

## Friends of the Valley Center Library Friends Express Book Reviews

By J S Rudolph

Remember the TV show “Dallas”? Well, imagine it as a novel. Then imagine the characters not as Texans, but as Chinese. And they’re not just very rich, but immensely, unimaginably rich, able to collect sports cars like candy wrappers, or buy a picture at auction for one hundred ninety-five million dollars. Give it all a satirical spin, and this is **“China Rich Girlfriend,”** by **Kevin Kwan**.

Kwan’s first bestseller, “Crazy Rich Asians,” is already being made into a movie; he has found a winning formula. Take a good soap opera plot of beleaguered lovers, desperate social climbers, marriages in trouble and feuding families. Season it with the details of how the mega-rich spend their time. And set it in the cultural context of Singapore and Hong Kong, with detailed descriptions of Chinese manners, taboos, social hierarchies and holiday celebrations, most of which will be alien and fascinating to non-Asian readers.

It may not be great literature, but it’s a lot of fun.

The current television series, “Longmire,” is taken from **Craig Johnson’s** well-written detective novels featuring Sheriff Longmire of huge, sparsely populated and fictional Absaroka County in Wyoming. **“Dry Bones”** is the latest book from Johnson, the title a reference to the unearthed dinosaur skeleton that starts the plot rolling.

Setting, action and characters are emphatically Western. The relationships (frequently troubled) among Cheyenne Indians, Anglo ranchers and lawmen have the sharp tang of realism, as does the weather and the scenery. These are not romanticized cowboy novels. Here are bars, fights, drugs, poverty, injustice, old ethnic resentments and prejudices.

Walt Longmire’s best friend, of Vietnam War vintage, is Cheyenne Henry Standing Bear, familiarly known as the Bear. You don’t mess around with Henry. The women in the series are strong characters too: Walt’s daughter Cady, a fiercely independent woman and a lawyer; and his street-smart deputy Vic, whose language in the books is in no way okay for prime time.

Besides cleaning up language, filming changes character and plot somewhat. The camera wants conflict, action and blood, the more the better. Whether you are a fan of the TV series or not, if you’re interested in the slower paced, more expansive books, start with an early one and read chronologically. The continuing story of a cast of well-drawn characters is interesting to follow.

Critics often compare Johnson’s books to Tony Hillerman’s Navajo mysteries. Of course, they’re both set in the American West’s Indian country, but I see few other resemblances. Longmire’s world seems tougher, harsher, and much more lonely.

**“The Watchmaker of Filigree Street,”** a novel by **Natasha Pulley**, is an intriguing blend of steam punk, fantasy and mystery. The setting is Victorian London, in the 1880s: militant Irish were

bombing British government buildings and women were agitating for the vote. The hero is a telegraph operator at the British Home Office, a low-level civil servant, who becomes involved in the investigation of a bombing at his office.

Central to the story (and to the investigation) is a genius of a watchmaker, who creates all sorts of magical creatures run on clockwork. Keita Mori is a wealthy Chinese immigrant, a former diplomat with a titled background and serious powers of precognition.

The female interest in the story is Grace, a college student of physics who yearns only for the work space and the leisure to pursue her scientific interests--not an easily satisfied yearning for a Victorian woman.

Some readers will be put off by the fantasy element of precognition, which is central to the plot. However, aside from this, "Watchmaker" is realistically written. One of the best parts of the novel--the relationship between the Chinese baron and Thaniel, the London telegrapher--develops so slowly and naturally, that by the end their attachment seems both touching and inevitable.

(Please note that the Friends are not purchasing this book, but it is readily available through the County Library system, if you're interested.)

**"Crooked Heart"** by **Lissa Evans**, is another novel that centers on relationships, also is set in an historical England, and coincidentally also touches on women's suffrage. In this case, the central character is Noel, a boy living near London during the second World War.

At first, I thought the plot would be too wrenching to read. Noel's beloved godmother, with whom he lives, is descending into senility, and the 10-year-old struggles to take care both of her and of himself. Eventually, like so many British children at the time, he is sent to live with strangers away from the German bombing raids. The woman who takes him in ("Vee") is poor, uneducated and none too honest. Noel's background is "posh," as Vee says, and he is very, very bright. How the two of them forge an unlikely partnership is the crux of the story.

