WORLD BOOK NIGHT 2014 eBOOK

an original collection of stories and essays by booksellers, librarians, and authors

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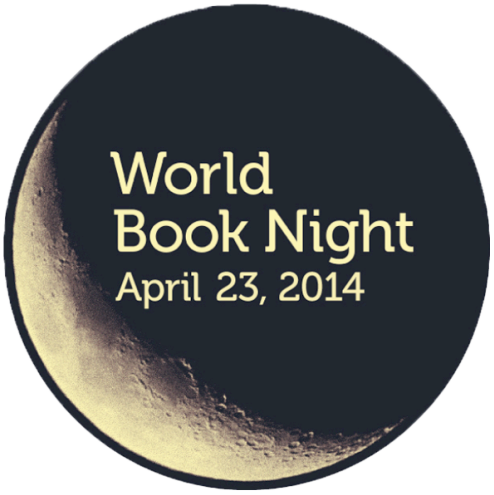

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The World Book Night 2014 ebook:

An Original Collection of Stories and Essays
by Booksellers, Librarians, and Authors

About World Book Night…

World Book Night is an annual celebration dedicated to spreading the love of reading, person to person. Each year on April 23, tens of thousands of people go out across America into their communities and give half a million free World Book Night paperbacks to light and non-readers.

World Book Night is about giving books and encouraging reading by those who don't regularly do so. But it is also about more than that: It's about people, communities, and connections, about reaching out to others and touching lives in the simplest of ways—through the sharing of stories.

World Book Night is a nonprofit organization. We exist because of the support of thousands of book givers, booksellers, librarians, and financial supporters who believe in our mission. Successfully launched in the United Kingdom in 2011, World Book Night was first celebrated in the United States in 2012.

A Thank-You from Team WBN U.S.

Dear reader,

Welcome to the first-ever free, fun, original World Book Night ebook!

This is free to any and all, and we hope you enjoy the variety of short pieces contained herein. Some are fiction, some true, all enjoyable.

Read, enjoy, share with friends, and thank you for your interest in World Book Night, a major nonprofit campaign to get books to those who may not be regular readers, or may not even have ever owned a book in their lives.

Thank you to Livrada and Ingram Content Group for producing and distributing this ebook, and to the people who gave us these pieces for free so you could enjoy them. All the words here are by booksellers, librarians, or authors who have been a big part of World Book Night and of sharing and giving the joy of words.

And next year? The ebook will contain stories and experiences from our givers!

A full explanation of all that we do, photos of our volunteer givers in action, and a list of our sponsors are at our website.

Thank you again!

Carl, Laura, Carolyn, Alia, and Kathi
Team World Book Night U.S.
www.us.worldbooknight.org

A Letter from Livrada…

World Book Night U.S. has taken on the important task of spreading the love of reading, person to person, each year. This year, for the first time, World Book Night is offering a digital book containing a selection of carefully chosen pieces.

You are among the first to read this specially created ebook. Livrada is honored to be World Book Night's digital partner in this inaugural year and humbled to take part in their noble and exciting endeavor.

As a company, we are thrilled to bring our technology and resources to support World Book Night. As a collective of book lovers, it is personally gratifying. Books are central to our own lives, bringing empowerment and inspiration during life transitions, solace in times of grief, escape, entertainment, and the exploration of worlds beyond our imagination.

We strive to meld our passion for technology and books, and hope this ebook brings joy to many people this WBN 2014.

Happy e-reading!

Leonard Chen and the Livrada Team
CEO and Co-Founder
www.livrada.com

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A Note About “El Lector”

Chris Cander is a writer, mother, reader, and one of WBN’s original givers. She first applied to be a giver to help “change lives through literacy.” As part of the national giveaway on April 23, 2012, she chose to hand out her twenty copies of *Peace Like a River* by Leif Enger at a shelter for homeless and runaway teens. This was an experience that touched not just the adolescents but thousands across the country.

Why? Because Chris shared her story in a blog post that went viral, becoming one of the most popular WBN testimonies that year. Her experience broke our hearts and lifted our souls.

Briefly, here’s what happened that day: While at the Covenant House shelter, Chris met Voltaire. After getting his book, Voltaire asked if he could show her his poem, as he had no one he felt he could share it with. It had been his suicide note until he chose life and turned it into something more. Through Chris, Voltaire touched thousands of hearts and reminded us that words can save lives.

This is why we asked Chris to take one of the chapters of her award-winning novel, *11 Stories*, and expand it into a beautiful, mysterious story, “El Lector,” about a Cuban storyteller who he may or may not have known.

Chris will also be one of two authors in the land officially launching this ebook on the evening of April 22 at her local store in Houston, Brazos Bookstore.

— *Laura Peraza, Social Media Manager, World Book Night U.S.*

El Lector

by Chris Cander

Deliveries had come regularly for the elderly man on the seventh floor, the one with the daughter and the Chihuahuas, once a month at least. The boxes were not particularly large, but they were often heavy and they always arrived by way of an international courier from Havana. It became the habit of the building superintendent, Roscoe Jones, to carry the boxes up to Joaquin Rojas.

Thinking of Joaquin, Roscoe closed his eyes. In his imagination he could hear the orotund voice, buried now, reading aloud from *Anna Karenina*. "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." He could smell the moss-burn scent of the Cohiba cigars, Castro's favorite. He saw the dogs lying rapt at the stumps of Joaquin's legs and the bookshelves behind the couch that contained a dictator's stolen cache.

Many years ago, long before he had become a father to Beatriz—the daughter who, decades later, beckoned him from Cuba to Chicago—Joaquin had been a poet. While the world around him grappled with uprisings and urban violence and economic despair, Joaquin withdrew to the sugarcane fields and that neutral, oblique space where he could slip into the language of youth and articulate all his passions and humors and impressions onto the back pages of his school notebooks. He wrote about the daughter of the city's best tailor, who had captured his heart from across their classroom simply by adjusting the strap of her sundress. He wrote about the Caribbean edge of his knowledge of the world, and about what might lie beyond it. He wrote about his fear of waves and his admiration of clouds and his desire for love. Around the time he was ready to enter university, after several years and six notebooks and two insignificant and one important sexual encounter, he ran out of words.

But then he learned to borrow the words of others. (It would be later—much later—before he learned how to steal them.) One might think a lapsed poet would bear

some bitterness toward those whose access to words was still intact, but Joaquin did not. In fact, once he reconciled himself with his disentanglement from verse, he began to truly enjoy reading. He started with Latin writers of the day: Gabriela Mistral, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1945; Alejo Carpentier, a fellow Cubano; Miguel Ángel Asturias, whose novel *Men of Maize* informed him of the threat and delight of modernity. Then he moved on to the world beyond his island border, to the real and imagined lives created by Emile Zola, Miguel de Cervantes, Charles Dickens, Peter Kropotkin (who thrilled and frightened him), Oscar Wilde, Mark Twain. He became enchanted by notables from the Harlem Renaissance, whose skin color reflected his own; Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston were his favorites. And of course there were newspapers and magazines and advertisements and shampoo bottles. Words—those strung magically together by better poets, important authors, even employees of Johnson & Johnson, whose products were still imported into Cuba at that time—became Joaquin's most significant treasures. He would have liked to say possessions, but by then he had been well steeped in the Marxist ideals of Communism, and so he knew he could lay no such claim.

In 1951, Joaquin graduated from the Faculty of Arts and Letters from the University of Havana. He was twenty-one, and he was in love. Ana Albertina Delgado Borrero, the daughter of a prominent cigar factory owner, had claimed him over a heady lunch of mixto and orange soda, and had promised him—with her soft hand cupping his acne-scarred face—a life and children and a particular job at her father's factory.

Ana told her father, Ulises, who wanted no such penniless nobody for his only daughter, "But he is a poet! An educated man with a beautiful soul who understands the heart of the working class, Papa. The very people who work for you. He would be an asset."

In the end, it was up to the employees to choose the person for the position Ana had in mind. So she prevailed upon those she knew, and brought Joaquin to the factory for an audition. Not to become a cigar roller, no; Joaquin was to become their entertainment. He won them over with a dramatic reading from his favorite novel, *Don*

Quixote. He read an episode from chapter eight in which Don Quixote plans to fight against a farm of windmills that he believes to be giants. “Those you see over there,” replied his master, “with their long arms. Some of them have arms well nigh two leagues in length.” Joaquin emphasized the absurdity by swinging his free arm around in an arc. Throughout the reading, he applied different voices to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Quixote’s faithful and illiterate squire, using very convincing Castillian accents. When he finished, the rollers approved him unanimously by banging their chavetas—the curved knives they used to trim the tobacco leaves—against their rolling boards, and he was thusly hired to be El Lector, the reader, the one who sat upon an elevated chair amid the quiet drone of the rollers as they worked the tobacco, with his suit and books and sonorous elocution.

To Joaquin, the arrangement was perfect. Every day, the workers arrived amid the humidity in starched white shirts and hats, which they hung on pegs alongside their numbered seats. Pews, they called them, for they had to pray to God for strength to get through the day, which was long and tedious except for the respite they received while Joaquin read aloud. He was always the favorite among the workers for the intensity of his voice, the complexity of his intonation, his interpretation of the news and international politics, his sympathy with the proletariat—but mostly for the style and drama with which he enacted their chosen works of fiction.

La lectura was a position he would hold for the next thirty-two years, and an identity that he would retain through and beyond a decade of unjust incarceration and an unwilling exile from a country that he loved even more, he would later admit, than he had loved his wife and child.

Joaquin had still had his legs when he’d moved into Roscoe’s building in Chicago to live with his only and estranged daughter, Beatriz. He’d also had had a barreled torso, a pate of white hair, and a communicable smile that Roscoe, who was rarely affected by anyone, had found irresistible—even more so when he learned, gradually, the series of events that would have turned anyone else bitter beyond salvation. Perhaps it was this

trait of Joaquin's that endeared him to Roscoe more than any other, because it was something that Roscoe had never developed for himself. The friendship they developed was woven as densely as a brotherhood. As a conspiracy.

The first package from Cuba had arrived addressed to Señor Joaquin Rojas, El Lector sometime around 2005. Roscoe had carried it up to the seventh floor along with a lunch of grilled cheese and orange sodas, plus some biscuits for the dogs. By this time, it had become their custom to share lunch two or even three days each week while Beatriz was at work. Roscoe could still see the look on Joaquin's face when he'd handed over that first box.

"What's it say?" Roscoe asked, as Joaquin unfolded and read the cream-colored stationery.

"Dice, 'Para el fuerzo de grito.'"

"My Spanish still isn't good enough to know what that means," Roscoe said.

Joaquin narrowed the white caterpillars above his eyes, even as a smile played at the corners of his mouth.

"For the strength of voice."

"Who's it from?" Roscoe took a bite of sandwich. The dogs, still just puppies then, looked up with great expectation.

Joaquin turned the card over then looked again at the front of the package. "I don't know," he said. "There's nothing else but this." He pulled out a copy of *Marianela*, by Benito Pérez Galdós, and leafed through it with his thumb. After a moment, he said in his robust, clear voice, "Do you know this book, Roscoe?"

Roscoe shook his head.

Joaquin took a deep breath, as though to fill the bellows. "It is the story of a blind boy, Pablo, who is enchanted by a young orphan girl named Marianela. She is very ugly, but since he cannot see her, he falls in love with her anyway. She tells him that she is not beautiful, but he thinks she is, because of the strength of her voice." Even while

summarizing, his voice carried the practiced modulation of a performer. The caterpillars went up and he nodded his head, perhaps at some distant memory. Then he looked inside the box again for anything else that might identify the sender. Finding nothing, he shrugged. “In the end,” he said, “with Marianela’s help, Pablo regains his sight. But upon seeing her, he turns and proposes marriage to her cousin Florentina.” He shrugged again and made a breathy tsk-tsk sound. “It’s the way it goes sometimes, no?”

Roscoe had only a vague idea. He had only been in love with one woman, but it was mostly from afar, and it had lasted all his life. And that was something about which he didn’t care to speak.

“I used to read this book en la galera.” Joaquin still spoke a pidgin of Spanish and English. “It was always quiet when I read *Marianela*,” he said. “The workers were very affected by that story. But I don’t know who would send this to me now. I don’t have many friends left in Cuba.”

Yet the books had arrived in that way, by ones or twos, every few months ever since. Each time the DHL courier arrived, Roscoe would sign for the package and hold it until lunchtime, at which point he would prepare a simple meal for them to share, his spirits buoyed by anticipation. Then he would take the lunch and the package to the seventh floor, and after they ate—quickly on delivery days—Joaquin would slowly unwrap the packaging and hold up whatever book was inside.

Always, Joaquin searched each page for some clue as to the identity of the sender or the reason behind it. Only once was there a letter tucked into the pages of a book, but that was much, much later, after the diabetes had claimed much of his strength and both legs below the knee. And until that letter finally arrived toward the end of Joaquin’s life, they were forced to simply wonder.

