Beacon Press
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December 19, 2008

To: UUA Board of Trustees
From: Helene Atwan, Director
Re: Beacon Press Board Report

BEACON

All throughout the 2008 election and even afterward, Beacon Press has shared the media spotlight with two of our most well-known authors, **Bill Ayers** and **Rashid Khalidi**, who in the days leading up to the election had become centerpieces of the right wing's campaign against Barack Obama. We are proud to have reprinted Ayers' ***Fugitive Days: Memoirs of an Antiwar Activist*** with a new afterword this fall after seven years since first publication. As a founding member of one of the most radical anti-war organizations in US history, Ayers here tells the true story of his impassioned activism and participation in the Weather Underground during the Vietnam era. Since the election, he has also spoken out about his Underground days and his real relation to President-elect Obama on **MSNBC's Hardball with Chris Matthews**; **ABC's Good Morning America**; **WBUR's Fresh Air** with Terry Gross; **Salon** with Walter Shapiro; **NPR's Morning Edition**; **Amy Goodman's Democracy Now!**; and in the December 5th issue of the ***New York Times***. ***The Atlantic***, ***Time***, and the ***Washington Post*** have also run articles on Ayers, and he has been widely discussed on the national satirical television programs **The Colbert Report** and **The Daily Show with Jon Stewart**. As was the case in 2001 when the book was first published and caught in controversy, we urge readers to judge the book for themselves.

Rashid Khalidi's new book ***Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East*** will be in bookstores just after the holidays. Khalidi, who is considered by many to be the foremost US historian of the Middle East, was publicly supported during the McCain slur campaign by the ***New York Times***; the ***Washington Post***; John Judis at the ***New Republic***; Christopher Hitchens at ***Slate***; and Scott Horton at ***Harper's***. *Publishers Weekly* has just given *Sowing Crisis* a **starred review**.

Recently published ***Dating Jesus*** by **Susan Campbell** has been selected as one of the "Great Reads for Fall 2008" in the October issue of ***Ms. Magazine***. *Dating Jesus* is a lovingly-told memoir about growing up fundamentalist and female—and ultimately maturing into a feminist in search of a more compassionate and tolerant religion that does not demote women to "second-class spiritual citizenship." "Simultaneously wisecracking and scholarly, both heartfelt and hilarious," according to author Wally Lamb, "Campbell's story. . .rejects the chauvinistic dictates of religious dogma and insists on fairness and equal footing for all." Also selected as one of the "Great Reads" by *Ms. Magazine* was Carmine Sarracino and Kevin M. Scott's ***The Porning of America***.

Alan Collinge's ***The Student Loan Scam*** is receiving a warm welcome with a **starred review** in the October 6th issue of *Publishers Weekly*. With nearly 5 million defaulted loans, average undergraduate borrowers leaving school with $20,000 of debt, and average graduate borrowers accruing $42,000 in debt, *The Student Loan Scam* could not be more timely.

Founder of the political action committee StudentLoanJustice.org, Collinge here argues that student loans have become the most profitable, uncompetitive, and oppressive type of debt in American history. *Publishers Weekly* calls his debut book "comprehensive and stirring. . . whistle-blowing at its finest," and **CNNMoney.com** has profiled Collinge as one of **2008's financial Heroes**. ***The Student Loan Scam*** has been selected along with another recently published title, ***Nature's Second Chance: Restoring the Ecology of Stone Prairie Farm*** by **Steven I. Apfelbaum**, as an **Indie Bound Notable Pick** for February.

BEACON

Also recently published, ***Beyond Bogotá: Diary of a Drug War Journalist in Colombia*** by **Garry Leech** and ***The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the Twenty-first Century*** by psychiatrists **Jacqueline Olds** and **Richard S. Schwartz** are quickly garnering favorable reviews. A documentary memoir of Colombia's civil conflict by an independent journalist held captive there by leftist guerrillas, ***Beyond Bogotá*** has been hailed as an "eye-opening look at the drug war in Colombia" and "excellent reportage" in the November 1st issue of ***Kirkus Reviews***. The North American Congress on Latin America will begin excerpting the book on its website **NACLA.Org** in January.

In ***The Lonely American***, Olds and Schwartz show how the current American lifestyle leads to social isolation. Drawing on their extensive clinical experience, new social surveys, and recent research on the physiological and cognitive effects of social exclusion, they trace the devastating societal ripple of widespread personal loneliness. *The Lonely American* has received praise in *Library Journal* for being a "seminal work" and "a substantive contribution" to the sociological and psychological literature on loneliness.

