

## Summaries of Selected Books

March            *Teahouse Fire* by Ellis Avery            480 pp.; 4 stars

From Publishers Weekly Starred Review. In 1865, nine-year-old Aurelia Caillard is taken from New York to Japan by her missionary uncle Charles while her ailing mother dies at home. Charles soon vanishes in a fire (not the one of the title), leaving Aurelia orphaned and alone in Kyoto. She is taken in by Yukako, the teenage daughter of the Shin family, master teachers of *temae*, or tea ceremony. Aurelia, narrating as an elderly woman, tells of living as Yukako's servant and younger sister, and how what begins as grateful puppy love for Yukako matures over years into a deeply painful unrequited obsession. Against a backdrop of a convulsively Westernizing Japan, Avery brings the conflicts of modernization into the teahouse, and into Aurelia and Yukako's beds, where jealousy over lovers threatens to tear them apart. In one memorable instance, Yukako, struggling to bring money in for the family, crosses class lines and gives *temae* lessons to a geisha in exchange for lessons on the shamisen, a seductive (and potentially profitable) string instrument. Eventually stuck in a painful marriage, Yukako labors to adapt the ancient tea ceremony to the changing needs of the modern world, resulting in a breathtaking confrontation. Avery, making her debut, has crafted a magisterial novel that is equal parts love story, imaginative history and bildungsroman, a story as alluring as it is powerful.

April            *Tulip Fever* by Deborah Moggach 288 pp.; 3.5 stars

From Publishers Weekly Although Moggach, a well-known TV writer and prolific novelist in her native Britain, has published here before, this book, a bestseller at home last year, is the one that is likely to be her breakout on this side of the water. It is yet another story set in 17th-century Holland involving a real-life artist, Jan van Loos. But whereas such books as Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* and Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* concentrate on an artist's work, this is a headlong romantic drama that uses the painting of a portrait simply as a jumping-off point. Van Loos comes to paint Sophia, the pretty young wife of wealthy burger Cornelius Sandvoort, which starts a train of events that will irredeemably change all their lives. Sophia and the artist fall hopelessly in love; the Sandvoorts' servant, Maria, is having a child by a man who, thinking himself betrayed by her, has run off and joined the navy; meanwhile, Cornelius has always longed for a child. Out of these circumstances, the infatuated couple formulate a plot, but one that depends on getting together a great deal of money in a short time; hence, the frenzied speculation in the value of new and rare breeds of tulip that gives the book its title. Moggach puts all this together in a series of brief, breathless chapters -- packing in skillfully presented facts, atmosphere and color-- each told from a different point of view: even the hapless drunk who brings the whole scheme crashing down around Jan's and Sophia's ears is given his moment in the limelight, and the figure of the elderly, cuckolded lover is for once sympathetically drawn. The Amsterdam of the period is brought almost physically alive, and a wistful postlude looks back at all the romantic anguish from a serene distance. This is popular fiction created at a high pitch of craft and rapid readability. Movie rights sold to Steven Spielberg.

May            *The Greater Journey* by David McCullough 576 pp (4.5 stars) 68+ cc @ HCL

Amazon Best Books of the Month, June 2011: At first glance, *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris* might seem to be foreign territory for David McCullough, whose other books have mostly remained in the Western Hemisphere. But *The Greater Journey* is still a quintessentially American history. Between 1830 and 1900, hundreds of Americans—many of them future household names like Oliver Wendell Holmes, Mark Twain, Samuel Morse, and Harriet Beecher Stowe—migrated to Paris. McCullough shows first how the City of Light affected each of them in turn, and how they helped shape American art, medicine, writing, science, and politics in profound ways when they came back to the United States. McCullough's histories have always managed to combine meticulous research with sheer enthusiasm for his subjects, and it's hard not to come away with a sense that you've learned something new and important about whatever he's tackled. *The Greater Journey* is, like each of McCullough's previous histories, a dazzling and kaleidoscopic foray into American history by one of its greatest living chroniclers.

