

Book Reviews: Summer reading roundup

by Arthur Salm

Summertime: Set your SPF at 30, your beach towel at McMansion and your reading at ... heavy. Yes, it's the 2007 edition of our Summer Reading Roundup, in which we suggest that, since you've got the time, serious books should be considered in season.

SUMMER READING - The weighty books of our summer reading roundup are just perfect. CNS Illustration. Disagree? Fine. Walk into a bookstore, take aim at the out-front displays and shoot off a scatter-gun; 90 percent of the pellets will penetrate fluff. Cart an armful of the wounded to the counter, disengage your brain and don't let James Patterson hit you on the way out.

We'll start with nonfiction - specifically, to scare off the lightweight riffraff and the faint of biceps, "Reclaiming History: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy" (Norton, 1,612 pages, \$50). Such a tome would seem to be for conspiracy geeks only, were it not written by Vincent Bugliosi ("Helter Skelter"), who knows how to construct airtight paragraphs as well as cases. The above-mentioned geeks will not be pleased with Bugliosi's conclusions - but then, maybe Bugliosi's in on it ...

Peter Irons taught constitutional law at University of California San Diego for more than 20 years; his books include "Justice at War" and "Jim Crow's Children." In "God on Trial: Dispatches From America's Religious Battlefields" (Viking, 362 pages, \$27), he looks at, among other contentious cases, recent set-tos over displays of the Ten Commandments in courthouses, the recitation of "under God" in classroom pledges of allegiance to the flag, and a familiar-sounding 43-foot cross on public property.

The problem with thinking about the beginning of the universe is that it inevitably leads you to ask what there was before that, which, given enough time, will drive you crazy, or, worse, to reading James Patterson novels. Well, suggest Paul J. Steinhardt and Neil Turok in "Endless Universe: Beyond the Big Bang," (Doubleday, 285 pages, \$25), maybe the Big Bang wasn't the start of everything; maybe it was the end of something else - another universe. One without, perhaps, James Patterson novels.

While we're on the subject of things we kind of think we understand a little of until we try to explain it to someone else and then we realize we don't but we like reading about them anyway, take a look at "Faust in

Copenhagen: A Struggle for the Soul of Physics" (Viking, 310 pages, \$24). Gino Segre, a professor of physics and astronomy at the University of Pennsylvania, tells of an amazing gathering of physicists in Copenhagen in 1932, the year of the discovery of the neutron and antimatter. It was also the year before Hitler took power in Germany; not only physics, but physicists themselves were undergoing rather dramatic transformations.

Every generation - and every subject - deserves a new wave of biographers to reinterpret lives and histories through contemporary sensibilities. Jean Edward Smith opens "FDR" (Random House, 880 pages, \$35) with the line "The Roosevelts were an old but relatively inconspicuous New York family." That was to change, so much so that Smith could begin his preface by stating that "Three presidents dominate American history: George Washington, who founded the country; Abraham Lincoln, who preserved it; and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who rescued it from economic collapse and led it to victory in the greatest war of all time."

One of the great debates around these parts concerns The Fence. But if we erect a fence to keep others out, are we in a sense fencing ourselves in? The problem is similar, but different, then similar again in Israel, as Sylvain Cypel explores in "Walled: Israeli Society at an Impasse" (Other Press, 574 pages, \$18). It's the Wall as metaphor: Israelis blinded by security obsessions, Palestinians bent on the destruction of the state of Israel, both sides enmeshed in a ceaseless cycle of violence fueled, in part at least, by self-deception and selective memory. Cypel concludes that Israel must leave the occupied territories immediately: "Even if Israeli society today is walled into its denial of the other, deep down it senses that the present situation is not tenable in the long run."

There's no reason why we couldn't have a heavy-duty summer roundup without a coffee-table-type book, but that would mean leaving out William Burt's "Marshes" (Yale University Press, 180 pages, \$35). With fauna, mostly birds - who can resist a roseate spoonbill? - and one very wet muskrat.

"All the best to you! Do not work too much! Take time enough to enjoy the beauty of this world. I'm afraid the hereafter will be rather boring." This is the conclusion of a short note Bernd Heinrich's ("The Mind of the Raven") father wrote the author in 1979, taken from the younger Heinrich's naturalist memoir, the incandescent "The Snoring Bird: My Family's Journey Through a Century of Biology" (Ecco, 461 pages, \$30). As for fiction ... this one's fiction. Sort of:

"We entered the train and almost at once it started to move." The short, planed, declarative sentences in Zdena Berger's "Tell Me Another Morning" (Paris Press, 272 pages, \$16) drive home the horror: Subtitled "An

Autobiographical Novel," it's a rediscovered masterpiece of Holocaust literature, first published in 1961 and now lovingly, and vigorously, resurrected. Anne Frank died in the camps, of typhus; Zdena Berger, a Czech girl of about the same age, somehow survived. And, with "Tell Me Another Morning," triumphed. Read, breathe, recover, then place on the shelf with Frank, Levi, Wiesel.

Lost and dying in the Gulag, the great Russian author Isaac Babel is forbidden to write. But of course he does - he's Isaac Babel, after all - and his manuscripts are confiscated and marked for destruction. But the young man in charge of them may have other ideas in "The Archivist's Story" (The Dial Press, 239 pages, \$23), a debut novel by Travis Holland.

More family secrets, and another haunting debut novel, In "Seizure" (Norton, 214 pages, \$24), by Erica Wagner, a young woman, raised by a loving father, learns that the mother she always thought had died many years ago, has, in fact, died only recently - and left her a stone cottage. Where a young man is waiting. Not for her, specifically, but ...

They live by Tokyo night: A collection of lost and wandering souls pachinko off one another between the hours of midnight and 6 a.m. in the short, bizarre, mesmerizing novel "After Dark" (Knopf, 191 pages, \$23) by Japanese master Haruki Murakami ("The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle" and "Kafka on the Shore").

In "Peony in Love" (Random House, \$24), Lisa See, best known for her mysteries set in China, goes back to the 17th century to tell a tale set around "The Peony Pavilion," an opera - parts of which were banned for centuries - said to have an extraordinary effect on young women.

Sherman Alexie! William Kittridge! Elmore Leonard! Melanie Rae Thon! Luis Alberto Urrea! All are included in Marc Jaffe's short-story collection "Best Stories of the American West" (Forge, 316 pages, \$26). Before he got into writing mysteries (and other stuff; see above), Leonard was a virtuoso of the Western - "Three-Ten to Yuma," just for example. The second-best thing about this "Best" collection? Its subtitle: "Volume I."

Finally, Debra Lee Baldwin's "Designing With Succulents" (Timber Press, 255 pages, \$30). No more excuses for drenching that grass, that ... that lawn, with precious water. (Disclosing fully: our garden is included in two of the pictures. Which does not make us morally superior. Not very, anyway.)

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- Arthur Salm, Copley News Service

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