

## *Book Choices for July, August & September*

### **1. Three Cups of Tea by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin**

Some failures lead to phenomenal successes, and this American nurse's unsuccessful attempt to climb K2, the world's second tallest mountain, is one of them. Dangerously ill when he finished his climb in 1993, Mortenson was sheltered for seven weeks by the small Pakistani village of Korphe; in return, he promised to build the impoverished town's first school, a project that grew into the Central Asia Institute, which has since constructed more than 50 schools across rural Pakistan and Afghanistan. Coauthor Relin recounts Mortenson's efforts in fascinating detail, presenting compelling portraits of the village elders, con artists, philanthropists, mujahideen, Taliban officials, ambitious school girls and upright Muslims Mortenson met along the way. As the book moves into the post-9/11 world, Mortenson and Relin argue that the United States must fight Islamic extremism in the region through collaborative efforts to alleviate poverty and improve access to education, especially for girls. Captivating and suspenseful, with engrossing accounts of both hostilities and unlikely friendships, this book will win many readers' hearts.

### **2. Shantaram by Gregory David Roberts**

At the start of this massive, thrillingly undomesticated potboiler, a young Australian man bearing a false New Zealand passport that gives his name as "Lindsay" flies to Bombay some time in the early '80s. On his first day there, Lindsay meets the two people who will largely influence his fate in the city. One is a young tour guide, Prabaker, whose gifts include a large smile and an unstoppably joyful heart. Through Prabaker, Lindsay learns Marathi (a language not often spoken by gora, or foreigners), gets to know village India and settles, for a time, in a vast shantytown, operating an illicit free clinic. The second person he meets is Karla, a beautiful Swiss-American woman with sea-green eyes and a circle of expatriate friends. Lin's love for Karla and her mysterious inability to love in return gives the book its central tension. "Linbaba's" life in the slum abruptly ends when he is arrested without charge and thrown into the hell of Arthur Road Prison. Upon his release, he moves from the slum and begins laundering money and forging passports for one of the heads of the Bombay mafia, guru/sage Abdel Khader Khan. Eventually, he follows Khader as an improbable guerrilla in the war against the Russians in Afghanistan. There he learns about Karla's connection to Khader and discovers who set him up for arrest. Roberts, who wrote the first drafts of the novel in prison, has poured everything he knows into this book and it shows. It has a heartfelt, cinemascope feel. If there are occasional passages that would make the very angels of purple prose weep, there are also images, plots, characters, philosophical dialogues and mysteries that more than compensate for the novel's flaws. A sensational read, it might well reproduce its bestselling success in Australia here.

### **3. Norwegian Wood by Haruki Murakami**

In a complete stylistic departure from his mysterious and surreal novels (*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*; *A Wild Sheep Chase*) that show the influences of Salinger, Fitzgerald and Tom Robbins, Murakami tells a bittersweet coming-of-age story, reminiscent of J.R. Salamanca's classic 1964 novel, *Lilith*--the tale of a young man's involvement with a schizophrenic girl. A successful, 37-year-old businessman, Toru Watanabe, hears a version of the Beatles' *Norwegian Wood*, and the music transports him back 18 years to his college

days. His best friend, Kizuki, inexplicably commits suicide, after which Toru becomes first enamored, then involved with Kizuki's girlfriend, Naoko. But Naoko is a very troubled young woman; her brilliant older sister has also committed suicide, and though sweet and desperate for happiness, she often becomes untethered. She eventually enters a convalescent home for disturbed people, and when Toru visits her, he meets her roommate, an older musician named Reiko, who's had a long history of mental instability. The three become fast friends. Toru makes a commitment to Naoko, but back at college he encounters Midori, a vibrant, outgoing young woman. As he falls in love with her, Toru realizes he cannot continue his relationship with Naoko, whose sanity is fast deteriorating. Though the solution to his problem comes too easily, Murakami tells a subtle, charming, profound and very sexy story of young love bound for tragedy.