A number of titles continue to receive accolades. Both **Meredith Hall**'s ***Without a Map*** and **Laila Halaby**'s ***Once in a Promised Land*** have been selected by ALA as part of "**The Best of the Best from the University Presses: Books You Should Know About**" program, which aired on C-Span on October 25th. ***The Paradise of All These Parts*** by **John Hanson Mitchell** was named one of "the most memorable titles of 2008" by the ***Boston Globe***, and **Kai Wright**'s ***Drifting Toward Love*** received one of ten 2008 **Gustavus Myers Center Outstanding Book** Awards. ***The Blue Cotton Gown*** by **Patricia Harman** continues to be a favorite, with ***People*** magazine giving it a glowing review in the November 24th issue.

We are pleased to have acquired a number of important books over the last three months. ***The Khaarijee: A Chronicle of Friendship and War in Kabul*** by reporter **J. Malcolm Garcia** is a gritty and unsentimental memoir about friendship, humility, and transformation in war-torn, post-Taliban Afghanistan. Unlike fly-by reporters traveling through the country armed with a sat phone and a ticket on the next flight to Islamabad, Garcia settles into Afghanistan—learning its history, meeting its resilient people, and forging life-long connections.

The Pure Lover by **David Plante**, author of more than a dozen novels and professor of creative writing at Columbia University, is a powerful and moving response to his life partner's death from brain cancer. It is a memoir about grief, memory, loss, and above all, love. Here, Plante traces Nikos's life, drawing on Greek themes from Nikos's heritage, and ultimately tells their love story, culminating in his care of Nikos during his final days.

The New York Times
nytimes.com

December 6, 2008

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Real Bill Ayers

By WILLIAM AYERS

Chicago

IN the recently concluded presidential race, I was unwillingly thrust upon the stage and asked to play a role in a profoundly dishonest drama. I refused, and here's why.

Unable to challenge the content of Barack Obama's campaign, his opponents invented a narrative about a young politician who emerged from nowhere, a man of charm, intelligence and skill, but with an exotic background and a strange name. The refrain was a question: "What do we really know about this man?"

Secondary characters in the narrative included an African-American preacher with a fiery style, a Palestinian scholar and an "unrepentant domestic terrorist." Linking the candidate with these supposedly shadowy characters, and ferreting out every imagined secret tie and dark affiliation, became big news.

I was cast in the "unrepentant terrorist" role; I felt at times like the enemy projected onto a large screen in the "Two Minutes Hate" scene from George Orwell's "1984," when the faithful gathered in a frenzy of fear and loathing.

With the mainstream news media and the blogosphere caught in the pre-election excitement, I saw no viable path to a rational discussion. Rather than step clumsily into the sound-bite culture, I turned away whenever the microphones were thrust into my face. I sat it out.

Now that the election is over, I want to say as plainly as I can that the character invented to serve this drama wasn't me, not even close. Here are the facts:

I never killed or injured anyone. I did join the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s, and later resisted the draft and was arrested in nonviolent demonstrations. I became a full-time antiwar organizer for Students for a Democratic Society. In 1970, I co-founded the Weather Underground, an organization that was created after an accidental explosion that claimed the

lives of three of our comrades in Greenwich Village. The Weather Underground went on to take responsibility for placing several small bombs in empty offices — the ones at the Pentagon and the United States Capitol were the most notorious — as an illegal and unpopular war consumed the nation.

The Weather Underground crossed lines of legality, of propriety and perhaps even of common sense. Our effectiveness can be — and still is being — debated. We did carry out symbolic acts of extreme vandalism directed at monuments to war and racism, and the attacks on property, never on people, were meant to respect human life and convey outrage and determination to end the Vietnam war.

Peaceful protests had failed to stop the war. So we issued a screaming response. But it was not terrorism; we were not engaged in a campaign to kill and injure people indiscriminately, spreading fear and suffering for political ends.

I cannot imagine engaging in actions of that kind today. And for the past 40 years, I've been teaching and writing about the unique value and potential of every human life, and the need to realize that potential through education.

I have regrets, of course — including mistakes of excess and failures of imagination, posturing and posing, inflated and heated rhetoric, blind sectarianism and a lot else. No one can reach my age with their eyes even partly open and not have hundreds of regrets. The responsibility for the risks we posed to others in some of our most extreme actions in those underground years never leaves my thoughts for long.

The antiwar movement in all its commitment, all its sacrifice and determination, could not stop the violence unleashed against Vietnam. And therein lies cause for real regret.

We — the broad "we" — wrote letters, marched, talked to young men at induction centers, surrounded the Pentagon and lay down in front of troop trains. Yet we were inadequate to end the killing of three million Vietnamese and almost 60,000 Americans during a 10-year war.

