**Tinkers**
*Paul Harding*

*Starred Review*  A tinker is a mender, and in Harding’s spellbinding debut, he imagines the old, mendable horse-and-carriage world. The objects of the past were more readily repaired than our electronics, but the living world was a mystery, as it still is, as it always will be. And so in this rhapsodic novel of impending death, Harding considers humankind’s contrary desires to conquer the “imps of disorder” and to be one with life, fully meshed within the great glimmering web. In the present, George lies on his death bed in the Massachusetts house he built himself, surrounded by family and the antique clocks he restores. George loves the precision of fine timepieces, but now he is at the mercy of chaotic forces and seems to be channeling his late father, Howard, a tinker and a mystic whose epileptic seizures strike like lightning. Howard, in turn, remembers his “strange and gentle” minister father. Each man is extraordinarily porous to nature and prone to becoming “unhitched” from everyday human existence and entering a state of ecstasy, even transcendence. Writing with breathtaking lyricism and tenderness, Harding has created a rare and beautiful novel of spiritual inheritance and acute psychological and metaphysical suspense. --Donna Seaman

**Mudbound**
*Hillary Jordan*

Jordan’s beautiful debut (winner of the 2006 Bellwether Prize for literature of social responsibility) carries echoes of As I Lay Dying, complete with shifts in narrative voice, a body needing burial, flood and more. In 1946, Laura McAllan, a college-educated Memphis schoolteacher, becomes a reluctant farmer’s wife when her husband, Henry, buys a farm on the Mississippi Delta, a farm she aptly nicknames Mudbound. Laura has difficulty adjusting to life without electricity, indoor plumbing, readily accessible medical care for her two children and, worst of all, life with her live-in misogynous, racist, father-in-law. Her days become easier after Florence, the wife of Hap Jackson, one of their black tenants, becomes more important to Laura as companion than as hired help. Catastrophe is inevitable when two young WWII veterans, Henry’s brother, Jamie, and the Jacksons’ son, Ronsel, arrive, both battling nightmares from horrors they’ve seen, and both unable to bow to Mississippi rules after eye-opening years in Europe. Jordan convincingly inhabits each of her narrators, though some descriptive passages can be overly florid, and the denouement is a bit maudlin. But these are minor blemishes on a superbly rendered depiction of the fury and terror wrought by racism. (Mar.)

**The Imperfectionists: A Novel**
*Tom Rachman*

Amazon Best Books of the Month, April 2010 Printing presses whirr, ashtrays smolder, and the endearing complexity of humanity plays out in Tom Rachman's debut novel, The Imperfectionists. Set against the backdrop of a fictional English-language newspaper based in Rome, it begins as a celebration of the beloved and endangered role of newspapers and the original 24/7 news cycle. Yet Rachman pushes beyond nostalgia by crafting an apologue that better resembles a modern-day Dubliners than a Mad Men exploration of the halcyon past. The chaos of the newsroom becomes a stage for characters unified by a common thread of circumstance, with each chapter presenting an affecting look into the life of a different player. From the comically overmatched greenhorn to the forsaken foreign correspondent, we suffer through the painful heartbreaks of unexpected tragedy and struggle to stifle our laughter in the face of well-intentioned blunders. This cacophony of emotion blends into a single voice, as the depiction of a paper deemed a "daily report on the idiocy and the brilliance of the species" becomes more about the disillusion in everyday life than the dissolution of an industry. --Dave Callanan

**Water for Elephants: A Novel**
*Sara Gruen*
With its spotlight on elephants, Gruen's romantic page-turner hinges on the human-animal bonds that drove her debut and its sequel (Riding Lessons and Flying Changes)—but without the mass appeal that horses hold. The novel, told in flashback by nonagenarian Jacob Jankowski, recounts the wild and wonderful period he spent with the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth, a traveling circus he joined during the Great Depression. When 23-year-old Jankowski learns that his parents have been killed in a car crash, leaving him penniless, he drops out of Cornell veterinary school and parleys his expertise with animals into a job with the circus, where he cares for a menagerie of exotic creatures... He also falls in love with Marlena, one of the show's star performers—a romance complicated by Marlena's husband, the unbalanced, sadistic circus boss who beats both his wife and the animals Jankowski cares for. Despite her often clichéd prose and the predictability of the story's ending, Gruen skillfully humanizes the midgets, drunks, rubes and freaks who populate her book. (May 26)