#### **4. Atonement by Ian McEwan**

This haunting novel, which just failed to win the Booker this year, is at once McEwan at his most closely observed and psychologically penetrating, and his most sweeping and expansive. It is in effect two, or even three, books in one, all masterfully crafted. The first part ushers us into a domestic crisis that becomes a crime story centered around an event that changes the lives of half a dozen people in an upper-middle-class country home on a hot English summer's day in 1935. Young Briony Tallis, a hyperimaginative 13-year-old who sees her older sister, Cecilia, mysteriously involved with their neighbor Robbie Turner, a fellow Cambridge student subsidized by the Tallis family, points a finger at Robbie when her young cousin is assaulted in the grounds that night; on her testimony alone, Robbie is jailed. The second part of the book moves forward five years to focus on Robbie, now freed and part of the British Army that was cornered and eventually evacuated by a fleet of small boats at Dunkirk during the early days of WWII. This is an astonishingly imagined fresco that bares the full anguish of what Britain in later years came to see as a kind of victory. In the third part, Briony becomes a nurse amid wonderfully observed scenes of London as the nation mobilizes. No, she doesn't have Robbie as a patient, but she begins to come to terms with what she has done and offers to make amends to him and Cecilia, now together as lovers. In an ironic epilogue that is yet another coup de the tre, McEwan offers Briony as an elderly novelist today, revisiting her past in fact and fancy and contributing a moving windup to the sustained flight of a deeply novelistic imagination. With each book McEwan ranges wider, and his powers have never been more fully in evidence than here.

#### **5. The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini**

Hosseini's stunning debut novel starts as an eloquent Afghan version of the American immigrant experience in the late 20th century, but betrayal and redemption come to the forefront when the narrator, a writer, returns to his ravaged homeland to rescue the son of his childhood friend after the boy's parents are shot during the Taliban takeover in the mid '90s. Amir, the son of a well-to-do Kabul merchant, is the first-person narrator, who marries, moves to California and becomes a successful novelist. But he remains haunted by a childhood incident in which he betrayed the trust of his best friend, a Hazara boy named Hassan, who receives a brutal beating from some local bullies. After establishing himself in America, Amir learns that the Taliban have murdered Hassan and his wife, raising questions about the fate of his son, Sohrab. Spurred on by childhood guilt, Amir makes the difficult journey to Kabul, only to learn the boy has been enslaved by a former childhood bully who

has become a prominent Taliban official. The price Amir must pay to recover the boy is just one of several brilliant, startling plot twists that make this book memorable both as a political chronicle and a deeply personal tale about how childhood choices affect our adult lives. The character studies alone would make this a noteworthy debut, from the portrait of the sensitive, insecure Amir to the multilayered development of his father, Baba, whose sacrifices and scandalous behavior are fully revealed only when Amir returns to Afghanistan and learns the true nature of his relationship to Hassan. Add an incisive, perceptive examination of recent Afghan history and its ramifications in both America and the Middle East, and the result is a complete work of literature that succeeds in exploring the culture of a previously obscure nation that has become a pivot point in the global politics of the new millennium.

**6. Then We Came to an End by Joshua Ferris**

In this wildly funny debut from former ad man Ferris, a group of copywriters and designers at a Chicago ad agency face layoffs at the end of the '90s boom. Indignation rises over the rightful owner of a particularly coveted chair ("We felt deceived"). Gonzo e-mailer Tom Mota quotes Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson in the midst of his tirades, desperately trying to retain a shred of integrity at a job that requires a ruthless attention to what will make people buy things. Jealousy toward the aloof and "inscrutable" middle manager Joe Pope spins out of control. Copywriter Chris Yop secretly returns to the office after he's laid off to prove his worth. Rumors that supervisor Lynn Mason has breast cancer inspire blood lust, remorse, compassion. Ferris has the downward-spiraling office down cold, and his use of the narrative "we" brilliantly conveys the collective fear, pettiness, idiocy and also humanity of high-level office drones as anxiety rises to a fever pitch. Only once does Ferris shift from the first person plural (for an extended fugue on Lynn's realization that she may be ill), and the perspective feels natural throughout. At once delightfully freakish and entirely credible, Ferris's cast makes a real impression.

**7. A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini**

It's difficult to imagine a harder first act to follow than *The Kite Runner*: a debut novel by an unknown writer about a country many readers knew little about that has gone on to have over four million copies in print worldwide. But when preview copies of Khaled Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, started circulating at Amazon.com, readers reacted with a unanimous enthusiasm that few of us could remember seeing before. As special as *The Kite Runner* was, those readers said, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is more so, bringing Hosseini's compassionate storytelling and his sense of personal and national tragedy to a tale of two women that is weighted equally with despair and grave hope.

