

Friends of the Valley Center Library

Friends Express Book Reviews

By J S Rudolph

Kate Atkinson, author of the tour-de-force, “Life After Life,” has a new novel out, “**A God in Ruins.**” This one follows some of the characters from the earlier novel over a period of more than 80 years, from childhood into old age. It is not a sequel--you need not have read the first book. The central character is World War II R.A.F. pilot Teddy, brother to Ursula, who was the main character in “Life After Life.”

The narrative moves around in time, each chapter labelled with its date. Atkinson has done this sort of thing before and is adept at it; the reader is never confused. It’s an effective technique, resulting in a rounded sense of each character’s life as a whole. All the characters are so well developed that they take on a sense of reality. Even Viola, Teddy’s difficult, unlovable daughter, is someone we’ve all met at some time: self-pitying, negative, too selfish to nurture well even her own children.

Although World War II itself is only a small part of “A God in Ruins,” one idea behind the book is the destruction that war wreaks beyond the body count. For it is not just bodies that die--it is whole lives, including the love, accomplishments, careers, joys and sorrows that will never be, children and grandchildren who will never exist. Thought of in this way, war entails an obliteration of unimaginable scope.

The title, by the way, is quoted from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s description of a human being.

Judy Blume established her reputation decades ago with her children’s books, many of them now classics for young readers up through teens. However, she also writes novels for adults, and “**In the Unlikely Event**” is the latest of these.

It is an old-fashioned book, in the sense that an omniscient narrator follows a large cast of characters over a period of years, each character dealing with the inevitable changes, joys and disappointments in his or her particular fashion. Blume is good at this, her adolescents especially true-to-life in their yearning, confusion and emotional roller-coasters.

The interesting twist in “Unlikely Events” is that it is built on a framework of historically accurate events in a real town. Judy Blume was a teenager in Elizabeth, New Jersey, when over a period of a few months three planes taking off from Newark airport crashed into the town. Sometimes everyone on board died. Sometimes the planes destroyed town buildings and their inhabitants as well.

This was 1951-1952, before trauma counseling, when people were urged not to talk about it, preferably not even to think about it. Everyone dealt with the tragedies in their own fashion, as well as they could. Fertile ground for a novel.

The characters are all fictional, but the crashes and the historical setting are painstakingly reproduced. Those who grew up in the 50s will remember the details: finished

basements with knotty pine paneling, dressing tables with gathered fabric skirts, bobby pins for setting curls, the annual March of Dimes polio drives, Packards and cashmere twin sets, Doris Day and the Korean War. Ah yes, I remember it well.

David Brooks is a well-known newspaper columnist, author, and self-described pundit called upon for his opinion on multiple topics (not just politics). In **“The Road to Character”** he explores how individuals arrive at morally excellent lives, starting from the observation that people today are far more self-centered than people 60 years ago.

This premise is probably true in general. Millions of people assiduously document their daily trivia, circulate selfies, photograph their meals, bumper-sticker their opinions, and star in their Facebook pages. Brooks’s prescription for transcending what he calls the culture of the Big Me, requires self-sacrifice and humility on a major scale. He sees human nature as inherently flawed. Only unrelenting struggle can overcome our drive toward selfishness, shallow values and greed.

This emphasis on fierce battle against the sinful self sounds a lot like That Old Time Religion. Our Puritan forefathers would feel at home in these arguments. However, there are other, less militant, ways of looking at building character. One more gentle metaphor, for example, is the self as gardener who encourages some personality traits to grow while weeding out undesirable tendencies. Brooks would find this mildness ineffective.

He illustrates his argument on the need for sternness, with the lives of people whom he feels demonstrate moral excellence--people like Dorothy Day, Dwight David Eisenhower, St. Augustine and Samuel Johnson. The personalities that Brooks has chosen as examples are often self-controlled to the point of coldness, judgmental or obsessive. They are not people who would be pleasant to spend time with.

Along the way, Brooks dismisses those who volunteer to do community work as “do-gooders” who are really only self-serving. I do not know in what circles he moves, but have never found this to be true. In fact, I think it’s a very odd perspective.