Evans's description of British life at this moment in history is unflinching, even wrenching, as I said before. But its realism extends to the fact that people do cope, do manage to adapt, even to be kind, under harsh circumstances. This, along with the growing understanding between the woman and the boy, gives "Crooked Heart" a satisfying warmth that sticks with you long after you finish the last page and put down the book.

One more book centered on a child and on the subject of relationships, is **"My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry,"** by Swedish novelist **Fredrik Backman**. Here the child is a girl seven years old, and the story is told from her viewpoint--she's precocious, inquisitive, rebellious, friendless and bullied at school. Elsa lives with her divorced mother and beloved Granny in an apartment building full of eccentrics.

Her grandmother gives her a "quest," really a sort of treasure hunt, both to uncover her grandmother's past and to find out something about the people (and animals) in the other apartments. All this plays out against the background of the stories her granny has told her for years, about the imaginary Kingdom of Miamas, where "different" folks (like Elsa) are not only accepted but welcome.

There is a bad guy in the novel (Granny says there always has to be a dragon), also illness, fear and death, and characters struggle with very serious problems. But you sense that

most things will work out in the end. If you want to read something that's edgy, dark or ironic, look elsewhere. If you want a charming (but not sentimental) book that keeps you interested all the way through, try Backman's "My Grandmother Asked Me."

**Kate Atkinson**, author of the tour-de-force, "Life After Life," has a new novel out, "**A God in Ruins.**" This one follows some of the characters from the earlier novel over a period of more than 80 years, from childhood into old age. It is not a sequel--you need not have read the first book. The central character is World War II R.A.F. pilot Teddy, brother to Ursula, who was the main character in "Life After Life."

The narrative moves around in time, each chapter labelled with its date. Atkinson has done this sort of thing before and is adept at it; the reader is never confused. It's an effective technique, resulting in a rounded sense of each character's life as a whole. All the characters are so well developed that they take on a sense of reality. Even Viola, Teddy's difficult, unlovable daughter, is someone we've all met at some time: self-pitying, negative, too selfish to nurture well even her own children.

Although World War II itself is only a small part of "A God in Ruins," one idea behind the book is the destruction that war wreaks beyond the body count. For it is not just bodies that die--it is whole lives, including the love, accomplishments, careers, joys and sorrows that will never be, children and grandchildren who will never exist. Thought of in this way, war entails an obliteration of unimaginable scope.

The title, by the way, is quoted from Ralph Waldo Emerson's description of a human being.

**Judy Blume** established her reputation decades ago with her children's books, many of them now classics for young readers up through teens. However, she also writes novels for adults, and "**In the Unlikely Event**" is the latest of these.

It is an old-fashioned book, in the sense that an omniscient narrator follows a large cast of characters over a period of years, each character dealing with the inevitable changes, joys and disappointments in his or her particular fashion. Blume is good at this, her adolescents especially true-to-life in their yearning, confusion and emotional roller-coasters.

The interesting twist in "Unlikely Events" is that it is built on a framework of historically accurate events in a real town. Judy Blume was a teenager in Elizabeth, New Jersey, when over a period of a few months three planes taking off from Newark airport crashed into the town. Sometimes everyone on board died. Sometimes the planes destroyed town buildings and their inhabitants as well.

This was 1951-1952, before trauma counseling, when people were urged not to talk about it, preferably not even to think about it. Everyone dealt with the tragedies in their own fashion, as well as they could. Fertile ground for a novel.

The characters are all fictional, but the crashes and the historical setting are painstakingly reproduced. Those who grew up in the 50s will remember the details: finished basements with knotty pine paneling, dressing tables with gathered fabric skirts, bobby pins for setting curls, the annual March of Dimes polio drives, Packards and cashmere twin sets, Doris Day and the Korean War. Ah yes, I remember it well.

**David Brooks** is a well-known newspaper columnist, author, and self-described pundit called upon for his opinion on multiple topics (not just politics). In **“The Road to Character”** he explores how individuals arrive at morally excellent lives, starting from the observation that people today are far more self-centered than people 60 years ago.

