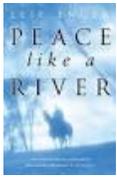
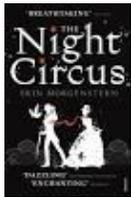


Book Notes by Valerie Oakley -- Summer 2015 *Out East Newsletter*



My immediate response after finishing *Peace like a River*, a first novel by Lief Engle (2001), was that this was a book full of miracles, poetry, mystery, love, retribution and -- did I mention -- miracles and love. The narrative is told from the point of view of Reuben Land, an 11-year-old boy living with his 9-year-old sister Swede, older brother Davy and their dad Jeremiah in a small Minnesota town.

Reuben had a difficult birth and did not breathe for the first 12 minutes, until his father took him in his arms and said "Reuben Land, in the name of the living God I am telling you to breathe." And he did. Reuben tells us that it did not occur to him to wonder why he was allowed, after all, to breathe and to keep breathing. "The answer, it seems to me now, lies in the miracles." Reuben, who struggles with asthma, knows that life is a gift and that his father has been touched by the hand of God and can overturn the laws of nature. When Davy shoots two intruders and is about to be sentenced, he breaks out of jail and takes off. Jeremiah, Swede and Reuben leave home in an Airstream trailer in an effort to find him, tracking him to the Badlands of North Dakota. Swede, age 9, is writing an epic poem, "Sunny Sundown Delivers the Payroll," and verses set in the Old West in the meter of Robert W. Service and "The Cremation of Sam McGee" echo what is happening in their lives. Engle's use of language evokes the spareness and beauty of the western landscape: "The fog lay rich and steamy over the barnyard...and it really did smell like April, though I noticed it also smelled like a wet dog; the two are not dissimilar." The dust jacket notes that the book is "sprinkled with playful nods to biblical tales, beloved classics such as *Huckleberry Finn*, the adventure stories of Robert Louis Stevenson, and the westerns of Zane Grey" and language and a plot that make the book hard to put down.



Another debut novel, *The Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern (2011), deals with real magic and magicians. The author is a multimedia artist "who describes all her work as fairy tales one way or another" and it is certainly apparent that she sees the world through the eyes of an artist. The opening lines are "The circus arrives without warning. No announcements precede it, no paper notices on downtown posts and billboards, no mentions or advertisements in local newspapers. It is simply there, when yesterday it was not." And not only does it appear magically, the circus takes place only at night. The tents are black and white striped, lots of creative lighting is used and, as with most circuses, there is a large cast of characters. The book may appear to be somewhat chaotic -- like a three-ring circus -- but it will sort itself out over time. The "bones" of the plot concern two magicians who compete against each other in a complex game with unwritten rules, using apprentices, the daughter of one magician in one case, and the winner is only determined by who outlasts the other. The daughter, Celia, observes that "It's a stamina and control, not skill." Her father replies, "It is a test of strength." One of the complicating factors, aside from not knowing the rules until they break them, is that the two competitors fall in love. At the book's conclusion the competing magician observes, "There are many kinds of magic, after all," which in many ways sums up the book. It's a flight of fantasy, "magic in a core of realism."



For some reason I think of Pete Hamill as a sports writer, when in fact he is a journalist, editor and screenwriter who occasionally writes about baseball. Although *Snow in August* (1997) is set in Brooklyn, and Ebbets Field is a "player" in this delightful tale, there is also a different focus. Eleven-year-old Michael Devlin wakes up to a cold Saturday morning in 1946 Brooklyn to discover "snow now so deep, so dense and packed, that the world glowed in its blinding whiteness." Michael is an altar boy and a devotee of Captain Marvel comics. He befriends a Rabbi and a whole new world opens up, one including an education in the ways of Judaism for Michael and in the ways of spoken English, the love of baseball and the admiration of Jackie Robinson for the Rabbi. An encounter with the local gang of teenaged thugs results in a life lesson for Michael about anti-Semitism, resolved, not by shouting SHAZAM and conjuring Captain Marvel, but by applying the teachings of the Rabbi. The novel is called a "coming-of-age story with a hearty dose of magical realism mixed in." In fact, it does snow in August and Michael is successful in creating a golem as a better solution than conjuring up Captain Marvel, but these unlikely incidents do not detract from the believability of the story. It has been noted that "Hamill is not a lyrical writer but he is a heartfelt one" and the reader accepts this story of courage in the face of great odds as it was intended. Hamill notes that the novel has a simple theme: first we imagine, then we live.