My recommendation? Brooks is an interesting and thoughtful writer, even when you don’t agree with him. Those who habitually focus on the dark side of human nature or think of the inner life as a battleground, will find the **“The Road to Character”** a reaffirming tonic.

If you somehow missed getting the word, **Lee Child** has a new Jack Reacher thriller out, **“Personal.”** Engrossing as always, the novel has the usual number of savage beatings and heads-exploded-by-gunshots. As well as a couple of attractive, competent, female companions. A new twist is the actual giant with whom Reacher must tangle--will this be the one time our hero cannot triumph? The plot initially looks to be political, but as the saying goes, the political is personal and vice-versa.

Irish novelist **Tana French** also has a new bestseller: **“The Secret Place.”** French’s detective novels should probably be shelved with mainstream fiction, because the joy of them is less in the whodunit and more in the characters and the writing itself. The setting is a boarding school for teenaged girls in Dublin.

French has the psychology, dialogue and emotional landscape of the adolescent down pat. It's all so evocative that memories of your own insecure teen years may come flooding back with a shudder.

A little tightening up and slimming down wouldn't have hurt this long novel, but no publishing house wants to edit (and possibly irritate?) their winning writers. And anyway, even when she goes on too long, French is one of the best.

Jan Karon has a new addition to her long series of novels about life in small town Southern U.S.A. "**Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good**" starts out slowly, mostly because Karon has to re-introduce characters from previous books, for those readers who may be new to them. But eventually central character Father Tim Kavanagh begins his slow progress toward not only accepting his retirement from active Episcopal priesthood, but making an interesting and useful new life for himself.

The Father Tim books are centered on Christian relationships, prayer and celebrations. Although there appears to be one atheist (a mean-spirited college professor who bullies his wife) and one Jewish man (a jovial sort who makes Jewish jokes and sprinkles his conversation with the occasional Yiddish word), in the North Carolina town of Mitford, everybody else is either Baptist or Episcopalian.

The Karon novels are a fictional escape from our troubled real world. In Mitford, a kindly homily can turn a juvenile delinquent into a model citizen. What happens in the village is the gentle, unsurprising progression of birth, marriage, aging, Thanksgiving dinners, town politics, gossip, and the occasional crisis brought on by a misfit or malcontent. This gentleness sometimes is true of small towns, where bad behavior cannot hide behind anonymity and where people get along because they depend upon one another.

Finally, for something completely different, try "**The Museum of Extraordinary Things**" by **Alice Hoffman**, whose novels usually have a lightly magical bent to them. Hoffman is not afraid to place women with witchlike powers, or selkies from the sea, in a realistic, mundane setting. In fact, their interaction with the normal is usually the crux of the plot.

In "Extraordinary Things," the setting is New York City around the time of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. The heroine is the daughter of the proprietor of a freak show, with human exhibits like a sword-swallower, the Wolfman and the Butterfly Girl. Coralie herself is a freak of sorts, having webbing between her fingers. She needs to free herself from her tyrannical father and find love with a good man. How this comes about is the focus of the tale.

Laura Lippman sets her detective novels in Baltimore, Maryland, where I grew up. There is a peculiar pleasure to reading a book that features neighborhoods and streets that you remember and can picture. Lippman's reputation, however, depends upon her writing, her inventive plots and well-developed characters. Usually the stories center around private detective Tess Monaghan, a quirky half-Jewish, half-Irish, fiercely independent young woman.

The main character in **After I'm Gone** is male: Sandy Sanchez, an ex-cop-detective working old cold cases in his retirement. He comes upon a mystery involving a man who ran to Canada to escape the law, leaving behind his wife and children, and his (later murdered)

mistress. The heart of this story is not so much whodunnit as how the families have coped--or not coped-- in the years since their husband/father/lover disappeared.

For the toddler set, we've purchased **The Pigeon Needs a Bath** by **Mo Willems**. Willems is a prolific writer and illustrator who is deservedly popular. Both story and pictures are simple but humorous. The pigeon, of course, does not want to take a bath, and comes up with some very inventive excuses. There are other books in Willem's pigeon series, like *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*, which you can order through the library system.

