editor at Random House, where she worked until she was confident her writing would support her, Morrison published writers ranging from Chinua Achebe to Toni Cade Bambara. As a writer herself, she crashed the front ranks of the world's novelists while bringing the specific experience of black America to life.

Take 1987's *Beloved*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel that vivifies the enormity of slavery in one woman's story. Morrison spent years researching and thinking before she wrote a word.

"I didn't know anything," she says, but at some point she realized that "all the narratives about slavery were by men." Then she read a newspaper article about Margaret Garner, who had killed her own daughter to keep her from being returned to bondage.

"She did it and didn't regret it," Morrison says, ticking off things that struck her about Garner's story. "The man who interviewed her was astonished because she was so calm and not drooling — I mean, she wasn't insane. And her mother-in-law said, 'I neither approved nor disapproved.' She just couldn't make up her mind.

"And that was exactly the point."

Morrison tried to imagine killing her own child. She couldn't get there. "But I thought the real person who might be able to judge her — that she would pay attention to — would be the dead daughter. And once I knew that, then I just had to make it work."

Take *Jazz*, the novel Morrison published a year before her 1993 Nobel. She sees it as part of her continuing need to re-imagine history, to "tell it again properly, fill in those silences, those things that people just, whoooooh, blew over." What's blown over in all the talk of the Jazz Age, she says, is the migration behind the music, the syncopated liberation that came with leaving the rural South for northern cities.

"It's transition from the blues, it's different, it's anger, it's seduction, it's below-the-belt stuff," Morrison says. "It was not just the music, it was the style. It was free." Back home, you loved who was next door, but here "you could choose to love somebody."

Maybe it wouldn't work out. "But the point is, it was choice — black choice."

Or take *Song of Solomon*, Morrison's breakthrough book. A sprawling, mythic family saga whose plot resists summary, it won the 1977 National Book Critics Circle Award and got compared to the work of Gabriel García Márquez. It's also the rare Morrison novel centered on a man.

Hmm.

Might that be why Marlon Brando used to call to talk about it?

"He would read passages to me, of

my own book. In that voice," says Morrison, who never met the actor in the flesh. "He said, 'Do you remember this part?' " She laughs. "He'd keep you on forever. I was scared to hang up."

Barack Obama wasn't quite so scary. But when the candidate called to ask for her endorsement, he talked about the same favorite book.

"Before I speak to you about anything else," she recalls Obama saying, "let me tell you about *Song of Solomon*. " As it happens, she had been impressed by his memoir, *Dreams From My Father*. It's filled with scenes and dialogue and reflection, she says, not just the usual "and then and then." So they talked about writing and she told him, "You and I have a connection that way — but politically, I don't know."

She had admired Hillary Clinton for years. She had never made a presidential endorsement.

Then she did.

"It really was about this thing that I dared to call wisdom," she says now.

Interesting times. Morrison can't stop thinking about them.

"I have to say, I wish Jimmy Baldwin were here," she says quietly. "There's so many people that I wish — I would just like to hear them at this point, you know?"

And what does she think her old friend's reaction to the Age of Obama might have been?

She gets quieter still, as though she knows a bittersweet laugh is coming.

"I think he would be desperately, desperately in love," Toni Morrison says. ■

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**MICHAEL DIRDA**

# *A girlish diary that turned into a chilling record*

• Originally Published Sunday,  
November 23, 2008

The *Journal of Hélène Berr* is a relatively late addition to that most sorrowful of genres, one that should never have come to exist: Holocaust literature. Its title subtly recalls the most famous testimony to the horror of life under Nazi domination, *The Diary of Anne Frank*. As it happens, these two vital and deeply appealing diarists described precisely the same period — 1942 to 1944 — but with a significant difference: While the adolescent Frank hid in her secret rooms in Amsterdam, Berr carried on with her life as a university student in occupied Paris. At least for a while. Ultimately, though, both shared the same fate: death at Bergen-Belsen in 1945. The two young women were imprisoned there at the same time. They might have met.

As the journal begins in the spring of 1942, Hélène Berr picks up a package left with a Paris concierge. France's most distinguished poet has kindly inscribed one of his books to her: "On waking, so soft is the light and so fine this living blue, Paul Valéry." The next day Berr records that she and her friends are planning a picnic to her family's country place at Aubergenville. In Paris itself life consists of English classes, evenings of chamber music (Bach, Schumann, Chopin), visits to bookshops, the reading of Russian novels or romantic poetry. Berr confesses that she might be in love with a young man named Gérard — until she meets a fellow student named Jean Morawiecki. Her heart is suddenly torn. Full of emotional confusion, the 20-year-old finds refuge



MÉMORIAL DE LA SHOAH, PARIS, COLLECTION JOBA™ THE JOURNAL OF HÉLÈNE BERR™

**Hélène Berr, 1942****THE JOURNAL OF HÉLÈNE BERR**

Translated from the French by David Bellos

Weinstein. 307 pp. \$24.95

in the study of Old English. A dozen pages of the journal go by before there is any mention of the Germans.

After all, why discuss such unpleasantries? Hélène Berr belongs to a privileged family and class, her father being the eminent and valued managing director of Etablissements Kuhlmann, an important chemical company. Though Jewish, the Berrs are thoroughly French — and haut-bour-

geois — in their outlook and culture. They certainly have almost nothing in common with the lower-class and sometimes now stateless émigré Jews occasionally being detained by the Germans. One could hardly imagine that such people and the elegant Berrs belonged to the same race — at least not until the edict of May 29, 1942, ordering all Jews to wear a yellow star.