The dishonesty of the narrative about Mr. Obama during the campaign went a step further with its assumption that if you can place two people in the same room at the same time, or if you can show that they held a conversation, shared a cup of coffee, took the bus downtown together or had any of a thousand other associations, then you have demonstrated that they share ideas, policies, outlook, influences and, especially, responsibility for each other's behavior. There is a long and sad history of guilt by association in our political culture, and at crucial times we've been unable to rise above it.

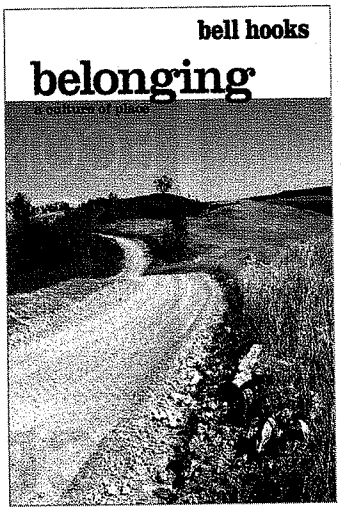
President-elect Obama and I sat on a board together; we lived in the same diverse and yet close-knit community; we sometimes passed in the bookstore. We didn't pal around, and I had nothing to do with his positions. I knew him as well as thousands of others did, and like millions of others, I wish I knew him better.

Demonization, guilt by association, and the politics of fear did not triumph, not this time. Let's hope they never will again. And let's hope we might now assert that in our wildly diverse society, talking and listening to the widest range of people is not a sin, but a virtue.

William Ayers, a professor of education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, is the author of "Fugitive Days" and a co-author of the forthcoming "Race Course."

"Great Reads for Fall 2008" in October issue of *Ms.* Magazine

might argue that it is also a desire to make the present tolerable and hopeful, that by romanticizing the past we feed the spirit and warm the heart and thereby keep the body moving.



hooks uses powerful metaphors to reconstruct the agrarian past that for most black people is a fading identity. Home, she writes, is not only an emotional and physical space, but also the environment where life is conceived and creativity inspired. It is in this rootedness that hooks finds harmony and wholeness, where she herself finds peace, first with herself and then with others and with nature. But while *Belonging* is a powerful cultural history of place, it also reflects the loss of place. hooks writes of an earth disappeared beneath concrete; of a pastoral idyll eaten away by disharmonious industrialization; of blacks forgetting their agrarian past and historical love of and for the land; of communities built through the creative arts of quilting, gardening and cooking being displaced into urban mazes that stifle creativity and imagination. Reading hooks' warm descriptions of her growing-up years in a farming community offers a therapeutic sense of relief, but ultimately her book is a reminder of what has died in our society.

This is not a call for return to rural life. For most of us that is not likely or even possible (though there's much to be gained by participating in a community garden, spending time in the woods observing what nature provides or even tending flower pots on a balcony). Rather, hooks encourages a return to our rural past as an ideal. By re-adopting the agrarian values that foster creativity and community, by re-engaging with the land and nature, the "dearest freshest deep down things," she writes (quoting poet Gerard Manley Hopkins), we can find autonomy and peace within ourselves. ■

VALERIE GRIM *is an associate professor of African American and African diaspora studies at Indiana University-Bloomington.*

ceit that she's a feminist. This isn't entirely far-fetched: Bush, in fact, has described herself as a feminist and said she doesn't think *Roe v. Wade* should be overturned. Sittenfeld hews closely to Bush's real life to create a frighteningly believable situation in which a woman finds herself complicit in an administration with which she utterly disagrees.

At the Elbows of My Elders: One Family's Journey Toward Civil Rights
By Gail Milissa Grant
The Missouri History Museum Press
The civil rights battles of the 1950s and '60s have been well-documented; less is said about blacks who fought segregation and racial discrimination in the decades before. This family memoir recounts the day-to-day struggles of the author's father and mother in St. Louis before the reform movement began.

The Porning of America: The Rise of Porn Culture, What It Means, and Where We Go From Here
By Carmine Sarracino and Kevin M. Scott
Beacon Press
English professors Sarracino and Scott delve into the history of American pornography since the Civil War era and show how, to our detriment, it has infiltrated everyday speech, entertainment, advertising and sexuality.

Dating Jesus: A Story of Fundamentalism, Feminism, and the American Girl
By Susan Campbell
Beacon Press
This fond memoir of growing up a rebellious tomboy in a fundamentalist church that expects women to be pious, subservient and, above all, quiet tells what it feels like to have Jesus as your boyfriend—and what happens when you want to break up with him.

Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China
By Leslie T. Chang
Spiegel & Grau
Chang, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter, tracked two factory workers over three years and offers an up-close look at the social pressures in modern-day China, where women must lie about their age and education to get ahead.

