

Our reviewers pick their favorites from '05. (Part II next Sunday)

01:00 AM EST on Sunday, December 25, 2005

LOIS D. ATWOOD 1. **THE PENELOPIAD**: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus, by Margaret Atwood. (Canongate Books. 199 pages. \$18.) A witty look at the faithful wife, told antiphonally by Penelope and the chorus of her 12 murdered maids. The chanting, singing chorus often burlesques the main action of the legend. Full of humor and insight, told by a fine stylist.

2. **HOW TO BE IDLE**, by Tom Hodgkinson. (Harper/Collins. 286 pages. \$18.95.) A joyful tribute to living a freer, more independent life by learning the fine art of doing nothing. Most persuasive.

3. **THE PAINTED DRUM**, by Louise Erdrich. (Harper/Collins. 279 pages. \$25.95.) Erdrich describes in loving detail the making of a massive drum and its redemptive qualities in the lives of several generations of the Ojibwe people.

4. **BREAKING TRAIL: A Climbing Life**, by Arlene Blum. (Scribner. 313 pages. \$27.50.) A groundbreaking chemistry researcher, Blum chronicles her successes and failures as she manages to enjoy high mountains and windswept slopes while pursuing a scientific career. Author of *Annapurna: A Woman's Place*, she overcame a dreadful early home life to lead women's teams to 8,000-meter summits.

5. **DESERTION**, by Abdultazak Gurnah. (Pantheon. 282 pages. \$23.) Set in the Sultanate of Zanzibar, off the east coast of Africa, where a community of Muslim Indians is centered by their mosque. Lyrical writing brings the feel of a different place and culture, the agony of separation, the mixed blessings of political independence, the weight of family and the multiple felicities of first love.

DONALD D. BREED 1. **THE FATE OF AFRICA**: From the Hopes of Freedom to the Heart of Despair, a History of Fifty Years of Independence, by Martin Meredith. (Public Affairs. 752 pages. \$35.) A pessimistic, even sorrowful account of what has happened to so many of Africa's nations, which became independent with much promise and fell victim to corruption, tribal animosities and big-power politics, among other things.

2. **BOSS TWEED**: The Life and Legacy of the Corrupt Pol Who Conceived the Soul of Modern New York, by Kenneth D. Ackerman. (Carroll & Graf. 464 pages. \$27.) William Marcy Tweed was the most notorious municipal swindler in American history. This account by a Brown graduate "fleshes out" the bloated figure in the familiar Thomas Nast cartoon.

3. *THE SURVIVOR: President Clinton and His Times*, by John F. Harris. (Random House. 487 pages. \$29.95.) This account by a Washington Post reporter is a useful reminder of both the achievements of the most recent ex-president and the many opportunities lost.

4. *BOUND FOR CANAAN: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*, by Fergus M. Bordewich. (Amistad. 528 pages. \$27.95.) A very moving and exciting account of the various ways slaves escaped from the South to the North and the heroism of the people, black and white, who helped them.

5. *THE STORY OF BRITAIN, From the Romans to the Present: A Narrative History*, by Rebecca Fraser. (Norton. 832 pages. \$35.) Rebecca Fraser, daughter of Antonia Fraser, has written a very readable narrative that takes us all the way into the Blair administration, though not the Iraq war.

TOM CHANDLER 1. *180 MORE*, edited by Billy Collins. (Random House. 373 pages. \$14.95.) When Billy Collins was U.S. Poet Laureate, he edited *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry*. It was so successful that he's now published *180 More* -- "180 vehicles to carry you away to unexpected places."

2. *JACK AND OTHER NEW POEMS*, by Maxine Kumin. (Norton. 112 pages. \$23.95.) This is Pulitzer Prize-winner Maxine Kumin's 15th book of poems, and it shows. Her life as a widow on a New Hampshire horse farm is presented here in a series of loosely connected, unforgettable snapshots of words.

3. *DUTIES OF THE SPIRIT*, by Patricia Fargnoli. (Tupelo Press. 80 pages. \$16.95.) These poems are clear and deep as a secret mountain pool, one you'll want to dive into for the sweet shock of waking.

4. *WHITE SEA*, by Cleopatra Mathis. (Sarabande Books. 81 pages. \$13.95.) In this, her sixth book, Cleopatra Mathis once again demonstrates her trademark eloquence and passion. Intricate and a bit challenging, this is a beautiful collection by a poet working at her peak.

5. *1776*, by David McCullough. (Simon & Schuster. 386 pages. \$32.) Packed with compelling personal anecdotes from those who lived through that single wild year, *1776* is nearly impossible to put down.

SAM COALE 1. *THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING*, by Joan Didion. (Knopf. 219 pages. \$23.95.) A meticulous, exhilarating and incandescent memoir of novelist Didion's first year after her husband's sudden death. A revelation of grief and language.