Book Notes by Valerie Oakley -- Spring 2015

In 2002, Rory Stewart, a Scottish academic, author, diplomat, and Conservative, began a 32-day trek walking from Herat, Afghanistan, east to Kabul. As he says in his preface to *The Places in Between*, (2004) "I'm not good at explaining why I walked across Afghanistan. Perhaps I did it because it was an adventure." In general he is treated well by the wide range of people he meets: "heroes and rogues, tribal elders and teenage soldiers, Taliban commanders and foreign-aid workers." The Taliban have fallen, but their mark is evident in burned and empty hamlets. Muslim etiquette dictates that a stranger be welcomed, fed and offered a place to sleep. Too, the fact that he is accompanied by a mastiff he calls Babur may also explain why he was never attacked. Stewart muses, as he walks, about the idea that walking is "a central part of what it means to be human." He writes in a straightforward engaging style and offers a personal view of Afghanistan not reported on by the mainstream press.

A must-read for anyone thinking about hiking the Appalachian Trail, is *Hiking Through* (2010) by Paul V. Stutzman. "Thru-hiking" is the term used by trail-hikers for those completing the 2,176 mile trek from Georgia to Maine. Stutzman had frequently sought the quiet of the Ohio woods when his life was stressful, and knew that he wanted to do more walking--someday. That day arrived in March, 2008, after his wife of 32 years died of cancer, and he was ready to move forward. Stutzman relates his trip not day by day, mile by mile, but with enough detail that the reader celebrates his achievements and comforts him in his blunders. He drew strongly on his Mennonite faith to sustain him at his low points. He benefited from the advice of experienced hikers and the numerous non-hikers who left "care packages" at shelters along the way, and invited him in for a warm shower and a hearty meal. The dust jacket says Stutzman "hopes the book will convince others not to take their spouses for granted." It does that and offers spectacular scenery along the way.

For a different view on hiking, consider *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, (2012) by Rachel Joyce, her first novel. Harold Fry, a retired brewery sales rep, lives in the south of England, with his wife, Maureen. When he gets a letter from a former co-worker, who is in hospice, he writes her a letter and then sets out to mail it at the corner postbox. It is such a nice day he decides he must deliver the letter in person, coming to believe that his friend, Queenie Hennessy, will live as long as he keeps walking to see her. The fact that she is 600 miles away in Berwick-upon-Tweed does not deter him a bit, and off he goes. Of course, he meets a variety of interesting people and has experiences he never could have imagined, generally confirming his belief in the goodness of people. Maureen discovers that, though she frequently found Harold irritating, especially as he has gone off without telling her where and why he was going, she misses him. When he finally contacts her and explains, Maureen accepts his reasons and comes to admire him, a feeling she hasn't had for a long time. One critic called the book a "novel of unsentimental charm...never cloying." Indeed, there is sadness and there is laughter, memories and the steady pace of Harold's way north, into a better understanding of himself, Maureen and their life together.

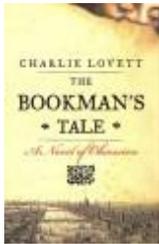
If you like dogs, look for *Dogtripping: 25 Rescues, 11 Volunteers, and 3 RVs on Our Canine Cross-Country Adventure*, (2013) wherein the author, David Rosenfelt, rescues Golden Retrievers, mostly, from people who can no longer care for them, from vets who call him, and from the side of the road in California. He determines to move a group of 25 dogs (from the 4,000 he and his wife Debbie have rescued over a 17-year period) to Maine, with the assistance of Team Woofabago. The subtitle tells it all and their trip across the U.S. is as expected, full of dealing with feeding and walking 25 dogs and trying to keep them quiet in the hotel parking lot where they spent one night. I did have a slight problem with the editing, done apparently by someone who doesn't know when to use "lie" instead of "lay." Rosenfelt is a screen writer and some of the book reads like a made-for-television script, but it is rewarding because of its premise and the dedication of the author to giving the dogs a second chance.