Joaquin would clear his throat and take a sip of honeyed tea, open the book, and begin to read aloud to Roscoe the way he had to the cigar rollers all those years in the tabaquería. Aside from playing the trumpet in the quiet of his basement apartment, listening to Joaquin’s inflected reading was the closest thing to peace Roscoe had ever known.

“Why did you leave Cuba?”

“That, my friend, is a long story.”

“I’ve been asking for a long time.”

“Indeed you have.”

"How can you expect a man who's warm to understand a man who's cold?” This was from *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, one of the books that had arrived by courier.

Joaquin looked up at Roscoe. “Coming from Cuba, I could never know such cold as I have since coming to Chicago,” he said. “But it was nothing compared to knowing the emptiness of my daughter’s heart.”

Roscoe nodded, knowing nothing of either the warmth of an island or the love of a child. Their friendship hinged on something apart from that.

“Tell me why you left,” Roscoe said, one more of countless times. Finally, after they’d been sharing lunches in the seventh-floor apartment for some fifteen or sixteen years and his daughter Beatriz was approaching the time when her father’s absence from her childhood had mostly been forgiven for his presence in her middle age, Joaquin lit one of his Cohiba cigars and agreed.

Joaquin was a fat child with drooping socks and a thick chin back when he was a student at La Salle boarding school in Santiago, on the plantar coast of the island. The other boys mocked his unathletic gait and his tendency to bend over his verse-filled notebooks. There was a day when an older boy named Marco, driven maybe by a hormonal surge or some misplaced anger, had passed by Joaquin on the green and kicked his notebook out of his hands like a soccer ball.

“¿Qué es eso?” said another boy who had been playing basketball on a court close to Joaquin. His hands flew up with the question. Fidel was his name, which meant “faithful.” Marco refused to back down—they were equal in height and academic

standing, and Marco was heir to the largest coffee plantation in Cuba, not the illegitimate son of a Spanish peasant and a domestic servant, as was Fidel. But Fidel, with his views against the bourgeoisie already strident, threw himself upon Marco until a priest finally ran out onto the lawn to intervene. Caught in the priest's black robes, Fidel tried to kick himself free and as he did, the priest went down in an unwieldy heap. Fidel was expelled immediately and sent to yet another school.

But Joaquin never forgot him.

Several years later, as a lector, Joaquin donned a suit from his father's meager closet. He had no money for books but he had friends, and his friends had books. He borrowed them to read to the rollers, and as he did so, over the months and early years, he absorbed ideas that belonged to minds more elastic than his own. His thoughts began to stretch and sway toward the passions of those other thinkers, and soon he began to slip away again to the sugarcane fields of his imagination.

Ana, his wife, tried to love the space that he left between them. She didn't know that Joaquin had found another woman, and that her name was Liberty.

Sitting on his daughter's sofa with frost filling the windows of the seventh floor, Joaquin sketched with his hands above his head, filling in the details of his history. Roscoe, who had never traveled further than Minnesota when his mother once needed a cardiac specialist, sat with one leg tucked under the other, listening. As Joaquin drew his past with his squat fingers in the smoke-filled air, Roscoe breathed it in and, in his own small way, became enlarged.

It's not a surprise that by the time Castro descended from the mountains to reclaim Cuba from the dictator Batista, Joaquin was in full support of his old protector. When his father-in-law, Ulises, realized what would happen to his cigar factory and tobacco plantation when the revolution absorbed them, he told Ana, Joaquin's wife of only eight years, "Are you going to stay here and stand in a Soviet bread line with that fool, or are you going to come with me to Florida to make a new start? Huh, Ana? Him

or me. Wealth or poverty?" He lowered his head and looked at her above the rims of his glasses. "You have a child now to think about." It took her less time than Joaquin would have imagined to pack up seven-year-old Beatriz and follow her father, who abandoned both his country and his wealth with a tipped-up chin and a handful of tobacco seeds. Joaquin stayed behind, betrothed now to the revolution and to the leader who would later condemn and eventually exile him.

Joaquin scratched the bare head of one of the Chihuahuas. "Would you like to smoke a Cuban?" he said, winking. The lines in his round face were etched deep, like a failed rift where the smile couldn't quite secede from the frown. "There's another one hidden here, next to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. What do you think of that, huh? Whoever is sending these books knows me well."

Joaquin explained to Roscoe that he outgrew Castro's revolution the way a man falls out of love with a woman: gradually, until the boredom or the outright discontent makes itself known, or with a return to a former love or the development of a subsequent one. In Joaquin's case, it was that he missed the breadth and depth of reading—even more than the 300-peso-per-month stipend. The squashed, government-approved views of the newspaper *Granma,* from which he was allowed to read, seemed to suffocate him even as he presented them to the rollers in the factory that had once belonged to Ana's family. Now, it belonged to the faithful.

"But by the time I started to miss my family, I was too late," he said, moving his jowls from side to side. He shrugged. "Ana, she married a restaurateur in Tampa. She had three more children by him. Beatriz was my only one." He waved a finger in the air, and pressed his lips together into a severe line.

The first time Joaquin was reported to the authorities by Los Comités de Defensa de la Revolución was after he chose to read Orwell's *Animal Farm* to the rollers who were sweating under a particularly humid summer afternoon. He was cited the next day

by two young men—boys—who embellished their authority with puffed-out chests and lowered voices. Joaquin was surprised but not particularly threatened. It was several months, however, before his boredom compelled him to choose something else to read that wasn't approved by Castro's government.

The libraries in Havana were well stocked with publications that nobody wanted to read: *The Complete Works of Marx and Lenin, The Unabridged Speeches of Fidel Castro*. There were no copies of Toqueville's *Democracy in America*, nothing about the Polish human rights activist Lech Wałęsa, or anything by the Russian novelist and historian Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who exposed the Soviet's forced labor camp system. Nothing by the exiled novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante, who had fallen out of favor with the Castro regime. The revolution had failed them all.

Years passed. There were no jobs. No food. No freedom. In 1980, the Peruvian Embassy opened its doors and a tide of disenfranchised Cubans swelled the building. Joaquin, bored though he was, and poor, and jettisoned, still held something in his heart for the Castro that he believed in, the one who'd beaten off the bullies, who'd tangled with the priest. One couldn't easily eschew a touch from greatness such as that.

"Don't let the flame touch the foot," Joaquin said, bending forward, his eyes set with concern. "Turn it, yes, like this, spinning, until the foot gets an even burn, yes, yes. Now take it, what do you say, inhale, yes? Slow! Slower, mi amigo." He laughed, and patted Roscoe on the back. "Finish coughing, then try again. Slow. See? Taste." He patted the air, as though it were a pillow to be fluffed or a kite of smoke to be translated into signals.

There were to be several more minor infractions reported by the CDR. Then, in September 1983, as a tropical depression prevailed over the island and bent the palm trees to nearly horizontal, three armed men in uniforms marched into the tabaquería, pulled Joaquin off his elevated chair, shackled him, and marched him out.

He spent no less than ten years, one month, and sixteen days in prison for the crime of reading Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* to illiterate tobacco rollers.

Roscoe wondered at the ways Joaquin had insulated himself against all that he'd had to for so long. Their lives weren't so different. The accumulated losses—of freedom, of love. Yet Joaquin had found some peace before he'd died. It was that peace that had made Roscoe want to append Joaquin to those missing parts of himself, to round the sharp edges of his fragmented life.

Someone had written to Castro on Joaquin's behalf, perhaps once, perhaps many times. And at the end of the summer of 1993 the squat guard at Joaquin's cell, who had become lax over the years, suddenly stood erect and sweating when he slid wide the iron door.

"Denos un minuto." The voice was unmistakable. Anyone would have listened to it for hours. Give us a minute.

Joaquin admitted to Roscoe that he had stood mute in the corner then, abandoned by his fuerzo de grito. He was once again the fat boy with loose socks, protecting his written verse from the hails and kicks of the bullies.

"I remember you," Castro said, "from La Salle. And later, the marches. We even kept company for a time." There was a long stretch of quiet as they considered one another. "You believed in the revolution, Joaquin." Castro could deliver an accusation with the slant of a single word. He emphasized "believed" with a breathy whisper and narrowed eyes, and Joaquin—though admonished—could not help his kindred admiration of Castro's speaking abilities. He was a hypnotic orator. If he'd been born with less ambition, he might've been a great lector. "I am told that you were persuasive. You occasioned many people to support our cause through your readings." Joaquin blinked, but said nothing. El Lector had again run out of words. "Yet that is evidently no longer the case." Fidel, the faithful, crossed his arms and paced the small length of concrete.

"According to the law, you are meant to die, Joaquin," he said. Then he turned to the small window and tipped his unshaven chin. He took a breath of the sea air and closed his eyes. Then he turned and leveled his severe green stare at Joaquin. "I will let you live," he said. "But you will need to find a way off this island that you love."

Joaquin dropped his head, and eventually turned away.

"There is a letter!" he said to Roscoe. He held it aloft, then brought it close to his eyes to read first in silence. He erupted into such laughter that he startled the dogs to barking.

"Well?" Roscoe said, smiling. "Tell me what it says."

"I'll translate," Joaquin said when he caught his breath.

"Dear Sr. Lector. You will not remember me from among the many rollers who listened to you, but I remember you well. The revolution, while it was still good, provided me the opportunity and education to become a nurse, and for many years I have been employed by a mutual acquaintance that we both once thought to be a great leader, until he was seduced by his own authority. When I learned what happened to you, I was outraged, but what could I do? My employer is ill, but he is nonetheless still powerful. Then, several years ago, I had occasion to enter his personal library. Imagine my surprise to find it filled not just with books sanctioned by the government, but shelves and shelves of forbidden works—the very ones that the CDR reported you for reading. I hope you have enjoyed filling your own shelves with these books. I have enjoyed emptying his. Respectfully, Robin Hood."

"These are Castro's?" Roscoe turned to look at Joaquin's bookshelves.

Joaquin looked also. "Apparently so." His laughter had faded to silence, and then his expression turned dark. There were many years yet unaccounted for.

"Bastard!" he said. Then he picked up the book that had arrived in the mail, *The Foresters* by Alfred Lord Tennyson, and threw it across the room as hard as he could. "Bastard," he said again, more quietly, and he glared at the book on the floor as if it were Castro himself.

After a few minutes, Roscoe pushed himself off the couch and walked over to where the book lay splayed. He picked it up and returned to his place across from Joaquin. He thumbed through it with his good hand and then held it out to his friend.

"Will you read to me?"

Joaquin took a breath and exhaled deeply. His barrel chest rose again and fell. Finally, he nodded. He accepted the book and looked at it. Then he filled the bellows of his lungs again, opened it to the beginning, and began to read aloud: "These roses for my Lady Marian; these lilies to lighten Sir Richard's black room, where he sits and eats his heart for want of money to pay the abbot." He read until the gloaming sunlight slanted through the window all the way to the stumps of his legs, until Beatriz came home carrying grocery bags filled with the makings of dinner, until Roscoe's back ached from sitting in rigid stillness, until Joaquin had lost himself completely in the stolen words.

Joaquin died in his sleep one snowy night. The packages continued to arrive at their usual intervals, and Roscoe continued to sign for them. The loss of his friend had become one more burden for him to bear; it was especially heavy when the books came.

On those days, he would prepare himself a mixto and an orange soda for lunch and sit down with whatever book the mysterious Robin Hood had sent. He considered sending a note back, letting him or her know that Joaquin had died and there was no further cause for revenge, but he never did. He liked the idea of Castro's library slowly thinning, and the books, when they came, let him remember Joaquin.

Always the sender included a Cohiba, also presumably from Castro's stash—even though Joaquin had heard that Castro claimed to have stopped smoking in the mid-eighties. Roscoe would light the cigar the way Joaquin had taught him but would simply let it burn against the ashtray, smoke rising into the room like incense.

Then after he ate he would open the book to the beginning, take a deep breath, and read aloud in a whisper, as though the room were filled with ghosts.

A Note About *You Are One of Them*

Elliott Holt was a giver last year at the St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C., and we also read her fabulous debut novel, *You Are One of Them* at the time. She's going back to the hospital again this year with *This Boy's Life*.

As luck would have it, her novel is due out in paperback the week after World Book Night this year, and the wonderful people at Politics & Prose, Elliott's local store, are having her in to launch this ebook on April 22, World Book Night eve.

What you are about to read is the prologue of *You Are One of Them*, and it will totally hook you into the story about two best friends, their falling-out, and yes, their separate journeys to Russia and resolution, or not. Enjoy.

— Carl Lennertz, Executive Director, World Book Night U.S.

