

BOOK CHATS

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COOL READS FOR *HOT* DAYS

BY JENNIFER, ST. PAUL PUBLIC LIBRARY, CENTRAL LIBRARY

A little romance, a little chicklit, and all fun . . .

Balogh, Mary. *Simply Perfect*. (New York: Delacorte Press, 2008) If you like regencies with good chewy plots, interesting characters, wit, humor, and a dash of proto-feminism, then Mary Balogh is the writer for you. This novel features 35-year-old Claudia Martin, head of Miss Martin's School for Girls in Bath, and Joseph, Marquess of Attingsborough, the unenthusiastic heir to a dukedom who's constantly reminded of his legacy. This novel is 4th in a quartet though it can easily be read alone.

Barrett, Jo. *This Is How It Happened: Not a Love Story*. (New York: Avon A, 2007) Brownies after a breakup are good idea. Arsenic-laced brownies for your ex after a breakup only seem like a good idea. And no matter what, it's *never* a good idea to hire a hitman to take out an ex, no matter how obnoxious he is.

Favorite, Eileen. *The Heroines: A Novel*. (New York: Scribner, 2008) Thirteen-year-old Penny Entwistle and her mother Anne Marie run a quaint little B&B called the Homestead which is full of cozy eiderdowns, tea, and home comforts. It's also the preferred stopover for heroines from any number of famous novels as the plots of their famous home novels start to unravel emotionally. Madame Bovary languishes for love in the backyard hammock, while Scarlet O'Hara finds no comfort from her goose-down comforter. Penny's adolescent angst eventually collides with Anne-Marie's comfort but no counseling policy for her guests (to avoid changing their plots) and havoc ensues.

Fowler, Karen Joy. *Wit's End*. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2008) Sly humor pervades this mysterious book that explores what happens when characters become more real to the readers than to the writer who created them. Between reader fetishism and doll-house bourn writer's block lies Wit's End, a fabulous seaside Victorian house in Santa Cruz, CA, home to mystery writer Addison Early and now her god-daughter Rima Lanisell.

Some other femme fiction titles to kick back with:

Berg, Elizabeth. *The Day I Ate Whatever I Wanted: And Other Small Acts of Liberation* (2008); Cabot, Meg. *Big Boned* (2007); Fforde, Katie. *Practically Perfect* (2008); Macomber, Debbie. *Twenty Wishes* (2008); and Quick, Amanda. *The Third Circle* (2008).

Small-town mysteries

Albert, Susan Wittig. *Nightshade*. (New York: Berkley Prime Crime, 2008) Entry #16 in this series of unsentimental cozies find former attorney and now herbalist China Bayles of Pecan Springs, Texas, reluctantly investigating the death of her chilly and mysterious father with her recently discovered half-brother Miles. As always, the novel is rich with herbal lore and recipes. The series benefits from being read in order, but it's not required; you can get started with *Thyme of Death* (1992).

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Graves, Sarah. *The Book of Old Houses: A Home Repair Is Homicide Mystery.* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2007) Jacobia “Jake” Tiptree escaped from Manhattan with her addicted adolescent son leaving behind her egotistical surgeon ex-husband and money management clients with legally dubious personal and professional lives. She’s settled into life in Downeast Maine and the cycle of incessant repairs innate to her ownership of a Federalist-era house. Jake finds an old book hidden the walls of her house in the course of the repairs and murder and mysteries ensue.

Hart, Carolyn G. *Death Walked In: A Death on Demand Mystery.* (New York: William Morrow, 2008) Annie Darling, proprietor of Death on Demand—the best mystery bookstore in South Carolina—and her husband Max Darling (Joe Hardy all grown up) are restoring an antebellum house with all the expected complications and a few unexpected ones, including rare gold coins, family secrets, and, of course, a murder.

Lourey, Jess. *Knee High by the Fourth of July.* (Woodbury, MN: Midnight Ink, 2007) Our heroine Mira (small-town Minnesota’s answer to Stephanie Plum) has developed a quirky, if unrequited, crush on Chief Wenonga the handsome 23-foot-tall fiberglass statue that watches over Battle Lake. When the statue disappears, murder soon follows. The third entry in the Month-by-Month mystery series, which started with *May Day* (2006) and *June Bug* (2007).

Swanson, Denise. *Murder of a Chocolate-Covered Cherry.* (New York: Signet, 2008) Skye Dennison, school counselor and Scumble River denizen, finds herself in the thick of it again when Grandma’s Soup-to-Nuts Cooking Challenge comes to town and is plagued by sabotage. Bullied into entering by her mother, Skye tries to master the basics of cooking while solving a chocolate-covered murder.