At first Berr hesitates, considering it "degrading," but ultimately she changes her mind out of a brave sense of solidarity. Her pages about publicly displaying this hateful insignia are both piteous and shocking:

"I was very courageous all day long. I held my head high, and I stared at other people so hard that it made them avert their eyes. But it's difficult ... This afternoon it all started over again. I had to fetch Vivi Lafon from her English exam at 2:00. I did not want to wear the star, but I ended up doing so, thinking my reluctance was cowardly. First of all there were two girls in avenue de La Bourdonnais who pointed at me. Then at Ecole Militaire métro station ... the ticket inspector said: 'Last carriage.' ... I suddenly felt I was no longer myself, that everything had changed, that I had become a foreigner, as if I were in the grip of a nightmare. I could see familiar faces all around me, but I could feel their awkwardness and bafflement." It's all horrible, she knows, but then she thinks about Jean. The shy couple take walks, listen to records together, visit each other's families. ... and suddenly life is beautiful again.

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Berr is any young woman in love with a young man who loves her.

But one evening she arrives home to discover that her father has been arrested. Raymond Berr spends three months in Drancy, an internment camp near Paris. Berr, her mother and sister visit, and they notice the working-class Jews all around them in the visitor's room. "The four of us were so distant from those poor folk that we could hardly conceive that Papa was a prisoner too." But Papa is a prisoner too, and slowly Berr's consciousness begins to alter.

Etablissements Kuhlmann eventually pays a ransom to have Raymond Berr released, and the family continues its life in Paris. Some of their friends escape to Vichy France, and yet the Berrs decide to stay put, out of a sense of dignity, steadfastly refusing to be cowardly, believing it important to stand together with other Frenchmen. Berr herself touchingly confesses that it's "because of him [Jean] that I do not want to leave." Everyone is in denial. Nobody can quite believe that worse is yet to come.

Then it is announced that "Jews are no longer entitled to cross the Champs-Elysées. Theaters and restaurants are off-limits." Neighbors begin to warn the family about a series of roundups. Hélène Berr starts to record what she hears as well as sees:

"In Mlle Monsaigeon's neighborhood, a whole family, the father, the mother, and five children, gassed themselves to escape the roundup.

"One woman threw herself out of a window.

"Apparently several policemen have been shot for warning people so they could escape. They were threatened with the concentration camp if they failed to obey."

More and more, Berr regards her journal as an aide-memoire, almost a reporter's notebook: "I'm not even keeping this diary anymore, I've no



willpower left, I'm just putting down the salient facts so as to remember them."

Take their young friend Pironneau. "Maman has gotten the details of his execution. It was on the day of the great parade, he was taken off at 7:00 A.M., with another man, in the prison van, with their coffins. There was nobody there to shoot them; they had to wait until 3:00 in the afternoon for a 'volunteer' to come and shoot them, obliging one of them to witness the other's death."

Somewhat to her own surprise, Berr admits to a growing visceral hatred of the Krauts — and to anger at the frequent indifference of non-Jewish Parisians. She begins to work part-time at a Jewish-run agency intended to help deportees and their families, soon taking homeless children under her wing, even organizing a scout troop. Suddenly, Jean announces that he is leaving to join Charles de Gaulle's Free French.

At this point Hélène Berr stops writing in her journal for some 10 months, starting again only in the fall of 1943. Sadly, the once high-spirited young woman, full of plans for a life

of scholarship and learning, dreaming of happiness with the man she loves, has virtually disappeared. The voice is somber now, philosophical, that of a mature woman who recognizes that death in a concentration camp is her most likely future. Berr's only aim, until arrested, is to bear witness:

"I have a duty to write because other people must know. Every hour of every day there is another painful realization that other folk do not know, do not even imagine, the suffering of other men, the evil that some of them inflict. And I am still trying to make the painful effort to tell the story. Because it is a duty, it is maybe the only one I can fulfill." To ensure at least her journal's survival, she passes along sections to the household cook, asking her to save the pages for Jean. Berr still daydreams about him, even imagines him reading the very page she is writing. But so much has been lost. "If only I could laugh! Jean liked laughing so much. Before, I used to laugh. Nowadays a sense of humor feels like sacrilege."

Still, Berr periodically strives to maintain a semblance of her old existence, fighting off despair to imagine that she will somehow survive. She studies and frequently quotes her beloved Keats, transcribes the reflections on World War I of the novelist Roger Martin du Gard, plays music, even reads *Winnie-the-Pooh* and retells Kipling's "Rikki Tikki Tavi" to her young orphans. But she also finds herself loathing the barbaric Germans, who "dared to claim that I was not French." And the horrible stories continue. Thirteen children from an orphanage are seized to make up the required 1,000 deportees for a convoy to the "East." So many people have been killed, Berr writes, that "we have almost stopped grieving for the dead." Her cousin, who is also her best friend, disappears into a concentration camp. "How many souls of infinite worth,

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repositories of gifts others should have treated with humility and respect, have been similarly crushed and broken by Germanic brutality?" For a long time, she cannot fathom why children and pregnant women are being seized by the Germans, until she finally recognizes the truth and sets it down: "They have one aim, which is extermination."