June            *Dreams of Joy* by Lisa See      368 pp (4.5 stars)

Amazon Best Books of the Month, June 2011: See's *Dreams of Joy* picks up the story of sisters Pearl and May where *Shanghai Girls* left off: on the night in 1957 when Pearl's daughter, Joy, discovers that May is her true mother. While *Shanghai Girls* followed the sisters from their time as models in the glittering "Paris of Asia" to their escape from the Japanese invasion and their new life in Los Angeles, its sequel sends Pearl back to Shanghai twenty years later in pursuit of Joy, whose flight to China is propelled by anger, idealism, and a desire to find her true father, Z.G., an artist who may be falling out of favor with the Party. Joy goes with him deep into the countryside to the Green Dragon commune, where they take part in the energetic inception of Mao's Great Leap Forward. But their collective dream of a communist paradise is soon overshadowed by hunger as the government's bizarre agricultural mandates create a massive, relentless famine. Pearl, trapped in Shanghai as travel restrictions tighten, has little idea of the hardship Joy endures—until both women realize they must subvert a corrupt system in order to survive. The best estimates put the death toll from China's Great Leap Forward at 45 million, and See is unflinching in her portrayal of this horrific episode. In clean prose, she gives us a resounding story of human resilience, independent spirits, and the power of the love between mothers and daughters.

July            *Vermeer's Hat* by Timothy Brook 288 pp., 4.5 stars

**Product Description** In the hands of an award-winning historian, Vermeer's dazzling paintings become windows that reveal how daily life and thought—from Delft to Beijing—were transformed in the seventeenth century, when the world first became global. A painting shows a military officer in a Dutch sitting room, talking to a laughing girl. In another, a woman at a window weighs pieces of silver. Vermeer's images captivate us with their beauty and mystery: What stories lie behind these stunningly rendered moments? As Timothy Brook shows us, these pictures, which seem so intimate, actually offer a remarkable view of a rapidly expanding world. The officer's dashing hat is made of beaver fur, which European explorers got from

Native Americans in exchange for weapons. Those beaver pelts, in turn, financed the voyages of sailors seeking new routes to China. There—with silver mined in Peru—Europeans would purchase, by the thousands, the porcelains so often shown in Dutch paintings of this time. Moving outward from Vermeer's studio, Brook traces the web of trade that was spreading across the globe.

The wharves of Holland, wrote a French visitor, were “an inventory of the possible.” Vermeer's Hat shows just how rich this inventory was, and how the urge to acquire the goods of distant lands was refashioning the world more powerfully than we have yet understood.

August                      *The Rembrandt Affair* by Daniel Silva (tie in with Rembrandt in America)  
544 pp.; 4 stars; 122 cc @ HCL) 2010

From Publishers Weekly Silva's spy, assassin, and art-restoring protagonist, Gabriel Allon, returns in a fresh--and thrilling--international adventure. When an art restorer friend is killed and the Rembrandt painting he was working on stolen, Allon is lured out of a self-imposed retirement to investigate the crime. As the complex plot flips and twists from one country to the next, Phil Gigante keeps the plot moving forward with a calm, thoughtful reading that coils around the reader. His characters are perfectly drawn; the suspense, taut; and each individual is rendered distinctly: his reading of a Holocaust survivor's remembrance of being a little girl hiding from the Nazis is particularly effective and moving.

#### **A possibility for the Rembrandt exhibit (June 24 - September 16):**

*Stealing Rembrandt: The Untold Stories of Notorious Art Heists*, Anthony Amore and Tom Mashberg, 2011, 4 stars, 272 pp., hardcover now,

**Book Description** A spellbinding journey into the high-stakes world of art theft.

Today, art theft is one of the most profitable criminal enterprises in the world, exceeding \$6 billion in losses to galleries and art collectors annually. And the masterpieces of Rembrandt van Rijn are some of the most frequently targeted.