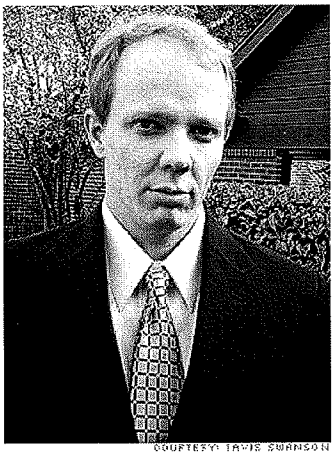
Labor of Love
By Thomas Beatie
Seal Press
In his brutally honest memoir, Beatie, a female-to-male transsexual who stopped hormones long enough to give birth, describes his path to global fame as a pregnant *man*, including childhood abuse, collegiate sexual awakening and a legal and biological transition that will leave readers pondering the meaning of gender.

Heroes and Zeros

Hero: Alan Collinge

Founder, StudentLoanJustice.org

"Student loans have become the most profitable, uncompetitive and oppressive type of debt in our nation's history." -- CNNMoney.com, Dec. 12, 2008


COURTESY: TAVIS SWANSON

• Sallie Mae: A hot stock, a tough lender

Five million federal student loans are currently in default, which adds up to about $38 billion in bad debt. Collinge has spent years fighting for college graduates, as well as dropouts, who are in trouble with these loans.

What's frightening about the situation, he says, is that lenders have all the power: "Student loans have become the most profitable, uncompetitive and oppressive type of debt in our nation's history." He points out that Congress long ago eliminated standard consumer protections for borrowers. A family struggling with mortgage or credit card payments enjoys far more rights than a recent grad who helped pay for his anthropology degree with student loans. (He gives details in his upcoming book *The Student Loan Scam: The Most Oppressive Debt in U.S. History--and How We Can Fight Back.*)

Working out of his cramped apartment in Tacoma, Wash. - for no pay - he has watched membership in his grass-roots organization grow to about 4,000 people. In 2009, he hopes to start a counseling/advocacy service for desperate borrowers and to continue fighting for a federal student borrower bill of rights. --L.O.

NEXT: Hero: Nouriel Roubini
Last updated December 12 2008: 6:01 AM ET

Find this article at:
http://money.cnn.com/galleries/2008/news/0812/gallery.heroes_zeros_2008/5.html

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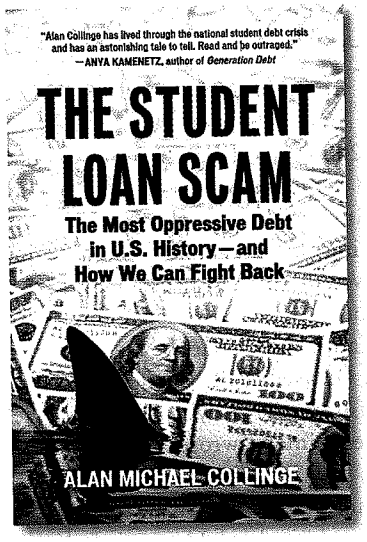
Publishers Weekly **Pick of the week**

A Pound of Flesh



★ The Student Loan Scam: The Most Oppressive Debt in U.S. History—and How We Can Fight Back

Alan Michael Collinge. Beacon, $22.95 (192p)
ISBN 978-0-8070-4229-8

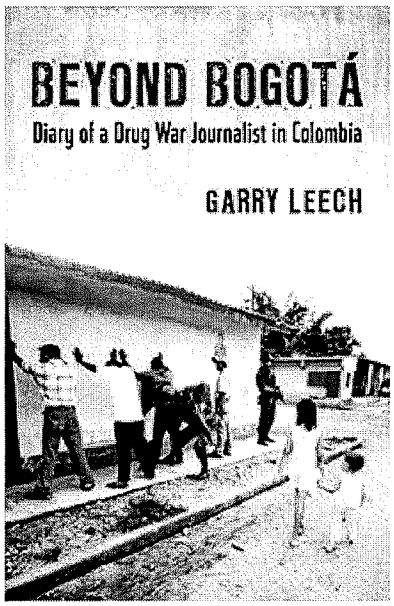
Think credit-card debt is a problem? Take a look at the lives ruined through the corporate thug tactics, usurious fees and vicious harassment employed by some of the nation's largest student-loan providers in this shocking exposé from Collinge, founder of StudentLoanJustice.org. The author had a manageable $38,000 in loans—until he missed a single payment. Fees and charges quickly piled up, and his debt mushroomed to more than $100,000. The author reveals that since lenders make far more money from defaulted loans than they do from borrowers in good standing, they go to extraordinary—and illegal—lengths to force borrowers into default. There are currently more than five million defaulted loans on record, and incredibly, student loans are the only type of loan in U.S. history to be nondischargable in bankruptcy. The author exposes the engineers (and profiteers) of this predatory system and urges Congress to restore standard consumer protections to student loans, concluding with a call to arms for progressive changes, refinancing rights and a plethora of practical advice for borrowers. Comprehensive and stirring, this extraordinary book is whistle-blowing at its finest. *(Feb.)*