On March 8, 1944, at 7:30 in the morning, there was a knock at the door to the family's apartment. Raymond

and Antoinette Berr died later that year in Auschwitz. Hélène Berr nonetheless managed to survive and in 1945 was transferred to Bergen-Belsen, where she grew sick from typhus and was then brutally beaten to death just five days before the camp was liberated by the British.

David Bellos, the translator and biographer of Georges Perec, as well as a professor of French and comparative literature at Princeton, has created an exemplary American edition of Berr's journal. It includes maps, an introductory

essay, a memoir by Berr's niece Mariette Job, a brief history of "France and the Jews" (by Bellos), and a half-dozen useful lists of books, acronyms, names and places. *The Journal of Hélène Berr* has been an immense bestseller in Europe and deserves comparable success in this country. This, alas, is how it truly was when good people were heartlessly abused and their lives were ruthlessly taken from them. ■

*Michael Dirda's e-mail address is mdirda@gmail.com*

BY ARIANA EUNJUNG CHA

*Washington Post Foreign Service*

• Originally Published July 28, 2008  
SONGJIANG, China — Nodding his.

■  
*Staff writer Steven Mufson in Washington and researchers Wu Meng and Crissie Ding contributed to this report.*

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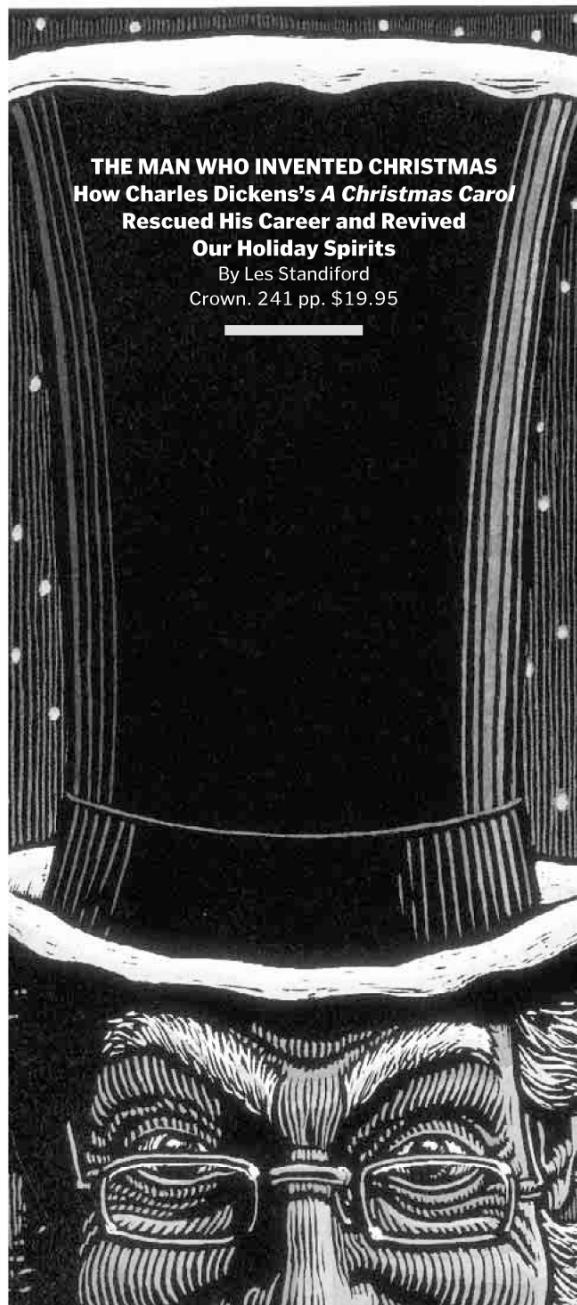
## JONATHAN YARDLEY

# Dickens was facing financial ruin when he imagined Ebenezer Scrooge

• Originally Published, Sunday,  
November 30, 2008

In October 1843 Charles Dickens's "once unequalled popularity was at a nadir, his critical reputation in a shambles, his bank account overdrawn," Les Standiford writes. His first five books — *Sketches by Boz*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* — had made him "perhaps the world's first true celebrity of the popular arts" and "far and away his country's best-selling author, acclaimed as much for his themes — the misery of the poor and the presumption and posturing of the rich — as for his spellbinding powers as a storyteller." Yet as he sat on a stage in Manchester, preparing to give a speech to raise funds for the local Athenaeum, "the industrial capital's primary beacon of arts and enlightenment," he was deeply worried about "how rapidly — and how unaccountably — his good fortune had fled."

Those first five brilliant successes had been followed by three disappointments. The first was *Barnaby Rudge*, an ill-advised attempt at a historical novel, which sold respectably but considerably less well than its predecessors. The second was *American Notes*, the result of a trip he had made to the United States, one that was meant to increase his American readership and gain publicity in England. But the book was poorly received by British reviewers and readers, and the novel he was publishing in serial



BY JAHI CHIKWENDIU — THE WASHINGTON POST

in 1843, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, was doing no better. He needed something to reverse his slide but seems to have had no idea what it might be. He was only 31 years old, but he had a large family to feed as well as other pressing financial obligations, and he feared that he was sliding toward oblivion.