Prologue to *You are One of Them*

by Elliott Holt

In Moscow I was always cold. I suppose that's what Russia is known for. Winter. But it is winter to a degree I could not have imagined before I moved there. Winter not of the pristine, romantic *Doctor Zhivago* variety but a season so insistent and hateful that all hope freezes with your toes. The snow is cleared away too quickly to soften the city, so the streets are slushy with resentment. And I felt like the other young women trudging through that slush: sullen and tired, with a bluish tint to the skin below the eyes that suggests insomnia or malnutrition or a hangover. Or all of the above. Every day brought news of a drunk who froze to death. I saw one: slumped over on a bench on Tverskoy Boulevard with a bottle between his legs and icicles decorating his fingers. Distilled into something so pure and solid that I didn't recognize it as death until I got up close. The babushka next to me summoned the police.

I cracked under the weight of the cold. My only recourse was to eat. I inhaled entire packages of English tea biscuits in one sitting. They came stacked in a tube, and when I found myself halfway through one, I decided I might as well finish it. I polished off a whole tube every night after work and then pinched the extra flesh around my hips in the bathtub and thought, *At least I'm warm.*

It was 1996. At the English-language newspaper where I worked, the other expats were always joking. Russia, with all its quirks, was funny. At Sheremetyevo Airport, there was a sign perched at the entrance to the short-term-parking lot that had been translated into English as ACUTE CARE PARKING. It was a sign better suited to a hospital, where everything is dire. And at the smaller airports, the ones for regional flights, the Russian word for "exit," *vykhod*, was translated into English as GET OUT. A ticket to Sochi, for example, said you would be departing from Get Out #4. I laughed with them, but I knew that eventually these mistranslations would be corrected, that Russia would grow out of its awkward teenage capitalism and become smooth and nonchalant. You could see the growing pains in the pomaded hair of the nightclub

bouncers, in the tinted windows of the Mercedes sedans on Tverskaya, in the garish sequins on the Versace mannequins posing in a shop around the corner from the Bolshoi Theater.

At the infamous Hungry Duck, I watched intoxicated Russian girls strip on top of the bar and then tumble into the greedy arms of American businessmen. American men still had cachet then; as an American woman, I hugged the sidelines. ("Sarah," said the Russian men at my office, "why you don't wear the skirts? Are you the feminist?" They always laughed, and it was a deep, carnivorous sound that made me feel daintier than I am.) Everyone in Moscow was ravenous, and the potential for anarchy—I could feel its kaleidoscope effect—made a lot of foreigners giddy. Most of the reporters at my paper spoke some Russian. But among the copy editors, many of whom were fresh out of Russian-studies programs and itching to put their years in the language lab to good use, the hierarchy was built on who spoke Russian best. They were not gunning for careers in journalism; they just wanted to be in the new post-Soviet Moscow—the wild, wild East—and this job paid the bills. The Americans with Russian girlfriends—"pillow dictionaries," they called them, aware that these lanky, mysterious women were far better-looking than anyone they'd touched back home—began to sound like natives. They were peacocks, preening with slang. In the office each morning, they'd pull off their boots and slide their feet into their *tapochki* and head to the kitchen for instant coffee—Nescafé was our only option then—and they'd never mention their past lives in Wisconsin or Nevada or wherever they escaped from. *"Oy,"* they said, and *"Bozhe moy,"* which means "my God" but has anguish in Russian that just doesn't translate. A little bravado goes a long way toward hiding the loneliness. You can reinvent yourself with a different alphabet.

On Saturdays at the giant Izmailovo Market, tourists haggled for Oriental rugs and *matryoshka* dolls painted to resemble Soviet leaders—Lenin fits into Stalin, who fits into Khrushchev, who fits into Brezhnev, who fits into Andropov, who fits into Gorbachev, who fits into Yeltsin. History reduced to kitsch. While shopping for Christmas gifts once, I stopped by a booth where a spindly drunk was selling old Soviet stamps.

And there, pinned like a butterfly to a tattered red velvet display cushion, was Jenny. Her image barely warped by time. *"Skolko?"* I said. The man asked too much. He had the deadened eyes of a person who hasn't been sober for years, and I didn't feel like bargaining, so I handed him the money. He could smell my desperation. He put the stamp in a Ziploc bag, and on the way back home on the Metro I studied her through the plastic. My best friend, commemorated like a cosmonaut. Her name had been transliterated into Cyrillic: ДЖЕННИФЕР ДЖОНС, it said above the smiling photo of her freckled face. A five-kopeck stamp from the postal service of the USSR. I had just paid ten dollars for something that was originally worth next to nothing.

Conspiracy theorists will tell you that Jennifer Jones's death was not an accident. They will tell you that her plane crashed not because of mechanical failure, not because the pilot was suffering from dizzy spells, but because the CIA shot it down. She had become a Soviet pawn, they say, too sympathetic to the party. Others say that the KGB was responsible, that after the press took pictures of her smiling at the Kremlin and quoted her saying how nice the Russians were, they needed to quit while they were ahead. I've read the official reports. I heard the pundits spew their Sunday-morning-talk-show ire. But I don't recognize the Jennifer Jones I knew in their versions of the story.

Some people will tell you that all of it was propaganda, that she was just a pawn in someone else's game, but the letter—the original letter—was real. It came from a real place of fear. The threat used to be so tangible. I was prepared to lose the people I loved best. My mother, with her fuzzy hair and lemon-colored corduroys; our dog, Pip; and Jenny. Always Jenny, whose last act must have been storing her tray table in its upright and locked position. Yuri Andropov wished her the best in her young life. Maybe this blessing was a curse.

Or maybe her luck just ran out.

A Note About “Marble Man”

Robert Gray is well-known in the world of indie booksellers. He was one himself, at Northshire Books in Manchester Center, Vermont, where he famously hand-sold hundreds and hundreds of books he loved, and in one case, a thousand of a single title.

He’s taken this passion to writing, including a regular spot in *Shelf Awareness*, one of the leading e-newsletters in the book business. He reports on trends, talks to people about their passions, and makes daily sense of the ever-changing literary landscape.

Bob has had many short stories published and is working on a novel, but he sent me “Marble Man,” a true story about his dad, for a book about New England life I am compiling. I love it so much that I asked him if I could include it here. And Bob, as always, graciously said yes, give it to any and all.

—Carl Lennertz, Executive Director, World Book Night U.S.

Marble Man
by Robert Gray

"Most of the stone a nation hammers goes toward its tomb only. It buries itself alive."
—Henry David Thoreau

In the dream, I reached for a switch to the fluorescent light above the kitchen sink. As the bulb flickered, gasping for breath, I thought I saw a shadow, but then the glow revealed only four kitchen chairs and a table. I turned the light off and waited for my eyes to adjust to the moonlight again. Someone was definitely there, sitting at the table. I couldn't risk the slightest movement, couldn't even speak, though my mouth instinctively formed a silent question: *Dad?* The figure at the table looked up slowly, straight ahead, then turned toward me.

My father wasn't a tall man, but still gave the impression of bulk because of his full shoulders and chest. In the dream, he wore the same dark green work clothes, dredged in white dust, that had served as his uniform during all those years with the marble company. His steel-toed shoes were coated with mud; even his face had a blue-gray tint. A marble man, he sat rigidly upright, his hands planted firmly on thighs. He stared at me, though his eyes were shadows, like the eyeholes carved in statues. He nodded. I nodded back, but could not meet his stare for long, so I glanced away. When I looked again, he was gone.

I don't remember dreams most of the time, but this one hit me as I approached my fiftieth birthday, and I've never forgotten it. My father died at the age of fifty-one.

Maybe that was why the dream stuck.

The Vermont Marble Museum in Proctor bills itself as "The World's Largest Marble EXHIBIT." Those capital letters overcompensate for what is, even by optimistic standards, a modest display on the second floor of a creaky old mill building in the complex where I had a grunt job during summer vacations in the late sixties. I'm a marble man by birth. My father worked the mills and quarries in Proctor as well as West

Rutland, where my grandfather—my mother's father—was a foreman at the lime plant.

I visit the museum at least once a year. To pay my respects, I suppose. Am I nostalgic, or in search of a Vermont that has long since vanished? I don't know. I don't think so. This isn't about nostalgia. It's about marble heritage.

One summer, the nice woman who sold me an admission ticket also offered a map and tried to tell me about the marble exhibit. After all, who would come here alone more than once? I'm sure any repeat visitors tend to be families playing host to out-of-town relatives with nothing better to do.

"I used to work here," I said, politely declining her help.

"Really? In the exhibit?"

"No, in the mill . . . summers, when I was in college."

"Really?" she said again.

"Out there." I nodded toward the north end of the museum, beyond which stretched empty shells of attached factory buildings and their walls of filthy broken windows, along with weed-infested loading yards and rusting rail tracks. That dead zone isn't open to the public, though years ago they used to let you step out on a small second-floor landing, where you could look out on the empty, cavernous finishing shop floor and the ghost rails of the overhead crane.

It was my father who got me a job in the yard during the summers of 1969 and 1970. I worked on a team with two other guys and a crane operator. We moved marble slabs or already loaded wood pallets. The job was easy. When the crane stopped above the designated location, we just had to slip canvas slings on either side of a slab or pallet and off it went to a prescribed destination, with the three of us trailing along below to unhook the load.

Unfortunately, certain obstacles undermined the deceptive simplicity of our appointed task. The crane man was a drinker, so the pallet often swayed dangerously in the air above us as he jolted the apparatus into motion or stopped it too quickly. Our gang boss, a Polish immigrant with a smoker's squint from the Lucky Strike perpetually

dangling between his lips, knew little English beyond obscenities and the constantly repeated sentence that sounded like a single word: "You-betcha-my-ass." He communicated by screaming, arm waving, and, when all else failed, pushing us aside and doing the job himself.

Maybe it's not surprising that I didn't see my future in this job, though at the time I wasn't aware of just how tenuous the future would be for most of my co-workers, whose life as marble men (and a few women) would change dramatically in 1976, when the Vermont Marble Company sold its holdings to the Swiss firm Pluess-Staufer, a company that specialized in the manufacture of calcium carbonate—crushed marble (a reversal of nature's intentions) that could be used in a variety of products, ranging from antacids to paint.

By 1993, the *Rutland Herald* was reporting on Pluess-Staufer's decision to fold a company that had employed thousands at its peak, but was reduced to fifteen remaining Vermont Marble Company workers, some of whom “spoke with sadness, resignation and a hint of bitterness about the end of the 123-year-old company.”

Decades after the industry died there, Proctor and West Rutland are still marble towns. The jobs are long gone, but the stone is everywhere you look. It’s an incandescent marble orchard of schools, churches, libraries, bridges, sidewalks, and even house foundations. Some of the roads are still lined with marble slag, those chunks of waste stone in myriad sizes that were long ago scattered about like a giant kid’s broken toy blocks.

Abandoned, water-filled quarries stand idle. I’ve read that at the bottom of one of the holes, local scuba divers found an old steam boiler, rusted drills, and pry bars, as if the workers had just punched the clock, gone home, and would return tomorrow to pick up where they'd left off.

Someday in the distant future, archaeologists will unearth the ruins of Proctor and West Rutland and wonder what the hell we were thinking, pulling all this rock out of the ground and then just living in the middle of so much stone waste.

Proctor still looks like a factory town, though ominously so, as if, like that underwater quarry, someone had misplaced the shift whistle and no one knew enough to come back to work—a good setting for a *Twilight Zone* episode.

West Rutland, on the other hand, when viewed from a safe height and distance along Vermont Route 4 (which offers a bypass to the southwest), appears to nestle snugly among the hills like a leaf-peeper's Green Mountain fantasy, picturesque as hell. If I focus, however, I can see that the quaintness is flawed by ruins and remnants of the once-thriving marble industry that lie scattered like bleached bones across the terrain. And I see the dim outlines of squat stone buildings on marble chip-covered yards, which in sunlight can make the landscape look like it was hit by a freak early snowstorm.

If I squint, I can see the past.

Vermont has changed dramatically since I was born at the Proctor Hospital in 1950. Somehow, on the surface at least, neither of these marble towns reflects the social and cultural bedrock shift that that occurred in the wake of the 1970s back-to-the-land-and-out-of-the-suburbs movement, which later "evolved" into a wave of upscale utopian dreamers from out of state buying second homes here.

Industry left; flatlanders kept coming.

This is a great state to live in, but you'd better bring money with you if you decide to move here. Oddly, as a Vermont native, I never resented the invasion. In fact, I probably wouldn't have stayed as long as I did if these changes hadn't happened, but I also clearly recall another, older version of the Green Mountain dream.

At the museum, there remains the tattered fabric of an illusion that the bright future of marble is ahead of us and the space is not really a post-industrial mausoleum. They manage this neat trick by hawking the benefits of calcium carbonate. A special exhibition touts the wonders of CaCO3, the main product of Omya, a Pluess-Staufer subsidiary and what now passes for "the company" in this old company town.

The museum's website explains what the new kid does instead of quarrying,

sawing, and finishing marble blocks: “Together with Omya, our neighbor in Proctor, Vermont, and the premier producer of ground calcium carbonate (marble) products, we have opened a new educational room on the current uses of Calcium Carbonate in the Paper, Pain, Plastic, Food and Pharmaceutical Industries—for example, Chewing Gum & Toothpaste,... you'll be surprised!”