Mennonite in a Little Black Dress: A Memoir of Going Home
Rhoda Janzen
Starred Review. At first, the worst week of Janzen's life—she gets into a debilitating car wreck right after her husband leaves her for a guy he met on the Internet and saddles her with a mortgage she can't afford—seems to come out of nowhere, but the disaster's long buildup becomes clearer as she opens herself up. Her 15-year relationship with Nick had always been punctuated by manic outbursts and verbally abusive behavior, so recognizing her co-dependent role in their marriage becomes an important part of Janzen's recovery (even as she tweaks the 12 steps just a bit). The healing is further assisted by her decision to move back in with her Mennonite parents, prompting her to look at her childhood religion with fresh, twinkling eyes. (She provides an appendix for those unfamiliar with Mennonite culture, as well as a list of shame-based foods from hot potato salad to borscht.) Janzen is always ready to gently turn the humor back on herself, though, and women will immediately warm to the self-deprecating honesty with which she describes the efforts of friends and family to help her re-establish her emotional well-being.

Bijou Roy
Ronica Dhar
In her deft debut, Dhar examines the consequences of secrets shared between families against the politically charged backdrop of modern India. As the eldest of two daughters, U.S.-raised Bijou Roy struggles to fulfill traditional male roles for the burial of her father, Nitish, culminating in a trip with her mother and sister to Calcutta to scatter his ashes. In the unfamiliar country, each step of the process reinforces Bijou's alienation, from the people and culture as well as from her mother, who continues to keep Nitish's past shrouded in secrecy. It's only after meeting Naveen, the son of Nitish's oldest friend, that Bijou begins to comprehend her father's political entanglements and the reasons her parents migrated years before. As she learns more about her father, Bijou predictably gains insight into her own character, but Bijou's struggle to reconcile tradition with the demands of the modern world is propelled by skillful, luminous prose.

The Gerbil Farmer's Daughter: A Memoir
Holly Robinson
Robinson's traditional military-brat upbringing is upended by her father's sudden and inexplicable fascination with gerbils. As she details the family's dedication to this new project, her mother's grudging tolerance, and the machinations required to keep the gerbils secret from the navy (which would frown upon such kitschy weirdness), Robinson makes her family seem ordinary in spite of this one bit of strangeness. And her father was no rodent dilettante, as evident in her chronicling of his years of research into using gerbils in lab experiments and his careful business plan. What keeps this surprising memoir from becoming a Lucille Ball/Henry Fonda parody is, sadly, the sudden death of Robinson's younger sister from cystic fibrosis, a disease her father hopes can be cured through scientific inquiry. Suddenly gerbil farming isn't so silly after all. Robinson writes with humor and honesty, creating a
Charming story, a reminder of how all the love and care in the world may not be enough, and a moving tribute to a father who, nonetheless, never stopped trying. --Colleen Mondor

The Dervish House
Ian McDonald
McDonald takes the history of Istanbul, both real and imagined, and forges a multi-faceted and fascinating character out of the city itself; then he adds in the experiences of six people whose lives are about to intersect in the most unexpected ways. Over the course of a week, following a suicide bombing in which only the bomber dies, these people will discover conspiracies, legends, and long-dormant memories. In the not-so-distant future, five years after Turkey became part of the EU, the city that straddles Asia and Europe is again the center of global trade. Three seemingly disconnected stories meet in the streets and coffee houses of Istanbul: the travails of a young man who was caught in the blast who suddenly sees djinn, the efforts of an art dealer set on a mad quest for something even the buyer believes is a mere legend, and the greatest stock-market scheme ever imagined. McDonald creates a magnificent knot of intrigue, thrills, and daring adventures, with the flair for character and setting that make his tales so satisfying to indulge in. --Regina Schroeder