However improbably, he found what he was looking for that October night in Manchester. After delivering his remarks, he walked the city's streets, thinking about his career. He "began to take stock of himself in a way that any accomplished and acclaimed writer would find extremely difficult, much less the most famous writer of his time." As he subsequently told his close friend, advisor and future biographer John Forster, perhaps he had begun to take his public for granted. He needed to return to plain storytelling, "without browbeating or scolding, or mounting a soapbox," as had been his tendency of late:

"And so, as he walked the streets that night, a new story began to form. His nightly walks continued, even after his return from Manchester to London, his mind still whirling ... until bit by bit his tale took shape, and, as his friend Forster put it, with 'a strange mastery it seized him.' He wept over it, laughed, and

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then wept again, as bits and pieces swam up before him, including the vision of two children named Ignorance and Want, those ‘wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable’ creatures who would, with Tiny Tim and Bob Cratchit and Scrooge and Marley and all the rest, stamp themselves on Dickens’s imagination, and that of the world, forever.”

Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* in a fever; it took him only six weeks to complete the 30,000-word manuscript. “I was so closely occupied with my little Carol (the idea of which had just occurred to me),” he told a friend, “that I never left home before the owls went out; and led quite a solitary life.” It was the shortest book he had written — the others were issued in multiple serials and then published as three-volume books known as “triple deckers” — and the biggest financial gamble of his life. His publisher, Chapman and Hall, expressed little enthusiasm for the book, so Dickens decided to have the firm bring it out “for publication on his own account.” All the risk would be his own: “He would be responsible for the costs of the book’s production, which would be deducted from its sales. He would also oversee the book’s design, hire its illustrator, and consult on its advertising. In essence, his publishers — which would receive a fixed commission tied to sales — had become merely his printer. In contemporary terms, then, *A Christmas Carol* was to be an exercise in vanity publishing.”

The book has for so long been a central part of the Christmas season, and even more central to popular images of the Victorian British Christmas, that it is useful to be reminded by Standiford of one important thing: In 1843 Christmas was not even remotely similar to what it became and what we know now.

Dickens himself “had always been greatly enamored of the holiday,” but to the public at large it was a minor blip on the calendar:

“There were no Christmas cards in 1843 England, no Christmas trees at royal residences or White Houses, no Christmas turkeys, no department-store Santa or his million clones, no

weeklong cessation of business affairs through the New Year, no orgy of gift-giving, no ubiquitous public display of nativity scenes (or court fights regarding them), no holiday lighting extravaganzas, and no plethora of

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AP PHOTO

**Charles Dickens**, in an undated photo, wrote “*A Christmas Carol*” in only six weeks.

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birth of a savior. In fact, despite all of Dickens's enthusiasms, the holiday was a relatively minor affair that ranked far below Easter, causing little more stir than Memorial Day or St. George's Day does today. In the eyes of the relatively enlightened Anglican Church, moreover, the entire enterprise of celebrating Christmas smacked vaguely of paganism, and were there Puritans still around, acknowledging the holiday might have landed one in the stocks."

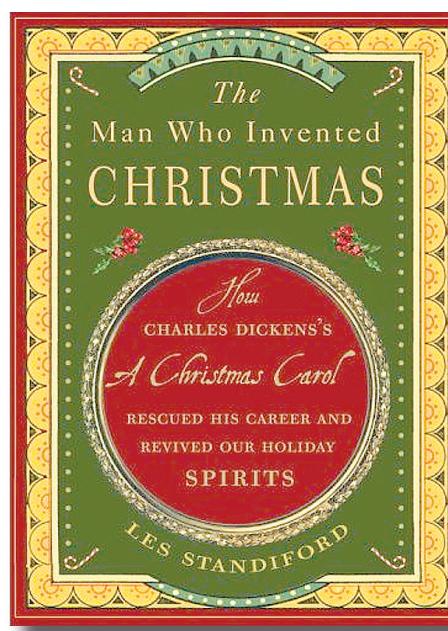
Totally — and correctly — contradicting the title of *The Man Who Invented Christmas*, which probably is the invention of someone in his publisher's marketing department, Standiford says that "no individual can claim credit for the creation of Christmas, of course — except, perhaps, the figure that the day is named for." No, Dickens did not "invent" Christmas. But he "played a major role in transforming a celebration dating back to pre-Christian times, revitalizing forgotten customs and introducing new ones that now define the holiday," including the turkey as the centerpiece of the day's feast. He gave us "a secular counterpoint to the story of the Nativity," and "complemented the glorification of the nativity of Christ with a specific set of practices derived from Christ's example: charity and compassion in the form of educational opportunity, humane working conditions, and a decent life for all. Just as vital as the celebration of the birth of a holy savior into a human family was the glorification and defense of the family unit itself."

Financial reward from *A Christmas Carol* came more slowly to Dickens than he had hoped — Chapman and Hall, in the grand tradition of publishing, seems to have cooked the books against him — but popular success was immediate and immensely gratifying, taking the book into its third printing before the

one from the ostensibly reputable Harper and Brothers, which infuriated Dickens, a passionate advocate of international copyright. A bogus edition appeared in England as well, but there he won his legal case against the offending opportunist. There also were dozens of unauthorized stage adaptations, but by and large he was less concerned about them. The practice was widespread, and the dramatizations provided free publicity for the book. In the 20th century "at least twenty-eight film adaptations" have been made, "the very best" having been released in 1951, starring Alastair Sim as Scrooge. And the beat goes on:

"According to a count made in the late 1980s, at least 225 live stagings, films, radio dramas, and television plays based on Dickens's 'little Carol' had been produced after 1950, and that number does not take into account the untold number of amateur and regional productions staged every year. Not only has *A Christmas Carol* become the most 'adapted' of all the author's works, but it would be hard to name any other work of fiction that has thereby become so ubiquitous a part of Western popular culture."