- Then and Now, Venezuela and Cuba, 1960-2008
Progreso Weekly | Saul Landau
- Migrants Can Help Solve Economic Crisis
OneWorld | Various Authors
- Coping with Crisis, Latin America Bucks the System
Huffington Post | Laura Carlsen
- Mercosur Summit Shares Social Concerns, Diverges on Economy
Inter Press Service (IPS) | Mario Osava
- Agribusinesses in Paraguay Protests Land Occupations
Inter Press Service (IPS) | Natalia Ruiz Díaz
- Immigration: A Few Bad Apples...Or a Rotten System?
Foreign Policy in Focus | Laura Carlsen
- Morales Remakes Bolivia
In These Times | Alex van Schaick

On the Cocaine Trail in 'Muerto Asis'

Dec 1 2008
Garry Leech

In August 2002, I traveled to Putumayo in southern Colombia to investigate the consequences of almost two years of the Plan Colombia counter-narcotics initiative. At the time, Putumayo had emerged as a central battleground in the conflict being waged by the Colombian military, leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries—a battle that continues to this day. The region also lay at the center of the cocaine trade, making it ground zero for Plan Colombia's military operations.



Beyond Bogotá is available for purchase through the Beacon Press website, or benefit NACLA with a purchase from Amazon.com, or Powell's Books.

One afternoon, in the town of Puerto Asís, I ran into a photojournalist I knew named Scott Dalton. Scott had worked for the Associated Press in Colombia for several years before becoming a freelance photographer and would later co-produce a documentary film called *La Sierra*, which looked at the lives of paramilitaries in the barrios of Medellín. He was in Putumayo with a documentary film crew that was doing a report on Colombia's conflict.

The next morning Scott, the film crew, and I headed out of town to visit a cocaine-processing lab in the jungle. Just past the town of Santa Ana, about thirty minutes outside of Puerto Asís, we turned off the main road onto a bumpy dirt road that could be traversed only by a four-wheel-drive vehicle. Every so often we passed small clearings in the rainforest where the trees had been felled and a small farm established. Finally we pulled off the road and parked in front of a wooden house. Three women were sitting outside on chairs while four small children played nearby. Our driver spoke to one of the women, who then disappeared around the side of the house.

The children eyed the five *gringos* with suspicion and curiosity. I pulled some colorful pens out of my pocket and asked the women whether I could give them to the children—when working in rural conflict zones, I had found that befriending the children helped the parents to relax and open up. With the women's consent, the children immediately came over to me to lay claim to their gifts, and the mood of the women and children quickly shifted from wariness to festiveness as we all began to talk and laugh.

The first woman reappeared from behind the house with a man who looked to be in his mid-twenties. He spoke with our driver for a minute, introduced himself to us as Fernando, and beckoned us to follow him as he turned to walk back around the side of the house.

Attached to the rear of the house, surrounded by jungle on three sides, was a small open-sided structure with a slanting wooden roof: the cocaine-processing lab. A large pile of coca leaves sat on the cement floor in one corner. Along the far side of the lab were several fifty-five-gallon drums of chemicals used in the processing. On a platform at the end of the lab sat a two-ring kerosene burner, a small scale, and several plastic buckets and aluminum cooking pots. Fernando did not own the lab, which was located in paramilitary-controlled territory; he was simply an employee who processed coca paste into cocaine base.

A guide to the most memorable titles of 2008, from entertaining to enlightening

FICTION

By Anna Mundow

The year brought new fiction from writers such as Philip Roth ("Indignation"), Marilynne Robinson ("Home"), Toni Morrison ("A Mercy"), and John Barth ("The Development"). But the novel that delighted me more than any "big book" was a sleeper, published not in 2008 but in 1924. "The Rector's Daughter," by F. M. Mayor, is a slim masterpiece whose first sentence — "Dedmayne is an insignificant village in the Eastern counties" — encapsulates the life we are about to enter; that of Mary Jocelyn, a spinster daughter, whose dutiful existence is shaken by love. If you had your fill of weighty fiction in 2008, here's the antidote: a brilliant portrait of unforgettable yet unremarkable characters by a forgotten master: Flora Macdonald Mayor, herself a clergyman's daughter.

