Coach’s Picks

Looking for something good to read?

Yeah, me neither. Got more on my list than I’ll ever get to. (Heck, I’ve got more on my floor than I’ll ever get to!) But just in case you want some good read leads:

Fiction

_Blessings_, Anna Quindlen,
Random House, 2002
I liked her newspaper column, and I figured I’d give her fiction a go. Awfully glad I did. This is a most unusual love story, about a young man employed as live-in groundskeeper for a wealthy widow. When scared teen parents abandon their baby on Lydia Blessing’s doorstep, it’s the caretaker, Skip Cuddy, who finds and adopts the baby. The result is an awakening for Cuddy and the widow Blessing. Great storytelling.

_The Beekeeper’s Apprentice_, Laurie R. King,
Picador (St. Martin’s Press), 1994
Where was I when this great novel came out? As many of you no doubt know, it’s a beauty. The log-line for this might have been “Nancy Drew meets Sherlock Holmes,” but King says it grew out of the question, “What if Sherlock Holmes had been a woman?” Thus was born super-sleuth Mary Russell, who’s every bit Holmes’ equal.

And what if Russell and Holmes actually meet -- and work on cases together?

Russell is a fascinating character, and in King’s hands, Holmes is as brilliant and complex as he was in Doyle’s— a good deal more compassionate.

She’s already written another one! Let me at it!

_So Brave, Young, and Handsome_, Leif Enger,
Atlantic Press, 2009
I loved Enger’s first novel, _Peace Like a River_. When I started this one, completely different and a little slow out of the blocks, I worried about the dreaded “second book curse” that has been known to strike some writers.

I needn’t have worried. Enger’s fine, but his protagonist, Monte Becker, has the curse, severe writer’s block after the surprise success of his first novel. It’s 1915 in Minnesota, and Monte lives with his artist wife Susannah and his smart, appealing son, Redstart. He squeezes out 1,000 words a day, but novels keep dying on him.

Thus he readily accepts when a mysterious neighbor named Glendon Hale invites him to go west with him. Turns out Hale is a wanted desperado, hiding out as a reclusive boat maker, and he wants to go back to California to apologize to the wife he ran out on years before when the Feds were after him.

By this time the novel is singing, and when we meet up with a kid named Hood Roberts and a relentless lawman named Charlie Siringo, it just gets better.

_The Big Rock Candy Mountain_, Wallace Stegner,
Penguin (Doubleday), 1943
Decided to reread the autobiographical first novel from my old mentor, Wallace Stegner, one of the finest writers we’re ever produced and an environmentalist before we’d invented the term. It’s the story of transient bootlegger Bo Mason, who drags wife Elsa and their two sons from one rude abode and get-rich-quick scheme to another.

The writing is as precise and accurate as Stegner’s lectures invariably were, and he explores the points of view of all four major characters with compassion and honesty. The descriptions of place are vivid and so well-written, they never seem to get in the way of the story.

I gained a greater understanding of Stegner’s roots and confirmed my high regard for him.

_The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian_, Sherman Alexie,
Little, Brown, 2007
Sister Barbara sent this one along, and I’m very glad she did. I’ve read lots of Alexie, really liked almost all of it, and think this as good as anything he’s done.
As with most of Alexie’s protagonists, Junior lives on the Rez (Spokane Indian Reservation) and faces challenges above and beyond being a native in a culture that tried its best to exterminate his people. So he’s already “other” when he decides he needs to go to Reardan, the white folks school in a neighboring town. The only other native in the school is the caricature Injun mascot.

The move costs him his best friend, Rowdy, but gains him friendship with the lovely Penelope and a starring role with the basketball team.

I found it impossible not to love Junior, root for him, and suffer with him. I doubt I’ll forget him.

Non Fiction
How We Decide, Jonah Lehrer,
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009
Thanks to brother Dale for sending this one my way. Drawing from examples as diverse as a professional poker player and a Super Bowl winning NFL quarterback, Lehrer examines the necessary interactions of “rational brain” and “emotional brain” in making effective decisions in high-pressure situations. He even puts us at the controls of a plane spiraling into a death-dive.