Only Pack What You Can Carry (2011) by Janice Holly Booth, is not a book advising you not to take 4 pairs of shoes on a two-day weekend getaway, but about another kind of journey. Again, the subtitle sets you straight: *My path to inner strength, confidence and self-knowledge*. It really does not fall into the genre of "self-help" but possibly instead "self-actualization," in her case, achieved by conquering her fear of climbing in slot canyons. Booth determined to give herself a year to pull herself "out of the ashes" of sadness and despair that had gripped her. Ultimately she went to the slot canyons of Utah, having signed up for a three-day canyoneering school, near Zion National Park. There are suggested exercises for those interested in introspection, but Booth's life and what she made of it may provide enough personal insight.

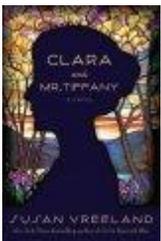
Book Notes By Valerie Oakley -- Winter 2014



The Art Forger by B.A. Shapiro is a somewhat convoluted tale of intrigue, romance, mystery and the procedure for producing a forged picture. The protagonist, Claire, is a copyist, meaning that she is employed by a firm that reproduces famous paintings for sale online, “perfect replicas” whose “provenance only an art historian could discern” and with no intent at deception. Claire is approached by a gallery owner to reproduce a Degas, which he claims to be an original that had been stolen from Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. His plan was to sell the reproduction but return the original to the museum. Claire would have a one woman show in his prestigious gallery. She is faced with technical as well as moral decisions and the reader follows her to the provocative, if somewhat too neat, conclusion. Along the way, we learn, in meticulous detail, what it takes to create a work to appear nearly a century old, from the preparation of the canvas to the drying of the paint. In addition, we are caught up with the complications that arise with the master plan, the gallery owner, the potential buyer and Claire’s own sense of right and wrong.

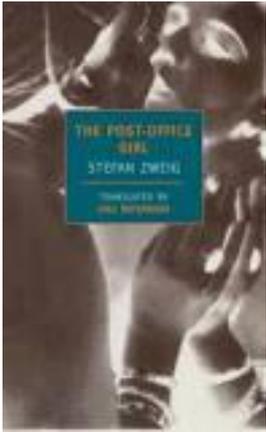


Charlie Lovett’s *The Bookman’s Tale* has a subtitle, A Novel of Obsession, which it is. It is also a book about books. Peter Byerly is an antiquarian book collector and has gone to live in England following the death of his wife, Amanda. In an 18th century study of Shakespeare’s forgers, he comes across a photograph of a woman with a remarkable resemblance to his wife. Intrigued with the photograph, and being of an obsessive state of mind, Peter determines to find who the subject of the photo was. In chapters alternating in time from 1592 in Southwerk, London, and 1983 in North Carolina to present day 1995 England, Peter follows clues which lead to “a priceless literary artifact that could prove the truth of Shakespeare’s identity.” Along the way he encounters a murderer, a love story and even a secret tunnel. Lovett, as an antiquarian bookman himself, brings to the narrative details one needs to be aware of when collecting rare books: paper age, book construction, type face, marginalia and the aura of mystery – is the book truly rare? All the questions are answered and the two tales come together in a satisfying conclusion. A recent news article about forging a book by Galileo noted that “when a book is false, it is equal to, if not better than, the original,” a case of life imitating literature, and leads one to question whether perhaps not all the mysteries have been solved.



Although the central character in *Clara and Mr. Tiffany* comes across as self-centered, author Susan Vreeland conveys a good deal of information about the Tiffany Glass & Decorating Company in its early days (1893) and the personalities which grew the company. Based on real people, the book portrays Louis Comfort Tiffany as an aloof man with strict principles (he does not hire married women, and will fire any of his “girls” who marry) and fully focused on the stained-glass department of the company, rather than the jewelry side. His ambition was to achieve artistic recognition for his stained-glass windows. Clara Driscoll became the head of his women’s division and also desired respect as an artistic designer. She suggested, and ultimately formulated the shape and process for producing the now iconic stained-glass lamps. Clara’s drive and ambition help bring more equality to the whole company, while her own personal life is a mixture of highs and lows. She is protective of the members of the women’s division while she “struggles with the challenges that she faces as a professional woman.” Vreeland describes New York society of the times, with galas and balls in contrast to the poverty of the immigrant population, while creating fictional scenarios that make a good read; as she did with *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. Detailed descriptions of the process of designing and working with glass add to the pleasure of the book. The author leaves the reader with a greater understanding of the make-up of the artistic personality, through both Clara and Tiffany, and how and why some extremely talented people are not particularly well-liked.