**8. Memory Keeper's Daughter by Kim Edwards**

Edwards's assured but schematic debut novel (after her collection, *The Secrets of a Fire King*) hinges on the birth of fraternal twins, a healthy boy and a girl with Down syndrome, resulting in the father's disavowal of his newborn daughter. A snowstorm immobilizes Lexington, Ky., in 1964, and when young Norah Henry goes into labor, her husband, orthopedic surgeon Dr. David Henry, must deliver their babies himself, aided only by a nurse. Seeing his daughter's handicap, he instructs the nurse, Caroline Gill, to take her to a

home and later tells Norah, who was drugged during labor, that their son Paul's twin died at birth. Instead of institutionalizing Phoebe, Caroline absconds with her to Pittsburgh. David's deception becomes the defining moment of the main characters' lives, and Phoebe's absence corrodes her birth family's core over the course of the next 25 years. David's undetected lie warps his marriage; he grapples with guilt; Norah mourns her lost child; and Paul not only deals with his parents' icy relationship but with his own yearnings for his sister as well. Though the impact of Phoebe's loss makes sense, Edwards's redundant handling of the trope robs it of credibility. This neatly structured story is a little too moist with compassion.

#### **9. History of Love by Nicole Krauss**

The last words of this haunting novel resonate like a pealing bell. "He fell in love. It was his life." This is the unofficial obituary of octogenarian Leo Gursky, a character whose mordant wit, gallows humor and searching heart create an unforgettable portrait. Born in Poland and a WWII refugee in New York, Leo has become invisible to the world. When he leaves his tiny apartment, he deliberately draws attention to himself to be sure he exists. What's really missing in his life is the woman he has always loved, the son who doesn't know that Leo is his father, and his lost novel, called *The History of Love*, which, unbeknownst to Leo, was published years ago in Chile under a different man's name. Another family in New York has also been truncated by loss. Teenager Alma Singer, who was named after the heroine of *The History of Love*, is trying to ease the loneliness of her widowed mother, Charlotte. When a stranger asks Charlotte to translate *The History of Love* from Spanish for an exorbitant sum, the mysteries deepen. Krauss (*Man Walks into a Room*) ties these and other plot strands together with surprising twists and turns, chronicling the survival of the human spirit against all odds. Writing with tenderness about eccentric characters, she uses earthy humor to mask pain and to question the universe. Her distinctive voice is both plangent and wry, and her imagination encompasses many worlds.

#### **10. The World Is Flat by Thomas Friedman**

Thomas L. Friedman is not so much a futurist, which he is sometimes called, as a presentist. His aim in *The World Is Flat*, as in his earlier, influential *Lexus and the Olive Tree*, is not to give you a speculative preview of the wonders that are sure to come in your lifetime, but rather to get you caught up on the wonders that are already here. The world isn't going to be flat, it is flat, which gives Friedman's breathless narrative much of its urgency, and which also saves it from the Epcot-style polyester sheen that futurists—the optimistic ones at least—are inevitably prey to.

What Friedman means by "flat" is "connected": the lowering of trade and political barriers and the exponential technical advances of the digital revolution that have made it possible to do business, or almost anything else, instantaneously with billions of other people across the planet. This in itself should not be news to anyone. But the news that Friedman has to deliver is that just when we stopped paying attention to these developments—when the dot-com bust turned interest away from the business and technology pages and when 9/11 and the Iraq War turned all eyes toward the Middle East—is when they actually began to accelerate. Globalization 3.0, as he calls it, is driven not by major corporations or giant trade organizations like the World Bank, but by individuals: desktop freelancers and innovative startups all over the world (but especially in India and China) who can compete—and win—not just for low-wage manufacturing and information labor but, increasingly, for the highest-

end research and design work as well. (He doesn't forget the "mutant supply chains" like Al-Qaeda that let the small act big in more destructive ways.)

Friedman has embraced this flat world in his own work, continuing to report on his story after his book's release and releasing an unprecedented hardcover update of the book a year later with 100 pages of revised and expanded material. What's changed in a year? Some of the sections that opened eyes in the first edition—on China and India, for example, and the global supply chain—are largely unaltered. Instead, Friedman has more to say about what he now calls "uploading," the direct-from-the-bottom creation of culture, knowledge, and innovation through blogging, podcasts, and open-source software. And in response to the pleas of many of his readers about how to survive the new flat world, he makes specific recommendations about the technical and creative training he thinks will be required to compete in the "New Middle" class. As before, Friedman tells his story with the catchy slogans and globe-hopping anecdotes that readers of his earlier books and his New York Times columns know well, and he holds to a stern sort of optimism. He wants to tell you how exciting this new world is, but he also wants you to know you're going to be trampled if you don't keep up with it. A year later, one can sense his rising impatience that our popular culture, and our political leaders, are not helping us keep pace.

