



BiblioFiles

By Ruth Freeman

Readers' Advisor @ the Rowayton Library

December 2008

Toni Morrison's latest novel, 'A Mercy', takes place in 1682 in an America that is still forging a national identity. Institutions are virtually non-existent. The setting is the East coast from then Catholic Maryland to New England. The population is an amalgam of free and enslaved African Americans, poor European immigrants working off their passages, traders discovering the riches to be gained from slaves, planters, Native Americans and clergy. The novel is amazing, both in terms of the lyrical writing and the development of characters. The beautiful geographic descriptions convey a strong sense that nature is still ascendant in all its glory and terror. The brutality of the environment is crystallized in the act of the title. A mother's desperate attempt to save her daughter from a cruel fate scars the girl for life, leaving her searching for love in a cold, often violent world. Morrison writes unsparingly about the brutal impact of slavery and the destruction of the Native American population.

'A Private Patient' is vintage PD James. Her murder victim, an investigative journalist, remains a bit of a cipher but the other characters are fully drawn and complex. As usual her prose shines in the evocation of the English countryside and way of life. The clinic where the victim meets her end is an old manor house stocked with a variety of potential killers. Family history plays a part in the proceedings and the red herrings swim around merrily. Dagliesh is an intellectual copper who is also a poet so his ruminations are apt to be more philosophical; but he always gets his murderer! James has a charming way of wrapping rather gory details in her pitch perfect language.

'All the Pretty Horses' won the National Book Award in 1992 and is the first novel in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy. 'The Crossing' and 'Cities of the Plain' are the next two volumes of this amazing work. McCarthy has become much better known recently thanks to 'No Country for Old Men' and 'The Road' but for those of you who like me missed these earlier works, I think they are his best. The plots are connected by the locale and era – the border country of New Mexico, Texas, Arizona and Mexico in the 1940's and 1950's. This sometimes bleak, arid but beautiful country is the backdrop for the haunted wanderings of John Grady Cole and Rawlings in the first book, and Billy Parham and his brother Boyd in the second. The last book reunites the characters but I do not want to spoil with specifics. In each book the boys become men by virtue of the journeys they embark on and the people they meet. The cruelty endured by the boys can be breathtaking; this is a harsh time and they begin their journeys as raw boned idealists. The books are distinguished by the realistic descriptions



BiblioFiles

By Ruth Freeman

Readers' Advisor @ the Rowayton Library

of the horses and dogs that are major characters in their own right. 'All the Pretty Horses' in particular is a masterful depiction of John Grady Cole as an early horse whisperer.

'The Spanish Game' by Charles Cummings is a terrific spy thriller full of original twists and turns. Featuring Alec Milius, who we met in 'A Spy by Nature' (published in 2007), it takes place largely in Madrid. Cummings was an MI6 recruit before he became a novelist; this gives his books an air of realism missing from many books in this genre. Fighting terrorists and double crossing agents at the same time keeps Alec literally on the run as the puzzles unfold. Suitably mysterious characters from the British and American secret services, the Basque ETA faction, and several lovers and friends from his past circle around Alec and cause maximum stress and confusion. There is a good balance in the plot between the more far fetched but entertaining spy vs. spy games and realistic takes on current global concerns.

'Final Salute: A Story of Unfinished Lives' by Jim Sheeler is about the losses of the Iraq war as seen through the eyes of a Marine casualty notification unit. This group notifies families of the death of loved ones and then stands guard over their bodies and supports the families in the aftermath of the devastating news. Major Steven Beck is the fulcrum around which the stories of individual soldiers are told. It's a riveting read about huge sacrifices and is highly recommended.

Please come visit us early and often in the New Year!

###