Book Notes by Valerie Oakley -- Fall 2014 *Out East* Newsletter



The author Stefan Zweig was unknown to me; but, as frequently happens, after his work *The Post-Office Girl* was recommended by a friend, his name showed up in a number of articles and reviews, especially of the film “The Grand Budapest Hotel.”

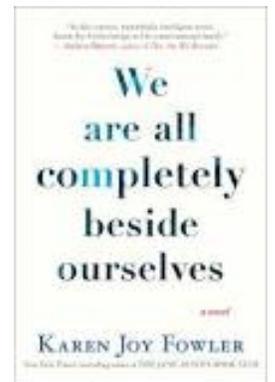
Zweig was a Viennese writer, 1881-1942, whose work included biographies, historical works, plays, long fiction and novellas. There is a movement to make even his unpublished works available, including *The Post-Office Girl*, published in 1982 by New York Review of Books Classics. The original title, “The Intoxication of Metamorphosis,” aptly describes the book.

Told from the point of view of Christina, the book is set in Austria not long after The Great War. Christina lives with her mother, scraping together an existence, when she receives an invitation from her mother’s sister, who had moved to America and married well, to join her at a resort in Switzerland. Christina discovers a life she never dreamed of and a person within herself she didn’t know existed. Her return home to her civil service position in the town post office highlights the wretchedness of her life. She meets a war-weary veteran, Ferdinand, who proposes a solution to their cheerless lives, which will be their salvation or their doom.

One reviewer felt Zweig was “particularly astute in the way he handles women their yearning and frustrations.” The book has been called over-written but “also hypnotic in its downward spiral into tragedy.” I found it written (or translated) in a style that kept me engaged and surprised by the possible final conclusion.

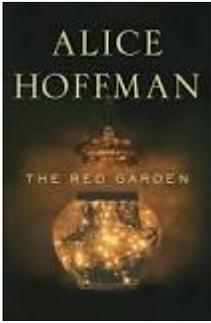
Karen Joy Fowler, author of *The Jane Austen Book Club*, has written a somewhat disturbing book in *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, but one that stays with you.

The narrator, Rosemary Cooke, recounts her growing up in the mid-west in the late 1970s, with her mother and father, brother Lowell and sister Fern. Her father was a psychology professor at Indiana University and encourages her, as she is a talkative, precocious child, when recounting anything, to “start in the middle” and so she does with her narration. We don’t learn what the event was that drove her to silence about her family until well into the book, when her sister Fern is sent “to a farm.” It becomes apparent that Fern, in addition to being Rosemary’s best friend and companion, is a chimpanzee, and her departure from the household results in unforeseen consequences. Essentially, the family falls apart.

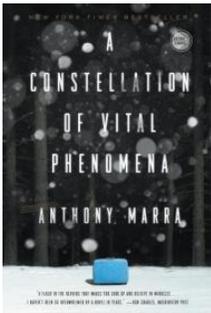


Barbara Kingsolver, in her review in the *New York Times* (June 6, 2013) says, “To experience this novel exactly as the author intended, a reader should avoid the flap copy and everything else written about it” -- including her excellent review. She goes on to praise it, calling it “readably juicy and surreptitiously smart,” which it is, but it is also sad, with a dash of weird. Rosemary’s life follows the path of many in the ‘70s; upheaval, risky friends, involvement in social causes, in her case, and her brother’s, animal rights, as she learns where Fern is and bends her efforts to go to her. Rosemary’s account of her efforts, and her life, create an emotionally gripping picture of the boundary between human and animal beings.