I'm not surprised.

I lived in Vermont for six decades before moving to upstate New York. Long ago I lost touch with the marble men I once knew. It's been decades now since the Vermont Marble Company and the Proctor family ruled this area, but I'm sure that in a few of those modest Proctor and West Rutland houses, there are still a handful of old men who worked with my father and have trace amounts of marble dust flowing in their veins. They remember the old days, good or otherwise.

You-betcha-my-ass.

Given the prodigious forces of time, mass movement, and metamorphosis involved in the formation of the Green Mountains and, of course, the marble buried inside, is it any wonder that stone dominated the lives of these poor, now largely forgotten men?

Did they ever believe they were dominating rock by cutting and hauling it out of the ground? They have gone, or will soon go, underground themselves, in graves like scale-model quarries, covered by dirt and headstones made of marble. I hope some of them appreciate the irony. And under the right geologic circumstances, in four or five hundred million years they just might become part of a decent marble vein themselves.

My favorite room at the Vermont Marble Exhibit is the Marbles of the World display, a former sales showroom that contains polished slabs bathed in abundant natural light that streams through banks of factory windows. The space is arranged like an art exhibit, and you can walk along narrow aisles, moving from one slab to the next as if each were a separate canvas representing God's Abstract Period: Highland Danby,

Verde Antique, Regal White Danby, Westland Green Veined Cream, Pico Green, Westland Cippolino, Neshobe Gray Clouded, Champlain Black, Light Cloud, Mariposa Danby, Royal Antique, Striped Brocadillo, Best Light Cloud, Verdoso, Plateau Danby, Olivo.

When I study a slab up close, I can see crystal flecks in the subtly changing light. If I step back, the crystals weave delicate veins of soft color. I once read—probably at the museum—that the colors, veining, clouds, mottling, and shadings in marble were caused by extraneous substances that had been introduced in minute quantities during formation. The activity and movement of the earth's crust caused the wavelike or folded configuration of the veining.

There is a cool purity to marble, despite the flaws that are its essence and beauty. I like that contradiction, if it is a contradiction.

Watching the sunlight alter stone, I can imagine my father underground as a young man, standing with other workers in the depths of a quarry, dwarfed by stark ivory walls, looking like the men in those ancient drawings of slaves who built the pyramids.

In *Walden*, Thoreau wrote: "As for the Pyramids, there is nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby... Many are concerned about the monuments of the West and the East—to know who built them. For my part, I should like to know who in those days did not build them—who were above such trifling."

The guys who worked in these quarries and mills, including my father and grandfather, "were not above such trifling." Slaves to an essential paycheck, they probably would have cut stone for the pyramids, too, if they'd been ordered to do so. Pyramids, Washington Monument, Jefferson Memorial, Lincoln Memorial, Arlington National Cemetery—just another job. Punch in. Punch out. Have a few beers. Do it again tomorrow.

On the walls of the marble museum are large, grainy photographs depicting the marble industry in its prime in the early twentieth century, with underfed immigrant laborers from countries like Ireland, Italy, or Poland down in the hole or standing glumly beside their gang saws or shielding their eyes from the sun reflecting off marble in the yard, all of them staring grim as prisoners at the camera. These are also the marble men I see in my memories when I choose to let them in or fail to keep them out.

"This is our world. You wouldn't understand," their eyes say to the camera. "We've got work to do."

When I was a kid, every house, even those of the poorest workers (like my own), seemed to have marble everywhere you looked: bathtub shrines, lamps, coffee tables, ashtrays, bowling trophies. All "seconds," of course, with a telling chip here or crack there. Now there is just one piece of marble on my desk. I bought it at the Vermont Marble Museum's gift shop, rescuing it from a basket of rejected chess pieces that were being sold individually. It's a pawn, of course, standing about two inches high and leaning to one side like the Tower of Pisa. Every day, I find myself holding this pawn, feeling its heft before placing it back down on my desk as if making a critical move, a winning move with a marble pawn that, if turned just so, leans fiercely and solidly into its future.

A Note About “Bakersfield, California 93312”

There really aren’t enough words to describe Jessica Stockton Bagnulo’s impact on the recent history of independent bookselling. Let’s just say that she and her co-owner, Rebecca Fitting, have created a beautiful new store in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, anchoring the renaissance of the neighborhood, and along with Word in Williamsburg and Community Books in Park Slope, sparking the Brooklyn literary scene.

But, as she writes in the following essay, her thoughts go back often to a misunderstood California town.

—Carl Lennertz, Executive Director, World Book Night U.S.

Bakersfield, California 93312
by Jessica Stockton Bagnulo

When I tell people I'm from California, I can see images of Hollywood blondes and Bay Area hippies flick behind their eyes. Both are worlds away from the California I grew up in. Despite a lot of good writing about what the Golden State is and means, it's hard to wrap one's head around just how big and varied it really is. You can drive all day and all night and still be in the same state, but you've passed through a dozen different cultures and subcultures at ever highway exit. It's only one of many Californias that I really come from.

I grew up in a valley—not the one where Valley Girls come from (that's the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles), but the San Joaquin Valley, that, long smooth swath of green in the center of the state, so big that you can feel it on a textured globe. In the lower half of the San Joaquin is Kern County, home of the so-called mighty Kern River of country music lore (which was usually only a trickle when I crossed it because the water was redirected for irrigation). The seat of Kern County is Bakersfield: equidistant, and infinitely removed, from both Los Angeles and San Francisco, a conservative, suburban community most people remember as an exit sign on the highway.

As a teenager I joked that I was Luke Skywalker on Tatooine: "If there's a bright center to the universe, you're on the planet that it's furthest from." (Shades of a hero complex: It helps to imagine you come from a barren outpost if you intend to leave home and change the world.) I grew up in a California that on the surface was just interchangeably suburban middle America. But the farther away I get from it, the more its specifics fascinate me, and the more it seems to reflect something essential about California, and perhaps about contemporary America.

Bakersfield is not really a small town. The population was 175,000 when I was in grade school; it's now about twice that. But it likes to think of itself as a small town, in the sense that it is the opposite of the urban glamour of Los Angeles, and it prides itself on a certain set of working-class tastes. It's not immune from the national cultural homogenization—big-box stores, cookie-cutter housing tracts, strip malls—and there is

an almost Southern emphasis on big pickup trucks, reflector shades, and country music. There is an art museum and a small downtown, but no arthouse cinemas (though I remember seeing I Shot Andy Warhol screened at the excellent public library as a teenager, much to my then-horror-disguised-as-sophistication).

It's predominantly conservative, culturally and politically (I have always told people I was from the most Republican county in the state, though a modicum of research shows that that distinction is disputed among Modoc, Placer, and Orange Counties). My high school mascot was Danny Driller, dressed in overalls and a hard hat like the workers who man Kern County's oil derricks, producing three-quarters of the state's crude and defining much of the local economy.

It is, essentially, a desert landscape, but extremely fertile. High desert, not sandy but dry, makes a good climate for almonds, cotton, carrots, and table grapes (I still often see produce bags with my hometown's name on them). The weather is mild, except when it's extreme. In the summer, if the newspaper predicted a high over 110 degrees, we'd get let out of school an hour early. In the winter, if the "tule fog" that emanated from the half-dry river impaired visibility, we'd go to school late.

The local music culture is not without distinction, though much of it was lost on me as a teenager. Bakersfield is known as "the Nashville of the West"; there are streets named after the locally born Grand Ole Opry impresario Buck Owens, who popularized the electrified "Bakersfield Sound" beloved of country singers like Dwight Yoakam, and founded a country music nightclub called the Crystal Palace. In response, of course, my friends and I sought out ska and grunge and hardcore bands at a dilapidated downtown dive called Jerry's Pizza, a windowless basement full of cigarette smoke and teenage sweat. Both Jerry's and the Palace were both still going strong the last time I visited.

But the town also has a soundtrack that is older, more primal and melancholy. If its surface is the world of strip malls and tract houses and the suburban counterculture of skaters and punks, its layers include the ghosts of Okie farmers, Basque shepherds, Mexican itinerant laborers, Union soldiers and Spanish priests, the Yokuts and the Mojaves and the Paiutes and the Tubatulabals. Each of them has their songs, hymns and

ballads and party songs and dirges, and each has left their ghostly mark on the homogenous landscape.

Enormous mountains rise up at the edge of every sight line in such a valley, which gives everyday life a certain mythic resonance: the valley as a happy kingdom, or if you are young, the mountains as a visible symbol of the boundaries you must cross to escape. Between here and Los Angeles are miles of pale, naked hills, folded silky as sand dunes at a distance, studded with outlaw-hiding outcroppings of rock and stoic dark oaks up close. There is, in fact, plenty of scope for the imagination.

It's no coincidence that a few miles north, the "Fresno School" of poetry turned the ethnic diversity and the changeable sunlit landscape of the valley into a wellspring of art. The poet Frank Bidart, nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, was born in Bakersfield, though he doesn't talk about it much. The name of his family's farm, Bidart Brothers, is stenciled in giant letters on two water towers I drive past every time I visit home.

My father’s grandparents owned a ranch in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, which is where I spent much of my childhood. My great-grandfather had been a judge, who family legend says gave country singer Merle Haggard his first stay in prison for vagrancy or a similar juvenile crime. They were old Californians, with roads and small towns named after them, descended from Revolutionary War stock. My mother's grandparents were Kansas and Oklahoma Mennonite farmers, who came in the late twenties fleeing the dust bowl, as they had previously fled the militancy of Germany and then Russia in the nineteenth century. These are the denizens of this nondescript corner of California, this astoundingly American story I've really only discovered after leaving.

In the same way, it's only recently that I've grasped the realities of race and class as they played out in that mid-sized town. Steinbeck mentions Bakersfield in *The Grapes of Wrath,* and Cesar Chavez has streets named after him here, as well; its agricultural

climate has always attracted farmers both permanent and itinerant. One day during my sophomore year the white kids and the Mexicans faced off in the quad, yelling slurs and throwing rocks at each other, because Proposition 182 had proposed denying all state benefits to undocumented immigrants. My mother's father (himself, once an unwelcome Okie immigrant farmer, and an otherwise entirely admirable man) could be heard to mumble bitterly in his last years about "those Mexicans"—in part because his neighborhood had become unrecognizable in the seventy or so years he'd lived there, the signs now written in a language he couldn't read.

But it's easy to exaggerate the degree to which these tensions define life here. I was recently given a copy of a thriller called *The Devils of Bakersfield* (with an oil drill on the cover), in which a roving private eye finds himself in the midst of a religious fervor that leads to mass book burning in Bakersfield. (The author is from Los Angeles.) I can attest to the fact that there was never anything resembling such a scene in the town where I grew up—it might have interfered with the outdoor concerts, or the new program of arts events downtown. The streets around Jerry's Pizza are now full of new restaurants and cafes, art studios and retail shops. The Padre Hotel and the Fox Theatre, relics of the downtown's more prosperous era, have been lovingly renovated. The population continues to grow; apparently, the town has become known for a certain quality of life.

Bakersfield can sometimes seem like a well-known symbol for everywhere that is not well-known—a sort of Californian Fargo, famously obscure. In a state where people do a lot of driving, it's the sort of place a lot of people have driven through, without stopping. It appears as a waystation or a modest hometown in Kerouac's *On the Road,* Stephen King's *Misery,* Max Brooks' zombie novel *World War Z,* and in the Rolling Stones song "Far Away Eyes." In the film *Running Man,* Arnold Schwarzenegger's character is (unjustly) labeled "The Butcher of Bakersfield." Along with the standard California images, these are some of the associations that come up when I tell people specifically where I'm from. And I have to admit, even when I find myself recounting its eye-rolling shortcomings, I like being from somewhere slightly misunderstood, even ominous, that

people have heard stories about but have never visited. The more complicated truth about the place is my secret, my origin story.

And my sense of the truth about the place is inextricable from my personal history there. My childhood memories are of exploring Native American rock paintings in my grandmother's ranch in the foothills. The warehouse-like downtown high school, which my grandfather attended years before I did, smelled of history and ambition and aged wood and industrial cleansers, and seemed to have the stillness of a place where things have happened over and over again. When we drove cars at night along the train tracks toward the smaller towns of Wasco or Porterville, orchard rows slanted out of the dark along the highway like hairy trains, with the exhilarating force of nightmare. The fog rolled down the hills into the valley, pooling and swirling with the tule fog rising from the river. There were a thousand shades of green, brown, and gray. Empty hay barns. Slow freight trains out of town.

I did, eventually, escape the small town. I went to college in New York City, and later put down roots and started a business in Brooklyn, which now feels like my grown-up hometown. I love Brooklyn's walking neighborhoods, its interesting architecture, its local shops, its neighbors who greet each other on the street rather than retreating down suburban cul-de-sacs.

