

books '14
Book Talk
AMPA Lunch
October 29, 2014



Sandy Mack



The Signature of All Things

Elizabeth Gilbert

Fiction

Born in 1800, Alma Whittaker is the daughter of one of the wealthiest men in Philadelphia who made his fortune in medicinal plants. An unattractive child, she learns from her father and becomes a botanical expert as well, immersing herself in the natural world, particularly the ecosystem of mosses, but at what expense? It is a fascinating look at a family spanning the Enlightenment to the Industrial Revolution.

The Valley of Amazement

Amy Tan

Fiction

It is 1905 and seven year old Violet is the daughter of Lulu, the American owner of the Hidden Jade Path, a successful courtesan house in the International Settlement in Shanghai, China. In 1912, she will learn that her father is Chinese and that she has a brother who resides in San Francisco. Her life will take a dramatic turn.

Blood and Beauty

Sarah Dunant

Fiction

In the late 1400s, Spanish born Rodrigo Borgia is elected Pope—and moves his four illegitimate children and his young mistress into the Vatican. Rome will never be the same. His hunger for power will bring scandal and shame to Rome as he schemes to place each child in a marriage designed to strengthen his stronghold on power.

The Light in the Ruins

Chris Bohjalian

Fiction

When the second woman of the Rosati family, an aristocratic Tuscan family, is murdered, police think they may have a serial killer at work. The investigation leads them to look at the Nazi invasion of Italy and the time when Germans arrived at the Rosati estate during the war.

Unbroken

Laura Hillenbrand

Non-Fiction

The riveting story of Louis Zamperini who ran the fastest mile in track of any high school student and who went to the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin in the 5000 meter race, placing 8th. He runs track for USC, sets records, and when the '40 games are cancelled, joins the Army Air Corps. When his plane crashes he and two others spend 46 days on a raft in shark infested waters, only to be captured by the Japanese. After more than two horrific years as a POW, he is free, left to deal with the ravaging aftereffects of the war. Despite all odds, Louis triumphs.



Carl Silva



A Constellation of Vital Phenomena

Anthony Marra

Fiction

At once heart-breaking and beautiful, this novel explores the life of five characters over the course of five days—with many dips back in time to round out the story—struggling with the deceit and devastation of the Chechen war. Eight-year old Havaa is the center of this story surrounded by adults whose lives are changed both from within and without while navigating through a war where acts of love can look like acts of violence. Marra's stunning prose is both difficult to read (war is not kind) and at other times transcendent, reflecting the power of the human spirit in the bleakest of times.

The Goldfinch

Donna Tartt

Fiction

This big luscious find-your-favorite-couch-to-read novel feels like four novellas gracefully woven together about a work of art, a young boy, his best friend, and a cast of characters all involved in a remarkably journey. Tartt has a gift for creating scenes cinematic in scope (what network/studio will dare take this novel on?). At its heart is Theo Decker, a boy who became a man, growing up after losing his mother under circumstances that carry him into the world of antiques, the world of the very rich, and into in the world of his soon to be best friend, Boris. There are few friendships endearing as Theo and Boris, whose escapades take them to Vegas and into the European underworld of stolen art. Tart's gift for story telling is captivating.

We are All Completely Beside Ourselves

Karen Joy Fowler

Fiction

Best not read anything about this book and just dive right in. You need something? Ok, Rosemary, the narrator, tells us the story about her family and her time at U.C. Davis. Her droll sense of humor captures college life, but what is revealed is the most interesting story about her sister—a sister who is absent from the family. Why? Well, best you read to find out.

Life after Life
Kate Atkinson
Fiction

Atkinson takes a break from Jackson Brodie series to bring us into the world of Ursula Todd. What begins as a story of Ursula being raised in England turns into a rather time bending novel as we learn of her one gift—she cannot die or at least each time she does...well, her life is reset, traveling through multiple events from different perspectives. As Ursula lives through WWII (multiple times), this idea will take on greater significance, producing a beautiful novel that asks what could we do if we could begin anew?

Letter of Note: An Eclectic Collection of Correspondence Deserving Wider Attention
Shaun Usher (Compiler)
Non-Fiction

There was a time when we wrote letters. Yes, pen in hand or paper in type writer, we let the ink flow or letters clack, producing notes placed in envelopes that were carried to big blue metal containers. From there, our letters were magically transported to our friends. So what if someone dove back into letters of yore and compiled them into a beautiful book, sharing history, humor, and moments of poignancy? Well, you would have this remarkable collection of correspondences. Please buy the book. To see the actual letter beautifully replicated makes you want to fetch a pen a write note.