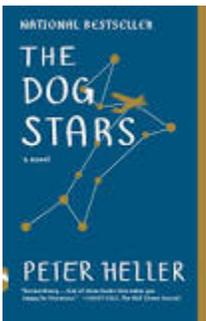
Book Notes by Valerie Oakley -- Spring 2014 *Out East Newsletter*



The Red Garden by Alice Hoffman is a collection of vignettes limning the history of the (mythical) town of Blackwell, MA from its establishment in 1786 to present day. Each self-contained chapter focuses on a person or event that has some relation to the chapter before or next. The characters are all descendents of the town's founding families and the interconnections result in the chronicle of a small town, which could be any small town, with its dark secrets, loyalty and passions. From the publisher: "At the center of everyone's life is a mysterious garden where only red plants can grow, and where the truth can be found by those who dare to look." It is not a continuous narrative but snapshots of town life, town characters, town events, which build to create a touching, funny, sad, memorable work.



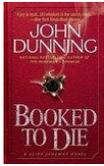
Anthony Marra's debut novel, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*, takes place in Chechnya, told in reminiscences from 1994 through 2004. Against the background of the bloody struggle against Russia for independence is told the story of Haava, an 8-year-old girl whose father is abducted by the Russians, and Akhmed, a neighbor and friend who takes Haava to a nearby abandoned hospital, run by Sonja, the sole, stressed-out doctor doing her best to save those she can. In the course of the five days the narration covers, the lives of these three become enmeshed. Many characters appear (and disappear) throughout; there is death and deceit, but there is also life, as defined in Sonja's dictionary, "a constellation of vital phenomena -- organization, irritability, movement, growth, reproduction, adaptation." There is beauty in the language: "The quiet of the house followed him into the woods. Two hundred meters in, raising his head in a long scream, he tore a hole in the silence through which he could walk more freely...A meteorologist might beg to differ, but weather prediction was an act of infidel witchcraft that could not be trusted." This is a complex book, sometimes hard to follow, poignant, but well worth the trip.



If I had known Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars* was a post-apocalyptic novel, I never would have picked it up. However, being a dog-lover and living with a pilot, I was intrigued by the cover, with its "dog" constellation anchored by a single-engine plane. I was not expecting the contents to enthrall me. Hig, the narrator, lives on the plains near the mountains of what was Colorado before an infection swept away everyone he knew and loved. He survives at an old airport, with his dog, Jasper; a paranoid, gun-toting misanthrope, Bangley, as a neighbor; and a 1956 Cessna 182. They have food and gas for the plane and have established a perimeter, which Bangley guards against intruders from towers he has built. Hig surveys the area from the plane, or flies off into the mountains to hunt or fish. On one of Hig's sorties he hears a transmission on his radio confirming that there are others "out there." He is eventually drawn to investigate and, as the dust jacket says, "What he encounters... is both better and worse than anything he could have hoped for." There is violence and "language" but also a writing style that mimics thoughts that start and aren't completed, but are understood. When a group of strangers invade their domain, they must defend it. Bangley tells Hig, "You are going to have to participate. I [Hig] have the AR-15, a semi-auto. I am good with it, he fitted me with the night scope. I just. I did." The reader knows what has taken place without the details.

There are wonderful, less disturbing, descriptions of the view of the land from the plane. The book has been called both savagely funny and achingly sad, but with insights of what it means to be human. I found it surprisingly poetic.

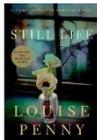
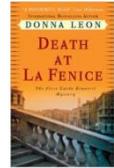
BookNotes by Valerie Oakley -- Summer 2014 *Out East Newsletter*



As a mystery writer **John Dunning** comes from a varied and somewhat mottled background. He left high school in the tenth grade because of his inability to concentrate. This was in the 1950s, before the name “Attention Deficit Disorder” was commonplace and long before Dunning was so diagnosed. After bouncing around from his childhood in Charleston, SC, to Denver, he worked in a glass shop and then as a clerk at *The Denver Post*. From copyboy to reporter to the investigative team, he learned that “that the hardest thing about any job is getting it.” He spent some time in California where he worked with horse trainers and ended up at Santa Anita Park, in Arcadia, CA. Back in Denver, he hosted a radio show for 25 years and began to write. His first book, *The Holland Suggestions*, a mystery, was published by Bobbs Merrill in 1975.