Little Bee
Chris Cleave
The publishers of Chris Cleave's new novel "don't want to spoil" the story by revealing too much about it, and there's good reason not to tell too much about the plot's pivot point. All you should know going in to Little Bee is that what happens on the beach is brutal, and that it braids the fates of a 16-year-old Nigerian orphan (who calls herself Little Bee) and a well-off British couple--journalists trying to repair their strained marriage with a free holiday--who should have stayed behind their resort's walls. The tide of that event carries Little Bee back to their world, which she claims she couldn't explain to the girls from her village because they'd have no context for its abundance and calm. But she shows us the infinite rifts in a globalized world, where any distance can be crossed in a day--with the right papers--and "no one likes each other, but everyone likes U2." Where you have to give up the safety you'd assumed as your birthright if you decide to save the girl gazing at you through razor wire, left to the wolves of a failing state. --Mari Malcolm

Lucia, Lucia
Adriana Trigiani
In 1950 Greenwich Village, 25-year-old Lucia has it all: a warm and loving Italian family, a papa with a successful grocery business, an engagement ring from her childhood sweetheart, and best of all, a career she loves as a seamstress and apprentice to a talented dress designer at B. Altman's department store. When Lucia meets a rich, handsome businessman whose ambitions for a luxurious uptown lifestyle match her own, her goals for her future soar even higher. Over the next two years, however, her dreams gradually unravel. Sorvino is well-cast as the narrator of Trigiani's (Milk Glass Moon) first-person tale. She ably conveys the confidence, eagerness, and romantic yearnings of youth, as well as the guilt Lucia suffers when she disappoints her loved ones. Sorvino is also adept at providing voices for a large cast of characters: the rich Italian accent of Lucia's father, the scolding tone of her mother, the shy voice of her sister-in-law and the smooth, movie-star tones of the rich stranger Lucia pins her hopes on. This is an engaging, well-told tale about life's unexpected twists and turns, the ways that even small choices have large repercussions and the hopeful notion that sometimes, when you least expect it, you can find happiness.

Three Junes
Julia Glass
This strong and memorable debut novel draws the reader deeply into the lives of several central characters during three separate Junes spanning ten years. At the story's onset, Scotsman Paul McLeod, the father of three grown sons, is newly widowed and on a group tour of the Greek islands as he reminisces about how he met and married his deceased wife and created their family. Next, in the
book's longest section, we see the world through the eyes of Paul's eldest son, Fenno, a gay man transplanted to New York City and owner of a small bookstore, who learns lessons about love and loss that allow him to grow in unexpected ways. And finally there is Fern, an artist and book designer whom Paul met on his trip to Greece several years earlier. She is now a young widow, pregnant and also living in New York City, who must make sense of her own past and present to be able to move forward in her life. In this novel, expectations and revelations collide in startling ways. Alternately joyful and sad, this exploration of modern relationships and the families people both inherit or create for themselves is highly recommended for all fiction collections. Maureen Neville, Trenton P.L., NJ

Under This Unbroken Sky
Shandi Mitchell
Spring 1938. After nearly two years in prison for the crime of stealing his own grain, Ukrainian immigrant Teodor Mykolayenko is a free man. While he was gone, his wife, Maria; their five children; and his sister, Anna, struggled to survive on the harsh northern Canadian prairie, but now Teodor—a man who has overcome drought, starvation, and Stalin's purges—is determined to make a better life for them. As he tirelessly clears the untamed land, Teodor begins to heal himself and his children. But the family's hopes and newfound happiness are short-lived. Anna's rogue husband, the arrogant and scheming Stefan, unexpectedly returns, stirring up rancor and discord that will end in violence and tragedy.