Gabrielle Zevin's "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry" is a well-written novel about starting over, finding friends and love in unlikely places, and about the joy of reading. A.J. Fikry, the recently widowed owner of a bookstore, in his 30s, is rude, opinionated and too fond of the oblivion alcohol can offer. His bookstore is barely viable and stocks only books that he personally likes.

I'm not going to give away the plot, just say that "Storied Life" traces the turn of his life from devastating loss to caring, companionship and happiness. Along the way, every character talks passionately about books. Some even write books.

Although Zevin clearly finds redemption and love to be real possibilities, this is not a saccharine, sentimental read. Bittersweet, maybe--like life.

Hugely successful **Arianna Huffington**, co-founder of the "Huffington Post," wants us all to turn off our electronic devices, get off the overwork treadmill and relax. Many will snort, "Well, she can afford to."

The advice she has, however, is earnest and well packaged, if nothing new. Take care of your health, consider meditating, be generous, take time for gratitude and fun, among other things.

Huffington is writing for those 30-and-40-somethings who use smart phones like umbilical cords, spend hours on social media, and take no holidays from their drive toward worldly success. She does not claim that her prescription is new, quoting folks like Thoreau and Marcus Aurelius. For up-to-date scientific validation, she also offers extensive statistics and studies.

There's a little too much self-congratulation about the savvy things she's done to bring about change (for herself and others), but "**Thrive**" is a useful, well-documented reminder that life is precious; let's not waste it.

Donna Leon's newest in her series about Venetian detective Commissario Guido Brunetti is just as good as all the others. It's wonderful when an author can keep producing literate, interesting novels that don't recycle old themes and plots.

"**By its Cover**" focuses on the rare book world, specifically the growing problem of theft from libraries. There is eventually a murder, of course, and along the way, a lot of talk about

the dismaying state of affairs in today's Italy. Guido and his friends lament the ever-presence of bribery, corruption, favoritism, class privilege and nepotism.

Recently I read an account of an Italian who came to the U.S. for an extended stay and needed a telephone installed. He put in a request at the local phone company, and in a few days, without his pulling strings or paying bribes, someone just came to the house and hooked it up. He was amazed. Guido would have been too.

Sue Monk Kidd's first novel, "The Secret Life of Bees," had lots of fans and good reviews. Her second, "The Mermaid's Chair," broke no new ground. But her latest book, "**The Invention of Wings**", has got everything: suspense, suffering, cruelty, joy, love, creativity, betrayal, secret plots. No car chases, but then, the setting is the early 19th century American South, Charleston, South Carolina.

Kidd has written a thoroughly researched novel based on the life of Sarah Grimke, abolitionist and feminist. An appendix charts the places where the novelist departed from historical fact or supplemented it. One addition is the fully imagined slave, Handful, given to Sarah as a gift on her 11th birthday. (The historical Grimke did receive such a gift, but the slave died early on.)

The novel alternates chapters between the viewpoints of Sarah and Handful, a device that works well to make both characters come alive. Their relationship is not unrealistically sweet, but fittingly complicated, real affection mixed with resentment and guilt, and hampered by the lack of understanding of each other's starkly different lives.

It's a riveting read, and a fine dramatization of what slave-owning Southerners euphemistically called their "peculiar institution."

"The Wives of Los Alamos" by Tarashea Nesbit There seems to be a small spate of books detailing the lives of the wives of famous or important men. This one is about those families who gave up normal "outside" life to retreat to a New Mexican desert military reservation where their men worked on developing the atomic bomb.

Nesbit has written a novel, not a history, but she has done her research. The women were not told where they were going, just to pack for a desert climate. Many of them never knew exactly what their husbands were doing in the lab (although they certainly had guesses). Conditions in the military housing were not comfortable: water as well as food was rationed, houses were small, dust was everywhere. No one could leave the area without permission, which was not often granted, even to visit parents. Mail was censored.