In 1984 John and his wife Helen opened The Old Algonquin Bookstore in Denver. “The store dealt in books ranging from the cheap and recently out-of-print to unusual and scarce items. It joined another bookstore that had been in the block for several years, and soon a third, then a fourth, opened for business. For a time that block between 5900 and 6000 East Colfax Avenue was a lively book community.” *Booked to Die*, published in 1992, is about a Denver cop, **Cliff Janeway**, who gives up police work to open a bookstore on Denver’s Book Row. Four more Janeway mysteries have followed *Booked to Die: The Bookman’s Wake* (1995), *The Bookman’s Promise* (2004), *The Sign of the Book*, (2005) and *The Bookman’s Last Fling* (2006). Janeway gets involved in murders, horse racing and, always, acquiring and appraising rare books. The series is a delightful mix of the activities of an interesting and likable character.

Another enforcer of the law is **Donna Leon’s character, Commissario Guido Brunetti**. All 23 of the Brunetti books are based in Venice, Italy, where Leon has lived for the past thirty years. She taught English literature from 1981 to 1999, when she stopped teaching to concentrate on writing and became involved in the classical music world of Venice. In response to a question asked in the Boston Globe in 2008, Leon said Commissario Guido Brunetti was created when she was at “*La Fenice* opera house back in 1991 with friends, and we started talking about a conductor whom none of us liked. Somehow there was an escalation, and we started talking about how to kill him, where to kill him. This struck me as a good idea for a book.” The series has been called a sly commentary on environmental issues, politics, and the Catholic Church. Although each book stands alone, if you read more than 2 or 3 of the series you’ll get to know his family and the other police officers who assist and sometime thwart the Commissario in his efforts to solve crimes. His wife Paola, who teaches at university, creates and serves meals as only Italians can. Leon has said, “To Italians, good food and eating well ... is no different from wearing nice clothes. It's just one of the givens of your life -- that you will live with pleasure.” The meals are such a part of the Brunetti’s life that a cookbook was published in 2009, with recipes by Roberta Pianaro and culinary stories drawn from the books by Donna Leon.



For a change of venue though not genre, don’t miss **Louise Penny’s series** set in fictional Three Pines, Quebec. **Inspector Armand Gamache** has many of the same characteristics as Commissario Brunetti -- slow thoughtful deductive reasoning, superiors who are not necessarily supportive, staff who are. The setting of the series in a small town offers the opportunity for gossip, eccentric characters, and real crime. Louise Penny, much like Donna Leon and Dunning, came to writing after several careers: 15 years as a journalist and radio host with the Canadian Broadcasting system, specializing in “hard news and current affairs.” From Thunder Bay to Winnipeg to Quebec City and finally Montreal, Penny and her husband currently live “in an old United Empire Loyalist brick home in the country, surrounded by maple woods and mountains and smelly dogs.” Her website has photos of, I assume, the surrounding country, lovely flowers and trees, and snow. Not hard to imagine the fictional village of Three Pines. She also says “In my life as a journalist I covered deaths and accidents and horrible events, as well as the quieter disasters of despair and poverty. Now, every morning I go to my office, put the coffee on, fire up the computer and visit my imaginary friends, Gamache and Beauvoir and Clara and Peter. What a privilege it is to write.” She has been asked if the books need to be read in order. Her response is that “there is a strong, and growing, character development arc throughout the books. I think of the books as having two streams--one is the plot--the crime. The other is the personal life of the characters. The first will, for the most part, be contained in a single book. The character development, though, gets deeper and deeper across the series.” The first book of the series is *Still Life; The Long Way Home*, the tenth and latest, will be published in August of 2014.

