

Friends of the Valley Center Library

Friends Express Book Reviews

It is impossible to talk about **Karen Fowler's "We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves"** without spoiling the surprises that underlie the plot. So I will just say that this novel is about siblings, love and attachment, betrayal and healing from betrayal, the ethics of science, and psychology. That all sounds a bit weighty, which the book is not. It's basically about what constitutes a family. And it's one of the best books published this year.

"Allegiant" by Veronica Roth is the third in a trilogy of novels for young adults. If you have not read the preceding two books--"Divergent" and "Insurgent"--this concluding volume will make little sense. So read the other two first. Well written young adult books may often be enjoyed by readers over 35, and Roth's dystopian series is one of these. The premise is that of an isolated society split into factions distinguished by strong personality traits (peacefulness, aggression, selflessness, rationality), and youngsters get to choose into which faction they will go. Divergent characters are those who test out as strong in multiple characteristics, and so will fit in no one faction easily. The plot moves along quickly, with lots of conflict and scariness; characters grow and develop; there's a love interest; and the underlying ethical issues are worth thinking about. As with "The Hunger Games," the first book in the trio ("Divergent") is the best, but by the time you've finished it, you are invested in the story and will want to go on to read the other two. Roth is a very young (25 years old) writer, but she has packed complexity and twistiness into her plot and characters. Like an onion, one layer of reality peels back to reveal another truth... and then another... and another.

Asked whether he ever read novels, the English philosopher Gilbert Ryle replied, "Yes, all six, every year." He was referring to Jane Austen's novels, and his belief in their preeminence is not unusual. Centuries after her death, Austen still has worshipful fans, and a modern author who pilfers her materials is at risk of outrage.

However, **Jo Baker's "Longbourn"** is an exception. Based upon Austen's "Pride and Prejudice," the novel explores the lives of the servants whose hard, unceasing, barely compensated labor keeps the Bennett family clothed, well-fed and comfortable. Each chapter in "Longbourn" is headed by a quote from "Pride and Prejudice," reflecting some development in the plot. The chapter then shows the (fictional) downstairs characters adjusting to new demands. Remember that this is before bathrooms, central heating, modern kitchens and laundries. Mr. Collins's long stay, for instance, requires extra hauling of (full and smelly) chamber pots and bathwater up and down stairs. Another fire to keep going, another grate to clean, bed to make, clothes to launder, shoes to clean and shine. Children like Polly in "Longbourn" went into service very young, often before the age of ten, and they were expected to do their share, rising before dawn and falling into bed after the upstairs family retired, with luck before midnight.

I will certainly read the Jane Austen novels again (although not all six, every year), but after “Longbourn,” I will read them from a slightly different perspective.

Fans of **Alexander McCall Smith’s** “No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency” series will rejoice: a new novel is out! In **“The Minor Adjustment Beauty Salon,”** our favorite characters have problems to work on. Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni is dismayed to find out that he is not a modern husband. Charlie, of all people, discovers an affinity for babies. Mma Makutsi has interesting news and is talking to her shoes again. Phuti Radiphuti shows unexpected courage and guile. And there are two troublesome cases to puzzle Precious Ramotswe, one involving the beauty salon of the title.

This is the fourteenth novel featuring Mma Ramotswe and her beloved Botswana. One wonders how McCall Smith manages to keep the stories fresh. Like the others, “Beauty Salon” offers some moral philosophy, some character development, a good plot, and considerable easy humor.

In interviews, **Reza Aslan** is articulate, well-informed and persuasive. However, fundamentalist Christians may find his conclusion, if not his scholarship, suspect in **“Zealot: the Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth.”** So I recommend this non-fiction book mainly to those who view the Bible as an historical document as well as a religious one, and to those who are interested in seeing Jesus in the setting of his own historical period and place. This would be Jerusalem and its environs during the Roman occupation, specifically during the first three decades of the Common Era.

The “Zealots” of the title were Jewish men fiercely opposed both to the rulers from Rome and to the local men chosen to oversee their government. Zealots waged continuous guerilla warfare on behalf of the cause of Jewish autonomy. Aslan sees Jesus as a member of this group.

The book reads like a good story and a reasonable discussion, not like an academic thesis. Aslan’s footnotes are 63 pages long, but they are grouped at the end of the book, so you can skip them if you like.

Donna Tartt takes a decade to write a novel. **“The Goldfinch”** is her third. (The other two are worth looking up, if you haven’t read them.)The bird in question is actually a painting, stolen almost accidentally by a 13-year-old boy from a New York museum under traumatic conditions. Theo, the boy-then-man who narrates this story, stumbles through the following years in a sort of walking-wounded state, shunted here and there, making wrong choices, falling into bad trouble, getting pulled free of it.

The cast of characters surrounding him is unforgettable: including the stately Mrs. Barbour, ethereal Pippa, steady Hobie, Theo’s devious dad, and charismatic Boris. Some critics have called “The Goldfinch” Dickensian. It is beautifully written, complex, compelling and bursting with life. Read it and find out what happens to Theo and his Goldfinch.