Lehrer says we’re wrong to assume that good decisions come from letting our rationality suppress our emotions, asserting that in some cases the opposite is true. He makes a strong case.

Playing with the Enemy, Gary W. Moore,
Penguin, 2006
Our Catcher of the Awry, Lisa, figured I’d love this one, seeing as it involves baseball and World War II. She was so right -- and she didn’t even know about a personal connection I have with the story.

Moore writes about his father, Gene Moore, a promising prospect signed out of tiny Sesser, Illinois by the Brooklyn Dodgers at the age of 15. After Pearl Harbor, Moore enlists and gets assigned to the US Navy barnstorming baseball team. He befriends a German prisoner of war and winds up teaching the Germans how to play baseball-- part out of humanitarian stirrings but mostly because the team needs somebody to play against. (Thus the book’s title.)

Ironically, he’s injured, his “war wound” in fact inflicted by the Germans on the baseball diamond, not the battlefield. He comes home shamed and defeated and seems ready to drink the rest of his life away in Sesser.

But a second chance with the Pittsburgh Pirates, a visit from his German friend, and reunion with his Navy teammate and star pitcher, Ray Laws (not, it turns out, his real name), turn his life around.

The personal connection? Ray Laws threw a new pitch, the forkball (we would call it a split-finger fastball now) and went on to stardom with the Pirates. That reminded me too much off my favorite player as a kid, Elroy Face, to be a coincidence. Face invented the forkball, introduced the save, and went a phenomenal 18-1 in 1959. I don’t know why author Moore chose to change the name, but at the end, he lets slip that Ray Laws was indeed Elroy Face.

But I already loved the book without all that.

New candidate for my list of Holy Books
The Collected Works of T.S. Spivet, by Reif Larsen,
Penguin Press, 2009
Don’t let the format throw you; information from the footnotes will not be on the test. (But you’ll want to read them all anyway.)

This is the most unlikely saga of a 12-year-old scientific prodigy named Tecumseh Sparrow Spivet, growing up on a ranch outside tiny Divide, Montana. His attempt to map the entire world results in an odyssey, the first leg by freight train, to Mecca, The Smithsonian Institute, “America’s Attic,” in Washington, D.C.

It’s a book about truth and illusion, about discovering who you are and aren’t, a hymn to science, and one of the most delightful reads I’ve ever loved.

When I finished, I faced a difficult choice: hide the book where no one will ever find it and cherish it forever or give it to my scientist daughter-in-law for her birthday.

Happy birthday, Kim. Hope you love this book.

“Spend some time living before you start writing. What I find to be very bad advice is the snappy little sentence, ‘Write what you know.’ It is the most tiresome and stupid advice that could possibly be given. If we write simply about what we know we never grow. We don’t develop any facility for languages, or an interest in others, or a desire to travel and explore and face experience head-on. We just coil tighter and tighter into our boring little selves. What one should write about is what interests one.”

Annie Proulx
Great publishing news from our friends

Jeanne Harvey

is publishing two picture books, Astro the Steller Sea Lion (Sylvan Dell, Fall 2010) and My Hands Sing the Blues-- The Artist Romare Bearden (Marshall Cavendish, Spring 2011)

“Yahoo!” she comments. “All those writing classes with you and others and just sticking to it paid off. Thanks for all your positive comments through the years.”

She’s also become a credentialed teacher in California and teaches 7th grade Language Arts (we old folks used to call it “English”) and two writing workshops at the middle school.

Astro tells the true story of the rescue and rehab of a baby sea lion by the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito, California. Astro now lives and entertains visitors at the Mystic Aquarium in Connecticut.

Barbara Burris

wrote a submission for Woodlands and Prairies magazine called “Discoveries Off Cranberry Road.” They liked it and will publish the end of December. “I really enjoyed working with the editor,” Barbara reports. “I tried to keep it short, as per instructions, but when he read it, he came back with questions galore. I laughed because it was all the material I’d cut to keep it within their guidelines! He told me to ‘just write and (he’d) edit’, so I did. The resulting story is double what they asked for. He did a nice job on the edit and the voice still sounds like me.”

