

Books Are Their Business



Writing book reviews for this month's Novel Ideas column are local librarians, seated, from left, Ken Rohrbach, Chris Brown, Carolyn Scheer (on the floor) and Nell Redhage. Back row, from left, are Kim Gluba, Vivienne Beckett, Christy Schink, Portia Clark and Ruth McGinnis.

Missourian
Photo.

By Chris Stuckenschneider

Here's a novel idea — turn *The Missourian's* book column, "Novel Ideas," over to the experts, those who keep readers in the know about books — and their own noses deep in the pages — our local library staffs. Know you'll enjoy reading their reviews in our annual summer book roundup.

"Happens Every Day," by Isabel Gillies

Reviewed by Nell Redhage, Washington Public Library, library director.

When beginning this book, I thought I was reading a novel told in first person about a young mother who thought she was in a perfect marriage and woke up one Sunday to be told otherwise. I was dismayed at the shallow, stereotypical protagonist Isabel Gillies had created.

A New York City girl from old money is recollecting old times spent in the family's summer home in Maine and the who's who of influential people her parents know. She meets a male friend from her childhood at a wedding and they fall instantly in love and get married. He's a professor who gets a job at Oberlin College. As they prepare to move, all of her preconceived prejudices about life in the Midwest emerge.

Somewhere near the middle of the book, the author inserts her surname into the story. It was then I discovered I was reading a memoir! I was amazed how open the author was about how clueless she was. Throughout her retelling it is obvious that Isabel really did not understand her husband.

•See 'Happens' 5D

"The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate," by Jacqueline Kelly

Reviewed by Christy Schink, Scenic Regional Library, children's librarian.

What good fortune! To be a budding, young, 11 3/4-years-old naturalist at the turn of the century, and have a grandfather who knows Mr. Darwin and Mr. Bell. But what if you're also a girl?

Calpurnia Virginia Tate carries her notebook everywhere writing down her observations about the world around her, and with her grandfather makes an amazing discovery. She loves nature and science, but her parents insist that she learn embroidery and cookery.

Follow along as Callie Vee learns about how she fits in — in nature, in her family and in society. I highly recommend "The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate" by Jacqueline Kelly, available at Scenic Regional Library.

"If I Stay" by Gayle Forman

Reviewed by Ruth McGinnis, Washington Public Library, children's librarian.

Everything can change in a blink of an eye. For 17-year-old Mia this fact becomes reality one fateful winter day.

"If I Stay" is a gripping tale about the aftermath of a tragic accident for one family out for a spontaneous drive. Once I began reading this heartbreaking story, I was riveted. It held my attention much like a person's natural reaction when he spots an accident. You want to look away, but somehow can't.

The painful details of "If I Stay" kept me captivated to the end. In an instant, Mia's life is stripped down to a single vital question: Is a life without her family one worth knowing?

Despite the tragic premise this book is actually life affirming. Flashbacks of Mia's life reveal an unconventional yet tightly knit family, devoted to each other's happiness and success. Classified as a Young Adult novel, the book addresses serious issues and there are a few instances of profanity. Mature audiences best read "If I Stay."

The reader cannot help but reflect on the meaning of family and friends in his own life as the book is read. "If I Stay" evokes a sense of gratitude for the significant others in our lives.

"Picking Cotton," by Jennifer Thompson-Cannino, Ronald Cotton

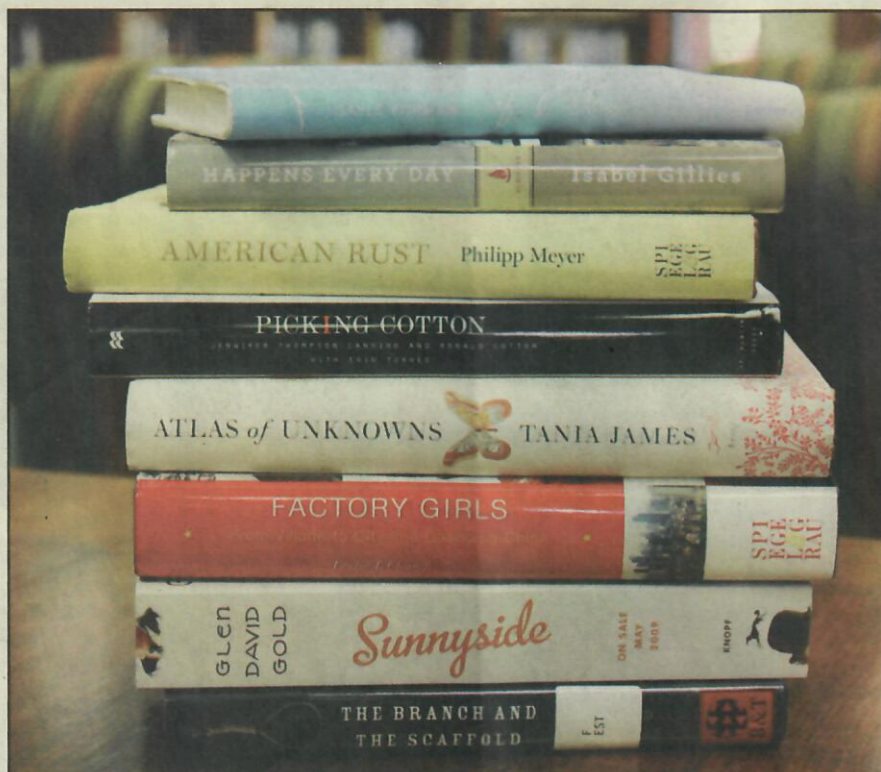
Reviewed by Ken Rohrbach, Scenic Regional Library, director.