Night Watch
Sarah Waters
Waters' new novel is a departure from her previous yarn, the gripping Victorian thriller ingersmith (2002). This one visits a group of characters in World War II-era London at three different points in their lives: in the aftermath of the war, during its height, and the early days of the war. Waters' narrative moves backward, beginning in 1947 before turning to 1944 and then 1941. The format introduces the characters while gradually revealing the intricacies of how they are all connected. Vivian is a vibrant young woman in love with a married soldier. Her brother, Duncan, is drifting through life after spending the years during the war in jail. Helen is worried her relationship with Julia is crumbling. Kay wanders aimlessly, searching for purpose in a broken city. All are affected and irrevocably changed by the war. Readers will be tempted to return to the beginning of Waters' elegant novel after turning the final page to fully appreciate the depth of the characters and their connections to each other. ((Reviewed February 15, 2006)) Copyright 2006 Booklist Reviews.

Prayers for Sale
Sandra Dallas
It's 1936 and the Great Depression has taken its toll. Eighty-six-year-old Hennie Comfort has lived in Middle Swan, Colorado - up in the high country of the snow-covered Rocky Mountains - since before it was Colorado. When she first meets seventeen-year-old Nit Spindle, Hennie is drawn to the young grieving girl. Nit and her husband have come to this small mining town in search of work, but the loneliness and loss Nit feels are almost too much to bear. One day she notices an old sign that reads "Prayers for Sale" in front of Hennie's house and takes out her last nickel. Hennie doesn't actually take money for her prayers, never has, but she invites the skinny girl in anyway. The harsh conditions of life that each has endured help them to create an instant bond, and a friendship is born, one in which the deepest of hardships are shared and the darkest of secrets are confessed. This novel tells the tale of a friendship between two women, one with surprising twists and turns, and one that is ultimately a revelation of the finest parts of the human spirit.

The Girls
Lori Lansens
*Starred Review* Lansens' remarkable second novel is told from two viewpoints: that of Rose and that of Ruby Darlen, 29-year-old conjoined twins. Rose and Ruby are about to go down in history as the
oldest surviving twins to be joined at the head. A recent medical diagnosis has spurred Rose to write her autobiography, and she encourages Ruby to do the same. Between the two sections, the story of their lives is revealed, beginning with their birth to an unwed teen mother and their adoption by Lovey Darlen, the nurse who was with their mother when she was in labor, and her strong, silent husband, Stash. The girls grow up on the Darlens' farm in rural Ontario, where Lovey refuses to accept the word of skeptical doctors who doubt the girls will ever be able to walk on their own. There is a great deal of subtlety in Lansens' narrative, and how the twins reveal the details of their lives--often one will refer to something she is sure the other has already mentioned in her section. But her biggest achievement in the novel is bringing to life these two truly extraordinary characters to such a degree that readers may forget they are reading fiction. ((Reviewed February 15, 2006)) Copyright 2006 Booklist Reviews.

**The Reader**
*Bernard Schlink*

Hailed for its coiled eroticism and the moral claims it makes upon the reader, this mesmerizing novel is a story of love and secrets, horror and compassion, unfolding against the haunted landscape of postwar Germany.

When he falls ill on his way home from school, fifteen-year-old Michael Berg is rescued by Hanna, a woman twice his age. In time she becomes his lover – then inexplicably disappears. When Michael next sees her, he is a young law student, and she is on trial for a hideous crime. As he watches her refuse to defend her innocence, Michael gradually realizes that Hanna may be guarding a secret she considers more shameful than murder.

**Housekeeping**
*Marilyn Robinson*

Winner of the PEN/Hemingway Award

A modern classic, *Housekeeping* is the story of Ruth and her younger sister, Lucille, who grow up haphazardly, first under the care of their competent grandmother, then of two comically bumbling great-aunts, and finally Sylvia, the eccentric and remote sister of their dead mother. The family house is in the small town of Fingerbone on a glacial lake in the Far West, the same lake where their grandfather died in a spectacular train wreck and their mother drove off a cliff to her death. It is a town “chastened by an outsized landscape and extravagant weather, and chastened again by an awareness that the whole of human history had occurred elsewhere.” Ruth and Lucille’s struggle toward adulthood beautifully illuminates the price of loss and survival and the dangerous and deep undertow of transience.