Barbara also had a piece in the December issue of Living the Country Life that, alas, “does not sound like me, but oh well. Such is life. The check is in the bank.”

She’s also helping a friend edit her novel and “86-ing’ attributions and exclamation marks like crazy.”

Debbie Wingate

published her memoir, News from the Northwoods, with CreateSpace. “And, it only took seven years!” she notes. I read a lot of it in manuscript form and just loved it! Check it out through this direct link to Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/News-Northwoods-Memoir-Debbie-Wingate/dp/1449517153/ref=cm_cr_pr_product_top

Marginal Madness

Thanks to Sandy Mickelson

Author unknown

Birds of a feather flock together and crap on your car.

When I'm feeling down, I like to whistle. It makes the neighbor's dog run to the end of his chain and gag himself.

A penny saved is a government oversight.

The older you get, the tougher it is to lose weight; because by then your body and your fat have gotten to be really good friends.

The easiest way to find something lost around the house is to buy a replacement.

He who hesitates is probably right.

Did you ever notice: The Roman Numerals for forty (40) are ’XL.’

If you can smile when things go wrong, you have someone in mind to blame.

The sole purpose of a child's middle name is so he can tell when he's really in trouble.

There's always a lot to be thankful for if you take time to look for it. For example, I'm sitting here thinking how nice it is that wrinkles don't hurt.

Did you ever notice: When you put the 2 words 'The' and 'IRS' together it spells 'Theirs.'

Eventually you will reach a point when you stop lying about your age and start bragging about it.

The older we get, the fewer things seem worth waiting in line for.

Some people try to turn back their odometers. Not me, I want people to know why I look this way. I've traveled a long way, and some of the roads weren't paved!

When you are dissatisfied and would like to go back to youth, think of Algebra.

You know you are getting old when everything either dries up or leaks.

Ah, being young is beautiful, but being old is comfortable.

First you forget names, then you forget faces. Then, you forget to pull up your zipper.

Finally, you forget to pull it down.

Dear Lord, keep your arm around my shoulder, and your hand over my mouth... Amen!
Meandering With Madonna

Guardian of the Books

By Madonna Dries Christensen

For my column for Extra Innings, I’ll meander around the world-wide-web for appropriate subjects. I might wander into a unique bookstore, visit a book festival, a reading group, stumble on an interesting blog about writing and publishing, interview a well-known or little-known author, or write a bio on an eccentric author (is there any other kind?). For my first sojourn, I return to the place I first became acquainted with the magic of libraries.

When I was growing up in Iowa during the 1940s and 1950s, I never imagined that someday books featuring my name beneath the title would be on the library shelf in my hometown. Back then, I did not aspire to being a writer, but I developed a habit of reading that continues today.

When I was eight, my father, bedridden after a heart attack, sent me to the library to fetch Zane Grey books. He gave me a list of those he’d read and instructed me to bring anything not listed. I presented the note to the librarian, Miss Zenobia Walton, and she helped me find the popular Westerns. She showed me the children’s section, and I chose books for myself.

It amazed me that I could leave this wonderful place with my arms full of books; that the librarian trusted me to take care of them and return them on time.

Miss Walton was the quintessential small-town librarian, presiding from behind a curved desk that divided the room in half. She stood just tall enough so that her generous bosom rested atop the desk. Whatever the season she seemed to be too warm, her round face flushed and dotted with perspiration. A spider-webby net veiled her gray hair, pinned into a knot at the back of her head. Her shoes were thick-heeled, laced black oxfords, her legs modestly covered by calf-length dresses. I remember flowered prints with white belts, and stiff shantung that whispered when she shuffled about the quiet room.

Whispering and page turning were acceptable, speaking aloud was discouraged by Miss Walton’s glare or whispered reminder. She closely watched teenagers who came in to study, but instead sat talking and giggling. If one warning did not suffice, she escorted them to the door.

