



# BiblioFiles

By Ruth Freeman

Readers' Advisor @ the Rowayton Library

## March 2009

Spring is on the way; let's celebrate by reading some of the great new books that have been published recently.

'Water Dogs' by first time author Lewis Robinson grabs you from the start with sympathetic characters and a wonderful setting in non tourist, wintery, rural Maine. The Littlefield's are a fractured clan trying to find a way to support themselves, both financially and emotionally. Two taciturn brothers in their 20's, their sister and various friends find their lives turned upside down after a paint ball game goes seriously wrong. It is the small details of the story that ring particularly true. The trials of working class jobs, the burdens of parental pressure, and the toll that ennui takes over time all play a role in moving the plot forward. There is a missing body mystery wrapped in as well, with plenty of atmosphere to keep you turning the pages to the conclusion.

Mistress of the Monarchy by Alison Wier is an engaging biography of Kathryn Swynford, mistress, then wife of John of Gaunt. One of our favorite authors hits another home run in this well researched book about early medieval times in royal England. It's rare that the mistress gets to marry the royal but in this case the fairy tale came true. I loved the descriptions of medieval meals, court traditions and the delicate politics of courtly love. Then there is the delicious detail that her descendants include our former Presidents Bush.

'Secret Suppers' by Jenn Garbee explores the hidden world of dinner parties at a price. The hosts and hostesses of these clandestine suppers cover the waterfront from frustrated chefs to talented home cooks. Each chapter covers a different undercover dining destination in the USA. Some of the menus are more appetizing than others, but all the chefs are enthusiastic and bent on exploring the pleasure of



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cooking for a crowd, without the hassle of running a restaurant. This is not a cookbook but an opportunity to explore a world that frankly I had no idea existed.

'Pictures at an Exhibition' by Sara Houghteling is set in Paris. I felt it could be better than it was given the fascinating subject of the attempted restitution of looted art after WWII. Somehow the author is unable to develop truly believable characters that really engage us. There are nice touches such as the photos of still missing art, but the book is somewhat hollow and not particularly well written. Read Paul Watkins' 'The Forger' for a thrilling look at the efforts to save France's precious art from the Nazi's.

'Cutting for Stone' by Abraham Verghese is my nomination for the riveting read of the month. This generational saga starts in 1946 when an Indian nursing sister and a British doctor team up in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia at the "Missing" (Mission) Hospital. They are out of the picture fairly quickly, leaving behind their twin boys Marion and Shiva, whose lives are the centerpiece of the novel. The boys are raised by Hema and Ghosh, two doctors at the hospital who are loving parents to the boys and guardians to the employees who round out the human interest in the hospital compound. The author is a doctor so the scenes of medical treatment are realistically detailed. The background of Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Selassie, is richly drawn and fascinating. Marion is the narrator of the story, and when he leaves Ethiopia to finish his medical training we travel to a poor hospital in New York where his life takes unforeseen turns that ultimately lead him back to his roots. Verghese has the magical ability to transport the reader via his descriptions of sights and sounds but it is his fully realized characters that make the book so compelling. I was enthralled by the world Verghese populated with these wonderful people. This book includes the drama of love stories, the tension of political instability, the joy of finding a cure for someone's illness, the heartbreak of lost parents and the engrossing bonds of family life. It's a real saga.



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Last but not least is Barbara Vine's new book (Vine is Ruth Rendell's pen name) called 'The Birthday Present'. It's the story of Ivor Tesham, an ambitious member of Parliament who is having an affair that goes disastrously wrong. This author's hallmark is creeping suspense and this book really delivers. The menace sneaks up on you as everyone's agendas roll up. This is a real page turner.

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