

BODWELL'S BAKER'S DOZEN

My Favorite 13 Books of 2009

As the 2009 season for "Best of..." lists rolled around in December, I figured, *why not me?*

Well, the moment I started to make my list, I knew that I wouldn't be able to keep it to the standard "Top 10." For one thing, I wanted to make room for two collections of poetry and two pieces of nonfiction. That was four books right there, so how could I keep the rest of my choices to just six titles?! Well, I couldn't...

In addition, while most "Best of..." lists this time of year only include books that were published during 2009. Well, not my list! Nope. My list reveals that I am perpetually behind in my reading and oftentimes discovering great writers or great books that many people have known about for years.

Happy New Year, Happy Reading, and Bon Chance!

13) *Reading Like a Writer* Francine Prose

I'm putting this one in the "13" slot because I actually first read it in late 2008...but it was so good that I re-read it in 2009! I must admit that I've never read any of Prose's novels...but if she writes fiction as well as she writes *about* fiction, her books must be staggeringly good. I recommend this gem of a writing craft book to every writer. Prose moves through chapters such as "Word," "Sentences," "Paragraphs," etc, citing wonderful literary examples along the way, and eventually arrives at the final chapter "Chekhov." What's not to love about that?

12) *Of the Farm* John Updike

I was reading this book, Updike's calm, lyrical third novel (just after *The Centaur*), when the great man of American letters passed away in January 2009. Though I love several of his short stories, I was never a huge Updike devotee. So, I was surprised at how much his death moved me. I read his obit several times, and re-read his 1966 interview in *The Paris Review*, as well as several of my favorite stories in his collection *Pigeon Feathers*. In terms of craft, it was a very educational bit of re-reading. Here's a little taste of Updike's prose skills (not from *Of the Farm*, but an early story called "A Sense of Shelter"...because it fits the season!) that made me understand why he was considered such a venerated man of American letters:

“Snow fell against the high school all day, wet big-flake snow that did not accumulate well. Sharpening two pencils, William looked down on a parking lot that was a blackboard in reverse; car tires had cut smooth arcs of black into the white, and wherever a school bus had backed around, it had left an autocratic signature of two V’s.”

11) *From Our House to Bauhaus* Tom Wolfe

I usually can’t stomach Wolfe for very long—when it comes to New Journalism, I’d much rather read Gay Talese any day of the week. However, this is a wonderfully slim, bouncing volume by Wolfe and I recommend it to anyone who is both literary and interested in architecture. In 2010, I’m digging into Le Corbusier’s *Towards a New Architecture*!

10) *Reasons for and Advantages of Breathing* Lydia Peelle

Both the title and stunningly simple cover design of this book (by Milan Bozic) caught my eye—it’s a gorgeous paperback original from Harper Perennial. Then, I flipped the book over and read raves by both John Casey and Simon Van Booy, two writers I admire. Well, after I read the book, I can say this: all titles, design, and great blurbs aside, Peelle is one hell of a writer and this debut collection was one of my big “discoveries” of the year. The stories “Kidding Season” and “Sweethearts of the Rodeo” are a couple of my favorites from the collection.

9) *For the Sake of the Light* Tom Sexton

I discovered the poet Tom Sexton years ago via his fine hand-bound, letterpress edition *Leaving for a Year*, published by the venerable Adastra Press. This collection is Sexton’s 192-page “New and Selected.” The former Poet Laureate of Alaska, Sexton handles the landscape of the snow-covered north with the elegance and lucidity of the greatest Chinese poets. I was selfishly pleased to see Sexton adding so many Maine poems (where he spends part of each year) to his already stunning cache of Alaska poems.

8) *God is Dead* Ron Currie, Jr.

I have to admit that when I first picked up this debut collection of linked short stories by a Maine native, I was worried that it would come off as a gimmick—after all, God in fact dies in the opening title story and from there on in, every story is set in a world where God is dead...and everyone knows it. But in his debut collection, Currie handles all this with amazing aplomb. He went on to win the Young Lions Fiction Award from the New York Public Library...and he lives up to the *New York Times Book Review* comparison to a young Kurt Vonnegut—I would say there’s a little Denis Johnson in there, too, perhaps even some Richard Brautigan.

7) ***Unaccustomed Earth* Jhumpa Lahiri**

I can honestly say that during every single Lahiri story I have ever read, there is a moment when I just pause and bask in the glow of an exceptionally elegant line. This collection is so good that when it was released in 2008, the judges of the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award skipped the whole “shortlist” phase of the prize and handed it right to Lahiri! It would be shameful to say this talented author writes stories about the “Indian-American” experience...she writes stories about the *human experience*—and each one of us is all the richer for it.

