

Bella Cora, by Phillip Margulies**historical fiction****608 pages**

A sweeping historical novel based on the extraordinary life and times of Belle Cora, the daughter of a New York merchant who went on to become a mill worker, a prostitute, a notorious madam, a murderess, and eventually one of San Francisco's richest and most revered dowagers.

Some people remember her as Arabella Godwin, others as Harriet Knowles, and still more as Frances Anderson or other names too numerous to list. But let there be no confusion, this is the legendary story of Belle Cora (1828-1919), who survived by her wits and made a fortune off the greed and lust of men.

Sarah's Key, by Tatiana de Rosnay

Paris, July 1942: Sarah, a ten year-old girl, is brutally arrested with her family by the French police in the Vel'd'Hiv' roundup, but not before she locks her younger brother in a cupboard in the family's apartment, thinking that she will be back within a few hours.

Paris, May 2002: On Vel'd'Hiv's 60th anniversary, journalist Julia Jarmond is asked to write an article about this black day in Frances's past. Through her contemporary investigation, she stumbles onto a trail of long-hidden family secrets that connect her to Sarah. Julia finds herself compelled to retrace the girl's ordeal, from that terrible term in the Vel'd'Hiv', to the camps, and beyond. As she probes into Sarah's past, she begins to question her own place in France, and to reevaluate her marriage and her life.

Kidnapped, by Robert Louis Stevenson**288 pages**

Spirited, romantic, and full of danger, Kidnapped is Robert Louis Stevenson's classic of high adventure. Beloved by generations, it is the saga of David Balfour, a young heir whose greedy uncle connives to do him out of his inherited fortune and plots to have him seized and sold into slavery. But, honor, loyalty, and courage are rewarded; the orphan and castaway survives kidnapping and shipwreck, is rescued by a daredevil of a rogue, and makes a thrilling escape to freedom across the wild highlands of Scotland.

Leaving Before The Rains Come, by Alexandra Fuller **272 pages**

This book is a memoir about a woman who was a "child of the Rhodesian wars and daughter of two complicated parents (who) charts her tempestuous 20-year marriage, from the brutally beautiful Zambezi to the Wyoming mountains – the adventures, unexplored paths and insurmountable obstacles. Shattered by the end of her marriage, she confronts tough questions about the American she married and the family she left behind in Africa."

What She Left Behind by Ellen Marie Wiseman**336 pages**

In this stunning new novel, the acclaimed author of *The Plum Tree* merges the past and present into a haunting story about the nature of love and loyalty – and the lengths we will go to protect those who need us most.

Ten years ago, Izzy Stone's mother fatally shot her father while he slept. Devastated by her mother's apparent insanity, Izzy, now seventeen, refuses to visit her. But her new foster parents, employees at a local museum, have enlisted Izzy's help in cataloging items at a long-shuttered state asylum. There, amid piles of abandoned belongings, Izzy discovers a stack of unopened letters, a decades old journal, and a window into her own past.

Clara Cartwright, eighteen years old in 1929. Is caught between her overbearing parents and her love for an Italian immigrant. Furious when she rejects an arranged marriage, Clara's father sends her to a genteel home for nervous invalids. But when his fortune is lost in the stock market crash, he can no longer afford her care – and Clara is committed to a public asylum.

Even as Izzy deals with the challenges of yet another new beginning, Clara's story keeps drawing her into the past. If Clara was never really mentally ill, could something else explain her own mother's violent act? Piecing together Clara's fate compels Izzy to re-examine her own choices – with shocking and unexpected results.

Necessary Lies, by Diane Chamberlain**368 pages**

Bestselling author Diane Chamberlain delivers a breakout book about a small southern town fifty years ago, and the darkest – and most hopeful – places in the human heart. After losing her parents, fifteen-year-old Ivy Hart is left to care for her grandmother, older sister and nephew as tenants on a small tobacco farm. As she struggles with her grandmother's aging, her sister's mental illness and her own epilepsy, she realizes they might need more than she can give.