### **11. The Abstinence Teacher by Tom Perrotta**

Tom Perrotta knows his suburbia, and in *The Abstinence Teacher* he carves out an even larger chunk of his distinct terrain. Set in the northeastern suburb of Stonewood Heights, Perrotta's sixth book takes on the war between the liberals and the evangelists. When single mother Ruth Ramsay, the sex ed teacher at the local high school, tells her class that oral sex can be enjoyable, the Tabernacle of the Gospel Truth church begins its crusade. Believable or not, the school agrees to an abstinence curriculum and in marches JoAnn Marlowe with her blonde hair and pumps to instill in Ruth the tenets of the new program. Gone are the days of rolling a condom over a cucumber; now Ruth is required to promote restraint, which she does wearily and halfheartedly. These are heady days, when students rat out their teachers and the local soccer coach? Ruth's daughter is on his team? is a divorced ex-druggie and active Tabernacle member. When Tim leads the team in prayer, Ruth wrenches her daughter from the circle and the hostility between the opposing camps grows. Who is bad and who is good? Ruth's youthful promiscuity rises slowly to the surface, while Tim's struggle to stay sober makes him constantly confront his past. He's lost his wife and daughter? also on the soccer team? to his addictions, but now he's clean and married to a Tabernacle girl. His Jesus-loving ways, however, are in direct conflict with his desires, rendering him the most complex and likable character. When he loses his own battle with abstinence at a poker party, the finest scene in the novel culminates with his keying Jesus across the hood of an SUV parked in the drive. Ruth would gladly have sex if it would only come her way, and she also drinks on school nights. A less well-drawn complement to Tim, Ruth is a tolerant liberal with a newly toned body who plays therapist to her gay friends, but who can't accept that her children are interested in Jesus. The lesson is that everybody must give up something. Even Ruth's ex-lover, once a pudgy trumpet player, no longer eats to maintain his abs of steel. So what is lost when we cannot succumb to our desires? Who then do we become? The book is rife with Perrotta's subtle and satiric humor (the Tabernacle is seen as a place of diversity, while the punks, Deadheads and headbangers of Tim's past are all predictably the same), but these questions get lost as the plot winds down. Issues of sex and religion that have shaken the

town become, in the end, the story of what Ruth and Tim's newly forged relationship will soon become.

## **12. Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides**

As the Age of the Genome begins to dawn, we will, perhaps, expect our fictional protagonists to know as much about the chemical details of their ancestry as Victorian heroes knew about their estates. If so, Eugenides (*The Virgin Suicides*) is ahead of the game. His beautifully written novel begins: "Specialized readers may have come across me in Dr. Peter Luce's study, 'Gender Identity in 5-Alpha-Reductase Pseudohermaphrodites.'" The "me" of that sentence, "Cal" Stephanides, narrates his story of sexual shifts with exemplary tact, beginning with his immigrant grandparents, Desdemona and Lefty. On board the ship taking them from war-torn Turkey to America, they married-but they were brother and sister. Eugenides spends the book's first half recreating, with a fine-grained density, the Detroit of the 1920s and '30s where the immigrants settled: Ford car factories and the tiny, incipient sect of Black Muslims. Then comes Cal's story, which is necessarily interwoven with his parents' upward social trajectory. Milton, his father, takes an insurance windfall and parlays it into a fast-food hotdog empire. Meanwhile, Tessie, his wife, gives birth to a son and then a daughter-or at least, what seems to be a female baby. Genetics meets medical incompetence meets history, and Callie is left to think of her "crocus" as simply unusually long-until she reaches the age of 14. Eugenides, like Rick Moody, has an extraordinary sensitivity to the mores of our leafier suburbs, and Cal's gender confusion is blended with the story of her first love, Milton's growing political resentments and the general shedding of ethnic habits. Perhaps the most wonderful thing about this book is Eugenides's ability to feel his way into the girl, Callie, and the man, Cal. It's difficult to imagine any serious male writer of earlier eras so effortlessly transcending the stereotypes of gender. This is one determinedly literary novel that should also appeal to a large, general audience.