THE RAIN BEFORE IT FALLS
By Jonathan Coe

THE SECRET SCRIPTURE
By Sebastian Barry

FALL OF FROST
By Brian Hall

THE WASTED VIGIL
By Nadeem Aslam

SEA OF POPPIES
By Amitav Ghosh

THE WHITE TIGER
By Aravind Adiga

A CASE OF EXPLODING MANGOES
By Mohammed Hanif

THE GIRL OF HIS DREAMS
By Donna Leon

THE NIGHT FOLLOWING
By Morag Joss

WHEN WILL THERE BE GOOD NEWS?
By Kate Atkinson

TO SIBERIA
By Per Petterson

WHEN WE WERE ROMANS
By Matthew Kneale

WHAT WAS LOST
By Catherine O'Flynn

The subtle mood created by neglected writers like Mayor is deliberately echoed in Jonathan Coe's exquisite novel **"The Rain Before It Falls,"** which depicts the modest life of elderly Rosamond, whose voice, on tapes bequeathed to a blind relative, tells the story of three generations of women. To explain the past, Rosamond describes 20 family photographs in sequence. Each picture prompts a recollection that gains significance as Rosamond's humdrum life and Coe's sly plot unfold.

The heroine of Sebastian Barry's **"The Secret Scripture"** is more ancient than Coe's Rosamond, and her recollections are more disturbing, but, like Rosamond, Roseanne McNulty attempts to untangle the past. Locked away for decades in a mental hospital in the Irish midlands, she secretly writes her story, which encompasses the nation's rebellion and civil war. The tension increases when we begin to see Roseanne not solely through her recollections but also through the eyes of the hospital psychiatrist reviewing her case who gradually unearths the shocking truth behind her incarceration. In "The Secret Scripture," as in Barry's other works, even brutality can be redeemed by mercy.

In Brian Hall's superbly evocative **"Fall of Frost,"** the world recollected by its narrator, Robert Frost, is the wider one of art and fame. Yet this is an intimate novel, and that is its greatest triumph. Frost's inner life is revealed in an ingenious, elegant loop from its near-end in 1962, back through childhood and adulthood to the poet's death, in 1963. He endured the death of four of his six children, his wife, his best friend, and the committal of a daughter to a mental hospital. "Grief takes so much away, but with the left hand it gives you naked ears, wide-open eyes," he observes. And Hall, with astonishing skill, repeatedly captures Frost in that moment when experience is transformed into art, and art into a form of salvation.

That alchemy is violated in Nadeem Aslam's beautiful novel of Afghanistan, **"The Wasted Vigil."** Here art, like Aslam's characters, is mutilated by the Soviet and US invasions and by the Taliban's oppression. The house in which much of the novel is set is filled with books and paintings; the garden shed was once a perfume factory. But the books are nailed to the ceiling and the paintings bullet-riddled. When Marcus, the English doctor whose Afghan wife was murdered by the Taliban, opens this defaced refuge to travelers — Lara, a Russian woman searching for her brother; David, an American friend and former spy; James, a US Special Forces officer; and Casa, a young jihadi — their stories intersect, and the novel becomes a taut thriller. This setup sounds unlikely, but the heightened reality that Aslam creates is as convincing as it is monstrous.

"Sea of Poppies," by Amitav Ghosh, is a more buoyant saga of another dark age, that of China's 19th-century Opium Wars. The first installment of a proposed trilogy, Ghosh's exuberant novel transports us to 1830s India, where the British Empire prepares for war with China, its most lucrative drug market. We first meet Deeti, who

FICTION, Page K7

Anna Mundow can be reached at ama1668@hotmail.com.

NONFICTION

By Michael Kenney

The measured tread of Lincoln books can already be heard, two months in advance of next year's bicentennial of his birth, with Civil War accounts marching along in step.

A deeply moving account of that war's deadly toll, **"This Republic of Suffering,"** by Drew Gilpin Faust, leads the roster of this year's best nonfiction books.

THIS REPUBLIC OF SUFFERING: Death and the American Civil War
By Drew Gilpin Faust

TRIED BY WAR: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief
By James M. McPherson

THE FOREVER WAR
By Dexter Filkins

THE HEMINGSES OF MONTICELLO: An American Family
By Annette Gordon-Reed

THE SUICIDE INDEX: Putting My Father's Death in Order
By Joan Wickersham

A SUMMER OF HUMMINGBIRDS: Love, Art, and Scandal in the Intersecting Worlds of Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Martin Johnson Heade
By Christopher Benfey

THE WORDY SHIPMATES
By Sarah Vowell

THE PARADISE OF ALL THESE PARTS: A Natural History of Boston
By John Hanson Mitchell

Faust, a Civil War historian and president of Harvard University, takes us on a grim tour of the killing battlefields, hospitals, and prison camps. She contrasts the violence and agony of the more than 600,000 deaths of Union and Confederate soldiers with the 19th-century notion of a "good death" in one's own bed, surrounded by family.