When Jane Forrester takes a position as Grace County's newest social worker, she doesn't realize just how much her help is needed. She quickly becomes emotionally invested in her client's lives, causing tension with her boss and her new husband. But as Jane is drawn in by the Hart women, she begins to discover the secrets of the small farm – secrets much darker than she would have guessed. Soon, she must decide whether to take drastic action to help them, or risk losing the battle against everything she believes is wrong.

Set in rural Grace County, North Carolina in a time of state-mandated sterilizations and racial tension, *Necessary Lies* tells the story of these two young women, seemingly worlds apart, but both haunted by tragedy. Jane and Ivy are thrown together and must ask themselves: how can you know what you believe is right, when everyone is telling you it's wrong?

Without You, There is No Us, by Suki Kim**293 pages**

Suki Kim's "Without You, There Is No Us," a chilling memoir of this Korean-American author's 2011 stint as a visiting English instructor at a North Korean university, takes its title from a patriotic song extolling the Great General Comrade Kim Jong-il, whose death was announced on what happened to be the day of the author's final class in the Democratic People's Republic. The book reminds us that evil is not only banal; it is also completely arbitrary.

To call North Korea a banana republic – the term historically used to denote little dictatorships with only one export – would be an insult to bananas. For North Korea produces nothing the world needs, and the regime knows it. Kim recounts many examples of how this global uselessness is the regime's own fault. To cite just one, the government has, until very recently, concealed the existence of the World Wide Web.

The most fascinating bits of Kim's book are those that deal with her student's shocking technological backwardness – shocking because the institution they attend is the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology. The students do have access to an internal network, or intranet, but it's not connected to the Internet, and they use their computers mostly as dictionaries. The sight of these whiz kids "staring blankly at screens," Kim writes, "was so pathetic that I was seized by a pang of anger, mixed with sadness, and soon left the room."

Yet Kim's narrative suggests that the regime's stranglehold on information is starting to crack. Kim may have been one of the very few Western journalists to witness what might be the beginning of the end – namely, the introduction of Google to a very limited number of students. The first time they use it, they are bewildered that any given search item could produce hundreds of thousands of results.

Kim's description of her former charges is highly sentimental and sometimes gloomy; she can't help wondering whether she has literally endangered them by giving them a sense of hope. "I hope they have forgotten everything I inspired in them," she writes. But whether Kim realizes it or not, her own book suggests that the North Korean authorities, or at least the higher education system, has already surrendered to the future. They seem to take it as a foregone conclusion that "Harry Potter" is as inexorable as the Internet, impossible to keep at bay forever. Can a dissolution of the most closed regime the modern world has ever known be far behind?

Cover of Snow, by Jenny Milchman**336 pages**

This superlative dark, wintry debut is set in a small town in upstate New York. Nora Hamilton oversleeps one morning to find that her husband, Brendan, has hung himself. Nora is bereft, and she struggles to reconcile Brendan's suicide with their seemingly happy life together and with his job as a cop in his hometown. Her mother-in-law, a cold, forbidding woman, blames Nora, who tries talking to his partner, a cop who was also Brendan's best friend, but he advises her to move on with her life. Nora can't move on, not without some answers, and as she starts digging, she uncovers secrets about her husband and the town, the kind of secrets that people will do anything, including murder, to cover up. The ravages of winter impede her progress, but she plows on, determined to learn why Brendan never confided in her, but the answers prove more shocking than anything she might have imagined. These well-defined characters take us on an emotional roller-coaster ride through the darkest night, with blinding twists and occasionally fatal turns. This is a richly

woven story that not only looks at the devastating effects of suicide but also examines life in a small town and explores the complexity of marriage.

