

## 2008 books: Fiction

Sunday, Dec. 07 2008

**The Book of Chameleons** by José Eduardo Agualusa and translated by Daniel Hahn (Simon & Schuster, 180 pages, \$12). Fiction traipsing as reality traipsing as fiction: A once-human gecko observes the life of an Angolan identity forger in this Borgesian wonder.

**When Will There Be Good News?** by Kate Atkinson (Little, Brown, 388 pages, \$24.99). There are killings, a fire, a train wreck, a couple of suicides, a disappearance, some reappearances, a secret, no shortage of lies, a few brilliant flashes of hope and at least two cases of mistaken identity in this third Jackson Brodie novel, leaving readers hungering for another.

**Man in the Dark** by Paul Auster (Henry Holt, 192 pages, \$23). A novel that manages to be both apocalyptic and tender, Auster plumbs the deepest recesses of the psyche of a former art critic as he blurs reality and illusion in post-Sept. 11 America.

**The Soul Thief** by Charles Baxter (Pantheon, 224 pages, \$20). It may not be possible to actually steal another's soul, but in Baxter's peculiar and delightful novel, narrator Nathaniel Mason has the growing suspicion that someone has taken up residence in his own psyche. The mystery of this novel has less to do with events as it does with character and identity.

**The Story of Forgetting** by Stefan Merrill Block (Random House, 320 pages, \$25). The 2004 Washington University graduate makes a spectacular debut in a poignant first novel that tracks the parallel path of Alzheimer's through two branches of a Texas family.

**Beautiful Children** by Charles Bock (Random House, 417 pages, \$25). An edgy look at the neon, gambling, sex industry and runaway children of Bock's hometown of Las Vegas. Bock's parents and brothers are second- and third-generation pawn shop owners in a declining district that houses the area's oldest casinos and hotels.

**Skeletons at the Feast** by Chris Bohjalian (Shayne Areheart Books, 384 pages, \$25). The final, cataclysmic months of World War II are detailed in this profoundly moving story seen through the eyes of slave laborers, battle veterans and terrified aristocrats.

**Babylon Rolling** by Amanda Boyden (Pantheon, 302 pages, \$23.95). A former St. Louisan creates a mesmerizing story about a diverse group of people living in New Orleans just before Hurricane Katrina, illuminating not only the lives of her characters but the unique character of the Crescent City as well.

**The View From the Seventh Layer** by Kevin Brockmeier (Pantheon, 288 pages, \$21.95). Brockmeier, a graduate of Southwest Missouri State University, probes gently to uncover the mysteries of life. Even the dead are filled with yearning in these luminous and often fantastical stories.

**People of the Book** by Geraldine Brooks (Viking, 372 pages, \$25.95). The same formula that made "The Da Vinci Code" a cultural and literary phenomenon — artistic intrigue, religious arcana, generous doses of history and a spunky

heroine — comes alive again in this tale of the travels of a sacred Jewish text. Its narrative power and strong, authentic detail make it a gripping, satisfying read.

**Supreme Courtship** by Christopher Buckley (Twelve, 285 pages, \$24.99). In this clever satire, a frustrated president fills a Supreme Court vacancy with a sexy Judge Judy sort, fresh from the TV screen.

**His Illegal Self** by Peter Carey (Knopf, 288 pages, \$25). A 7-year-old boy whose parents are notorious radicals goes on the lam to Australia with the woman he thinks is his mother. The '60s were far from over in 1972, the pivotal year that comes richly to life in Peter Carey's warmhearted ninth novel.

**So Brave, Young and Handsome** by Leif Enger (Atlantic Monthly, 387 pages, \$24). Enger's long-awaited follow-up to "Peace Like a River" is a rousing page-turner about a postman turned author and adventurer in the dying West of 1915. Touching, funny and full of surprises, it's a great yarn and a great read.

**A Plague of Doves** by Louise Erdrich (Harper, 320 pages, \$25.95). This novel evokes the same complex characters, hard lives and North Dakota terrain the author has explored since "Love Medicine." Her lyricism, the mystical touches and her compassion for her characters entice the reader.

**World Without End** by Ken Follett (Dutton, 992 pages, \$35). Call it a sequel to "The Pillars of the Earth," set in a medieval English town. But this tale stands on its own as drama wrapped around history. Lots of sex, too.

**Unaccustomed Earth** by Jhumpa Lahiri (Knopf, 331 pages, \$23.95). The stories in this absorbing and beautifully written book concern Bengalis struggling to adapt to new homelands and new ways of life. Lahiri, winner of a Pulitzer Prize, has emerged as a major author with a worldwide audience.