**A Mercy**
*Toni Morrison*

Nobel Laureate Morrison returns more explicitly to the net of pain cast by slavery, a theme she detailed so memorably in *Beloved*. Set at the close of the 17th century, the book details America’s untoward foundation: dominion over Native Americans, indentured workers, women, and slaves. A slave at a plantation in Maryland offers up her daughter, Florens, to a relatively humane Northern farmer, Jacob, as debt payment from their owner. The ripples of this choice spread to the inhabitants of Jacob’s farm, populated by women with intersecting and conflicting desires. Jacob’s wife, Rebekka, struggles with her faith as she loses one child after another to the harsh New World. A Native servant, Lina, survivor of a smallpox outbreak, craves Florens’ love to replace the family taken from her, and distrusts the other servant, a peculiar girl named Sorrow. When Jacob falls ill, all these women are threatened. Morrison’s lyricism infuses the shifting voices of her characters as they describe a brutal society being forged in the wilderness. Morrison’s unflinching narrative is all the more powerful for its relative brevity; it takes hold the reader and doesn’t let go until the wrenching final-page crescendo.

**An Inconvenient Wife**
Megan Chance
In this wholly absorbing historical novel, Mrs. Lucy Carelton, who comes from one of the wealthiest and most prominent families in 1880s New York City, has been completely undone by her nerves. Her ambitious husband, a nouveau riche stockbroker, drags her from one doctor to another in search of a cure that will allow her to fulfill her many social obligations without giving in to hysteria. They think they have found the solution in charismatic neurologist Victor Seth, a champion of a relatively new procedure called hypnotism. Seth sets about freeing Lucy from the social constraints that have made her so unhappy, encouraging her to pursue her artistic talents and explore her sexuality. Seth convinces himself that his techniques, including his handy way with an electrotherapy wand, are all in the name of science, but even he is unprepared for the new Lucy who emerges—a passionate, calculating, amoral creature of large appetites. Chance’s straightforward prose and over-the-top plotting effectively combine in this diabolically clever, thoroughly entertaining take on women’s liberation. ((Reviewed March 1, 2004)) Copyright 2004 Booklist Reviews.

Woman Who Watches Over the World
Linda Hogan
"I sat down to write a book about pain and ended up writing about love," says award-winning Chicksaw poet and novelist Linda Hogan. In The Woman Who Watches Over the World, she recounts her American Indian identity, her difficult childhood as the daughter of an army sergeant, her love affair at the age of twelve with an older man, the legacy of alcoholism, and the troubled history of the two daughters she adopted. She reveals how historic and emotional pain are passed down through generations, and she blends personal history with stories of important Indian figures of the past such as Lozen, the woman who was the military strategist for Geronimo, and Ohiyesha, the Santee Sioux medical doctor who witnessed the massacre at Wounded Knee. Ultimately, Hogan sees herself and her people whole again, and in doing so gives us an illuminating story of personal and spiritual triumph.

Midwives
Chris Bohjalian
During her hippie days, Sibyl Danforth delivered a friend's baby on a blizzard night. From this emergency delivery grew her calling as a midwife. Over the years, she had great success, helping with more than 500 home births. But on March 4, 1981, Charlotte Fugett Bedford died under Sibyl's care. Severe weather conditions treacherously iced the roads and downed phone lines, making contact with her backup physician impossible. After hours and hours of arduous labor, Charlotte seemed to suffer a stroke and die. To save the yet-unborn child, Sibyl performed a cesarean section. However, since she was not trained for this procedure and since witnesses thought perhaps Charlotte was not actually dead, Sibyl was charged with involuntary manslaughter and practicing medicine without a license. With meticulous detail, Bohjalian examines Sibyl's trial from the perspective of her personal notebooks and the recollections of her then-teenage daughter Connie, who now as an obstetrician delivers babies in the hospital yet is also on call to assist midwives. ((Reviewed February 15, 1997)) Copyright 2000 Booklist Reviews.