The Civil War "matters to us today," writes Faust, "because it ended slavery and helped to define the meanings of freedom, citizenship, and equality." But for those "who lived in and through the Civil War, the texture of the experience, its warp and woof, was the presence of death."

It's useful to recall that unlike the case with other wartime presidents, Abraham Lincoln's entire tenure was bounded by war.

In **"Tried by War,"** James M. McPherson establishes how Lincoln was forced by the immediacy of the war's onset — and by the ineptitude and even disloyalty of some of his leading generals — to truly become a commander in chief.

But curiously, McPherson notes, many Lincoln biographies, and even academic symposiums, have ignored that role. "Tried by War" redresses that oversight with intelligence and authority.

Modern wars call for a different kind of military history than McPherson's. Among such contemporary accounts, **"The Forever War,"** by Dexter Filkins of The New York Times, achieves a gripping, raw immediacy.

The book opens with a tension-filled exchange of dueling loudspeakers — cries of "The Holy War! The Holy War!" from one set and a blaring rendition of AC/DC's "Hells Bells" from another.

Another day, Filkins witnesses the aftermath of a car bombing, schoolgirls running with mouths open, shattered bodies sprawled across the street and tossed into brick walls. And then, he offers this telling observation: "The Americans arrived, children in the horror world."

Months ago, before Barack Obama's election, some reviewers suggested that his campaign, which renewed the national conversation about race, might bolster the candidacy of Annette Gordon-Reed's **"The Hemingses of Monticello"** for the National Book Award in nonfiction. It did eventually win the prize, but "The Hemingses" would be a notable book in any year.

Gordon-Reed, a professor at New York Law School, gives the Hemings family a history of their own while using their story to explore the complexity of America's "peculiar institution" for masters and slaves, whose lives were often intimately intertwined.

In any age, examining human relationships tends to be nearly endlessly fascinating. In **"The Suicide Index,"** Joan Wickersham, a Cambridge novelist, struggles to understand and come to terms with her father's decision to commit suicide. Much had gone wrong in his life, including the failure of his importing business, in which family members had heavily invested.

Wickersham writes that she had sensed her father's problems only bit by bit, until much of it spilled out over lunch at a Cambridge café. But in the end, her father's suicide meant that she would never know the whole story.

"Knowing that I'll never feel his death as fully and as directly as I might want to," she writes, "perhaps as a result I'll never be done feeling it."

In the late fall of 1882, Mabel Loomis Todd, a young artist, sent Emily Dickinson a small painting she had done of Indian pipes, a waxy-white plant that grows in dark woodlands. "I cannot make an Indian Pipe," Dickinson replied in a note accompanying her gift of a poem, "but please accept a Humming Bird." It was an exchange of

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Michael Kenney, a Cambridge freelance writer, reviews regularly for the Globe.

"The most memorable titles of 2008" in the **Boston Globe**

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Subtle explorations of the past

► **FICTION**
Continued from Page K5

survives on the poppy crop and faces ritual death when her husband is killed in an opium factory. The novel's cast soon expands to include the American son of a slave and Deeti's master; a local prince dispossessed by a British businessman; a courageous French orphan fleeing a loathsome betrothal; and numerous other villains and heroes. Each character, however minor, commands our interest as the party sets sail on the Ibis, a former slave ship, bound for the plantations of Mauritius and then for war. The novel's playful language, ranging from Anglo-Indian to seafaring dialect, and its descriptions of opium's cultivation, use, and trade are fascinating, but "Sea of Poppies" is first and foremost an irresistible adventure story.

Aravind Adiga's **"The White Tiger"** is, by contrast, a brilliant and sardonic portrait of modern India as reflected in the life of Balram Halwai, businessman, thinker, killer. "I am tomorrow," Balram declares as he recounts, over the course of seven nights, how he achieved success in a brutal world. But Adiga's mordantly funny novel, which won this year's Man Booker Prize, dispenses its own brand of hard-boiled compassion.

Mohammed Hanif takes a similarly satirical view of 1980s Pakistan in **"A Case of Exploding Mangoes."** This airy yet intricate novel depicts the dictatorship of General Zia ul-Haq as it impinges on the life of Ali Shigri, a seemingly innocent yet cunning young soldier who notices too much for his own good. Hanif's indictment of the psychopathic Zia and of the military — any military — is deadpan and deadly. As Ali observes: "If you are in a uniform, you salute. That's all there is to it."

Uniforms command little respect in the detective novels of Donna Leon, and **"The Girl of His Dreams,"** the 17th in the Commissario Brunetti series, is perhaps her darkest and best. The darkest hours, literally and figuratively, provide the setting for Morag Joss's engrossing suspense novel **"The Night Following,"** while Kate Atkinson's **"When Will There Be Good News?"** depicts a more predictable, though hardly sunnier, world where guilt is still a reassuringly criminal, not existential, matter.