In *Stealing Rembrandts*, art security expert Anthony M. Amore and award-winning investigative reporter Tom Mashberg reveal the actors behind the major Rembrandt heists in the last century. Through thefts around the world—from Stockholm to Boston, Worcester to Ohio—the authors track daring entries and escapes from the world's most renowned museums. There are robbers who coolly walk off with multimillion dollar paintings; self-styled art experts who fall in love with the Dutch master and desire to own his art at all costs; and international criminal masterminds who don't hesitate to resort to violence. They also show how museums are thwarted in their ability to pursue the thieves—even going so far as to conduct investigations on their own, far away from the maddening crowd of police intervention, sparing no expense to save the priceless masterpieces.

**Recommendations for September 2012 through February 2013**

*Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese 541 pp.; 4.5 stars; 198 cc. at HCL;

Focusing on the world of medicine, this epic first novel by well-known doctor/author Verghese (*My Own Country*) follows a man on a mythic quest to find his father. It begins with the dramatic birth of twins slightly joined at the skull, their father serving as surgeon and their mother dying on the table. The horrorstruck father vanishes, and the now separated boys are raised by two Indian doctors living on the grounds of a mission hospital in early 1950s Ethiopia. The boys both gravitate toward medical practice, with Marion the more studious one and Shiva a moody genius and loner. Also living on the hospital grounds is Genet, daughter of one of the maids, who grows up to be a beautiful and mysterious young woman and a source of ruinous competition between the brothers. After Marion is forced to flee the country for political reasons, he begins his medical residency at a poor hospital in New York City, and the past catches up with him. The medical background is fascinating as the author delves into fairly technical areas of human anatomy and surgical procedure. This novel succeeds on many levels and is recommended for all collections

*In the Garden of the Beasts* by Erik Larson 464 pp.; 4 stars; 98 cc. @ HCL

Amazon Best Books of the Month, May 2011: *In the Garden of Beasts* is a vivid portrait of Berlin during the first years of Hitler's reign, brought to life through the stories of two people: William E. Dodd, who in 1933 became America's first ambassador to Hitler's regime, and his scandalously carefree daughter, Martha. Ambassador Dodd, an unassuming and scholarly man, is an odd fit among the extravagance of the Nazi elite. His frugality annoys his fellow Americans in the State Department and Dodd's growing misgivings about Hitler's ambitions fall on deaf ears among his peers, who are content to "give Hitler everything he wants." Martha, on the other hand, is mesmerized by the glamorous parties and the high-minded conversation of Berlin's salon society—and flings herself headlong into numerous affairs with the city's elite, most notably the head of the Gestapo and a Soviet spy. Both become players in the exhilarating (and terrifying) story of Hitler's obsession for absolute power, which culminates in the events of one murderous night, later known as "the Night of Long Knives." The rise of Nazi Germany is a well-chronicled time in history, which makes *In the Garden of Beasts* all the more remarkable. Erik Larson has crafted a gripping, deeply-intimate narrative with a climax that reads like the best political thriller, where we are stunned with each turn of the page, even though we already know the outcome. --Shane Hansanuwat

*Luncheon of the Boating Party* by Susan Vreeland 448 pp.; 4 stars; 40 cc @ HCL

Once again--to the delight of her legion of fans--the best-selling author of *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* (1999) and *The Passion of Artemesia* (2002) imaginatively uses art history as the basis for a carefully constructed historical novel. Vreeland turns this time to French impressionist master Auguste Renoir's famous painting *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, which depicts a group of people (in 1880) enjoying leisure time on the terrace of a riverside restaurant. The current conditions in the life of the painter himself launch the author on an amazingly engrossing

reinvigoration of the lives of the individuals who modeled for Renoir for that work, all of whom were actual people, and all are given a third dimension in Vreeland's lovely prose, beyond the two dimensions in which they were painted. Renoir's purpose was to create not only a masterpiece but also a work that would solve the dilemma of his continuing to "belong" to the impressionist school of which he had been a primary founder; in other words, he put his reputation on the line with Luncheon0 . There are, then, basically three levels of "atmosphere" swirling through the pages of this riveting, complex novel: Renoir's issues in composing the painting, the separate and interconnected lives of the 14 individuals appearing in it, and the spirit of la vie moderne0 , the new modes of living, thinking, and expressing as conducted by the French arts community at the time. --Brad Hooper Copyright 2007 Booklist