On the plus side, many wives learned to ride horses, rode out on the trails, and developed a real love for desert landscape and Native American culture.

The narrative voice is collective. "We smiled and took off our gloves." "Some of us shivered, some of us got paranoid..." This takes getting used to, and the impersonality of the device distances the reader from the story. Moreover, trying to cover every woman's experience can

result in banality. Some men were harsh disciplinarians with their children; some were not. Some women treated the Indian maids poorly; others did not. Well, duh.

However, this is an interesting chapter in the history of World War II. Everybody learns in school about the Manhattan Project. This book expands the human dimension of those involved, and is a reminder that the scientists and physicists did not inhabit Los Alamos alone.

“The Rosie Project” by Australian writer **Graeme Simsion** is one of the funniest books I’ve read in a long time. A 39-year-old man with Asperger’s syndrome—a brilliant scientist whose specialty is genetics and whose social skills are abysmal—decides to find a wife. To his eminently logical mind, a questionnaire is the best way quickly to weed out incompatible women, so he creates one: 16 pages, double-sided.

Asperger’s syndrome is on the autism spectrum, and is characterized in varying degrees by lack of empathy, dislike of being touched, a need for unvarying routine, an impressive memory, and immensely logical thought processes in which humor, figurative speech and ambiguity have no place.

Simsion avoids the political incorrectness of making his “challenged” main character the butt of the joke. Don Tillman’s attempts at fitting in and his thinking processes are hilarious, but the reader really likes this guy and wants him to succeed. The plot of the novel (already optioned for a movie, by the way) is how our hero figures out the social cues and gets not only the woman he needs, but also a life more successfully interacting with other people. It’s satisfying that he accomplishes all this by using the intelligence that Asperger’s has given him.

A little girl grew up in “the projects” in the Bronx in the 1950s and 60s. Addicts shot up in the stairwells of her building. Although both parents worked, their jobs were low-paying. The family was Puerto Rican, and English was not spoken in the home. Her father was an alcoholic, and her mother emotionally distant.

At the age of nine, she was diagnosed with diabetes, at the time a disease that usually led to disability and/or early death. Because her parents were not always able to give her the shots of insulin that kept her alive, she learned (at nine) to inject herself. What future did this child have?

In 2009, **Sonia Sotomayor** was appointed Justice of the United States Supreme Court. **“My Beloved World”** is her memoir of the journey from childhood to the court. This is not a work of paying back grudges, as autobiographies often are. Sotomayor mentions being called “spic” and being unwelcome in some homes, but does not dwell upon it. She is generous with thanks for those who mentored her or gave her boosts along the way.

She got to college (Princeton, from which she graduated summa cum laude) because of affirmative action, a policy then just beginning to be implemented. For years Sotomayor was told by political conservatives that she did not deserve her accomplishments, had in fact stolen them from others more deserving.

Her own intelligence, fierce determination, perseverance and unrelenting hard work show clearly here. Anyone interested in the law also will appreciate the discussions about what justice is, and how it can be achieved in a complicated world.

It is impossible to talk about **Karen Fowler's "We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves"** without spoiling the surprises that underlie the plot. So I will just say that this novel is about siblings, love and attachment, betrayal and healing from betrayal, the ethics of science, and psychology. That all sounds a bit weighty, which the book is not. It's basically about what constitutes a family. And it's one of the best books published this year.

"Allegiant" by Veronica Roth is the third in a trilogy of novels for young adults. If you have not read the preceding two books--"Divergent" and "Insurgent"--this concluding volume will make little sense. So read the other two first.

Well written young adult books may often be enjoyed by readers over 35, and Roth's dystopian series is one of these. The premise is that of an isolated society split into factions distinguished by strong personality traits (peacefulness, aggression, selflessness, rationality), and youngsters get to choose into which faction they will go. Divergent characters are those who test out as strong in multiple characteristics, and so will fit in no one faction easily.

The plot moves along quickly, with lots of conflict and scariness; characters grow and develop; there's a love interest; and the underlying ethical issues are worth thinking about.

