



BiblioFiles

By Ruth Freeman

Readers' Advisor @ the Rowayton Library

August 2009

I think you really need page turners during the dog days of late summer. Here is a list of this month's favorites.

'Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town' by Nick Reding is a sobering look at the devastation wrecked by the methamphetamine epidemic that still rages across stretches of rural America. The author did years of field work chronicling the demise of the family farms and unionized meat packing plants that provided the jobs that helped sustain Midwestern small town economic and social life. The inevitable population collapse after the jobs disappeared left many small towns without the resources to combat the growing drug menace from cheap, easily manufactured meth. The book is a portrait of Oelwein, one Iowa town struggling with the ravages of the meth trade. There is a thread of hope in the chronicle of those determined to save their community, but the personal price paid for Oelwein's limited recovery is a big one.

'In the Shadow of Gotham' is a first novel by Stefanie Pintoff. Historical mysteries are fun, as detectives had to rely on their wits more than advanced forensic technology. The story takes place in New York City and a small Hudson River suburb called Dobson in the early 20th century. Det. Simon Ziele is the policeman in charge of finding the murderer of Sarah Wingate, a Columbia University graduate student. There is a lot of good period detail about the city and early criminology studies. A large cast of characters allows for plenty of suspects and lots of suspense.

'Tears in the Darkness: The History of the Bataan Death March and its Aftermath' by Michael and Elizabeth Norman is a fine rendering of one of WWII's most infamous events. Told partially through the eyes of Ben Steele, a Montana cowhand and artist whose portraits of his captivity are reproduced in this book, it is the story of both mass death and individual strength and courage. Everyone knows about the terrible march endured by the surrendered American and Filipino troops in 1942. I knew less about what happened after the troops arrived at prison camps, and later the Japanese slave labor camps. It is often difficult to read because of the terrible ordeals suffered by the prisoners. By telling the story through Ben Steele and including contrasting vignettes from his earlier life in Montana the horror of war for the ordinary soldier is given a face.



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'Til it's Over' by Nicci French is a beach or hammock read for Anglophiles. Astrid Bell is one of a half dozen housemates in London; she has the ridiculously bad luck to find herself at several murder scenes. A truly creepy villain, stubborn coppers who smell a rat and good set ups keep you guessing right to the end.

'Bad Things Happen' by Harry Dolan is a thriller set in Ann Arbor. The title says it all! This very clever first book features the mysterious David Loogan, new in town and working as an editor at "Gray Streets", a publication for mystery short stories. The cast of characters is very entertaining and the dialogue really crackles. There are lots of twists, the requisite femme fatale, a charming and witty female detective, lots of writers and professors who know how to turn a phrase and action that starts immediately with a secret nighttime burial. This is highly recommended for those who appreciate a good mystery.

'The Slippery Year' by Melanie Gideon is a month by month memoir of one year in an arguably ordinary life. The author is a happily married, forty four year old wife and mother of a 9 year old boy living in California. Her meditations on happiness or the pitfalls that prevent it take place in a variety of places like car pool lines. Some of her observations about her life are laugh out loud, others more serious. There are no dramatic events or classic mid life crises (but some amusing variations on that theme), just a lot of humorous, touching musings on "is this it".

'Shannon' by Frank Delaney is set in Ireland in 1922. Father Robert Shannon travels north by the shores of his namesake river as part of a cure for the severe shell shock he received in WWI. Originally from Boston, he is sent to Ireland in search of his roots, in the hope he will be spiritually revived by his journey. Delaney is an excellent writer and his descriptions of the people, wildlife and places along Shannon's route are wonderful. This is fine historical fiction, highly recommended.

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