Miss Walton worked efficiently, using a pencil with a rubber date stamp clipped on the eraser end. She dabbed the dater on an ink pad and then stamped the due date on a slip of paper pasted inside the book. She wrote the call number, the name of the book and the borrower’s name on a card, which she filed in a slot on her desk. There were no library cards. In this town of twenty-eight hundred, Miss Walton knew her readers.

She hung a bulletin board and encouraged children to display artwork, poetry, or stories. If a child had no money for a fine, she invented a chore to settle the debt.

The library, a red brick Carnegie building with a rounded tile roof, now has an addition. Patrons no longer enter up a flight of concrete steps, through a glass-paneled door, up two wooden steps and through open French doors. A deer head with glassy eyes once graced the foyer; a pair of hooves served as hat rests.

The blend of old and new was nicely done. Still, it’s disappointing to see meeting rooms in the section where there were once bookshelves, tables, chairs, magazine racks (with movie magazines) a stand for newspapers hung upside down on metal rods, and a globe that stood on the floor and seemed as huge as the world itself. Downstairs in the children’s section, there are tables and chairs that I used as a child. Miss Walton’s desk stands unused in a corner.

Noticeably absent is the old library’s distinctive smell, a compatible blend of old books, bookbinding paste, newspaper ink, furniture oil, floor wax, that dry, dusty odor steam radiators emit, all held together with thick summer humidity. That aromatic charm must have escaped out the windows and doors during renovation. There is no trace of it now. Except for what I evoke in memory.
Holiday Story Challenge

Tackle one of these openings and shake yourself out of your comfort zone

By Jim Herod

As Annell Gordon and I were reading the submissions for our writers’ group meeting, we realized we could predict the type of story each person was going to write. So we resolved to try to break us all out of our habits.

We decided to create story beginnings and have everyone draw two. Their story for November would start with one of their two drawings. We came up with these beginning sentences for Writers’ Club compositions for November, 2009:

Cruising Aunt Rhonda’s Thanksgiving buffet amid the din created by dozens of my closest relatives, I realized that there was certainly more than one turkey in the room.

Thanksgiving of that year involved more than the sacrificial twelve pound turkey.

Soot sifted down the chimney and dusted the white carpet of the New York penthouse; I could hardly believe my eyes at what landed on the hearth beside the sparkling Christmas tree.

Christmas! Bah! Humbug! Scrooge and I could have been soulmates during the Yuletide season.

Scurrying through the mall on Christmas Eve with an armload of last-minute gifts, I rounded the corner beside Macy’s Department Store and collided with the most unlikely person in the world.

The gift was wrapped and under the tree … there was no turning back.

New Year’s Resolutions aren’t exactly my cup of tea, especially the year that I resolved never to tell another lie – not even a tiny fib.

I opened the door on New Year’s Day, expecting to greet the biggest football fan in the universe and my best buddy Hal; never in my wildest dreams did I expect to see the person who stood on my snowy stoop.

“Auld Lang Syne! Should all acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind?” After what happened on New Year’s Eve, I’d have to say, “Hell, yeah!”

We had decided not to put up a Christmas tree that year.

Mama always cooked a turkey at Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving 1957 was different.

Mother said she was not surprised with what Michael decided to do. After all, he was born on the first day of Hanukkah and that was eighteen years ago. It was time.

Mama was standing at the door in our room with her arms folded and a scowl on her face.

“I don’t care that he ate the rest of my pound cake,” she grumbled. “But he left dirt on the floor by the chimney. Who’s going to clean up the mess?”

“What are we going to do about it being Christmas tomorrow?” I looked up from what I was reading.

Mama told everybody that my birthday was June 25. It wasn’t.

“Wesley (or Emma) called. He (or She) is bringing a guest home for Thanksgiving.” That’s the way it started.

No sooner had we sat down for Thanksgiving dinner than the phone rang. It was I who answered. The voice said, “Sorry. Wrong number.”