*Madonnas of Leningrad* by Debra Dean 231 pp.; 4.5 stars

Her granddaughter's wedding should be a time of happiness for Marina Buriakov. But the Russian emigre's descent into Alzheimer's has her and her family experiencing more anxiety than joy. As the details of her present-day life slip mysteriously away, Marina's recollections of her early years as a docent at the State Hermitage Museum become increasingly vivid. When Leningrad came under siege at the beginning of World War II, museum workers--whose families were provided shelter in the building's basement--stowed away countless treasures, leaving the painting's frames in place as a hopeful symbol of their ultimate return. Amid the chaos, Marina found solace in the creation of a memory palace, in which she envisioned the brushstroke of every painting and each statue's line and curve. Gracefully shifting between the Soviet Union and the contemporary Pacific Northwest, first-time novelist Dean renders a poignant tale about the power of memory. Dean eloquently describes the works of Rembrandt, Rubens, and Raphael, but she is at her best illuminating aging Marina's precarious state of mind: It is like disappearing for a few moments at a time, like a switch being turned off, she writes. A short while later, the switch mysteriously flips again. --Allison Block Copyright 2006 Booklist

### **Hold for the reopening of the Egyptian and African Galleries**

*Cleopatra* by Stacey Schiff 384 pp (3.5 stars) 103 + 41 on order/306 req cc @ HCL

From Publishers Weekly For those who think they know enough about Cleopatra or have the enigmatic Egyptian queen all figured out, think again. Schiff, demonstrating the same narrative flair that captivated readers of her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Vera* (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov) (1999), provides a new interpretation of the life of one of history's most enduringly intriguing women. Rather than a devastatingly beautiful femme fatale, Cleopatra, according to Schiff, was a shrewd power broker who knew how to use her manifold gifts wealth, power, and intelligence to negotiate advantageous political deals and military alliances. Though long on facts and short on myth, this stellar biography is still a page-turner; in fact, because this portrait is grounded so thoroughly in historical context, it is even more extraordinary than the more fanciful legend. Cleopatra emerges as a groundbreaking female leader, relying on her wits, determination, and political acumen rather than sex appeal to astutely wield her power in order to get the job done. Ancient Egypt never goes out of style, and Cleopatra continues to captivate successive generations.--Flanagan, Margaret Booklist

*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe 209 pp.; 4 stars;

One of Chinua Achebe's many achievements in his acclaimed first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is his relentlessly unsentimental rendering of Nigerian tribal life before and after the coming of colonialism. First published in 1958, just two years before Nigeria declared independence from Great Britain, the book eschews the obvious temptation of depicting pre-colonial life as a kind of Eden. Instead, Achebe sketches a world in which violence, war, and suffering exist, but are balanced by a strong sense of tradition, ritual, and social coherence. His Ibo protagonist, Okonkwo, is a self-made man. The son of a charming ne'er-do-well, he has worked all his life to overcome his father's weakness and has arrived, finally, at great prosperity and even greater reputation among his fellows in the village of Umuofia. Okonkwo is a champion wrestler, a prosperous farmer, husband to three wives and father to several children. He is also a man who exhibits flaws well-known in Greek tragedy:

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children. Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father.

And yet Achebe manages to make this cruel man deeply sympathetic. He is fond of his eldest daughter, and also of Ikemefuna, a young boy sent from another village as compensation for the wrongful death of a young woman from Umuofia. He even begins to feel pride in his eldest son, in whom he has too often seen his own father. Unfortunately, a series of tragic events tests the mettle of this strong man, and it is his fear of weakness that ultimately undoes him.

Achebe does not introduce the theme of colonialism until the last 50 pages or so. By then, Okonkwo has lost everything and been driven into exile. And yet, within the traditions of his culture, he still has hope of redemption. The arrival of missionaries in Umuofia, however, followed by representatives of the colonial government, completely disrupts Ibo culture, and in the chasm between old ways and new, Okonkwo is lost forever. Deceptively simple in its prose, *Things Fall Apart* packs a powerful punch as Achebe holds up the ruin of one proud man to stand for the destruction of an entire culture. --Alix Wilber