This premise is probably true in general. Millions of people assiduously document their daily trivia, circulate selfies, photograph their meals, bumper-sticker their opinions, and star in their Facebook pages. Brooks’s prescription for transcending what he calls the culture of the Big Me, requires self-sacrifice and humility on a major scale. He sees human nature as inherently flawed. Only unrelenting struggle can overcome our drive toward selfishness, shallow values and greed.

This emphasis on fierce battle against the sinful self sounds a lot like That Old Time Religion. Our Puritan forefathers would feel at home in these arguments. However, there are other, less militant, ways of looking at building character. One more gentle metaphor, for example, is the self as gardener who encourages some personality traits to grow while weeding out undesirable tendencies. Brooks would find this mildness ineffective.

He illustrates his argument on the need for sternness, with the lives of people whom he feels demonstrate moral excellence--people like Dorothy Day, Dwight David Eisenhower, St. Augustine and Samuel Johnson. The personalities that Brooks has chosen as examples are often self-controlled to the point of coldness, judgmental or obsessive. They are not people who would be pleasant to spend time with.

Along the way, Brooks dismisses those who volunteer to do community work as “do-gooders” who are really only self-serving. I do not know in what circles he moves, but have never found this to be true. In fact, I think it’s a very odd perspective.

My recommendation? Brooks is an interesting and thoughtful writer, even when you don’t agree with him. Those who habitually focus on the dark side of human nature or think of the inner life as a battleground, will find the “The Road to Character” a reaffirming tonic.

If you somehow missed getting the word, **Lee Child** has a new Jack Reacher thriller out, **“Personal.”** Engrossing as always, the novel has the usual number of savage beatings and heads-exploded-by-gunshots. As well as a couple of attractive, competent, female companions. A new twist is the actual giant with whom Reacher must tangle--will this be the one time our hero cannot triumph? The plot initially looks to be political, but as the saying goes, the political is personal and vice-versa.

Irish novelist **Tana French** also has a new bestseller: **“The Secret Place.”** French’s detective novels should probably be shelved with mainstream fiction, because the joy of them is less in the whodunit and more in the characters and the writing itself. The setting is a boarding school for teenaged girls in Dublin.

French has the psychology, dialogue and emotional landscape of the adolescent down pat. It’s all so evocative that memories of your own insecure teen years may come flooding back with a shudder.

A little tightening up and slimming down wouldn't have hurt this long novel, but no publishing house wants to edit (and possibly irritate?) their winning writers. And anyway, even when she goes on too long, French is one of the best.

**Jan Karon** has a new addition to her long series of novels about life in small town Southern U.S.A. "**Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good**" starts out slowly, mostly because Karon has to re-introduce characters from previous books, for those readers who may be new to them. But eventually central character Father Tim Kavanagh begins his slow progress toward not only accepting his retirement from active Episcopal priesthood, but making an interesting and useful new life for himself.

The Father Tim books are centered on Christian relationships, prayer and celebrations. Although there appears to be one atheist (a mean-spirited college professor who bullies his wife) and one Jewish man (a jovial sort who makes Jewish jokes and sprinkles his conversation with the occasional Yiddish word), in the North Carolina town of Mitford, everybody else is either Baptist or Episcopalian.

The Karon novels are a fictional escape from our troubled real world. In Mitford, a kindly homily can turn a juvenile delinquent into a model citizen. What happens in the village is the gentle, unsurprising progression of birth, marriage, aging, Thanksgiving dinners, town politics, gossip, and the occasional crisis brought on by a misfit or malcontent. This gentleness sometimes is true of small towns, where bad behavior cannot hide behind anonymity and where people get along because they depend upon one another.

Finally, for something completely different, try "**The Museum of Extraordinary Things**" by **Alice Hoffman**, whose novels usually have a lightly magical bent to them. Hoffman is not afraid to place women with witchlike powers, or selkies from the sea, in a realistic, mundane setting. In fact, their interaction with the normal is usually the crux of the plot.