But Bakersfield is still a place that I long for, a landscape straining with mystery, emanating the smells of alfalfa, sage, dust from the county fairgrounds. The more I think about the place, the more it expands, the further back and further out it goes. It is the American story of fruited plains and chemical industries, of immigration and civil rights struggles, of culture wars and changing demographics, of urban revitalization and suburban sprawl and the tensions of tradition and progress.

It is the story of home, which you cannot return to; which continues, bustling and melancholy, without you; which holds your precious history within itself, alongside all the reasons you had to leave.

Above and below that cultural nowhere land which I exaggerate to impress my urbanite friends, there is a different California, that state of endless and profound paradoxes, of vast landscapes and secret corners. It is a place that I still long for, and one that I am still trying to explain.

A Note About “Why I Love Libraries”

For Luanne Rice, books are treasures.

That was clear to me even when we first met, nearly twenty years ago, before our relationship changed from professional into a friendship. A *New York Times* bestselling author with more than thirty books to her name, Luanne is rooted by words and writing.

Those of you who know her lyrical novels may know some of her backstory: that her mother conducted writing workshops at the dining room table, that she was nourished by her local library. So when I asked her if she would contribute to this collection, she replied “yes” without hesitation, and shared a peek into her library experiences.

— Carolyn Schwartz, Development Director, World Book Night U.S.

Why I Love Libraries
by Luanne Rice

My first love, outside my family, was books. Every Saturday morning my mother would take us to the New Britain Public Library: a dream library built in 1900 of yellow brick with high, arched windows, terracotta reliefs, and deep stacks. There were two separate buildings—one for grownups, and the Mary Richardson Hawley Memorial Children's Library, right next door, with a fireplace, carved animals, oak card catalogues, and window seats.

I still remember the day I got my library card. The rule was that a new borrower had to be able to write her name. I practiced at home, wearing the pencil down to nothing, dreaming of that card. It would be just like my mother's, a cream-colored square of thick paper, with a numbered metal tab in the upper right corner that would imprint on the library's record sheet, letting them know that I, Luanne Rice, had taken out a particular book to read.

Mrs. Virginia Smith was the children's librarian. She was tall and thin, with an enigmatic smile, a gentle gaze, and brown hair pulled back in a French twist. She stood at the central desk. I could barely see over it. She produced the card and led me to a child-sized writing desk next to the big fireplace.

She handed me a pencil, and closing my eyes right now I can feel it in my hand. The lead was thicker than I was used to, and when I pressed down, I could feel the table's heavy oak grain beneath the point. I printed my name, every letter just right, until I got to the end of the line: I hadn't left enough room for the "e" of "Rice."

I panicked. This was my chance, and I was blowing it. Mrs. Smith put her hand on my shoulder. "You can do it," she said in a steady voice. "You can make the letter fit."

And I did. I wrote the "e" on a tilt, dangling off the end of the line, into the space below. It wasn't perfect, but because of a kind librarian, it didn't have to be. I had my first library card.

You can do it, Mrs. Smith had said. I believe she wanted me to get that card as much as I did. Over the years I saw her nearly every Saturday. While my mother browsed in the grownup library next door, I'd curl up in a corner and get lost in stories. Mrs. Smith would check my books out, and I'd take them home, spend every bit of free time reading.

Where other kids' fathers built them dollhouses or forts, our dad made us each our own bookshelf—wide, deep, painted glossy white. I kept my library books on mine, right beside my bed. Once I finished reading them, I couldn't wait to get back to the library—to see Mrs. Smith and pick out new books to read. Sometime during those years, somewhere in the Children's Library, my own stories began to rise, and I became the girl who would one day become a writer.

A Note About “Wisconsin’s Many Sides”

Kirk Farber is the author of the novel *Postcards from a Dead Girl*, which was an Indie Next Selection and winner of the Colorado Book Award for literary fiction. I was actually the editor for the novel, and I loved working with Kirk as he crafted a love story with a twist.

Kirk lives in Colorado with his wife and daughter, and when he's not writing he works in the acquisitions department at Pikes Peak Library District. He hails from Wisconsin, and here are his memories about the magic of that state.

— *Carl Lennertz, Executive Director, World Book Night U.S.*

Wisconsin's Many Sides
by Kirk Farber

America's Dairyland. The Badger State. Home of the Green Bay Packers. Domain of the cheeseheads.

My first realization that I lived in a state named Wisconsin occurred before I entered grade school. My dad was a traveling bookseller for Follett Publishing, and his territory covered grade schools in all seventy-two counties. He sold social studies textbooks, and our garage always had stacks of them lining the walls.

My mother and sister and I served as his audience while he practiced his slideshow presentations. We learned how the explorer Jean Nicolet founded the Green Bay Colony, and how French fur traders continued to settle the area until Britain took over. We learned that Wisconsin officially became the thirtieth U.S. state in 1848, its official bird is the robin, and its slogan is "Forward!" But because history is not that interesting to a five-year-old, there was really only one fact about Wisconsin I held in high regard as a child: Wisconsin is shaped like an enormous kid's mitten, the hand closed against the cold.

Geographically, the state is made up of several distinct sections. Most of my experiences living in Wisconsin were focused in the territories I like to unofficially call: Greater Farmland, Northwoods, and Milwaukee. Greater Farmland is largely the southern half of the state, where all the farmin' happens: corn, soybeans, and cows. The Northwoods is the northern third of the state, covered in pine trees, which also borders chilly Lake Superior. And Milwaukee, while technically resting in the southeast corner of Greater Farmland, is the state's largest city, and really, a world away from the rest of Wisconsin.

GREATER FARMLAND

If you drive into Wisconsin from Illinois on I-94, one of the first roadside attractions you will encounter is the Mars Cheese Castle. Giant yellow letters proclaim

the castle's name in neon, and medieval flags jut skyward to draw your attention, in case you missed the aforementioned massive neon cheese sign.

I love driving by this place because like many Wisconsinites, it is unashamed of what it is. In this case, it's a building full of cheese, a portal to America's Dairyland. A cheese *castle*. While this may seem a little, well, cheesy, isn't that the point? Have you ever tried cheese curds? They squeak when you eat them. What other foods squeak when you eat them? This is cause for celebration.

My little hometown is named Oconomowoc, pronounced Oh-KHAN-oh-moe-wok. Sure, it's tough to say, but it's still easier than Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. With a population of just over 12,000, Oconomowoc rests in the middle of Greater Farmland, near other cities with Native American names like Waukesha and Pewaukee and Chenequa. Also nestled among several lakes, this town was a great place to be a kid in. If you were wealthy, you lived on a lake and you were known as a "lakie." If you were not wealthy, you tried to find friends who were. Or you did what I did and went fishing with your dad after he was done selling books. Or you rode your bike to the gravel pit reservoir, dug deep by cement companies in search of rock. Affectionately known as "The Pit," this edge-of-the-suburbs playground had hundred-foot-tall piles of rocks to climb and jump off, and bottomless mini-lakes that were excellent for swimming and bass fishing but a source of constant worry for parents. Over time, the narrow quarry grew wider with extended excavation until several of the ponds were merged to form as one large body of water. Today, the dirt bike paths of my youth have been paved with streets, and the shores of "The Pit" have been repackaged and sold as luxury homes on "Crystal Lake." I guess you really can't go home again.

The smells can be strong in Greater Farmland. The putrid pig manure sprayed on crops mix with spring's blooms of lilacs and honeysuckle. Fall brings the crispy sunbaked scent of autumn leaves. As a kid, the smell of soil and cornstalks was a daily intake as I ran through rows of six-foot plants on my way home from school.

A Norman Rockwell quality seeps through the small towns of Greater Farmland—a feeling of simpler times. You see gazebos and boutique shops, ball parks

and parades. This makes it a fun place to be a kid or raise a family, but as a teenager, life can be torturously boring. My friends and I often reached a dead end in our search for entertainment during adolescence. The cool kids in small-town Wisconsin met in secret fields and had kegger parties with bonfires and loud music. The geeky bandheads (that's me) stayed home and watched movies and wondered what the cool kids were doing.

I've seen the cow-tipping stunt in many movies—bored teenagers sneaking up on a helpless bovine so they can push it over while it sleeps—but I've never seen it live, nor have I known anyone to partake in such an activity. In fact, I think it all might be a myth. Besides, you don't tip cows in America's Dairyland. It's disrespectful.

Wisconsin's dairy industry generates over $20 billion a year for the state's economy. Fourteen thousand operations care for 1.25 million dairy cows. And they're not just cows; they're Holsteins and Guernseys and Milking Shorthorns.

Even with all the new technology, farming is hard work, definitely not for the faint-of-heart. And if you're not used to the hard realities of farm talk, it can be a little jarring. Last Thanksgiving, my wife's uncle told us a farming story over dinner. It was about his livestock, and he started it like this: "There I was, shoulder deep in asshole."

The weather is of prime importance to farmers and non-farmers alike. And while not always favorable, Wisconsin's forecasts are not complicated. It is hot and humid and overcast in the summer. It is frigid and snowy and overcast in the winter. In between these seasons are fleeting days sometimes referred to as "spring "and "fall." Catch them if you can. The week of autumn can be stunning if the leaves change to bright oranges and reds. Or it can be wet and miserable and vaguely yellow-green.

My wife, Kelly, and I were married in the farmland town of Oshkosh, in a June outdoor ceremony that now seems to defy logic. Why we chose to brave the odds of Wisconsin weather, I'm not sure. And how we ended up with a sunny, warm, and dry day, I will never know. We just thanked our lucky stars, and headed to our mini-honeymoon destination, a place where many had gone before us: Up North.

NORTHWOODS

In Wisconsin, if someone tells you they are going “up north” for vacation, that is all that needs to be said. This means *not* Greater Farmland and *not* Milwaukee. Actually mentioning cities like Rice Lake or Cable or Minocqua is unnecessary. You are just going up north—majestic forests, streams, and lakes await. There will be mosquitoes also. Big ones. Traveling in swarms.

The gateway to Up North is the destination city of Wisconsin Dells, about one hour north of Madison. This is where the dark, pungent farmland suddenly shifts to fragrant pine trees. The air feels lighter, and the sky seems to take on a different hue.

Wisconsin Dells is also where you’ll find more waterslides than anywhere else on the planet, and why it is known as the Waterpark Capital of the World. Throughout the town are all manner of twisting, brightly colored plastic tubes—snaking in and out of the walls of hotels, undulating up and down hills, propped up on elaborate support systems. You will see giant wave pools and surfing simulators, speed slides and piles of inner tubes. This is Wisconsin’s Disneyland, and families flock here.

In the summer, the Dells can be a noisy place. Helicopters tours fly overhead. The Ducks—an armada of leftover amphibious Army vehicles—groan through town before they splash straight into the river and continue their tours afloat. And until Lake Delton was recently drained into the river, leaving a giant hole where a lake used to be, Tommy Bartlett would entertain thousands with his waterskiing shows à la the Go-Go’s “Vacation” video.

The downtown is lined with souvenir shops full of beaded moccasins and glass trinkets, wolf paintings and T-shirts. For a kid, Wisconsin Dells is a dream destination—junk toys and ice cream and fudge and water rides—what more could there possibly be in life?

My family frequented Hayward, near the top of the state. And we went fishing, because that’s what you do in a city that is home to the world’s largest fiberglass sculpture in the shape of a fish. At four and a half stories tall, the giant muskellunge is also part of the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame. This is where you take photos

of yourself catching impossibly large bluegill and browse the halls to see world-record catches, tackle box panoramas, and minnow box showcases.

Afterward, you take your boat on Lake Chippewa, and find a back bay with a nice drop-off. You toss out a Mepps bucktailed Musky Killer, start cranking, and watch the spoon flashing the dark water. You hope that you will catch a record yourself, preferably one of those monsters that are rumored to be so big they will eat your toes if you dangle them in the water, or that are capable of sucking a duckling, whole, right off the surface.

Most of the time, the fish are too smart. Most of the time, the statisticians are right that it takes ten thousand casts to catch one musky. But you never know if you don't have your line in the water, so you keep casting, and you keep cranking that reel, and you listen to the soundtrack of the loons as they sing their spooky song in the distance.

Northwoods culture would be incomplete without mentioning hunting. Bow season. Rifle season. Turkey, duck, bear. And the granddaddy of them all: deer hunting.

Wisconsin is known as one of the nation's premier deer hunting states. For nine days, thousands of hunters find their way to the Northwoods, armed with rifles and dressed in blaze orange. Out of the thriving herd of over 1.5 million deer, the hunters take home about 300,000 during one season—also known as "the harvest."

I've never been deer hunting, but I remember portions of my eighth-grade class disappearing en masse during the season—a third of all male students vanishing as if by some terrible plague. Suddenly gym class was strangely quiet, and the teachers were slightly more relaxed due to the decrease in population. But then, just as quickly, the boys returned, with stories of the hunt—how snow fell this year and allowed them to track the white-tails, how eight-point bucks were strapped to pickups, and how right now a gutted carcass was hanging from the rafters in their garage.