Still Alice
Lisa Genova
Still Alice is a compelling debut novel about a 50-year-old woman’s sudden descent into early onset Alzheimer’s disease, written by first-time author Lisa Genova, who holds a PhD in neuroscience from Harvard University.

Alice Howland, happily married with three grown children and a house on the Cape, is a celebrated Harvard professor at the height of her career when she notices a forgetfulness creeping into her life. As confusion starts to cloud her thinking and her memory begins to fail her, she received a devastating diagnosis, early onset Alzheimer’s disease. Fiercely independent, Alice struggles to maintain her lifestyle
and live in the moment, even as her sense of self is being stripped away. In turns heartbreakingly, inspiring, and terrifying, *Still Alice* captures in remarkable detail what it’s like to literally lose your mind.

**The Inheritance of Loss**  
*Kiran Desai*  
Published to extraordinary acclaim, *The Inheritance of Loss* heralds Kiran Desai as one of our most insightful novelists. She illuminates the pain of exile and ambiguities of postcolonialism with a tapestry of colorful characters: an embittered old judge, Sai, his sixteen-year-old orphaned granddaughter, a chatty cook, and the cook’s son, Biju, who is hopscotching from one miserable New York restaurant to another, trying to stay a step ahead of the INS.

In a crumbling, isolated house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga lives an embittered old judge who wants to retire in peace, then his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, arrives on his doorstep.

When a Nepalese insurgency the mountains threatens Sai’s new-sprung romance with her handsome tutor, their lives descend into chaos. The cook witnesses India’s hierarchy being overturned and discarded. The judge revisits his past and his role in Sai and Biju’s intertwining lives. A story od depth and emotion, hilarity and imagination. *The Inheritance of Loss* tells “of love, longing, futility, and loss that is Desai’s true territory.”

**One Amazing Thing**  
*Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni*  
Late afternoon sun sneaks through the windows of a passport and visa office in an unnamed American city. Most customers and even most office workers have come and gone, but nine people remain. A punky teenager with an unexpected gift. An upper-class Caucasian couple whose relationship is disintegrating. A young Muslim-American man struggling with the fallout of 9/11. A graduate student haunted by a question about love. An African-American ex-soldier searching for redemption. A Chinese grandmother with a secret past. And two via office workers on the verge of an adulterous affair.

When an earthquake rips through the afternoon lull, trapping these nine characters together, their focus first jolts to their collective struggle to survive. There’s little food. The office begins to flood. Then, at a moment when the psychological and emotional stress seems nearly too much for them to bear, the young graduate student suggests that each tell a personal tale. “one amazing thing” from their lives, which they have never told anyone before. And as their surprising stories of romance, marriage, family, political upheaval, and self-discovery unfold against the urgency of their life-or-death circumstances, the novel proves the transcendent power of stories and the meaningfulness of human expression itself.

**The Man Who Loved Books Too Much**  
*Allison Hoover Bartlett*  
Journalist Allison Hoover Bartlett describes in her non-fiction debut novel, *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much*, that according to the Antiquarian Booksellers’ Association of America, there are five specific profiles of book thieves: those who steal for profit; those who steal in anger; the casual thief; and those who steal for their own personal use. *Know thine enemy*.

Bartlett’s real life account of rare book thief John Gilkey and the Utah rare book dealer and self-appointed “bibliodick” Ken Saunders who caught him, will leave book lovers astounded and most likely looking a little closer through garage sale or bargain bin books in the future. Bartlett takes us deep into not only the years that Saunders chased Gilkey around the country while he stole possibly up to $300,000 worth of rare books with stolen credit card numbers, but also into a world where Bibliomania is the main stream, dust jackets are described like beloved children, and many would sell their soul for a first edition of J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*.
At times, it’s hard not to sympathize with Gilkey and his obsession to own all of the books upon the Modern Library’s list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century. Even Bartlett finds herself considering this impulsive behavior while attending a book fair.