Standiford's account of *A Christmas Carol* relies almost entirely on secondary sources and probably will be dismissed by Dickensians as adding nothing new to our understanding of the writer, but it is a nice addition to the literature of Christmas. A small addition, to be sure, but then so was *A Christmas Carol*. ■



end of 1843. Writing about himself in the third person, Dickens told a friend: "By every post, all manner of strangers write all manner of letters to him about their homes and hearths, and how this same Carol is read aloud there and kept on a very little shelf by itself. Indeed it is the greatest success as I am told, that this ruffian and rascal has ever achieved."

In the United States pirated editions of the book were quickly issued, including

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## JONATHAN YARDLEY

# *The literary preparation of a great president*

### LINCOLN The Biography of a Writer

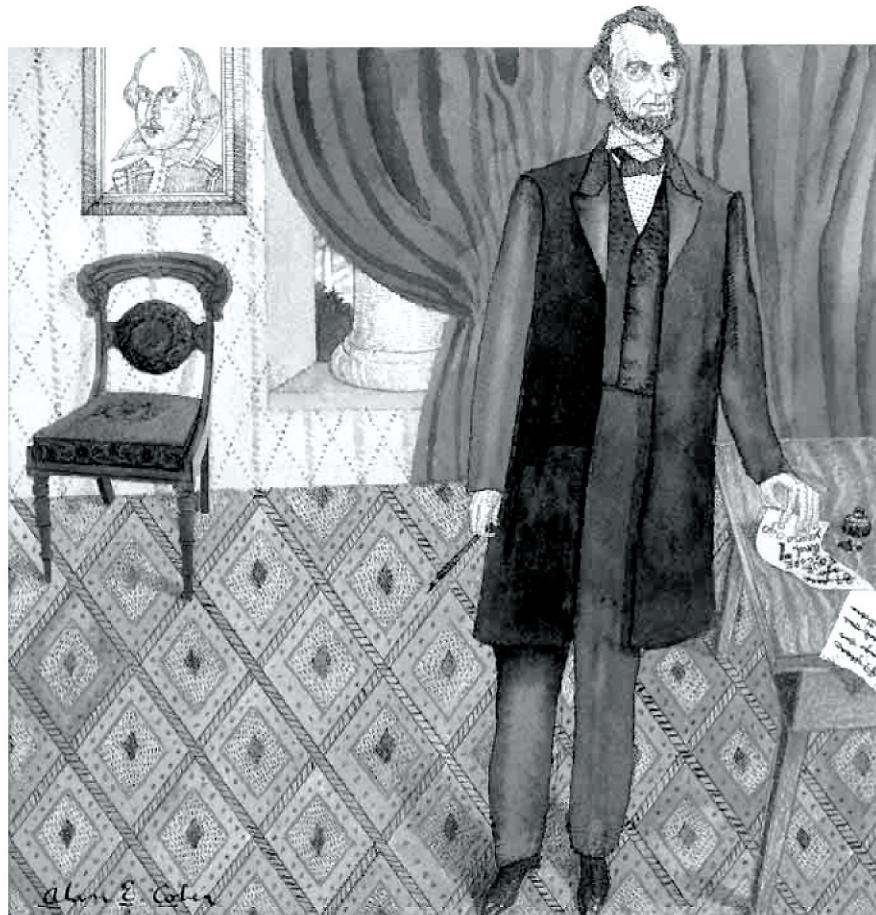
By Fred Kaplan

Harper. 406 Pp. \$27.95

• Originally Published November 2, 2008

The literature about Abraham Lincoln is so vast as to defy comprehension, yet historians and other scholars — not to mention novelists, poets, artists, sculptors, even composers — continue to find new and revealing things to say about this greatest of all Americans. Fred Kaplan's *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer*, is the latest case in point, a book that is certain to become essential to our understanding of the 16th president. To be sure, many others before Kaplan have dealt in various ways with Lincoln's love of literature and writing, but no one has explored the subject so deeply or found so much meaning in it. Kaplan's central subjects are Lincoln's "compelling interest in language as the instrumental vehicle for civilization and culture" and his specific interest in written language, about which he once said:

"Writing—the art of communicating thoughts to the mind, through the eye—is the great invention of the world. Great in the astonishing range of analysis and combination which necessarily underlies the most crude and general conception of it—great, very great in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn, at all distances of time and of space; and great, not only in its direct benefits, but greatest help, to all other inventions. ... Its utility may be conceived, by the reflection, that to it we owe everything which distinguishes us from savages. Take it from us, and the Bible, all history, all science, all government, all commerce, and nearly all social intercourse go with it."