Our neighbor, Buster, would bring over stacks of venison steaks in a good year, happy and proud to share his abundance. "Take as much as you like, we'll never eat it all," he told us, but warned us about the taste. "It's a little gamey."

MILWAUKEE

Out of the woods and into the city, you'll find Milwaukee, the largest urban place in the state. The population is large enough to offer big-city amenities but small enough to be family-friendly. There are several universities, some of the best hospitals in the country, and a major-league baseball team named the Brewers—as Milwaukee has been home to several of America's largest breweries.

The city rests on the shores of the great Lake Michigan, and its Lake Park was designed by the same man who designed New York City's Central Park, Frederick Law Olmsted. Another world-renowned architect, Santiago Calatrava (famous for the Sydney Opera House), designed a new art museum that sits on the lake's edge, looking like some sort of modern bird-ship complete with retractable wings. Nearby is an enviable marina.

And yet Milwaukeeans have a tendency to be self-deprecating. It's a quality that reaches beyond the city, a charming humility perhaps born of a working class mentality. People generally tend to avoid drawing attention to themselves, and eschew all things pretentious—they might eschew the word *eschew*.

Part of this self-esteem problem might be due to the fact that only ninety miles to the south lies the sprawling metropolis of Chicago. With a population of 600,000, Milwaukee can hardly compete with Chicago's five million. There is no Willis Tower in Milwaukee. There is no Oprah.

Now that I live out of the state, I can take it upon myself to do a little boasting and say this: Milwaukee has a few things on Chicago. It's much more accessible, it's easier to navigate, and it has an impressive variety of restaurants. And Milwaukee kicks ass when it comes to festivals, which is probably how it came to be known as the City of Festivals.

In a given year, you can drive down to the lakefront and attend African World Festival, Arab Fest, Asian Fest, Bastille Days, Festa Italiana, German Fest, Indian

Summer, Irish Fest, Mexican Fiesta, Polish Fest, and Pride Fest. Milwaukee knows how to celebrate its diversity.

The most grandiose of all the festivals, however, is Summerfest—the world's largest outdoor music festival. When I lived in town, I always had a love-hate relationship with this one. You've got to love knowing that for eleven days, you have access to a steady stream of A-list performers, breezy lake weather, an endless amount of food from a variety of cultures, and Brewtown beer. But like any resident in a town that has a tourist attraction, you can begin to resent the influx of visitors—the 100,000 people nightly that clog the highways, honking their horns, whooping out their car windows. It's like a rock concert times one hundred for over a week. By the end, you're ready to get your quiet little city back.

Whether it's the festivals of Milwaukee, the fishing of the Northwoods, or the simplicity of Greater Farmland, the people are really the stars of Wisconsin. There is a certain vibe you get from Wisconsinites that is hard to pin down. To be sure, they are friendly, humble, good-natured folks who put an emphasis on family and friends and community. Not that these qualities don't exist in other places, but you get a heaping helping of it in Wisconsin.

I remember my dad returning from his book-sales trips, after spending days on the road presenting to teachers and librarians all over the state. He always had stories to share about those trips—the busyness of Milwaukeeans, the quiet humor of farm town residents, the slight shift in dialect as you drive further north. He enjoyed traveling around Wisconsin. Tourists may not arrive in droves to marvel at America's Dairyland, or flock there for a sunny retirement, but the people who live there find it hard to leave.

A Note About “It Grows on You”

Aaron Curtis wrote the wonderful piece you’re about to read for a book I wanted to compile about life in the Southeast. Aaron works at the famous Books & Books stores in Coral Gables and Miami. The store’s owner, Mitch Kaplan, is considered one of the most influential and thoughtful booksellers in the land, and his staff reflects his fondness for good words and good deeds. Mitch and his colleagues started and still run the internationally famous Miami Book Fair.

Aaron is working on his first novel and wrote a monthly book column for *Moxxi Magazine*, a free Miami publication geared toward women. I love the following take on life on the Florida coast.

— Carl Lennertz, Executive Director, World Book Night U.S.

It Grows on You
by Aaron Curtis

Although native Miamians swear *Scarface* is no exaggeration, and that Miami Beach in the eighties meant little more than cocaine, violence, and Jewish retirees, my family vacation in grade school felt like a fantasy come to life. I remember Key lime pie. I remember salt, in the air and on my skin. I remember Palmetto bugs, flying burnt caramel cockroaches the size of a man's thumb. I remember overwhelming blue, a huge, cloudless sky over vast, rolling waters of white-capped lapis. Thinking of the first time I saw South Beach is like recalling treasured dreams I've had, or looking at an old photograph of my high school girlfriend.

In college, I dated a girl from Miami. Andi and I commuted between Syracuse University in my hometown and sunshine in her hometown dozens of times, inviting any classmates willing to endure nearly a full day in a car. The first fifteen or sixteen hours go quickly; mountains, winding roads, and states passing by like subway stops. Florida is featureless by comparison. Its highest point of elevation is the lowest of all fifty states. The flat monotony of highway from Jacksonville to Miami is torturous, hours of traffic-choked asphalt, the same median, the same row of trees with the same grass beyond, the same strip mall towns.

Our first trip was four months after Hurricane Andrew, the category five which caused more damage than any storm before it in U.S. history, the synonym for hurricane before Katrina dethroned him. Power and water had been restored to Miami, and people had stretched clear plastic over the missing parts of their homes, but few businesses had returned to the hardest-hit areas. You'd see blocks of kindling with a Taco Bell in the middle, then more blocks of debris and a Pizza Hut. It looked like a wrathful God had judged Miami and spared only fast food.

Andi knew where to find the best beach spots and when to leave to avoid the crowds. She knew which Cuban restaurants had servers who spoke English, which parks were good for private lounging among the banyans (Merry Christmas) or mangroves

(Matheson Hammock), and which promised jaw-dropping beauty (Vizcaya; Fairchild Tropical Botanical Gardens). Coming from Syracuse—with snow from September to May some years—eating fresh-caught grouper at the Lorelei on Islamorada Key and watching the sun set over the Gulf of Mexico felt like an exorcism.

When Andi became my wife and her hometown became our home, I learned that vacationing here was very different from living here. Tourists are expected to sweat. Natives should thrive in the heat. To me, Miami felt like one long, hot day that lasted five years. Breathing was enough to make my clothes stick to my body. Stirring from sleep, my waking mind turned sun reflecting off the cement outside my window into the snow I was used to seeing. Just before endless sun and oppressively cheery sky drove me mad, I began to feel the subtle shifts in temperature and humidity that Floridians call seasons. Wearing jeans and a sweater in seventy-degree weather stopped seeming insane and gradually became a necessity. Still, summers here are the kind of torment it takes amnesia to repeat, like timeshare presentations or childbirth.

My family, northeasterners all (save for two cousins living up in the panhandle), ask me how I can stand it. It takes time, but Florida grows on you.

People here are well traveled. They're grounded, fun-loving, and they come from all over the world. My mother is Kaniahkehake—Mohawk Iroquois—and my father is mostly Scottish. In central New York, I stood out. In Miami's patchwork of races and nationalities, I'm invisible. I didn't realize how heavy that burden was until it was gone. It's satisfying, freeing, and possibly just a side effect of getting older, but I thank the international folks who are now my friends, people I never would have met if I didn't move here, people whose warmth whittled through my northeastern stoicism and made me a Floridian.

Books & Books is Miami's largest independent bookstore. Opened in 1982, it has expanded from Coral Gables to Miami Beach, Bal Harbour, Miami International Airport, and Grand Cayman Island. In my fourth year at Books & Books, a publisher accidentally

shipped us several newly released titles in large-print format rather than the standard hardcover.

Making my retail life even more insignificant by comparison, Andi is an itinerant vision teacher for Miami-Dade, driving from school to school and teaching visually impaired students. She also has a relationship with Miami's Lighthouse for the Blind, a facility that helps visually impaired children and adults. To alleviate a portion of my guilt over the relative magnanimity of our jobs (and to save on shipping charges), I suggest that Books & Books donate the large-print books to the Lighthouse. The publisher and our owner, Mitchell Kaplan, both agree.

The Lighthouse director invites my wife to join their staff for a tour of the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind shortly after. By virtue of Books & Books' donation, I'm invited along. The road trip to St. Augustine, America's oldest city, is barely six hours. Not torturous, but long enough to make me wonder how I managed all those day-long car trips in college.

The Florida School for the Deaf and Blind fits right in among St. Augustine's stately bearded oaks and rock coral walls, looking more like a college campus than anything else. It's the largest facility of its kind in the world.

Because stomping on cement hurts, deaf students cup one hand against the wall and bark a short *hoh* to get each other's attention from a distance. The sound echoes up and down the halls and kids stop to see if it's them being hailed. Deaf couples stretch the boy's T-shirt forward, dip their faces into the neck, and sign inside for privacy. Their faces almost touch. Fabric ripples with hidden movements. Watching them, my inner adolescent feels a twinge of jealousy.

The students at Ray Charles's alma mater are not precious, coddled, or tragic. Moving from class to class, they are barely distinguishable from teens without disabilities. For class work, blind students grow vegetables in triangle-shaped box gardens known as the Pizza Garden. They make benches in woodshop with table saws, routers, and drill presses. Deaf students run the Dragon's Lair, a large dining hall stuffed with sports trophies. The blind students' dining room may be smaller, but their burger-

and-fry combo is delicious. The students exude pure joy doing the simplest tasks: making change, wiping down tables, busing dishes. A cynical part of me wonders how long that joy will last flipping burgers, but most of me marvels at their independence.

To keep the school public, the administration employs three full-timers whose only job is to look for grant money and donations. The results of their efforts are amazing, a blueprint for how schools should look and operate. There's a recording studio, a bowling alley, on-campus dentists and doctors. The dorms are red brick trimmed in white, with spacious bedrooms, living rooms, and kitchens. They're building a job village. The largest classes have ten students. Thirty-eight-hundred-dollar Smart Boards in every room, desks with workspace fit for drafting and storage space like traveling lockers, a science lab that's like walking onto the deck of the Enterprise, a three-hundred-thousand-dollar audiovisual system in the auditorium, and a home ec kitchen that looks like the Food Network started a program called *Top Blind Chef.*

The faculty measures their time here in decades rather than years.

Every child should attend a school as amazing as the Florida School, but Miami-Dade County has its priorities when it comes to budgeting. Rather than address moldy rooms, rickety air-conditioning, overcrowded classes, underpaid teachers, crumbling library books, and pitifully outdated supplies, Dade County commissioners and Miami City managers voted to build a brand-new,$515 million stadium for the Marlins.

But that nonsense is many miles south of St. Augustine.

My favorite part of the tour is a sign hanging on the door to the chemistry lab. It reads "Wear Your Safety Goggles" in type and in Braille. Below that, the sign asks, "Which Would You Rather Read?" In a school for the blind, I find this deliciously ironic.

No one from the Lighthouse seems to.

When I tell people that my wife and her stepfather taught me how to swim, it's shorthand, a way of saying they uncovered a joy in swimming I'd never known. They really did teach me to snorkel, though. Andi and Jim use scuba gear while I snorkel around them, the three of us exploring the coral reefs of Biscayne Bay. We eat lunch in

Stiltsville, a group of houses built on pylons accessible only by boat. At Fowey Lighthouse, we swim among the fish gathered beneath the rusty, barnacle-encrusted support beams. At a safe distance from the reefs, we use a dive board to drag behind Jim's boat. There's usually nothing to look at besides sand and sea grass, but it feels like flying.

The ocean looks lighter on a boat than from the beach. On exceptionally calm days, there's no way to tell where the sky meets the water. Marine life is beautiful, but the peacefulness of bobbing beneath the sun, wrapped in robin's egg green-blue, that sells it for me. You don't realize how loud the city is until you're away from it.

That's Florida's problem. Miami is so loud, it speaks for the whole state. If it's not Miami, it's the Keys, and if it's not the Keys, it's that other destination city with the giant mouse ears. This is a vacation spot enjoyed by people the world over, but there's a different kind of beauty in the day-to-day struggles of the average Floridian.

JC worked as the receiving manager at Books & Books for eleven years, taking night and weekend classes to earn his college degree and teaching certification. He owes this fierce work ethic to his father.

Moya came from Cuba to live with his older sister and her husband when he was fourteen. They put him to work delivering milk in the dark hours past midnight so he wouldn't be late for school the next morning. Now in his fifties, with a handyman business and a family of his own, Moya can hoist a chunk of rock coral over one shoulder that two men young enough to be his sons grunt and sweat to move a few feet (in my and JC's defense, that sucker was heavy). He still helps support a network of siblings and uncles and aunts. He expresses no resentment over working his youth away.

"Times were different," is all he offers, shrugging his wrecking ball shoulders.