2. *MELVILLE: His World and His Work*, by Andrew Delbanco. (Knopf. 403 pages. \$30.) This elegant, evocative biography nails Melville's psyche, his fiction and his career. The best biography of a writer in years.

3. **DEVIL'S GAME: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam**, by Robert Dreyfuss. (Metropolitan Books. 388 pages. \$27.50.) In a clear-minded analysis of our labyrinthine foreign policy, Dreyfuss reveals the shocking duplicities at the heart of the Middle East morass.

4. **WARPED PASSAGES: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Universe's Hidden Dimensions**, by Lisa Randall. (Ecco. 500 pages. \$27.95.) Often dense yet ebullient, this analysis of quantum theory and the possibilities of worlds beyond our four dimensions dismays and delights.

5. **A LITTLE LOVE STORY**, by Roland Merullo. (Random House. 272 pages. \$23.) This charmingly realistic and compassionate novel about cystic-fibrosis-crossed lovers is beautifully wrought and often very funny.

TOM D'EVELYN 1. **A THOUSAND YEARS OF GOOD PRAYERS: Stories**, by Yiyun Li. (Random House. 203 pages. \$21.95.) Li moved to the U.S. from China in 1996 to study immunology. We can be grateful she decided to write stories instead.

2. **MIDWEST ECLOGUE: Poems**, by David Baker. (Norton. 108 pages. \$23.95.) Baker's influences range from jazz to Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* to how to save "dying water" in a pond: his poems are both polyvocal and intimate.

3. **MARY MAGDALENE: A Biography**, by Bruce Chilton. (Doubleday. 220 pages. \$23.95.) Both controversial and diplomatic, this biography convincingly argues the case for Mary Magdalene not as the wife of Jesus but as one of his chief disciples, later largely expunged from the Gospels.

4. **BASHO'S JOURNEY: The Literary Prose of Basho**, by David Landis Barnhill. (State University of New York Press. 191 pages. \$17.95 paperback.) Ecologist and English Professor Barnhill's Basho is far more mindful than most translations of Basho's haiku suggest.

5. **SHADOWPLAY: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare**, by Clare Asquith. (Public Affairs. 348 pages. \$26.95.) Asquith's reading of the plays in the context of the politics of religion of Shakespeare's time is thought-provoking, judicious and valuable.

MARK DUNKELMAN 1. **THE SWORD OF LINCOLN: The Army of the Potomac**, by Jeffrey D. Wert. (Simon & Schuster. 559 pages. \$30.) The best single-volume study of the Union's eastern army in the Civil War.

2. **NOTHING BUT VICTORY: The Army of the Tennessee 1861-1865**, by Steven E. Woodworth. (Knopf. 784 pages. \$40.) An outstanding account of a major Union army of the western theater, marred only by a lack of maps.

3. *THE WIDOW OF THE SOUTH*, by Robert Hicks. (Warner. 426 pages. \$24.95.) A moving novel inspired by Carrie McGavock, who founded and gently tended a cemetery for Confederate dead on her Franklin, Tenn., plantation.

4. *THE MARCH*, by E.L. Doctorow. (Random House. 369 pages. \$25.95.) Fiction that reveals why the scars of Sherman's marches through Georgia and the Carolinas have yet to be healed.

5. *THE BLUE AND THE GRAY IN BLACK AND WHITE: A History of Civil War Photography*, by Bob Zeller. (Praeger. 224 pages. \$74.95.) The first substantive overview of the subject, beautifully illustrated, unfortunately priced.

JOHN FREEMAN 1. *THE GREAT WAR FOR CIVILISATION*, by Robert Fisk. (Knopf. 1,107 pages. \$40.) Based on 30 years of reporting in the Middle East by England's most revered and provocative reporter, this gargantuan, engaged, and unabashedly biased book about the history of war and torture in the region will make any open-minded reader question what we truly know about the Arab world.

2. *THE MARCH*, by E.L. Doctorow. (Random House. 384 pages. \$25.95.) Doctorow follows William Tecumseh Sherman on his lethal march from Georgia to the Carolinas in this devastatingly profound novel about America at a time when the only way forward was through a valley of death.

3. *REFUSING HEAVEN*, by Jack Gilbert. (Knopf. 112 pages. \$25.) Heartbreaking, soulful poems about memory, aging, loss and accepting a fallen world from one of the poetry world's most enigmatic but still potent pens.

4. *WHAT HAPPENED HERE*, by Eliot Weinberger. (New Directions. 224 pages. \$13.95.) This unflinchingly polemical little book draws together observations from September 11 to the Iraq war to shape a barbed and metaphorical portrait of what has happened in America since That Very Worst Day.