How would you feel if you made a mistake that put an innocent person in prison for 11 years? On the flip side — could you ever completely forgive a person whose wrongful identification caused you to lose 11 years of your life in prison?

This book's subtitle "Our Memoir of Injustice and Redemption" gives a hint as to the unusual sequence of events to befall Jennifer Thompson and Ronald Cotton. In 1984 Jennifer Thompson was raped by an assailant that she later positively identified as Ronald Cotton. Through a composite drawing and selection in a police lineup, Jennifer was certain as to the guilt of Ronald Cotton, and he was convicted of the crime.

Cotton, like most men in prison, continued to claim his innocence. Finally, in 1995, after being imprisoned for 11 years, Ronald Cotton was

•See 'Picking' 5D



"American Rust," by Philipp Meyer

Reviewed by Vivienne Beckett, Scenic Regional Library, assistant director.

This thoughtful piece will wake minds and expose the grit and determination of two young men, Isaac English and Billy Poe, who are escaping their hometown for a better life — one on his way to Berkeley, the other following without a plan. Then trouble hits. The police become involved, demonstrating how a flawed law enforcement team naturally adjusts to fix itself, whether it's legal or not.

Within seconds, everything changes for Isaac and Billy. Each encounters unpredictable obstacles along their journey, challenging their minds, stretching their physical abilities to the limit. The relationships they are tied to become dramatically strained and complicated.

Isaac and Billy are two American kids who make choices most face at

•See 'Rust' 5D

"Sunnyside," by Glen David Gold

Reviewed by Carolyn Scheer, Scenic Regional Library, reference/technical services librarian.

Seattle librarian Nancy Pearl (author of "Book Lust") promotes the "Rule of 50" which allows you to put a book aside if it has not grabbed your interest in the first 50 pages (if you are over 50 you can subtract your age from 100). It worked — I managed to slog through about 35 pages of "Sunnyside" by Glen David Gold before admitting that the book defeated me. The remaining 525 pages are a mountain I have not the mental energy to climb.

The concept is interesting — a view of the year 1916 constructed around the life of Charlie Chaplin and a cast of real and fictional characters.

•See 'Sunnyside' 5D

"Atlas of Unknowns," by Tania James

Reviewed by Kim Gluba, Washington Public Library.

"Atlas of Unknowns" is a tale of betrayal, secrets and the love between blood family as well as the familial bonds formed by kindred spirits. "Atlas" takes place in a post-9/11 world, but in the world that James creates, the falling towers are not just a symbol of a world gone mad, but a mirror image of real-life sisters, where if one falls the other will follow; but with the real sisters one follows with every intention of bringing the other back.

The point of view of the novel switches from one sister residing in India to the other who is temporarily, so her family believes, attending school in New York City. James does such an impeccable job with the details and overall "feel" of each city that the reader is completely

•See 'Unknowns' 5D

"The Branch and the Scaffold," by Loren Estleman

Reviewed by Chris Brown, Scenic Regional Library, branch coordinator.

"The Branch and the Scaffold" is a rollicking tour of Old West justice and the moral and ethical implications of being a judge in an untamed territory, where "all your judgments are final, with no appeal between you and Almighty God."

The story focuses on Isaac Charles Parker, the real-life legendary "Hanging Judge," who was responsible for hanging more men in his territory than perhaps any other judge of his era. Believing that swift and harsh punishment could set an example and deter outlaws, as the book opens we find that Parker, mere weeks after moving to the territory to take his position, has sentenced six men to hang at the same time.