For mysteries of other sorts check out:

Barr, Nevada. *Winter Study* (2008: Park ranger Anna Pigeon revisiting Isle Royale National Park); Bass, Jefferson. *The Devil’s Bones* (2007); Bowen, Rhys. *Her Royal Spyness* (2007); Box, C. J. *Blood Trail* (2008: This series really benefits from being read in order, and you can get started with his first one, *Open Season.*); Brown, Rita Mae. *The Purrfect Murder* (2008); George, Elizabeth. *Careless in Red* (2008); Hall, Parnell. *The Sudoku Puzzle Murders* (2008); Joss, Morag. *The Night Following* (2008); and Tremayne, Peter. *A Prayer for the Damned: A Mystery of Ancient Ireland* (2006).

Thrillers

Baldacci, David. *The Whole Truth.* (New York: Grand Central Pub., 2008) “I am dead. I was murdered.” These words trigger an escalating series of events designed to take the world to the edge of war—and quite possibly beyond if the aptly named Ares Corporation has its way. The only people standing in the way of a “perception managed” path to war are journalist Katie James and Shaw, a reluctant agent for an unknown international intelligence agency. A political thriller where all the world’s a stage for post-modern media manipulation, false wars, and a billionaire weapons manufacturer.

Johansen, Iris. *Quicksand.* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008) This latest thriller featuring Eve Duncan finds her at odds both with her police detective boyfriend Joe Quinn and Luis Montalvo, a Colombian rebel and arms dealer who wants Eve for his own, as she pursues a child killer who may have taken her daughter years ago. But the killer enjoys the chase and lures Eve ever deeper into a terrifying swamp that may finally hold the answer to what happened to her daughter so long ago.

Kellerman, Jonathan. *Compulsion: An Alex Delaware Novel.* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008) Psychologist Alex Delaware and LAPD detective Milo Sturgis are once again on the case in this aptly titled thriller. An elusive and shapeshifting murderer commits a series of brutal murders with no obvious motives and whose victims have no apparent ties to each other. The only commonality? The killer’s penchant for luxury vehicles and his ability to disappear into thin air. This book is likely to keep you up reading all night in a race to the ending.

MacLeod, Ken. *The Execution Channel*. (New York: Tor, 2007) A political thriller with an SF twist, this novel takes place in a possible near future where terrorist attacks in the U.S. were followed by a world-wide flu pandemic, a war with Iran, and world-wide terrorist attacks of increasing ferocity. U.K. citizen James Travis, a spy for France, and his daughter Roisin, a peace activist, become terrorism suspects after being caught with suspicious photos. In the midst of all of this is an illegal media outlet, the Execution Channel, which broadcasts sanctioned and unsanctioned executions around the clock.

Stabenow, Dana. *Prepared for Rage*. (New York: St. Martins Minotaur, 2008) Known for her mysteries, Stabenow has decided to try her hand at thrillers. This thriller involving the Coast Guard, NASA, and a distinctly non-religious Pakistani terrorist with a grudge against the West defies expectations and stereotypes. A complex plot and equally complicated characters make for a compulsively engaging read.

Some other thrillers to consider:

Barclay, Linwood. *No Time for Goodbye* (2007); Bear, Greg. *Quantico* (2007); Benedek, Emily. *Red Sea* (2007); Bernhardt, William. *Capitol Conspiracy* (2008); Connolly, John. *The Unquiet* (2007—Check out earlier titles too: *Every Dead Thing*, *The Killing Kind*, *The Black Angel*); Dekker, Ted. *Adam* (2008); Huston, Charlie. *Six Bad Things* (2005); and Rollins, David. *The Death Trust* (2007).

A Dollop of Fiction

(If you're looking for something meatier to read try one of these titles.)

Alexie, Sherman. *Reservation Blues*. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995) When justifiably presumed dead Blues legend Robert Johnson turns up on a Spokane Indian Reservation, the life of Thomas Builds-the-Fire changes forever. Johnson gives him a magic guitar which is the catalyst for forming Coyote Springs, an “all-Indian Catholic rock band.” Alexie combines magical realism with mordant humor to explore the unlikely intersection of Native American mythology and rock-n-roll. (Now a Book Club in a Bag!)

Barlow, Toby. *Sharp Teeth*. (New York: Harper, 2008) A novel in verse about werewolves in Los Angeles. What's not to love? (And do I hear the faint strains of Warren Zevon somewhere in the background?) This noir-ish free verse is a wink and nod to epic poems of the past while evoking in grittily bleak terms life in post-modern L.A. Among the plotlines: A dogcatcher who falls (unknowingly) in love with a werewolf.

Erdrich, Louise. *The Plague of Doves*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2008) The unsolved murder of a farm family sets the stage for this novel focusing on sin and redemption, murder and vengeance. Set in the small, white town of Pluto, SD, located near an Ojibwe reservation, the stories of the two communities are intertwined in the voices of Evelina Harp, her grandfather Mooshum, and Judge Antone Bazil Coutts. Erdrich's first novel in 3 years and worth the wait.