In "Extraordinary Things," the setting is New York City around the time of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. The heroine is the daughter of the proprietor of a freak show, with human exhibits like a sword-swallower, the Wolfman and the Butterfly Girl. Coralie herself is a freak of sorts, having webbing between her fingers. She needs to free herself from her tyrannical father and find love with a good man. How this comes about is the focus of the tale.

**Laura Lippman** sets her detective novels in Baltimore, Maryland, where I grew up. There is a peculiar pleasure to reading a book that features neighborhoods and streets that you remember and can picture. Lippman's reputation, however, depends upon her writing, her inventive plots and well-developed characters. Usually the stories center around private detective Tess Monaghan, a quirky half-Jewish, half-Irish, fiercely independent young woman.

The main character in **After I'm Gone** is male: Sandy Sanchez, an ex-cop-detective working old cold cases in his retirement. He comes upon a mystery involving a man who ran to Canada to escape the law, leaving behind his wife and children, and his (later murdered) mistress. The heart of this story is not so much whodunnit as how the families have coped--or not coped-- in the years since their husband/father/lover disappeared.

For the toddler set, we've purchased **The Pigeon Needs a Bath** by **Mo Willems**. Willems is a prolific writer and illustrator who is deservedly popular. Both story and pictures are simple but humorous. The pigeon, of course, does not want to take a bath, and comes up with some very inventive excuses. There are other books in Willem's pigeon series, like *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*, which you can order through the library system.

**Gabrielle Zevin's "The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry"** is a well-written novel about starting over, finding friends and love in unlikely places, and about the joy of reading. A.J. Fikry, the recently widowed owner of a bookstore, in his 30s, is rude, opinionated and too fond of the oblivion alcohol can offer. His bookstore is barely viable and stocks only books that he personally likes.

I'm not going to give away the plot, just say that "Storied Life" traces the turn of his life from devastating loss to caring, companionship and happiness. Along the way, every character talks passionately about books. Some even write books.

Although Zevin clearly finds redemption and love to be real possibilities, this is not a saccharine, sentimental read. Bittersweet, maybe--like life.

Hugely successful **Arianna Huffington**, co-founder of the "Huffington Post," wants us all to turn off our electronic devices, get off the overwork treadmill and relax. Many will snort, "Well, she can afford to."

The advice she has, however, is earnest and well packaged, if nothing new. Take care of your health, consider meditating, be generous, take time for gratitude and fun, among other things.

Huffington is writing for those 30-and-40-somethings who use smart phones like umbilical cords, spend hours on social media, and take no holidays from their drive toward worldly success. She does not claim that her prescription is new, quoting folks like Thoreau and Marcus Aurelius. For up-to-date scientific validation, she also offers extensive statistics and studies.

There's a little too much self-congratulation about the savvy things she's done to bring about change (for herself and others), but "**Thrive**" is a useful, well-documented reminder that life is precious; let's not waste it.

**Donna Leon's** newest in her series about Venetian detective Commissario Guido Brunetti is just as good as all the others. It's wonderful when an author can keep producing literate, interesting novels that don't recycle old themes and plots.

"**By its Cover**" focuses on the rare book world, specifically the growing problem of theft from libraries. There is eventually a murder, of course, and along the way, a lot of talk about the dismaying state of affairs in today's Italy. Guido and his friends lament the ever-presence of bribery, corruption, favoritism, class privilege and nepotism.

Recently I read an account of an Italian who came to the U.S. for an extended stay and needed a telephone installed. He put in a request at the local phone company, and in a few

days, without his pulling strings or paying bribes, someone just came to the house and hooked it up. He was amazed. Guido would have been too.

**Sue Monk Kidd's** first novel, "The Secret Life of Bees," had lots of fans and good reviews. Her second, "The Mermaid's Chair," broke no new ground. But her latest book, "**The Invention of Wings**", has got everything: suspense, suffering, cruelty, joy, love, creativity, betrayal, secret plots. No car chases, but then, the setting is the early 19th century American South, Charleston, South Carolina.

Kidd has written a thoroughly researched novel based on the life of Sarah Grimke, abolitionist and feminist. An appendix charts the places where the novelist departed from historical fact or supplemented it. One addition is the fully imagined slave, Handful, given to Sarah as a gift on her 11th birthday. (The historical Grimke did receive such a gift, but the slave died early on.)