“Moirandat left me with the manuscript for a few minutes while he helped a customer. I touched the pages and realized how much I would love to own something like it. *This is how it happens,* I thought. I could slip these sheets under my sweater and make a dash for the door.”

**A Gesture Life**  
**Chang-rae Lee**  
This acclaimed novel tells the story of Franklin "Doc" Hata, a Japanese immigrant who leads a proper, decorous life in a New York suburb. As his life slowly unravels, he is transported back to his days as a medic in the Japanese army in World War II, and his obsessive love of a young comfort woman.

**The Corrections**  
**Jonathan Franzen**  
Ferociously detailed, gratifyingly mind-expanding, and daringly complex and unhurried, New Yorker writer Franzen’s third and best-yet novel aligns the spectacular dysfunctions of one Midwest family with the explosive malfunctions of society-at-large. Alfred's simple values were in perfect accord with the iron orderliness of the railroad he so zealously served, but he is now discovering the miseries and entropy of Parkinson's disease. His wife, Enid, who has filled every cupboard and closet in their seemingly perfect house with riotous clutter in an unconscious response to her hunger for deeper experience, refuses to accept the severity of Alfred's affliction. Gary, the most uptight and bossiest of their unmoored adult offspring, is so undermined by his ruthlessly strategic wife that he barely avoids a nervous breakdown. Chip loses a plum academic job after being seduced and betrayed by a student, then nearly loses his life in Lithuania after perpetuating some profoundly cynical Internet fraud. And Denise detonates her career as a trendy chef by having an affair with her boss' wife. Heir in scope and spirit to the great nineteenth-century novelists, Franzen is also kin to Stanley Elkin with his caustic humor, satiric imagination, and free-flowing empathy as he mocks the absurdity and brutality of consumer culture. At once miniaturistic and panoramic, Franzen's prodigious comedic saga renders family life on an epic scale and captures the decadence of the dot-com era. Each cleverly choreographed fiasco stands as a correction to the delusions that precipitated it, and each step back from the brink of catastrophe becomes a move toward hope, integrity, and love.

**Jitterbug Perfume**  
**Tom Robbins**  
*Jitterbug Perfume* is an epic. Which is to say, it begins in the forests of ancient Bohemia and doesn't conclude until nine o'clock tonight [Paris time]. It is a saga, as well. A saga must have a hero, and the hero of this one is a janitor with a missing bottle. The bottle is blue, very, very old, and embossed with the image of a goat-horned god. If the liquid in the bottle is actually the secret essence of the universe, as some folks seem to think, it had better be discovered soon because it is leaking and there is only a drop or two left.

**Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates**  
**Tom Robbins**  
Switters is a contradiction for all seasons: an anarchist who works for the government; a pacifist who carries a gun; a vegetarian who sops up ham gravy; a cyberwhiz who hates computers; a man who, though obsessed with the preservation of innocence, is aching to deflower his high-school-age stepsister (only to become equally enamored of a nun ten years his senior). Yet there is nothing remotely wishy-washy about Switters. He doesn’t merely pack a pistol. He is a pistol. And as we dog Switters’s strangely elevated heels across four continents, in and out of love and danger, discovering in the process the “true” Third Secret of Fatima, we experience Tom Robbins—that fearless storyteller, spiritual renegade,
and verbal break dancer—at the top of his game. On one level this is a fast-paced CIA adventure story
with comic overtones; on another it’s a serious novel of ideas that brings the Big Picture into unexpected
focus; but perhaps more than anything else, Fierce Invalids is a sexy celebration of language and life.

Donna Tartt
The Secret History
Truly deserving of the accolade a modern classic, Donna Tartt’s novel is a remarkable achievement—
both compelling and elegant, dramatic and playful.

Under the influence of their charismatic classics professor, a group of clever, eccentric misfits at an elite
New England college discover a way of thinking and living that is a world away from the humdrum
existence of their contemporaries. But when they go beyond the boundaries of normal morality their
lives are changed profoundly and forever, and they discover how hard it can be to truly live and how
easy it is to kill.