As with "The Hunger Games," the first book in the trio ("Divergent") is the best, but by the time you've finished it, you are invested in the story and will want to go on to read the other two.

Roth is a very young (25 years old) writer, but she has packed complexity and twistiness into her plot and characters. Like an onion, one layer of reality peels back to reveal another truth... and then another... and another.

Asked whether he ever read novels, the English philosopher Gilbert Ryle replied, "Yes, all six, every year." He was referring to Jane Austen's novels, and his belief in their preeminence is not unusual. Centuries after her death, Austen still has worshipful fans, and a modern author who pilfers her materials is at risk of outrage.

However, **Jo Baker's "Longbourn"** is an exception. Based upon Austen's "Pride and Prejudice," the novel explores the lives of the servants whose hard, unceasing, barely compensated labor keeps the Bennett family clothed, well-fed and comfortable.

Each chapter in "Longbourn" is headed by a quote from "Pride and Prejudice," reflecting some development in the plot. The chapter then shows the (fictional) downstairs characters adjusting to new demands. Remember that this is before bathrooms, central heating, modern kitchens and laundries. Mr. Collins's long stay, for instance, requires extra hauling of (full and smelly) chamber pots and bathwater up and down stairs. Another fire to keep going, another grate to clean, bed to make, clothes to launder, shoes to clean and shine.

Children like Polly in "Longbourn" went into service very young, often before the age of ten, and they were expected to do their share, rising before dawn and falling into bed after the upstairs family retired, with luck before midnight.

I will certainly read the Jane Austen novels again (although not all six, every year), but after "Longbourn," I will read them from a slightly different perspective.

Fans of **Alexander McCall Smith's "No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency"** series will rejoice: a new novel is out! In **"The Minor Adjustment Beauty Salon,"** our favorite characters have problems to work on. Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni is dismayed to find out that he is not a modern

husband. Charlie, of all people, discovers an affinity for babies. Mma Makutsi has interesting news and is talking to her shoes again. Phuti Radiphuti shows unexpected courage and guile. And there are two troublesome cases to puzzle Precious Ramotswe, one involving the beauty salon of the title.

This is the fourteenth novel featuring Mma Ramotswe and her beloved Botswana. One wonders how McCall Smith manages to keep the stories fresh. Like the others, "Beauty Salon" offers some moral philosophy, some character development, a good plot, and considerable easy humor.

In interviews, **Reza Aslan** is articulate, well-informed and persuasive. However, fundamentalist Christians may find his conclusion, if not his scholarship, suspect in "**Zealot: the Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth.**" So I recommend this non-fiction book mainly to those who view the Bible as an historical document as well as a religious one, and to those who are interested in seeing Jesus in the setting of his own historical period and place. This would be Jerusalem and its environs during the Roman occupation, specifically during the first three decades of the Common Era.

The "Zealots" of the title were Jewish men fiercely opposed both to the rulers from Rome and to the local men chosen to oversee their government. Zealots waged continuous guerilla warfare on behalf of the cause of Jewish autonomy. Aslan sees Jesus as a member of this group.

The book reads like a good story and a reasonable discussion, not like an academic thesis. Aslan's footnotes are 63 pages long, but they are grouped at the end of the book, so you can skip them if you like.

Donna Tartt takes a decade to write a novel. "**The Goldfinch**" is her third. (The other two are worth looking up, if you haven't read them.)The bird in question is actually a painting, stolen almost accidentally by a 13-year-old boy from a New York museum under traumatic conditions. Theo, the boy-then-man who narrates this story, stumbles through the following years in a sort of walking-wounded state, shunted here and there, making wrong choices, falling into bad trouble, getting pulled free of it.

The cast of characters surrounding him is unforgettable: including the stately Mrs. Barbour, ethereal Pippa, steady Hobie, Theo's devious dad, and charismatic Boris. Some critics have called "The Goldfinch" Dickensian. It is beautifully written, complex, compelling and bursting with life. Read it and find out what happens to Theo and his Goldfinch.