Painted Horses, by Malcolm Brooks 336 pages

Set in an American West of the 1950's but carrying vestiges of the nineteenth century, and with Indian artifacts and the ancestry of wild horses going back even earlier, much of this novel, like its milieu, has a timeless feel. Catherine Lemay is a young archaeologist hired to explore a Montana canyon slated for damming and destruction, although she may have been hired specifically to find nothing, no evidence of why some of the local Crow Indians oppose construction of the dam. She is aided by Miriam, a young Crow woman (whose centenarian great-grandmother connects back to the Greasy Grass and Custer), and assisted (or not) by local horsemen and townspeople with a variety of interests in the land's future. Two of the horsemen, including the enigmatic John H, served together in the mounted cavalry in wartime Italy, and, though some readers will rightly find in Brooks' themes suggestions of Jim Harrison or Cormac McCarthy, the lengthy wartime flashbacks nicely recall vintage Hemingway.

Prayers for Sale, by Sandra Davis 318 pages

Hennie Comfort is eighty-six and has lived in the mountains of Middle Swan, Colorado since before it was Colorado. Nit Spindle is just seventeen and newly married. She and her husband have just moved to the high country in search of work. It's 1936 and the depression has ravaged the country and Nit and her husband have suffered greatly. Hennie notices the young woman loitering near the old sign outside of her house that promises "Prayers For Sale". Hennie doesn't sell prayers, never has, but there's something about the young woman that she's drawn to. The harsh conditions of life that each have endured create an instant bond and an unlikely friendship is formed, one in which the deepest of hardships are shared and the darkest secrets are confessed.

The Sun and Other Stars, by Brigid Pasulka Fiction 327 pages

Brigid Pasulka's PEN/Hemingway award-winning debut novel was compared to the works of Jonathan Safran Foer by the New York Times and hailed by Elle as "storytelling that gets under your skin and forces you to press copies into your best friends' hands." Now *The Sun and Other Stars*, Pasulka's extraordinary second novel, is all that and more: a profound, compelling, and big-hearted masterpiece that showcases an exquisite writer at the joyful height of her talents.

In the seaside village of San Benedetto, a resort town on the Italian Riviera, twenty-two year-old Etto finds himself adrift. Within the past year, Etto has not only lost both his twin brother and his mother, but in his grief has become estranged from his father, the local butcher. While his father passes the time with the men of the town in the tradition of Italian men everywhere – a reverential obsession with soccer – Etto retreats ever further from his day-to-day life, seeking solace in the hills above the town.

But then a Ukrainian soccer star, the great Yuri Fil. Sweeps into San Benedetto, taking refuge himself from an international scandal. Soon Yuri and his captivating tomboy sister Zhuki invite Etto into their world of sport, celebrity, loyalty, and humor. Under their influence, Etto begins to reconstruct his relationship with his father and, slowly, open himself back up to the world. Who knows: perhaps the game of soccer isn't just a waste of time, and perhaps San Benedetto, his father, love, and life itself might have more to offer him than he ever believed possible.

The Sun and Other Stars is a gorgeous, celebratory tale about families, compromise, and community, and about how losses can be transformed into hope. Irresistible and unforgettable, it is a shimmering miracle of a book.

Gods in Alabama, by Joshilyn Jackson paperback has 320 pages

For 10 years Arlene has kept her promises, and God has kept His end of the bargain. Until now. When an old schoolmate from Possett turns up at Arlene's door in Chicago asking questions about Jim Beverly, former quarterback and god of Possett High, Arlene's break with her former hometown is forced to an end. At the same time, Burr, her long-time boyfriend, has raised an ultimatum: introduce him to her family or consider him gone. Arlene loves him dearly but knows her lily white(not to mention deeply racist) Southern Baptist family will not understand her relationship with an African American boyfriend. Reluctantly, Arlene bows to the pressure, and she and Burr embark on the long-avoided road trip back home. As Arlene digs through guilt and deception, her patched-together alibi begins to unravel, and she discovers how far she will go for love and a chance at redemption.