6) ***The Shell Collector* Anthony Doerr**

This is why I love keeping old editions of literary journals on my bookcases: I picked up a Fall 2001 edition of *The Paris Review* to look for something I was researching and saw “The Caretaker” by Doerr in the table of contents. “Oh yeah,” I thought, “I’ve been meaning to read him!” Well, that story required me to stop several times, hold the open book against my chest, and just catch my breath. “Powerful” doesn’t even begin to describe what Doerr has done in those few pages. As for the collection itself, the title story alone is worth the cover price.

5) ***All-American Poem* Matthew Dickman**

I met Matthew this past summer at the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference. We both bunked in a sweet little building called the Annex. On the day of the picnic lunch at Robert Frost’s old farm, Matthew and I walked together for the two or so miles from Bread Loaf to the farm. We talked about loving; loving our family, friends, women; just loving. And Matthew recited the Jack Gilbert poem “Failing and Flying” to me. The piece begins: “Everyone forgets that Icarus also flew.” Well, there’s no question that Matthew is a wonderful guy to spend a summer day in Vermont talking life and writing with, but he’s also published a gorgeous first-collection of poetry full of humor, hurt, tenderness, wit, and intelligence. Read it and feel at ease: the future of poetry in this country is in very capable hands.

4) ***Out Stealing Horses* Per Petterson**

This was my “Summer Beach Book.” Who doesn’t love sweating beside the salty Atlantic while reading a quiet, snowy Norwegian novel about an old man alone in a cabin in the woods grappling with his past and his mortality? This novel (thanks in part to translator Anne Born) contains the kind of “simple” language that is anything but simple to write. It also won the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (the world’s largest monetary literary prize for a single work of fiction published in English: 100,000 Euro). This book felt as though Petterson let the whiteness of

snow blow in and around his sentences...and that whiteness has a haunting after-effect.

3) **Water Dogs** Lewis Robinson

This is Maine-native Lewis Robinson's first novel, and the follow-up to his incredible debut story collection, *Officer Friendly and Other Stories*. My "number six" author, Anthony Doerr, actually reviewed this novel about a young's man search for self within himself, his family, and his community for the *New York Times Book Review*. Doerr accurately noted that Lewis's snowy novel is "a quietly commanding book, one that exists mostly within itself..." There is a chapter in *River Dogs* wherein the family patriarch of the book—known simply as "Coach"—dives into the ocean in the middle of winter in order to save the family dog from drowning—that chapter is so perfect that it should have been included in the *Best American Short Stories* of year. In addition to Lewis's prose skills, he is a wonderful guy. I read this book in galleys and then interviewed Lewis about writing his first novel; that interview is still available on his web site: www.lewisrobinson.com

2) **Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It** Maile Meloy

Okay, Full Disclosure: I "heart" Maile Meloy. Big time. I've read everything Maile has written...twice. I once found something like eight first edition copies of Meloy's first collection, *Half in Love*, at this discount bookstore. I bought every copy so I could give them away to friends! So, I was *really* excited when I heard that this new collection was being released in June. Back in...oh, I don't know, March...I contacted her agent and editor and publicists and asked if I could get my grubby hands on a copy of bound galleys...I just couldn't wait! Riverhead Books came through and I got read the book about two months before it hit the shelves. Maile delivered with a stunning collection of stories that are concise, confident, and empathetic. The opening story, "Travis, B." is one of my favorites, as is "Red from Green." After reading the collection, I interviewed Maile about the book and the craft of the short story. You can find it here: <http://fictionwritersreview.com/interviews/the-rebel-from-helena-an-interview-with-maile-meloy>

1) **Love Begins in Winter** Simon Van Booy

Stumbling upon this collection and writer was, hands down, my "Big Discovery" of the year. I completely lucked into hearing Simon read in New Hampshire back in late June. His work knocked me out of my chair. He was also just a completely charming guy. I bought and devoured this collection...then I re-read it to savor the lyrical prose. By October, I'd arranged to host Simon for his first trip to and reading in Maine. His generosity and good-humor touched many people in the community, including and especially my seven-year-old daughter, who now wildly

adores Simon and keeps a poem beside her bed that they typed together on my grandfather's 1920s Royal typewriter.

In between meeting Simon in June and his visit to Maine in October, *Love Begins in Winter* won the coveted Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. "Unusual for a work of serious literature," noted the O'Connor jurors, "this book won with its consistently positive and optimistic approach to examining the travails of human experience."

This New Year will see not only the re-issue of Simon's first collection, *The Secret Lives of People in Love* (with a bonus story added), but also the publication of his first novel, *The Greek Affair*. I can almost guarantee that that book will have a place on my favorite books of 2010!

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