I hardly know where to begin. Maybe it should be by telling you that I was conceived on Christmas Day, 1947.

Anybody want to pick up Jim’s gauntlet and try one of these provocative holiday openings?

“As a writer, you’re always reaching for a more potent way to call somebody a jerk.”

Dan Harmon, creator of the TV show Community, explaining the prevalence of the word “douche” on network television in the last few years.
Garrison Keillor asks:
Are blogs the new journalism?

What the new media age also means is that there won't be newspapers to send reporters to cover the next war, but there will be 6 million teenage girls blogging about their plans for the weekend. There will be no TV networks to put on dramas in which actors in costume strut and orate and gesticulate, but you can see home video of dogs and anybody's high school graduation anywhere in America. We will be a nation of unpaid freelance journalists and memoirists. This is not necessarily a bad thing.

It comes too late for Richard Nixon or Bill Clinton. In the new media age, there would not be a Watergate or a Monica Lewinsky. The president could conspire to break the law or canoodle with anybody within arm's reach and likely there would be nobody in the forest to hear that particular tree fall. And that would be just fine. All we got from those enormous Old Media events, frankly, was entertainment. They were no more enlightening than a Harold Robbins novel.

I'm an old media guy and I love newspapers, but they were brought down by a long period of gluttonous profits when they were run as monopolies by large, phlegmatic, semi-literate men who endowed schools of journalism that labored mightily to stamp out any style or originality and to create a cadre of reliable transcribers. That was their role, crushing writers and rolling them into cookie dough. Nobody who compares newspaper writing to the swashbuckling world of blogging can have any doubt where the future lies. Bloggers are writers who've been liberated from editors, and some of them take you back to the thrilling days of frontier journalism, before the colleges squashed the profession.

The Internet is a powerful tide that is washing away some enormous castles and releasing a lovely sense of independence and playfulness in the American people. Millions of people have discovered the joys of seeing yourself in print -- your own words! the unique essence of yourself, your stories, your jokes, your own peculiar take on the world -- out there where anybody can see it! Wowser. Unfortunately, nobody is earning a dime from this. So much work, so little pay. It's tragic.

By Garrison Keillor, from the Prairie Home Companion online newsletter

Extra Innings
Of, by, and for writers, their enablers, and those who love them
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Editor-in-Coach: Marshall J. Cook
Catchers of the Awry: Sandy Mickelson, Lisa Krenz
Columnist this issue: Madonna Dries Christensen
Feature Essayist: Jim Herod
The Masked Man: Clayton Moore
In future issues, Leah Carson, Sue Roupp, Perry Stone, Carrie Gruman-Trinkner, Randi Mrvos, Charles Ries, Den Adler, Pat Goetz, Sandy Mickelson and other special guest stars will enliven this newsletter and enlighten and entertain us all.

I’ll publish Extra Innings whenever I get one ready and distribute it free to an open-enrollment mailing list. To get yourself on the list, email the Coach at mcook@dcs.wisc.edu

Extra Innings comes to you through the good graces of the folks of the writing program at the Division of Continuing Studies, Liberal Studies and the Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Christine DeSmet, Rita Mae Reese, and Laurel Yourke. Find out about their workshops, courses, conferences, and critiques services at: www.dcs.wisc.edu/lsa/writing

They’re the absolute best. Extra Innings is a proud booster of Write by the Lake The Writers Institute The Rhinelander School of the Arts Weekend with your Novel and the Odyssey Project No added sugar, honey. No carbs, no trans fats, no salt-- pretty tasteless all in all. Like its predecessor, Creativity Connection, this newsletter contains your recommended daily dose of nouns, verbs (transigent and intransigent), gourds, adjectives, adverbs and other artificial sweeteners, pronouns, antinouns, prepositions, propositions, conjunctions, contradictions, contractions, eruditions, bloviation, chiasmus, charisma, metanoia, paranoia, trace metaphors and the occasional half-witticism.

The last word:
“I have no particular talent. I am merely inquisitive.” Albert Einstein