The novel alternates chapters between the viewpoints of Sarah and Handful, a device that works well to make both characters come alive. Their relationship is not unrealistically sweet, but fittingly complicated, real affection mixed with resentment and guilt, and hampered by the lack of understanding of each other's starkly different lives.

It's a riveting read, and a fine dramatization of what slave-owning Southerners euphemistically called their "peculiar institution."

**"The Wives of Los Alamos" by Tarashea Nesbit** There seems to be a small spate of books detailing the lives of the wives of famous or important men. This one is about those families who gave up normal "outside" life to retreat to a New Mexican desert military reservation where their men worked on developing the atomic bomb.

Nesbit has written a novel, not a history, but she has done her research. The women were not told where they were going, just to pack for a desert climate. Many of them never knew exactly what their husbands were doing in the lab (although they certainly had guesses). Conditions in the military housing were not comfortable: water as well as food was rationed, houses were small, dust was everywhere. No one could leave the area without permission, which was not often granted, even to visit parents. Mail was censored.

On the plus side, many wives learned to ride horses, rode out on the trails, and developed a real love for desert landscape and Native American culture.

The narrative voice is collective. "We smiled and took off our gloves." "Some of us shivered, some of us got paranoid..." This takes getting used to, and the impersonality of the device distances the reader from the story. Moreover, trying to cover every woman's experience can result in banality. Some men were harsh disciplinarians with their children; some were not. Some women treated the Indian maids poorly; others did not. Well, duh.

However, this is an interesting chapter in the history of World War II. Everybody learns in school about the Manhattan Project. This book expands the human dimension of those involved, and is a reminder that the scientists and physicists did not inhabit Los Alamos alone.

**“The Rosie Project”** by Australian writer **Graeme Simsion** is one of the funniest books I’ve read in a long time. A 39-year-old man with Asperger’s syndrome--a brilliant scientist whose specialty is genetics and whose social skills are abysmal--decides to find a wife. To his eminently logical mind, a questionnaire is the best way quickly to weed out incompatible women, so he creates one: 16 pages, double-sided.

Asperger’s syndrome is on the autism spectrum, and is characterized in varying degrees by lack of empathy, dislike of being touched, a need for unvarying routine, an impressive memory, and immensely logical thought processes in which humor, figurative speech and ambiguity have no place.

Simsion avoids the political incorrectness of making his “challenged” main character the butt of the joke. Don Tillman’s attempts at fitting in and his thinking processes are hilarious, but the reader really likes this guy and wants him to succeed. The plot of the novel (already optioned for a movie, by the way) is how our hero figures out the social cues and gets not only the woman he needs, but also a life more successfully interacting with other people. It’s satisfying that he accomplishes all this by using the intelligence that Asperger’s has given him.

A little girl grew up in “the projects” in the Bronx in the 1950s and 60s. Addicts shot up in the stairwells of her building. Although both parents worked, their jobs were low-paying. The family was Puerto Rican, and English was not spoken in the home. Her father was an alcoholic, and her mother emotionally distant.

At the age of nine, she was diagnosed with diabetes, at the time a disease that usually led to disability and/or early death. Because her parents were not always able to give her the shots of insulin that kept her alive, she learned (at nine) to inject herself. What future did this child have?

In 2009, **Sonia Sotomayor** was appointed Justice of the United States Supreme Court. **“My Beloved World”** is her memoir of the journey from childhood to the court. This is not a work of paying back grudges, as autobiographies often are. Sotomayor mentions being called “spic” and being unwelcome in some homes, but does not dwell upon it. She is generous with thanks for those who mentored her or gave her boosts along the way.

She got to college (Princeton, from which she graduated summa cum laude) because of affirmative action, a policy then just beginning to be implemented. For years Sotomayor was told by political conservatives that she did not deserve her accomplishments, had in fact stolen them from others more deserving.

Her own intelligence, fierce determination, perseverance and unrelenting hard work show clearly here. Anyone interested in the law also will appreciate the discussions about what justice is, and how it can be achieved in a complicated world.