

Friends of the Valley Center Library

Friends Express Book Reviews

By J S Rudolph

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.