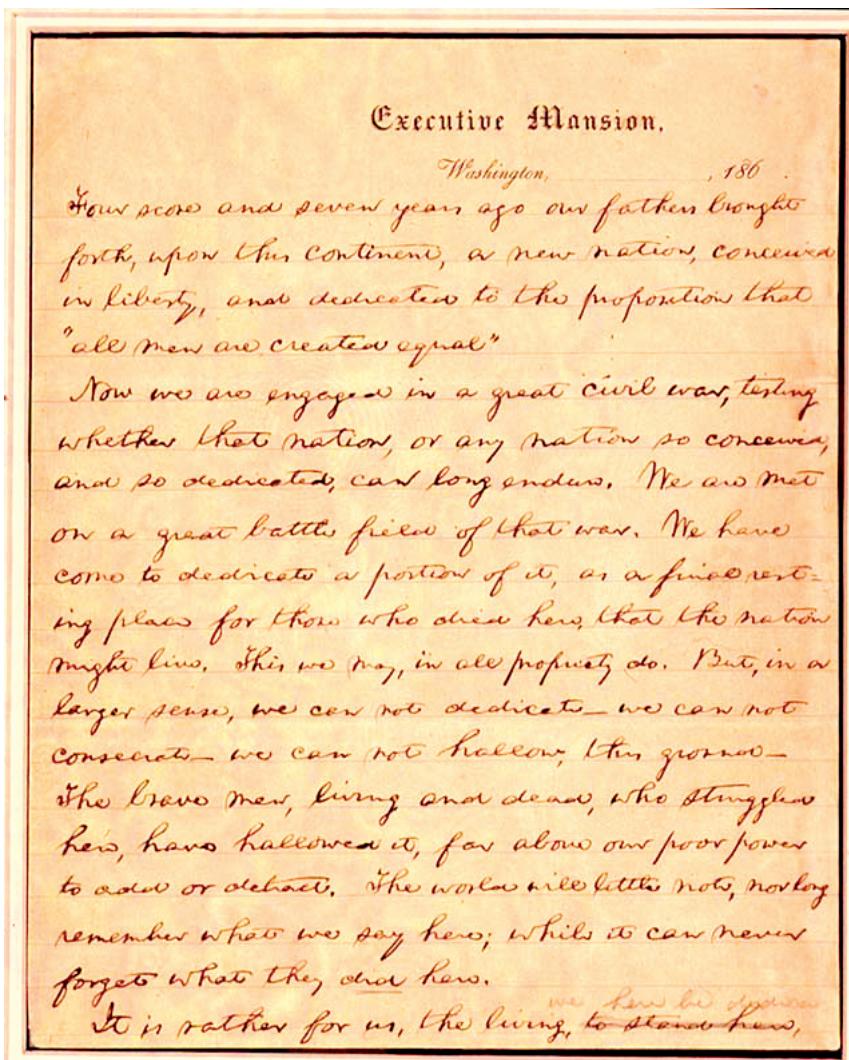
ALAN E. COBER/IMAGES.COM/CORBIS

The language of that passage may seem a trifle quaint to today's reader, but the essential truth of it is clear and beyond argument. And at a time when careful writing has fallen into disrepute — a time of lower-case e-mail, text messages and advertising idiocy — its importance may well be greater than ever, especially when one contemplates the debased state of political discourse. As Kaplan points out, "Lincoln is distinguished

from every other president, with the exception of Jefferson, in that we can be certain that he wrote every word to which his name is attached," and he "was also the last president whose character and standards in the use of language avoided the distortions and other dishonest uses of language that have done so much to undermine the

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

**"Nicolay Copy," the earliest known of the five drafts of what may be the most famous American speech, delivered by President Abraham Lincoln in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.**

credibility of national leaders." Some presidents have been well served by their speechwriters, but "the challenge of a president himself struggling to find the conjunction between the right words and honest expression, a use of language that respects intellect, truth, and sincerity, has largely been abandoned."

It is always instructive to study Lincoln, but now is a particularly good time to consider his devotion to

words. Yes, times do change and with them the ways by which we communicate with each other, but the need for clear, honest and comprehensible speech and writing has never been greater, as the political season now ending has made all too apparent. How we will be served in this regard by the person who is elected president on Tuesday remains to be seen, but the rhetoric of recent presidents — in particular the two most recent ones — does not bode well. Mendacity, as we

know to our sorrow, has become a well-established presidential prerogative, and Adlai Stevenson's pledge to "talk sense to the American people" is a figment of a forgotten past.

So let us contemplate the example of Abraham Lincoln, who before the age of 10 — and in circumstances scarcely conducive to learning, much less deep learning — had developed the habit of reading. As a boy on a farm in Kentucky in the early 1800s he seemed to face a "lifelong fate" of manual labor, as his father had, but in 1816 he came under the influence of a schoolmaster who set him on a different path. His "first formal lessons in literacy came from Thomas Dilworth's *New Guide to the English Tongue*, popularly known as Dilworth's Speller, a widely reprinted textbook first published in London in 1740." The book "taught Protestant theology and moral behavior" as well as grammar, and "some of the language and its lessons entered deeply into him" as "guideposts in his formative years."

Then, in 1818, not long after the Lincolns moved to Indiana, Lincoln's mother died. A year later his father married Sally Bush Johnston, a passionate reader who brought "a small but marvelous library" with her. Young Abe's world changed forever "when she took from her luggage the *Arabian Nights*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Noah Webster's *Speller*, Lindley Murray's *The English Reader*, and William Scott's *Lessons in Elocution*."

