Nonfiction Reviews:

The Foreigner's Gift: The Americans, the Arabs, and the Iraqis in Iraq by Fouad Ajami

Amidst all of the debate about the Iraq War, Ajami offers a thoughtful analysis of the situation in Iraq today. As a recognized expert in Middle East affairs, including his position as a Professor of Middle East Studies at the School of Advanced International Studies at John Hopkins University, Ajami has been granted unmatched access to diverse places and people representing a broad spectrum of views in Iraq. This access has enabled him to offer a unique perspective on the current crisis and the foreseeable future with a non-partisan eye offering a reasonable assessment of what Iraq’s future can hold. (Review by Jacque Miller)

Fiction Reviews:

Water for Elephants by Sara Gruen

This delightful, poignant book is one of the best novels I’ve read in a long time. Ninety- (or ninety-three) year-old Jacob Jankowski hates his life—living in a nursing home where he barely recognizes his weekly visitors, cursing the loss of mobility, eating soft foods he hates (oh, what he would do for an apple!), and trying to fend off the onset of senility the best he can. When the circus comes to town, the past comes rushing back as he recalls the events of his twenty-third year when disaster strikes, and he runs off to find himself in, of all places, the circus!! Providing a behind-the-scenes look into the world of the big top, Gruen shows us the magic and the dark side as well—and weaves a fascinating, expertly researched and detailed story about this part of American history. And the ending—what an ending!! (Review by Jacque Miller)

The Usual Rules by Joyce Maynard

In this story, thirteen-year-old Wendy heads off to school with thoughts of a typical teen’s day ahead: she’s eager to see her friends, she has an argument with her mother, her little brother is a pain, and her step-father is a tad annoying. But the day takes on a whole new meaning because the date is 9-11-2001. Wendy lives in New York City, and her mom works in the Twin Towers. This is a story of growth and healing for young and old alike. (Review by Jane Spencer)

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Classic Fiction Collection

This new collection highlights great works of literature in the fiction collection at the Ong Library. The new Classic Fiction Collection will serve as a browsing collection for leisure reading as well as a curricular support for assigned reading. The titles are shelved at the end of the Fiction Collection on the first floor of the Library.

(continued on page 3)
(continued from page 1):

Elements of Style by Wendy Wasserstein

The most vaunted members of New York City high society populate this novel with alternating chapters focusing on various characters’ experiences. From Frankie, the renowned pediatrician voted #1 in Manhattan, to Samantha, the married socialite with a distinguished family tree, the reader gets to peek into one of the most exclusive segments of American society. The most memorable scenes in this novel demonstrate the equalizing aspects of the human condition: how the privileged few still experience a coexistence of sorrow and joy in their lives, and that family, love, and friendship are just as priceless for the very wealthy as for anyone else. The tumultuous post-September 11 setting adds tension to the lives of those people who previously believed that money could protect them from the unpleasant realities of life.  (Review by Christina Sent)

Second Honeymoon by Joanna Trollope

Second Honeymoon is an entrancing family drama that speaks to anyone who has left home or is left with an empty household. Edie Boyd has just seen her youngest son off to live with his girlfriend. Edie’s older children are well into their adult lives, and the classic empty nest syndrome has taken hold of her. Edie’s husband is thrilled to find that after all the years of child rearing that they will finally have time together. However, Edie has other ideas and finds ways to fill the void, and one by one, the adult children return home as well as a young actor Edie befriends. Trollope’s family dramas are always engaging, and watching Edie, her husband, and the children juggle their new roles keeps this novel interesting with many poignant moments. (Review by Melissa Slager)

Twelve Sharp by Janet Evanovich

A little bit lurid, a little bit loony, and a whole lot of fun is what Janet Evanovich generally provides in her Stephanie Plum novels. Twelve Sharp is no exception, although it’s one of her more meager efforts. Every one of the series is pure brain candy, or perhaps more appropriately, brain doughnuts. Bon appétit. (Review by Suzi Morris)