**The Hour I First Believed** by Wally Lamb (Harper, 752 pages, \$29.95). The 1999 Columbine High School shootings send a wife spiraling toward insanity and her husband on a path that will force him to re-evaluate his history in a massive, moving and completely unpredictable story from the author of "She's Come Undone."

**Ellington Boulevard** by Adam Langer (Spiegel & Grau, 336 pages, \$24.95). The New York real estate market doesn't seem like the most likely of subjects, but in Langer's talented hands this multifaceted story unwinds like an intricate jazz composition, filled with entertaining riffs and precise counterpoint that add up to an engaging, multilayered novel that's a pleasure to read.

**Sway** by Zachary Lazar (Little, Brown, 255 pages, \$23.99). Lazar dials into the violent undertones of the '60s in this fictional account of the Rolling Stones, Charles Manson and filmmaker Kenneth Anger. The characters' shared fascination with death magic helped shape the dark allure of the Love Generation.

**The Whiskey Rebels** by David Liss (Random House, 544 pages, \$26). The latest novel by the author of "The Coffee Trader" is unexpectedly current, as its fictional intrigue focuses on postrevolutionary America's nascent but fragile national economy and its protagonist's attempts to exploit human greed to reclaim lost honor.

**Church Booty** by Carol Manley (Livingston Press, 140 pages, \$15.95). Manley vividly portrays the life of small-town black church folk in this collection of

short stories. With stories rich in humor and undercut by a subtle sadness, Manley has emerged as a powerful new voice in fiction.

*Art in America* by Ron McLarty (Viking, 366 pages, \$25.95). Long-suffering, unpublished and unappreciated, writer Steven Kearney leaves New York City for the wilds of Creedmore, Colo., to write a pageant based on the town's history. The adventures that ensue in this touching novel romp toward a satisfying conclusion like a well-crafted farce.

*The Senator's Wife* by Sue Miller (Random House, 320 pages, \$24.95). An "unflinchingly honest" portrayal of two marriages, one long-failed, the other struggling to succeed. "Isn't that what marriage is all about?" one protagonist asks. "Staying in it while getting out in some way, too?" It's a question Miller succeeds in answering, admirably.

*How the Dead Dream* by Lydia Millet (Counterpoint, 256 pages, \$24). Tragedy leads to a real estate developer's quirky obsession with endangered animals in this first book of a planned trilogy.

*A Mercy* by Toni Morrison (Knopf, 176 pages, \$23.95). Novel set in 17th-century America involves several plot strands, including that of a young slave sent on a journey to save her master. This book may be even better than the Nobel laureate's "Song of Solomon."

*Dictation* by Cynthia Ozick (Houghton Mifflin, 176 pages, \$24). This book contains four narratives, all written in Ozick's characteristically charming style, with humor and with great depth of characterization. Ozick has won many awards for her works of fiction and nonfiction, and this latest book bears out her mastery in many modes.

*Lush Life* by Richard Price (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 455 pages, \$26). Few novelists do urban grit as well as Richard Price, and his latest is no exception. Centered around a murder on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, its tale of culture clashes and senseless violence will stay with you long after the final page.

*Goldengrove* by Francine Prose (HarperCollins, 275 pages, \$24.95). By an author best known for satirical fiction such as "A Changed Man," this is an insightful, lyrical and at times disturbing look at the effects of the death of an older sister on a 13-year-old girl, her family and the sister's boyfriend.

*Indignation* by Philip Roth (Houghton Mifflin, 256 pages, \$26). One of America's finest novelists writes about Marcus Messner, a college student trying to avoid being drafted during the Korean War who finds a far different kind of conflict on a Midwestern campus. He must cope with circumstances he has not made, yet are keeping him from the life he should have.

*The End of Baseball* by Peter Schilling Jr. (Ivan R. Dee, 352 pages, \$25). Baseball's 1944 Brownies live again in this rollicking novel. Owner Bill Veeck shines in fiction, just as he did in real life.

*American Wife* by Curtis Sittenfeld (Random House, 551 pages, \$26). Novel inspired by life of Laura Bush changes the way you look at the president's wife and her husband.

*The Widows of Eastwick* by John Updike (Knopf, 320 pages, \$24.95). Updike has brought Sukie, Jane and Lexa back to Eastwick, R.I., site of the havoc they

wreaked 30 years earlier in "The Witches of Eastwick." There's more than enough frolic and fury in this sequel to make sharing the journey with them worth your while.

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