Knebel, Fletcher. *Seven Days in May*. (New York: Harper & Row [1962]) In this election year, certain classics take on renewed relevance as is the case for this political thriller from the 1960's.

Some other titles to read and ruminate on:

Barker, Nicola. *Darkmans* (2007); Hanif, Mohammed. *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008); Hoffman, Alice. *The Third Angel: A Novel* (2008); Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008); LeGuin, Ursula K. *Lavinia* (2008); Lutz, Lisa. *Curse of the Spellmans* (2008—sequel to *The Spellman Files: A Novel*, 2007); and Russell, Mary Doria. *Dreamers of the Day: A Novel* (2008—author of *The Sparrow*)

Scare Yourself Silly

(Many of these modern-day scares have a goodish bit of humor mixed in, so be prepared for some laughter with your creep-outs.)

Carey, Mike. *The Devil You Know*. (New York: Warner Books, 2007) The life of a freelance exorcist can be fun, especially if said ghostbuster happens to live in London—a city host to many forms of amusement and restless spirits. When what was supposed to be a bread-and-butter, pay-the-bills exorcism takes a nasty turn, our hero Castor finds himself the unfortunate prize in an informal contest to see who—or what—can kill him first.

Martinez, A. Lee. *Gil's All Fright Diner*. (New York: Tor, 2005) Picture H.P. Lovecraft set in a Texas diner with a vampire and a werewolf to save the day. Generally, Martinez sets out to subvert science fiction, fantasy, and horror tropes with great relish, so if you enjoy this one, also check out his others: *In the Company of Ogres* (2006), *A Nameless Witch* (2007), and his most recent novel *The Automatic Detective* (2008).

Moore, Christopher. *A Dirty Job*. (New York: William Morrow, 2006) Charlie, the ultimate Beta male, confronts the birth of his daughter and the death of his wife in the same day, meeting Death (with a capital D) in the process. Suddenly items start glowing red in the thrift shop Charlie runs, people start dying around him in unexpected ways, and a couple of hellhounds turn up to protect his daughter and ruin his furniture. What does all of this mean? Why that Charlie has become Death of course.

Pekearo, Nicholas. *The Wolfman*. (New York: Tor, 2008) So a werewolf walks into a bar . . . well actually a few of them over the course of this novel. If Charles Bukowski had written a story about a Vietnam vet who inherited a family curse, became a werewolf, and used his wolf-y powers to smite wrongdoers with a healthy dose of trash talking and brawling along the way, you'd pretty much have this novel.

Looking for something spooky to read without the laughs? Try these:

Hubbard, Susan. *The Year of Disappearances* (2008); Huston, Charlie. *Half the Blood in Brooklyn* (2007); Huston, Charlie. *Already Dead* (2005)

A Few Things to Make You Laugh, or the Humor Portion of the Program

Ferguson, Craig. *Between the Bridge and the River: A Novel*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006) Surreal, profane, and painfully funny are good adjectives for this first novel. Rooted in the self-acknowledged peculiarities of Scottish life, it takes satirical yet surprisingly poignant aim at religion, the media, pop culture, and anything else that's not nailed down. (And in case you're wondering it is by the late-night talk-show host.)

Laurie, Hugh. *The Gun Seller*. (New York: Soho Press, 1996) Yes, the author is that Mr. Laurie of *House* and *Fry and Laurie* fame. It turns out he can write too. This frothy and frantic spoof of the spy genre finds amiable but unfortunate ex-soldier Thomas Lang snarled up with CIA operatives, arms dealers, and terrorists after refusing an assassination job with some morale umbrage.

Millington, Mil. *Things My Girlfriend and I Have Argued About: A Novel*. (New York: Villard, 2002) Pel's life goes from bluffing his way through a series of impossible arguments with his imperturbable live-in German girlfriend Ursula to something that feels like bad thriller complete with Chinese Mafiosi, when he steps—with the best of intentions—into his missing boss's shoes. A columnist from Great Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, his other titles include: *A Certain Chemistry* (2003) and *Love and Other Near-Death Experiences* (2006).

Pratchett, Terry. *Making Money*: (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) Maybe you met con artist Moist von Lipwig in *Going Postal* where, as punishment, he was putting charge of Ankh-Morpork post office. He returns here successful, stable, and still running the post office. He's also quite literally climbing the walls out of sheer boredom, even breaking into his own office to pass the time. He's offered a position running the Mint, which he turns down—for awhile. Intrigue wins out and he takes over the Mint with all of its deeply peculiar traditions and sets out to transition society from the gold standard in this razor-sharp satire. Can be read as a stand-alone title.