Interspersed with Parker's story, each criminal's own story is outlined, weaving a historical narrative which eventually brings each of these men (or women) face-to-face with the judge and with their own morality and mortality. Estleman's book, though historical fiction, is written like a fast-paced Western. The action is fierce, the suspense enormous, and the settings and characters,

•See 'Branch' 5D

"Factory Girls" by Leslie T. Chang

Reviewed by Portia Clark, Washington Public Library.

"Factory Girls" is a non-fiction analysis of the largest human migration in the history of the world. In China, 130 million migrant workers left their homes in small villages to head to the cities in the Pearl River Delta in hopes of getting well-paying jobs in one of the numerous factories there.

Chang is a Chinese American correspondent for the Wall Street Journal in Beijing who traces this migration through the perspective of two young women, Min and Chunming, as they leave homes in poor farming villages and make their way to the assembly lines in Dongguan to attempt to rise economically to a better life.

Min has a middle school education and is only 16 when she leaves home but it is not hard to buy a forged document listing her age as 18, the required age to work in the factory. Over 70 percent of the workers in these factories are female and under 25 years of age.

Even though these young girls have no real adult supervision, and their living conditions in

•See 'Girls' 5D

'Girls'

•Continued From 1D

large dormitories are severe by Western standards, they see the freedom and potential for earning money as a step forward from the alternative: farm work from sunup to sundown, the whole family often sleeping in one bed in a brick house with no heat or running water, television is the only escape.

Even though both girls are eventually successful in moving up the economic spectrum and are empowered by earning cash for the first time, this rise comes with a downside. Traditional family values are sacrificed, long lasting friendships are almost impossible to maintain, ethical restrictions on behavior are lost, and corruption is rampant. After tasting life in the fast-paced cities, more and more girls reject the idea of returning home to a boring and stifling existence, returning only to celebrate the New Year.

This book is a fascinating study of a generation that is moving up socially, educationally and economically as a result of moving from the farms, where a family might have only one acre to till, to the factories which serve as stepping stones to freedom, opportunity and personal growth. The reader's understanding of modern China and its future is thoroughly enhanced by Chang's penetrating insights and readable style.

'Picking'

•Continued From 1D

indeed found innocent on the basis of DNA evidence.

Surprisingly, Cotton had already forgiven his accuser, knowing that it truly was a case of mistaken identity. These two individuals have now participated in numerous seminars for the law enforcement community to raise awareness of the pitfalls of eyewitness identification. While this book raises difficult issues with no easy answers about some of the workings of the criminal justice system, it also provides a portrait of resilience and faith that eventually triumphed.

'Happens'

•Continued From 1D

band or their relationship. She actually was enabling her husband's affair with their female "friend" and colleague.

If you are a woman who has been, or is going, through a divorce where you are caught quite unaware by your husband's infidelity, then you might appreciate reading this memoir and knowing that you are not the Lone Ranger. Otherwise, I would not recommend this book.

'Branch'

•Continued From 1D

realistic and noteworthy.

Throughout the book, as the judge convicts each of the accused (and sentences many of them to die), he wrestles with the same questions which exist today: Is capital punishment a viable option, and does it have the desired deterrent effect?

In short, Estleman has managed to create a historical novel bigger than most — a book which wrestles with many serious moral issues through the eyes of a territory judge, and yet keeps readers on the edge with action and suspense. Highly recommended.

'Unknowns'

•Continued From 1D

immersed in the surroundings knowing exactly where the characters are at all times, physically speaking, of course.

"Atlas" is a novel with many avenues to explore, from the "wrong-footed feelings" the characters all seem to share, to the search for the answers, to all the secrets that are being kept, and the realization that the "beginnings of knowledge (you) did not want" is the ascent into adulthood.

James' debut novel may be a little too meticulously planned — the themes almost being spelled out to the reader — with an ending that seems to be lacking some of the magic the rest of the work possesses, but it is one that is painted with exquisite imagery. Lines read as if they are extracted from poems, creating a story that is not only entertaining but a true piece of art.

'Sunnyside'

•Continued From 1D

acters (including several dogs). The year is significant — World War I is bringing an end to just about everything people have taken for granted for centuries and thrusting them into an uncertain future.

The characters are from all parts of society and I could see that they were going to interact in cleverly plotted ways to tell their stories. The language of the book is marvelously descriptive and the characters come to life immediately, but the language is also the barrier for me. It is packed with metaphor, detail and sudden shifts in location and viewpoint, and reading it requires your constant attention.

I couldn't shift into that effortless reading mode where the story flows into your mind and you don't even notice you are turning the pages.