Florida is Mo, a South African expatriate who traveled from Canada to New York to California before coming here. She helps manage the café at Books & Books Coral Gables four days a week, tottering to tables over a cane. Mo's hip has needed replacing for five years but she has no health insurance. Compensating for her bad hip has taken a toll her good hip and her back, her shoulder aches from supporting her weight. She uses

a walker at home in the mornings, waiting for the painkillers to take effect. Because the walker doesn't fit the café's tight spaces, she'll take two canes to work when the pain is especially bad. It requires all her strength, reserve, and character to get through four days; she spends her three days off recovering.

Insurance companies won't touch Mo. There have been people who knew people to get her hip replaced *pro bono*, but the connections never worked out. She couldn't get enough money together for a trip to South Africa to have the procedure done there. Mo kept moving forward, kept working, and finally became eligible for Medicaid. It's been long years of intense pain, hope a slow-forgotten salve, but you've never seen a woman so happy to turn sixty-five.

Florida is Doug the Tree Guy. A lifelong Floridian, Doug the Tree Guy is a one-man lawn service, trimming trees and hauling branches, chopping felled palms, wild tamarinds, satinleaf, gumbo limbos, and live oaks into manageable chunks and hauling them off to recycle. Doug supplements by selling rosewood and Norfolk Island pine and spalted mahogany to the South Florida Wood Turners Guild. He speaks with a heavy lateral slur and smells as you'd imagine someone engaged in manual labor in ninety-degree weather would smell. His hands and forearms are always bleeding somewhere. Couple these things with the white-blond hair and ruddy brown skin common to Caucasians who spend inordinate amounts of time in South Florida's sun, and he is easily mistaken for a homeless person.

Look closer and you'll see it's a worker's sweat. The dirt and grime is fresh rather than ingrained. His glasses are fashionable and pricey, his smile perfect, all the fat whittled from him not by malnutrition but by backbreaking labor. Listen past the speech impediment and you'll hear a friendly, outgoing personality, one of those salt-of-the-earth guys who somehow manage to carry the outdoors with them. Speaking with Doug is like taking a minute to lift your face to the sun.

If rumors are to be believed, Doug the Tree Guy "acted" in porn films as a young man.

To find the real Florida, take the back roads where the business signs have laughable grammar, leave the tourist traps, and find the dives. It's not celebrity-spotting at some South Beach club, but who cares? Their stories are everywhere.

In the eighteenth century, Spain owned Florida. It became a haven for escaping slaves, who created all-black communities like the ones Zora Neale Hurston wrote about. Creek Indians, or Maskoki, from Alabama and Georgia—accustomed to settling conflicts with minimal death and grudging truces—fled before English settlers who only understood peace as annihilation of anyone different.

Some Africans and Maskoki (including the Miccosukee) mingled with Florida's native Calusa and Tequesta. The various groups referred to themselves as *yat'siminoli,* Maskoki for "free people." Right around the time European settlers began calling themselves Americans, they began calling yat'siminoli—this mix of Africans, Calusa, Maskoki, Miccosukee, and Tequesta—"Seminoles." African heritage and generations of sun make for a gorgeous, deep reddish-brown skin tone, like polished cocobolo rosewood. Only someone who's never met a Seminole accepts the Cherokees and Navajo who represent them in movies like *Adaptation*.

When the Spanish surrendered claim to Florida, Andrew Jackson vowed to rid Florida of Indians. Over the next half century, thousands of Seminoles were slaughtered, forcibly relocated, or fled by boat to the islands of the Caribbean. The last survivors retreated into the Everglades.

The Calusa and Africans were accustomed to farming land that was by turns arid and swampy. This knowledge allowed Seminoles to adapt to the Everglades' unforgiving climate. The fifty remaining Miccosukee dug deep in the south end of the swamp, living in horrific poverty. A few hundred other Seminoles scraped out an existence around Lake Okeechobee and northeastern portions of Big Cypress.

Andrew Jackson's troops never conquered them.

Five or six generations later, the Miccosukee have four reserves around South Florida. The Seminoles enjoy more reserves than any other nation, six from Tampa on

down. I've never understood why two nations of such close lineage now share little more than mutual disdain.

Money must play a part. Both nations pulled themselves from poverty using tax-free smokes shops and, eventually, casinos. The Seminoles were the first nation to use gambling as a means of self-sufficiency. While the Miccosukee aren't hurting financially, the Seminoles bought the entire chain of Hard Rock Cafes. The Seminoles have more land, greater numbers, and more luxury hotels to entice tourists.

Besides the money, maybe the Miccosukee resented being lumped in with the various groups that came to be known as Seminoles. Although the federal government didn't recognize them as an independent nation until 1962, the Miccosukee never really assimilated with other yat'siminoli.

To celebrate sixteen years together and ten years of marriage, Andi and I recently took a long weekend to the Sunset Capital of Florida. People who give that title to Key West have never been to Naples.

From Miami to Naples, Tamiami Trail cuts through the dense, high greenery of the Everglades the way highways up north cut through the Adirondacks. On the drive we spotted a snapping turtle and an alligator, along with countless egrets, turkey vultures (which Florida natives call wuss hawks), and cormorants sunning themselves roadside.

As we lounge on a balcony in Naples, waves pulse on the beach beneath us. We're languid, sweaty, smiling. Watching the lemon-bitingly beautiful sunset cast shadows over sand like the top of focaccia bread, I experience that same loosening of spirit I felt years ago.

To understand the Naples sunset, peaceful over a wild, deserted beach, it helps to see the sun come up over Miami.

My bicycle is huge, a garage-sale beast I call the Rusty Nail. Knobby, cracked tires that need replacing, the back one worn to threads by a year of biking to work at Books & Books Buying Office. Six miles in, six miles back home. I'm not an environmentalist and

I'm not trying to save money. I need the exercise, but that's not the reason I started biking. Just over two years ago, I was airlifted to a trauma center after fracturing my pelvis, sacrum, and three ribs in a car accident. Recovering from that, I promised myself I'd never take my body for granted again.

The sun brutalizes me on the way home but the morning ride is dark and peaceful, the night coming to an end, hardly any traffic. Sometimes I linger too long over whatever book I'm reading with breakfast. When I swing onto my bike, periwinkle tints the predawn sky and I know I'll be pedaling into the sunrise.

The quality of light turns a row of run-down apartment complexes into a Hopper painting. It gives Latin women waiting at bus stops the gravitas of those photographs Edward S. Curtis took of Indians. The palms and telephone poles in silhouette against an orange-blue horizon, clouds underlined in pink, perfect waves, filling the entire horizon and darkening into a shade of cerulean painters can never quite capture. The sunrise is too perfect, God carelessly showing off, but most don't notice. People go about their morning business, walking dogs, throwing out garbage, power-walking, jogging, standing in driveways with coffee and a cigarette, cursing and rushing their way through the streets, waiting for buses and lights, openings and spaces. Just another hectic day, but the fresh light fills it all with promise.

Bicycling beneath this sky, I know I couldn't live anywhere else.

A Note About “The Wilmot Memorial Library”

I’ve known Susan Scott since her days at the famous Books & Co. in New York City, one of the great bookstores of its time. Susan heeded the siren call home to her native Seattle, and here’s a lovely piece about her childhood library.

— Carl Lennertz, Executive Director, World Book Night U.S.

The Wilmot Memorial Library
by Susan Scott

When I was quite young, in the mid-1950s, I spent a great deal of time with my grandparents, who lived just three doors down from the Wilmot Memorial Library in Seattle's Wallingford neighborhood. The library was housed in a bungalow left to the city in the owner's will, with the adult collection in the living room, children's books in the dining room, and mysteries and westerns back in what had been the kitchen.

My grandparents were voracious readers. My granddad was a regular visitor to the bungalow, checking out tall stacks of books each time, which he always deliberately kept a day or two past their due date; he thought the library could use the money. In those days, long before computers, you checked out a book by writing your library card number on the narrow card in the book's fly-leaf pocket, handing it to the librarian, then receiving rubber-stamped date-due card in return.

My granddad had grown impatient with this system, particularly since he checked out so many books at one time, and had eventually badgered the good librarians into keeping his library card under glass at the big front desk. He just collected the due-date cards and handed them over to the obliging ladies of Wilmot. If they thought he was a pain in the neck, they were too nice to say so.

At a very tender age—those were simpler times—I was allowed to visit the library alone since it was so nearby. And when it was time to check my books out, I'd been instructed to explain that my granddad's library card was there, under the glass—I could barely reach high enough to point—and I was allowed to use it. This worked well unless there was a new employee who had not yet been introduced to the eccentric borrower down the block, let alone his very young granddaughter. The whole story had to be explained all over again and a coworker fetched to corroborate, before I'd be allowed to leave with my books. I took to looking straight at the desk when I walked in, to see if I needed to gird my four-year-old self to break in another rookie on this visit.

Eventually, I asked one of the library ladies if I couldn't have my own card. "Well, you could," she said, "but you'd have to be able to write your name." Well, that was no

problem, I quickly explained; I'd been able to write my name for ages. She looked at me skeptically, but the four- or five-year old girl before her could, obviously, write her name and indeed read, so the form was duly filled out, and on my next visit to my grandparents, I skipped happily down the street to pick up my newly minted Seattle Public Library card. As it was handed over, the librarian told me I was the youngest person in town to have one!

Naturally, I was very proud at the time, and as the years have gone by, there has always been a library card in my wallet. My first job was at the Northeast Branch, not so very many years later. And now, as a bookseller, I haven't strayed too far from these bibliographic beginnings. But my favorite part of the story is the flexibility of all the parties involved, most especially the Wilmot Memorial Library staff. Our much faster-paced, more standardized and regulated world today rarely affords an opportunity for this kind of institutional improvisation.

But when it does, I always say the same thing: This is the way the world should work.

A World Book Night Exclusive

Simply put, we were thrilled when bestselling author Sophie Hannah offered to write this original foreword to the WBN edition of *After the Funeral*. Fans of Agatha Christie—and newcomers as well—will love Sophie's take on the enduring appeal of Agatha Christie over so many years. Thank you, Sophie!

A Foreword to *After The Funeral*

by Sophie Hannah

In a poll conducted by the Crime Writers' Association in November 2013 to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary, Agatha Christie was voted "Best Ever Author." Any other result would, frankly, have been rather a joke. Christie's novels have sold more than two billion copies in 109 languages (and probably more). Her play *The Mousetrap* has been delighting audiences in the West End for over sixty years. It would be fair to say, I think, that no other crime novelist comes close to matching her achievement. For me, as a psychological thriller writer, Agatha Christie is and will always be the gold standard—a lifelong inspiration whose every inventive tale demonstrates exactly how it should be done. It was Christie who made me fall in love with mystery stories at the age of twelve and, rereading her work now at the age of forty-two, I still believe that she cranks up the excitement and the intellectual puzzlement like no other.

In the "Best Ever Novel" category of the Crime Writers' Association poll, Christie won again, with a story that many of her fans believe to be her best: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Indeed, it is a deserving winner for the boldness of its solution. Interestingly, the most popular Christie novels tend to be the ones with the high-concept seemingly-impossible-yet-possible solutions, the ones that take your breath away*: The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, And Then There Were None, Murder on the Orient*

Express. It's easy to see why this might be. Christie, when conceiving these stories, gave her readers exactly what they wanted: the best story possible, the one most likely to elicit gasps of shock and astonishment when the genius solution is revealed at the end.

Sensibly, Christie didn't give a damn about the tedious consideration of "Come on, how likely is this to happen, really?" So long as it could happen in theory—as long as no law of science made it impossible—then she quite rightly deemed it to be plausible, and therefore acceptable fodder for fiction. She would, I suspect, have little sympathy for those contemporary readers who determinedly misunderstand the word *plausible* and use it as if it were synonymous with *commonplace*, *everyday* or *has happened to several people I personally.*

I say "contemporary readers" because I think our expectations of novels have changed. While Christie was alive and writing, my impression is that most readers of crime fiction shared her philosophy of "above all else, tell the most exciting story that you can." Now, however, a far greater value is placed upon what many insist on calling "plausibility" but what is in fact a worrying lack of imagination seeking to curtail the imaginations of others. Many, for example, might feel uncomfortable with a super-clever detective like Hercule Poirot, who always gets the right answer and proves himself over and over again to be a man of unparalleled genius. Some—having met no unparalleled geniuses themselves and therefore finding them impossible to believe in—might say, "No, this is not realistic; can't you have the detective being a bit more ordinary in his capabilities and maybe solving the case by . . . oh, I don't know, maybe putting some fingerprints into the database and finding a match?"

Let's imagine for a second that infallibly brilliant detectives like Poirot and Miss Marple could never exist in real life. Wouldn't it then be all the more important to invent them? To use fiction as a way of enlarging life—making it bigger, better, more interesting, and, crucially, more satisfactory? Of course there has to be a Hercule Poirot! Isn't it precisely the job of fiction to offer us what real life cannot, while at the same time enlightening us with regard to real life? If so, then this is exactly what Agatha Christie does. Her novels are packed with wisdom and experience and psychological

insight. She understood that sometimes the best way to illuminate an important truth about reality is to frame it in a startlingly unusual way, using an outlandish, unforgettable story that will grab everyone's attention.