The Messenger by Daniel Silva

In Daniel Silva’s newest novel, The Messenger, the Israeli government recruits American Sarah Bancroft to help expose an Al-Qaeda terrorist. Her mentor on this dangerous mission is Gabriel Allon, Israel’s top “secret” agent. This is a fast-moving tale that offers glimpses into the working world of the Vatican City, the art world, and the hazardous relationship that the United States has with Saudi Arabia’s ruling elite. I believe that Silva has written this fictional story as a cautionary tale. (Review by Holly Bunt)

The History of Love by Nicole Krauss

Octagenarian writer Leo Gursky is certain the end is near. He has a weak heart, lives alone in his cramped New York apartment, and feels invisible. He’s desperate to connect with the outside world but lives in his memories and imagination. As an adolescent in Poland, he wrote an autobiographical novel called “The History of Love” based on his true love Alma. When his journey to meet Alma in America was delayed, he learned that she was forced to marry another man. Leo not only lost Alma but also a son he would never know. Now, a teenage girl in New York named for the love interest in Leo’s book is searching for its author. Her widowed mother is translating the book into English, and Alma is on a quest to find the original Alma and Leo. It is an enthralling tale of love, loss, and our need to connect with others. Krauss’ richly layered prose should be savored. My book group enjoyed a lively discussion of this novel. (Review by Paula Campanelli) [Recommended in Spring ’06 by Helen Gregory]

(continued on page 3)
Nonfiction Reviews: (continued from page 1)

My Life in France by Julia Child and Alex Prud’Homme

Julia Child takes us back to her culinary beginnings in this posthumous autobiography. My Life in France is a wonderful retelling of Julia’s story with her husband and their time in France, Germany, Norway, and the United States. While her husband Paul worked for the USIA (United States Information Agency), Julia recounts her journey to become a Cordon Bleu chef. Along the way she met two wonderful friends and fellow chefs who together developed and created the classic French cookbook, Mastering the Art of French Cooking. This book is a terrific peek into the style, dedication, creativity, and life of Julia Child written with her great-nephew. (Review by Melissa Slager)

What Jesus Meant by Garry Wills

This is a short book, but even so, I found that Mr. Wills is able to illustrate the ongoing enigma of Jesus. He contends that Jesus is apolitical, but just as in his own time, he is now part of wide-ranging political machinations. Wills describes a radical Jesus who would be repulsed by the idea of a Christian state and by an organized and opulent Christian religion. Wills believes that Jesus would have considered this structured religion to be the world of Caesar, and Jesus’ reign is not of that world. Wills writes that Christ would eschew all of the material things people have come to want and would have people embrace those individuals in society that they go out of their way to avoid. He believes that Jesus demands a great deal from us, and at times, people have rewritten their view of him to make him easier to accept. Wills surmises that mortals will never easily comprehend Jesus and placing their own interpretations on his message would be wrong. (Review by Tom Germain)

Fiction Reviews: (continued from page 2)

The Torso by Helene Tursten

Pursuing more best-selling Scandinavian mystery authors whose novels are being translated into English, I discovered another gem in Swedish author Helene Tursten, whose police procedurals feature Detective Inspector Irene Huss. In this recently translated novel, a torso washes up on the shore near Goteborg, Sweden, and Huss’s search for clues leads her to Copenhagen where the bodies begin to pile up. Great writing and an interesting story for those of you who like serious crime novels and detailed police procedurals. (Review by Jacque Miller)

False Impression by Jeffrey Archer

Archer’s latest novel, after a nine-year writing absence, is a mild thriller. Archer has long-included art as a theme in his tales. False Impression involves a stolen Van Gogh painting, a FBI agent, an art historian, and a “chase” from New York to Budapest to Japan via the English countryside in the days following the 9/11 Twin Towers disaster. This is not his best, but Archer remains a noteworthy contemporary storyteller. (Review by Jane Spencer) [Recommended in Summer ’06 by Christine Borrmann]