Book Notes by Valerie Oakley -- FALL 2014 *Out East* Newsletter

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' first novel, *South Moon Under*, written in 1933, is a rough book about rough life in the Florida scrub. The book follows the life of the Lantry family for three generations. They have made a move to the other side of the river in the Ocala Forest area, exchanging "pine-land for scrub, with a precarious fringe of hammock." The family of five scrapes a living from the land, by hunting, gardening and planting crops, as do their surrounding neighbors and family. The story follows Piety, the youngest daughter, and her son Lant, as they carry on after the death of her husband Willy Jacklin. There are family feuds, whiskey making and running, "Prohis" – prohibition officers – and rough backcountry justice. Rawlings writes in the dialog of country folks, using the language of the time and place, which may be distasteful to some. According to one source, Rawlings "lived with a moonshiner for several weeks near Ocala to prepare for writing the book." The descriptions of the land and life paint a vivid picture. In the words of an old hunter, describing the habits of deer "...deer feeds on the moon like most any wild creature. Four times the deer feeds. Stirs or feeds. Moon-rise and moon-down, and south-moon-over and south-moon-under." In her old age, Piety Lantry commenting on a younger friend's graying hair observes "Dark haired people tarnish quicker." In a 1935 New York Times review of her next book, *Golden Apples*, critic Percy Hutchinson states, "Her work is romance of a kind, yet realistic; altogether, a rich combination of known and unknown ingredients." *South Moon Under* gives the reader a picture of early Florida life and is an absorbing tale.

The Highest Tide by Jim Lynch, (2005), is another work dealing with the natural world. This lyrical debut novel is set in Puget Sound, WA, and told from the point of view of the self-described narrator, who people saw as a "pink-skinned, four-foot-eight, seventy-eight-pound soprano...an innocent nine-year-old...even though I was an increasingly horny speed-reading thirteen-year-old insomniac" [whose hero is Rachel Carson]. Miles O'Malley scours the mudflats of the bay at the south end of the Sound, where he says everyone should spend half an hour: 10 minutes looking, 10 minutes listening and 10 minutes touching. This particular summer, collecting marine specimens for money, he finds a rare sea creature, a possible giant squid. He becomes a media phenomenon, even the object of attention of a local cult, though all he is really interested in is the girl next door and what the bay offers. The summer is filled with a variety of events, culminating in an abnormally high tide, which results in the death of a close elderly friend and Miles' realization that, as much as he doesn't want it, everything changes. Even himself.

As a librarian, I was intrigued by the title of Geraldine Brooks' work, *The People of the Book* (2008) even more so on reading her dedication, "For the librarians." You don't have to be a librarian to enjoy this trip back in time, tracing, with the guidance of Hannah Heath, a conservator of medieval manuscripts, the path a particular book has taken. The book is the Sarajevo Haggadah, the liturgy for the celebration of the Seder service at Passover, and does actually exist. Brooks, an Australian who was a correspondent for The Wall Street Journal in Bosnia, creates a realistic background for Hannah's research, which starts in Sarajevo in 1996 but goes back, one infinitesimal clue at a time, to Seville, Spain of 1480. The trail that Hannah follows, a wine stain here, a partial butterfly wing there, is mostly from the author's imagination. In describing her work Hannah says "...sometimes I can think myself into the heads of the people who made the book. I can figure out who they were, or how they worked. That's how I add my few grains to the sandbox of human knowledge." Each clue, of course, has a story, as does Hannah herself, all adding to an engaging read. Recommendation: Wait until the end to read the Author's note, which lays out the lines between fact and fiction.

The Night Circus (2011) takes a bit of effort but is worth the challenge. Two stories are intertwined in Erin Morgenstern's debut novel about a circus that appears only at night and arrives without warning. No advertisements, no notices. "It is simply there, when yesterday it was not." Unlike a traditional circus, with one large tent and rings within, "this circus contains clusters of tents like pyramids, some large and others quite small. They are set within circular paths, contained within a circular fence. Looping and continuous." "Le Cirque des Reves," the Circus of Dreams. Among the performers are Celia, with psychokinetic powers, and Marco, a young magician, who, unbeknownst to them, are competing against each other in a game contrived by Celia's father and Marco's mentor. This "game" has only one outcome; only one person can remain. The surrounding performers (who don't age) exercise their individual skills and even the patrons become involved as Celia and Marco, competing, find themselves in love, "a deep, magical love that makes the lights flicker and the room grow warm whenever they so much as brush hands." The question of illusion and reality is always present but Morgenstern's very visual style encourages the reader to suspend disbelief. The result is magical.