Christie didn't only tell great stories, however. Her true genius was to convey the story, once she'd come up with it, with palpable relish and irrepressible glee. When you read an Agatha Christie novel, you get a strong sense, all the way through, of how thrilled she is by the clues she's strewn across your path for you to misinterpret or ignore. You can feel her presence behind the text, laughing and thinking, "Tee hee! You're never going to get there before me—I've been too clever for you again!"

Christie's tangible love of storytelling is not her only unique feature as a crime writer. She also manages to combine light and dark, without either of them ever detracting from the other, in a way that no other writer can. Her stories are in no way cozy or twee, though some of their village settings might be; she understands the depravity, ruthlessness, and dangerous weakness of human beings. She knows all about warped minds, long grudges, agonizing need; in each of her novels, a familiarity with the darkest parts of the human psyche underpins the narrative. Yet at the same time, on the surface of her stories there is fun, lightness, warmth, a puzzle to make readers say, "Ooh, this is a good challenge!" The dark side of Christie's work never undermines the feel-good effect in any way; reading an Agatha Christie novel is, above all else, great fun.

In September 2013, I was commissioned by Agatha Christie's estate, family, and publishers to write a new Hercule Poirot novel as a way of celebrating the character's longevity on the printed page. As part of the publicity for the announcement, I was asked to name my favorite novel featuring Poirot. This was a tricky question to answer. I knew for certain that my favorite Miss Marple novel was *Sleeping Murder*—that was easy!—but with Poirot I wasn't sure. I have a very soft spot for *Murder on the Orient Express* because I believe it has the best mystery-and-solution package of all detective fiction. However, when I thought about the Poirot stories as full-bodied novels and not simply for their inventive plots, I ended up deciding that *After the Funeral* was my favorite.

After the Funeral has a brilliant plot, meticulously planted clues, a memorably dysfunctional family at its center, and a truly ingenious solution. But it also has something else that I prize highly: the nontransferable motive. Poirot is forever telling Hastings that motive is the most important feature of a crime, and I agree with him. A nontransferable motive is something that no other murderer in no other crime novel has ever had or will ever have: a motive that is unique to this character in this particular fictional situation. With a nontransferable motive, the reader should ideally think, "Well, although I would never commit murder for this reason, I can absolutely understand why this character did—it makes perfect sense because of their unique personality/predicament combination." On this score, *After the Funeral* works in the most superb way. It also does something else very clever on the motive front. It offers us a two-layer motive of the following sort: "X committed the murder(s) for reason Y. Ah, but why did X have reason Y as a motivation? Because of reason Z."

I am being deliberately cryptic because I don't want to give away any of the wonderful surprises this book contains. All I really want to say is: Read it! Read it now!

And This Just In . . .

Every bookstore and library assigns someone to be the official World Book Night coordinator, to keep things organized there and interact with us here on updates and essential information. They are usually givers themselves somewhere in their town.

We were on deadline for producing this ebook for you when we saw a blog post by a young bookseller in Bellingham, Washington. Sam Kaas is a bookseller at the beautiful Village Books, and he wrote this wonderful piece that captures the magic and serendipity of giving someone a book.

Thank you, Sam, and thanks to all of our wonderful givers!

Why World Book Night Matters to Everybody

By Sam Kaas

So we're doing World Book Night again.

World Book Night is a funny thing. It's sort of paradoxical, if you think about it. For one thing, it doesn't actually take place at night. For another, it's all about handing things out for free and there actually isn't any catch. It is a growing celebration of both the elegantly written word and the bound and printed page in an era of increasing pixelation and isolation. As an event, it's unconventional and surprising, rare and awe-inspiring.

And I'm a book guy, and I like to talk about books, so for me the fact that World Book Night is exciting and great is a little bit of a no-brainer. After all, it's an entire day devoted to putting books into the hands of people who wouldn't ordinarily read them. It not only encourages but requires givers to talk about their favorite books, something most of us, myself included, will happily do for hours with no provocation at all.

And then there's the list of books. What a list it is.

This year's list of World Book Night titles is easily the best ever. *Catch-22* and Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential* share the bill with *Tales of the City*, *The Botany of Desire*, and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*. There's more short fiction (Rebecca Lee's deservedly acclaimed *Bobcat* tops the list) and some graphic novels, too. There are books with large print, and books in Spanish. There is something here for every reader, and it's visceral, it's alive, it's out on the streets. This is passion for literature at its very finest.

But that's not what's really remarkable about an event like World Book Night.

We like to say, these days, that we're wired, that we're always on. Our phones talk to our computers, our computers talk to our cars, and everything in our lives seems to keep tabs on us. We are hooked up and dialed in and synchronized in every imaginable way.

In a world where our possessions do the talking for us, there's very little room to talk to each other. And as a result, we don't do it so much anymore.

I know you've probably heard this argument before, but I'd like to ask you to take a moment and really think about it now. In a single day, how many people do you interact with, face-to-face? Think. Of these, how many are immediate family members, or people you live with? How many are co-workers, or friends you've known for years?

How many are total strangers? Any?

We used to talk to people—to bus drivers, to cabbies, to grocery clerks, to the folks we were sharing the elevator with. We used to exchange pleasantries, make eye contact, laugh about the weather or a seasonally appropriate sports team. And sometimes, just once in a while, we'd have conversations as unexpected as they were fulfilling, as brief as they were meaningful.

I'm sure this still happens. Of course it does. But in a world where our constant quest for connection, for connectivity, has bred mass disconnection, it's even rarer than it used to be.

I'm not what you'd call an extrovert. I'm not a guy who seeks out social situations, or puts himself at the center of the crowd. But I, for one, wish that we would connect a little more.

And herein, I'd like to suggest, lies the true value of World Book Night.

Anybody who's familiar with the ever-popular genre of time-travel science fiction has probably heard of something called the Butterfly Effect. It goes like this: somewhere in China, a butterfly flaps its wings, and this very slight disturbance of the air sets in motion a chain of events resulting, perhaps centuries later, in a hurricane off the eastern seaboard of the United States. A cooking fire in ancient Turkey spawns a drought in modern Texas. A squashed flower in a long-ago South America leads to the extinction of a species of bird one thousand years down the line. There are infinite variations on the theme, but the central element remains the same—a minute, inconsequential, seemingly random action can have monumental effects in another time and place.

But let's forget, for a moment, about the insects and the storm systems. Let's talk now about people and books, and about very short conversations and everyday connections and how an action you barely think twice about might change someone's life.

Say a guy is walking through an unfamiliar city and is about to make a left turn. He looks lost, and a city resident suggests he make a right turn instead and check out a fantastic cafe. Maybe that guy takes the right and ends up meeting his future wife. Maybe he avoids the runaway garbage truck which, seconds later, comes barreling down the street from the left-hand side. Maybe he just gets a really good cup of coffee. Maybe.

Or maybe a woman sees a man in a lobby or a waiting room or on a bus and thinks he seems down, and shows him an already-wrinkled snapshot of her newborn granddaughter. Maybe it's just a picture she's showing to everybody. But maybe this man has been considering taking his own life today. Maybe this is just what he needs to keep living, to keep moving forward. Maybe not. But maybe.

Maybe a girl who only reads when she has to passes by someone in a park with a box of books. And maybe she picks out *Code Name Verity*, or *Miss Peregrine's*

Home for Peculiar Children. Or maybe it's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* or *This Boy's Life.*

And maybe she doesn't like it, but passes it on to a friend. Or maybe she reads it and loves it and keeps it, and starts looking for other books just like it. Maybe she realizes that the book she really wants to read is one that hasn't been written yet.

Maybe she sets out to write that book.

Maybe, years from now, that girl wins the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Maybe.

World Book Night is a day for books. But it's about more than books, too.

It's about talking to strangers and sharing something you love. It's about connection instead of connectivity.

So, we're doing World Book Night again. It's a little crazy, to be sure, and maybe it seems like our world is now too wired in and disconnected for a bunch of people wandering around handing out free books to make any difference, but if you think about it, it doesn't take much. It's only a couple of seconds, an abbreviated motion of the wrist and hand, a couple of shared words. Each book given on World Book Night, and each book received, is an instance of simple, profound connection in a world where it's all too rare.

And if you ask me, that's something.

On April 23, if somebody comes at you, offering a free book, don't ignore them. Don't act like you haven't seen them, or pretend to check your phone. Don't wave them away with a curt "maybe next time" (next time, after all, is next year). Instead, take a minute and talk.

Maybe you'll realize you have a lot in common. Maybe you'll hear a joke that will keep you laughing all day. Maybe you'll get an anecdote or a restaurant recommendation or a piece of advice that will change your life someday.

Maybe you'll just end up with a great book.

And that's not so bad, is it?

AFTERWORD

We hoped you enjoyed this free WBN original ebook.

A few things for your consideration:

- We weren't able to include pieces about all regions of the country. We will cover more geography next year!
- The last page will direct you to more great reading: Links to the first chapters of all the WBN picks this year.
- We'll include giver stories next time!
- We hope that you'll follow us on social media after April 23 and into the summer and next fall! Our website will take you to all links, newsletter sign-up, and a donation button so WBN can continue doing good work with you!

Spread the Love!

World Book Night U.S. promotes and celebrates reading and community. Every year on April 23rd (Shakespeare's birthday) 25,000 volunteers from across the country distribute 500,000 new, free adult and teen-appropriate paperbacks to light and non-readers. Handing out the books person-to-person in their own communities, our givers find the experience empowering, enriching, and life-changing—and the recipients (re)discover the magic of reading with a book they can call their own. For many, it's their first book ever.

Support future World Book Nights with a tax-deductible gift! Every penny donated goes to help spread the love of reading. To donate, click on the button or visit us at http://www.us.worldbooknight.org/how-do-i-get-involved/support-us/donate

It's also possible to make your donation by check, please make payable to "World Book Night U.S." and mail it to 71 5th Avenue, 2nd floor, New York, NY 10003

Keep up with all things World Book Night U.S.! Sign up for our mailing list for news, information, and updates. Click on the button or visit us at http://www.us.worldbooknight.org/how-do-i-get-involved/newsletter

Follow Us!

2014 World Book Night U.S. Titles

The Zookeeper's Wife by Diane Ackerman (W.W. Norton)
Me and Earl and the Dying Girl by Jesse Andrews (Amulet Books)
Zora and Me by Victoria Bond & T.R. Simon (Candlewick Press)
Kitchen Confidential by Anthony Bourdain (Ecco)
The Weird Sisters by Eleanor Brown (Berkley)
The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky (Simon & Schuster)
After the Funeral by Agatha Christie (William Morrow Paperbacks)
Ruins of Gorlan by John Flanagan (Puffin)
Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet by Jamie Ford (Ballantine Books)
Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet (Large Print Edition) by Jamie Ford (Thorndike Press (Cengage Learning))
The Lighthouse Road by Peter Geye (Unbridled Books)
The Tipping Point by Malcolm Gladwell (Back Bay Books)
Wait Till Next Year by Doris Kearns Goodwin (Simon & Schuster)
Catch-22 by Joseph Heller (Simon & Schuster)
The Dog Stars by Peter Heller (Vintage)
Hoot by Carl Hiaasen (Knopf)
Pontoon by Garrison Keillor (Penguin Books)
Same Difference by Derek Kirk Kim (First Second Books)
Enchanted by Alethea Kontis (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)
Miss Darcy Falls in Love by Sharon Lathan (Sourcebooks)
Bobcat and Other Stories by Rebecca Lee (Algonquin Books)
Young Men and Fire by Norman Maclean (University of Chicago Press)
Tales of the City by Armistead Maupin (HarperPerennial)
Waiting to Exhale by Terry McMillan (New American Library)
Sunrise Over Fallujah by Walter Dean Myers (Scholastic)
Twelve Years a Slave by Solomon Northup (Dover)
Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson (HarperTrophy)
The Botany of Desire by Michael Pollan (Random House)
The Raven's Warrior by Vincent Pratchett (YMAA Publications)
Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children by Ransom Riggs (Quirk Books)
When I was Puerto Rican by Esmeralda Santiago (DaCapo)
Cuando era puertorriqueña by Esmeralda Santiago (Vintage Español)
Where'd You Go, Bernadette by Maria Semple (Back Bay Books)
Where'd You Go, Bernadette (Large Print Edition) by Maria Semple (Thorndike Press (Cengage Learning))
Wild by Cheryl Strayed (Vintage)
Presumed Innocent by Scott Turow (Grand Central Publishing)
Code Name Verity by Elizabeth Wein (Disney Hyperion)
This Boy's Life by Tobias Wolff (Grove Atlantic)
100 Best-Loved Poems edited by Philip Smith (Dover)

World Book Night 2014 eBook

an original collection of stories
and essays by booksellers,
librarians, and authors

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