Can’t Wait to Get to Heaven by Fannie Flagg

Elmwood Springs, Missouri (the setting of her previous novel, Standing in the Rainbow), is the backdrop to Flagg’s latest novel about the meaning of life. Elner Shimfissle falls off her ladder while picking figs, is stung by many bees, and is rushed to the hospital, but she dies upon arrival. Elner’s niece rushes to her side as word gets out in Elmwood Springs that she has passed away. Elner has many friends who are affected by her death and realize what an impact she had on her family and the people of Elmwood Springs. Elner actually comes back to life, but not before she has many amusing encounters with those who died before her. Fannie Flagg has such a delightful and refreshing way of engaging the reader. There is a seamless shift between very poignant and very funny chapters. Elmwood Springs is a wonderful town to visit. (Review by Melissa Slager)

Digging to America by Anne Tyler

This book was suggested by a friend who had read it for her Book Club. I always enjoy Anne Tyler’s works, and this was no exception. Two couples of American and Iranian descent meet by chance at the Baltimore airport while greeting their newly adopted Korean baby girls. The two families decide to celebrate the anniversary of their daughters’ arrivals with a party each year inviting extended family and friends. The two families become so close that one couple moves to the other’s neighborhood so the girls can grow up together. Conflicts arise between the two families due to cultural differences and gender gaps, but differences are smoothed over, keeping the close relationship alive. (Review by Sue Donnelly)
Jeffrey Cronheim recommends:
The Count of Monte Cristo
by Alexandre Dumas

Look for this title in the new Classic Fiction Collection at the Ong Library! (see details on page 1)

Hal Donnelly recommends:
Great Expectations by Charles Dickens

“When I wish to read a book I love and never tire of, I reread this one. I can not tell you how many times I have read and taught it.”

Robert Aguilar recommends:
Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers by Mary Roach

“For those who are interested in the fields of medicine or forensics and are aware of some of the procedures, this book makes excellent reading.”

[School Library Journal] [Reviewed in Summer '05]

Jeanne Kidera recommends:
Delights & Shadows by Ted Kooser

“A really nice little book of poems by a former poet laurate... The poems are both quiet and stirring. They are sweet and genuine, yet avoid clichés. Well done poetry by a well-known poet.”

Kristin Huntley recommends:
The Glass Castle: A Memoir by Jeannette Walls

“The Walls children learned to support themselves, eating out of trashcans at school or painting their skin so the holes in their pants didn't show... One by one, each child escaped to New York City. Still, it wasn't long before their parents appeared on their doorsteps.” [Publishers Weekly] [Reviewed in Summer '06]

Lisabeth Robinson recommends:
She's Come Undone by Wally Lamb

“A young woman battles childhood trauma, family dysfunction and obesity to become a whole person who feels she deserves to be loved.”

Christine Borrmann recommends:
A Parchment of Leaves by Silas House

“I highly recommend it!”

Nate Mealy recommends:
Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era by James M. McPherson

“It is by far one of the best American history books I have ever encountered.”

Profiles in Courage by John F. Kennedy

“Highlights a few American congressmen who had the moral courage and integrity to fight for what they believed in, regardless of the costs... a great beginner read for anyone interested in American politics.”

Will McIntire recommends:
Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy by Viktor E. Frankl

“Timeless memoir and meditation on finding meaning in the midst of suffering.” [amazon.com]

Jeff Namiotka recommends:
City of God by E.L. Doctorow

“I had the good fortune to hear Doctorow speak back in November of 2005 at my alma mater. I’m ashamed to say that at that time I had not read any of his books. I picked up City of God the following day and read it cover to cover. It had been a long time since a book “blew me away” to such an extent. It’s brilliantly conceived and crafted.”

The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World by Matthew Stewart

“A historical-fictional account of the chance (or perhaps not so chance) meeting between Spinoza and Leibniz during the final year of Spinoza’s life. It argues for the profound influence of Spinoza (the heretic) upon the philosophy of Leibniz. The thesis is unconventional and even radical, but it is argued quite persuasively. The debate implicit in the thought of these two great minds sets the stage for the emergence of modernity.”

Gerard Manoli recommends:
The Enemy by Lee Child

“Arguably today’s finest thriller series.” [Publishers Weekly]