Though he could not have been aware of it at the time, Lincoln's constant, obsessive reading was teaching him how to write. The rhythms and cadences of the prose and poetry that he read — Shakespeare (his lifelong "secular Bible"), Robert Burns, Lord Byron, Edward Gibbon, Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope — insinuated themselves into his capacious, ever

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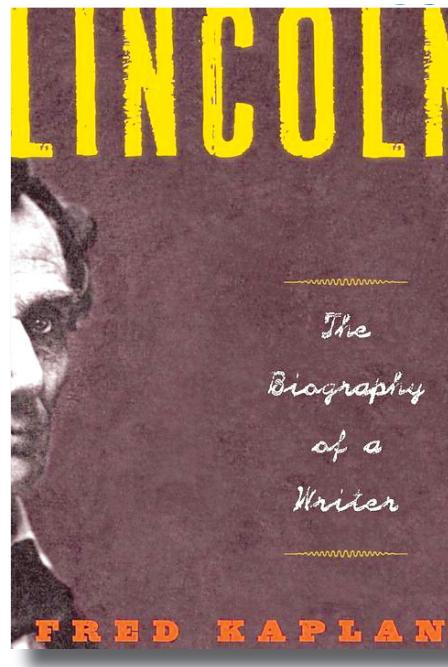
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curious mind and became the bedrock upon which his own majestic prose eventually was constructed. His reading also made him, again all unwittingly, a son of the Enlightenment, one who "had little mind for transcendence, let alone permanence," but was connected "to the rooted quotidian"; to him, "reason, logic, and experience seemed the best guides." The Enlightenment's "prevailing synthesis, which Lincoln absorbed, emphasized a combination of Christian ethics, classical style, and natural law." Shakespeare's "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason. ..." became his touchstone: "No matter how powerful the appeal of bombast, moodiness, and melancholy, Lincoln found in his Enlightenment models and in Shakespeare the affirmation of his tested but sustained faith in man's reasoning faculty as his highest and in reason's power to advance good works."

He believed that he had the capacity to do important things but often feared that the opportunity would never come his way. His young adulthood, his long apprenticeship in law and politics, his romantic disappointments and strange yet crucial marriage to Mary Todd — all gave him cause to wonder whether at worst failure or at best modest accomplishment was to be his fate. Through it all, though, he kept reading, and by 1846, when he was practicing law in Springfield, he decided to "try his hand as a writer of literature, attempting to use language as a vehicle of self-exploration and pleasurable expression in a way distinctly different from the writing that he had done as a political man addressing public issues." In three poems of his that have survived "the two alternative modes of his personality — the melancholy and the humorous

— provided literary guidelines." He wrote little poetry thereafter, but "the command of literary models and of language that enabled him to write these credible poems in 1846," Kaplan says, was "inseparable from his command of language as a prose writer."

Kaplan — emeritus professor of English at Queens College and author of well-regarded biographies of Mark Twain, Henry James and Charles Dickens, among others — meticulously analyzes how Lincoln's steadily maturing prose style, "projecting a persona of dignified but amiable authenticity," enabled him to come to grips with slavery and, as his own views evolved, to express his deepening opposition to it. In 1854, not long after Franklin Pierce signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which permitted slavery's westward expansion, Lincoln tartly exposed what Kaplan calls the "flawed and dangerous" logic of slavery's adherents. Then, the next year, he exploded:



"Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that 'all men are created equal.' We now practically read it 'all men are created equal, except Negroes.' When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read 'all men are created equals, except Negroes, and foreigners, and catholics.' When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty — to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy."

Five years later he was elected president. We know the rest of the story, and Kaplan devotes far less space to it than to Lincoln's education as a writer, for by then — just in time — that education was complete. In one of the finest passages in this fine, invaluable book, Kaplan sets him on the road to Washington:

"If intellectual readiness is everything, he was ready, as he well knew when he said goodbye to his Springfield world, having prepared himself over a lifetime to become a well-read master of the human narrative. If that narrative was to have its tragic dimension in Lincoln's failure, despite his talents, to prevent the South's secession, shorten the inevitable war, or alleviate Northern racism, it was to be an object lesson in the limitations of language rather than a failure in preparation. At the same time, the unfortunate givens of the narrative provided the context for his two greatest achievements, the Gettysburg Address and the second inaugural address, in which he did what great writers do: create useful texts from which readers can derive inspiration, literary pleasure, and universalizing direction."

Amen. ■

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## Michael Dirda

# The 10 Commandments of Book Giving

Last week, I began to think seriously about presents. 'Tis the season, after all. When little, I used to lie on the faded blue davenport in my family's living room and daydream about what I'd like to unwrap on Christmas morning. A gleaming silver six-gun in a tooled black leather holster. A gigantic Erector Set, with battery-operated motors. The plastic model kit for a three-masted frigate or a double-fuselaged P-38 Lightning. Cool stuff, in other words. I could never quite fathom why Santa even bothered with socks and underwear and heavy winter clothes, usually in wool.

**1** Look beyond the obvious bestsellers. People who are interested in the latest hot novels and topical works of nonfiction already own them. Plus, to give a bestseller shows a lack of imagination. And you don't want that.

**2** A classic is always welcome, especially in a pretty edition. If your intended giftee owns a much underlined Penguin *Pride and Prejudice* or never travels without a beat-up paperback of *On the Road*, you won't go wrong with a beautiful folio edition of the Jane Austen or the recent 50th-anniversary hardback of Jack Kerouac's classic.

**3** If you know that your friend reads and rereads Keats's poetry, then give something related to Keats. It might be W. Jackson Bate's monumental biography, Hyder Rollins's edition of the letters, the recent study by Stanley Plumly (*Posthumous Keats*) or even a scholarly edition of the poetry.

**4** Remember the books you love yourself. If you're crazy about the novels of Georgette Heyer, the stories of Laurie Colwin or such books as Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it makes sense to share your passion with others. After all, the giving and receiving of presents is a kind of soul-exchange.