5. *VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL*, by Svetlana Alexievich. (Dalkey Archive. 253 pages. \$22.95.) On April 26, 1986, an explosion in Chernobyl caused the worst nuclear accident in history. This is the first book to chronicle the survivors' stories.

ANNE GRANT 1. *COLLAPSE: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, by Jared Diamond. (Viking. 575 pages. \$29.95.) The prize-winning author of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* offers a fascinating opportunity to learn from past societies that thrived or collapsed due to the way they responded to environmental crises.

2. *THE WORLD IS FLAT: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, by Thomas L. Friedman. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 488 pages. \$27.50.) The Internet revolution has encircled the world with fiber-optic cable that allows corporations and terrorists alike to communicate, collaborate, outsource and multiply their market share. Brilliantly

readable, this best-selling journalist asks if the American imagination will export fear or the hope needed to build trust in this flattened world.

3. *A WORLD APART: Women, Prison, and Life Behind Bars*, by Christina Rathbone. (Random House. 279 pages. \$24.95.) A journalist who fought for access to women locked away in Framingham, Mass., compellingly illustrates the ongoing battle between fear and hope in running women's prisons from the early 19th century to the present.

4. *COURTROOM 302: A Year Behind the Scenes in an American Criminal Courthouse*, by Steve Bogira. (Knopf. 416 pages. \$25.) Another journalist eloquently depicts his year in one of the busiest courthouses in Cook County, Chicago, where big egos, bribes, political fears and mob pressure too often rule this secretive branch of government.

5. *FROM MADNESS TO MUTINY: Why Mothers Are Running from the Family Courts --and What Can Be Done About It*, by Amy Neustein and Michael Leshner. (Northeastern University Press. 284 pages. \$26.) A sociologist and attorney report on the corruption and dysfunction in the nation's family courts that are criminalizing mothers who try to protect children from abusive fathers.

ANN HOOD 1. *WILLFUL CREATURES: Stories*, by Aimee Bender. (Doubleday. 208 pages. \$22.95.) A weird and wonderful collection. Bender does what fiction writers are supposed to do: uses her imagination and explores the often painful conditions of the human heart with humor, honesty and sentences that soar.

2. *JULIE AND JULIA: 365 Days, 524 Recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen*, by Julie Powell. (Little, Brown. 320 pages. \$23.95.) My favorite blog, a daily description of Powell's attempt to reproduce all of Julia Child's recipes from *The Art of French Cooking* in one year, has been turned into a book. Hilarious, sometimes touching.

3. *PREP*, by Curtis Sittenfeld. (Random House. 416 pages. \$21.95.) This novel about a scholarship student from Iowa plunked down at a fictitious tony New England prep school is an incisive look at class and gender.

4. *THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING*, by Joan Didion. (Knopf. 240 pages. \$23.95.) This memoir about the year following the sudden death of Didion's husband won this year's National Book Award. It painfully explores the depths of grief in all of its ugliness and, oddly, beauty.

5. *THE POSITION*, by Meg Wolitzer. (Scribner. 320 pages. \$13.) Wolitzer is a master at social satire, and her new novel is no exception. It's always good to find fiction that can make you laugh while it also exposes our foibles.

BOB LEDDY 1. *JANE FONDA: My Life So Far*. (Random House. 596 pages. \$26.95.) The second in three generations of the great acting family, Fonda is lovingly candid about her relationship with her late father, the taciturn Hank Fonda and her controversial opposition to the Vietnam War.

2. ALEC GUINNESS, *The Authorised Biography*, by Piers Paul Read. (Simon & Schuster. 632 pages. \$35.) The great Sir Alec could play any part: from Shakespearian gravitas to the silly Obe Wan of Star Wars. Read serves up a brimming and refreshing Guinness.
3. THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND ME: *In My Anecdote*, by Eli Wallach. (Harcourt. 312 pages. \$25.) The veteran character actor traces his roots to the famed New York-based Actor's Studio, where he worked alongside other "method" types such as Montgomery Clift and Marlon Brando. Wallach, now in his 90s, ably presents what is, in effect, an actor's history lesson.
4. BUSTER KEATON: *Tempest in a Flat Hat*. By Edward McPherson. (Newmarket Press. 288 pages. \$26.95.) Despite some glaring omissions, this book will inform a new generation of readers that a man named Buster Keaton was -- alongside Chaplin -- the greatest screen comedy figure of his time.
5. BY MYSELF AND THEN SOME, by Lauren Bacall. (Harper Entertainment. 506 pages. \$26.95.) Bacall writes eloquently of her long (and ongoing) movie career, and her 11-year marriage to the iconic Humphrey Bogart. The actress comes across here as fair-minded and independent -- just as she does on screen.