Children's voices — haunting, funny, and courageous — guide us through Per Petterson's **"To Siberia,"** a flawless novel of Nazi-occupied Denmark; Matthew Kneale's irreverent and ingenious **"When We Were Romans"**; and Catherine O'Flynn's **"What Was Lost,"** a delightful first novel set largely in a British mall.

War, and a variety of remembrances

► **NONFICTION**
Continued from Page K5

enigmas, Christopher Benfey notes in **"A Summer of Hummingbirds,"** his delightful exploration of the artistic and literary lives and loves that enlivened Amherst in the 19th century.

Benfey's narrative traces the spread of a fascination among a group of artists and writers in the area with the hummingbird, which became an American icon.

Benfey, a professor of English at Mount Holyoke College, says that after the upheaval of the Civil War, Americans "came to see a new dynamism and movement in their lives, a brave new world of instability and evanescence" that "found perfect expression in the hummingbird."

From the American Renaissance, we turn to a fresh look at the Puritans and John Winthrop's "city upon a hill."

Sarah Vowell, a contributing editor for Public Radio International's "This American Life," has penned **"The Wordy Shipmates,"** an account of New England's Puritans brimming with enthusiasm and insight.

She decided to write about the colonists because "the country I live in is haunted by the Puritans' vision of themselves as God's chosen people, as a beacon of righteousness that all others are to admire."

As for Winthrop, Vowell reminds us that his famous phrase, along with the worldview it embraces, can be viewed as arrogant and dangerous and has been used to help justify US foreign policy decisions that proved wrongheaded and destructive.

John Hanson Mitchell's **"The Paradise of All These Parts"** sees the "city upon a hill," Boston, as a place of constant discovery, even today.

As he rambles around the city, Mitchell finds people as well as places to remark on. At the Charlesgate he finds the Citgo sign, which casts "an otherworldly glow above the town," serving as a reminder of the many poor urban-planning decisions made in the city in the 1950s.

Mitchell, the editor of Sanctuary, the Massachusetts Audubon Society magazine, is a worthy guide to the city's natural spaces, but he is at his best in making his readers think anew about a place they think they already know.

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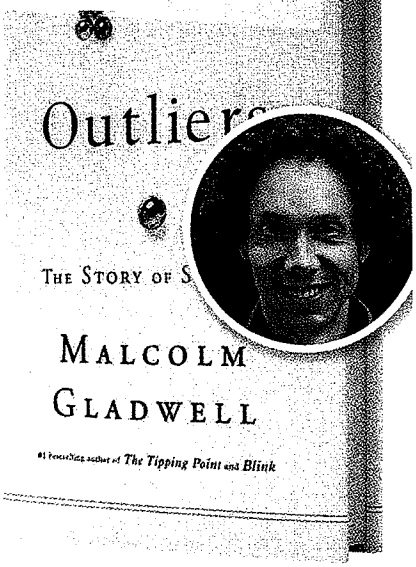
People Magazine, November 24th issue

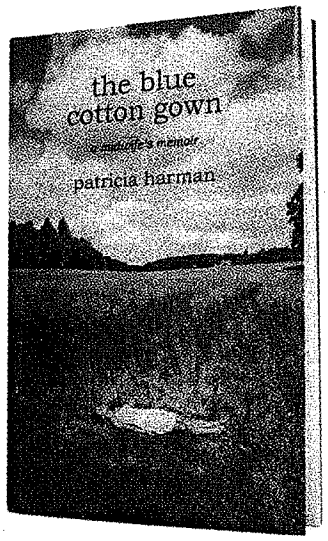
Outliers

by Malcolm Gladwell | ★★★½

REVIEWED BY MICHELLE GREEN

NONFICTION An analysis of what makes some rise to the top and others fall short, Gladwell's latest is as deliciously original as his best-sellers *Blink* and *The Tipping Point*. Think "the best and the brightest" are destined for success? Gladwell claims overachievers are just born at the right place and time and learn to seize the moment. An engaging take on a culture that, in his words, is "too much in awe of those who succeed and...too dismissive of those who fail."





The Blue Cotton Gown

by Patricia Harman | ★★★☆

MEMOIR A flower child who found her calling after coaching a friend through a home birth, nurse-midwife Harman works with her ob-gyn husband at a West Virginia clinic. In her sweetly perceptive memoir, she reveals how her exam room becomes a confessional. Coaxing women in thin gowns to share secrets—about abusive boyfriends, OxyContin habits, unplanned pregnancies—she reminds them that they're not alone.—**M.G.**

INSET: BROOKE WILLIAMS