**5** Do not scorn second-hand books. If your husband or son is fascinated by the naval operations during World

War II, he'd be thrilled to possess a copy of *Jane's Fighting Ships* from the late 1930s, or the 1943 edition of *The Bluejacket's Manual*, or — if you really want to splurge — the multi-volume set of Samuel Eliot Morison's *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*.

**6** Be complementary. Note that's with an "e" not an "i." If your wife obsessively reads and rereads the dark psychological thrillers of Ruth Rendell — and I'd be a little worried if this is the case — then she's likely to enjoy the so-called "hard" novels (romans durs) of Georges Simenon or the unsettling suspense fiction of Patricia Highsmith.

**7** Seek out books with a special association. Just last month I was browsing through the bargain tables outside Second Story Books near Dupont Circle and for a few bucks picked up *The Short Stories of H.G. Wells*, in worn but respectable condition. I already owned this edition, but on this particular copy's title page there was a dated inscription signed "H.G. Wells." (As all good collectors know: Carefully read any writing on endpapers and title pages.) What admirer of *The Time Machine* wouldn't be thrilled with such a present?

**8** Expand the horizons of your friends and family. In college my girlfriend gave me a copy of T.S. Eliot's collected poems. Till then, I had thought of Eliot as dauntingly academic and just

• Originally Published December 7, 2008

about impenetrable. But owning the book led me to read around in it, and before long I was memorizing long passages and looking for Eliot's *Selected Essays*. The gift changed my life.

**9** Support the midlist. Many good novelists, most poets and nearly all scholars sell only a few thousand copies of their books, if they're lucky. Blockbuster titles and brand-name authors will always be with us, but the books that matter in the long run, the books that will truly speak to our very innermost being, can easily be overlooked. Browse through the fiction shelves. Pause at the poetry section. Buy a few of these books, and you'll be a patron of the arts.

**10** Read book reviews, established literary blogs and best-of-the-year round-ups in magazines. Here, you can readily learn about all kinds of wonderful books, on every subject from public policy and current affairs to Taoist philosophy. Librarians and booksellers are great resources, too.

Over the years I've gone through all kinds of Christmas presents, and nearly all of them quickly broke or have been long forgotten. Not so the gift books, whether Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan and the Golden Lion*, a paperback copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or the Pléiade edition of Stendhal's *Oeuvres Intimes*. Given to me by relatives, teachers and friends, they helped to make the season bright — and they also helped to make me who I am. ■

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## Academic Content Standards

*This lesson addresses academic content standards of Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia.*

### Maryland

**Reading:** Read critically to evaluate informational text (Indicator 6)

- a. Analyze the extent to which the text or texts fulfill the reading purpose

- c. Analyze the text and its information for reliability;

Assessment limits:

Connections between the credentials of the author and the information in the text

- e. Analyze additional information that would clarify or strengthen the author's argument or viewpoint; Assessment limits:

Information that would enhance or clarify the reader's understanding of the main ideas of the text or a portion of the text

- f. Analyze the effectiveness of persuasive techniques to sway the reader to a particular point of view (Standard 2.0 Comprehension of Informational Text)

**Reading:** Analyze and interpret important ideas and messages in literary texts.

- c. Summarize or paraphrase

- e. Explain the implications of the text that may have implications for the reader

(Standard 3.0 Comprehension of Literary Text)

### Virginia

**English:** The student will read and analyze a variety of narrative and poetic forms.

- b. Describe inferred main ideas or themes, using evidence from the text as support.
- e. Compare and contrast authors' styles. (Reading, 8.5)

**English:** The student will read and analyze a variety of literature.

- a. Identify format, text structure and main idea.
- b. Identify the characteristics that distinguish literary forms.
- d. Explain the relationships between and among elements of literature: characters, plot, setting, tone, point of view, and theme.
- e. Explain the relationship between the author's style and literary effect.
- g. Explain the influence of historical context on the form, style and point of view of a written work. (Reading Analysis, 9.3)

**English:** The student will critique professional and peer writing.

- a. Analyze the writing of others.
- b. Describe how the author accomplishes the intended purpose of the writing.
- c. Suggest how the writing might be improved (Writing, 10.8)

### Washington, D.C.

**English:** Describe the facts and evidence used to support an argument. (Argument and Persuasive Text, 7.IT-A.6)

**English:** Compare (and contrast) works with similar themes in two different literary genres, using their structural features as the basis for the comparison. (Genre, 9.LT-G.2)

**English:** Write interpretations of literary texts that

- Extend beyond summary and literary analysis;
- Address the author's techniques;
- Draw inferences about its effects; and
- Support inferences through references to the text or other works. (Expository Writing, 10.W-E.4)

**English:** Write interpretations of literary or expository reading that

- Demonstrate a grasp of the theme or purpose of the work;
- Analyze the language and unique aspects of text;
- Support key ideas through accurate and detailed references to the text or to other works;
- Demonstrate awareness of the effects of the author's stylistic and rhetorical devices; and
- Include information on the validity and reliability of all relevant perspectives. (Expository Writing, 11.W-E.2)

The Maryland Voluntary State Curriculum Content Standards can be found online at <http://mdk12.org/assessments/vsc/index.html>.

Standards of Learning currently in effect for Virginia Public Schools can be found online at [www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Superintendent/Sols/home.shtml](http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Superintendent/Sols/home.shtml).

Learning Standards for DCPS are found online at [www.k12.dc.us/dcps/Standards/standardsHome.htm](http://www.k12.dc.us/dcps/Standards/standardsHome.htm).