



Photo of owl by Harm Weustink

A Newsletter for Employees of the University of Louisville Libraries  
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# The Owl

*"The Owl of Minerva takes flight only as the dusk begins to fall." — Hegel*

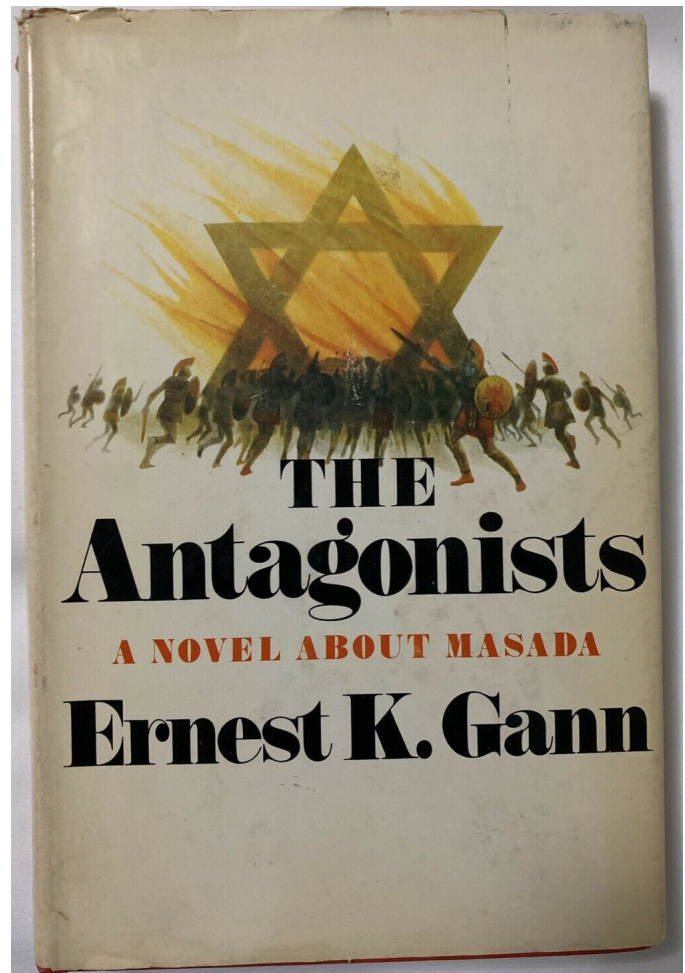
## Readers' Picks 2020

Written and compiled by Christopher Poché, Ekstrom Library

Without access to our library or the Louisville Free Public Library these past four months of our crazy times, I have relied upon my own library for "new" books to read. I stopped buying books for a number of reasons a few years ago, one of them being that I recognized that sometimes just the purchase of a book satisfied any real desire or practical prospect I had to read it. My library thus has its fair share of unread books, which has lately come in handy.

I purchased Ernest K. Gann's *The Antagonists* in a used bookshop several years ago because I fondly remembered watching the 1981 television miniseries based on that novel when I was a kid. The story is a fictionalized account of the Roman siege of the Jewish plateau fortress Masada in 73 and 74 CE. When the nearly 1,000 Jews resisting the Roman occupation of Palestine realized that their cause was lost, they committed suicide together rather than surrender. As a kid, I was mesmerized by the performance of Peter O'Toole, who portrays Lucius Flavius Silva, the Roman general leading the siege. And though I was too young to know O'Toole from William Shatner or have any understanding of what makes great acting, that performance and the shock of the mass suicide of the Jews were great sparks to my imagination that fueled my love of history.

Perhaps that is too great a legacy for Gann's original novel to live up to some thirty years later, but I ended up being disappointed with the book for reasons specific to its form and not because of my personal expectations. The novel is called *The Antagonists*, which seems to imply a certain narrative dynamism, but the book is oddly inert, switching focus from one of the two leaders (along with Silva, the other being the Jewish resistance leader Eleazar ben Ya'ir) chapter



to chapter. Though this could have led to an interesting long-distance battle of the minds, the alternating chapters largely focus on each leader's own particular circumstances and the problems they confronted within their own communities. I'm not saying this is uninteresting, only that the struggle between the Romans and the Jews is unexpectedly secondary. The two antagonists meet face to face only once at the end of the novel. This reflects a certain historical reality. The Jews were in a fortress hundreds of feet above the sieging Romans, and indeed it is doubtful that the two leaders ever really met. The miniseries ameliorated this by expanding the action of the story to skirmishes before the Jews retreated to Masada, offering more chances for Silva and Eleazar to meet. Though the novel did not live up to the miniseries, I am still glad to have finally read it.

Another book I bought some years ago is Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, again inspired to do so by films I had seen, in this case *Capote* (2005) and *Infamous* (2006), both of which chronicle Capote's research that produced his innovative non-fiction novel about the 1959 murder of the Clutter family by a pair of felons recently released from prison. This book's classic status is well-earned. It is a real page-turner. When I enthusiastically recommended it to my sister, she recoiled at the idea of reading a book about something so gruesome. But though the book does describe the details of the murders (no more and no less than necessary, I thought), it focuses more on the history and personalities of the family members, the effects of the murders on a close-knit rural community, and the psychologies of the two murderers. It is indeed a tragic story, but one compellingly told.



I have written before in this column about being a fan of Philip Roth. For a time I dutifully purchased each of his novels as they were published, but Roth was prolific up to his retirement in 2012 and I just couldn't keep up. The last book I bought was his 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*, but I never got around to reading it until this summer. It is an alternative history novel that imagines that Franklin D. Roosevelt lost his 1940 re-election bid to Charles Lindbergh. While Lindbergh is famous for his aviation triumphs, it is less well known that he was a member of the America First Party, which argued against American involvement in the Second World War. In a controversial speech for the party, Lindbergh argued that Jewish interests, along with the British, were pushing the United States unnecessarily into the war. In the alternative world of Roth's novel, President Lindbergh keeps the United States out of the war and institutes policies that appear to be anti-Semitic. One of the many clever things about the novel is that all of Lindbergh's actions are open to multiple interpretations, and it is unclear if he is truly anti-Semitic. For example, is his "Just Folks" program, which relocates Jewish families to various areas of the country, an attempt to destroy historic Jewish communities or an effort to better assimilate them into American life? Whatever Lindbergh's intentions, anti-Semitic sentiments and violence increase

across the nation. Without giving too much away about the plot, I will mention that our city of Louisville is the setting of the novel's climax when the famous radio announcer Walter Winchell, a vociferous critic of President Lindbergh, is assassinated, sparking a riot. Lindbergh flies to the city on the Spirit of St. Louis to address the violence and disappears on his return flight to Washington, D.C., sparking a constitutional crisis.

As often happens in Roth's novels, there is a character who stands in for Roth's perspective. In some novels, it's an alter ego such as Nathan Zuckerman, a successful novelist like Roth. This time, it's Roth himself as a child, living in a Jewish neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey (where the real Roth grew up), observing a rising tide of anti-Semitism as he tries to go about his life, learning the ways of the world and how he fits in it. This allows Roth to do one of the things he does best, which is to present the interiority of his characters, while expanding his narrative canvas to an alternate world of American history. Though Roth has produced some fantastic plots and addressed history before, *The Plot Against America* is his only alternative history novel, and it is a testament to his mastery that he pulls this one off with his usual panache.

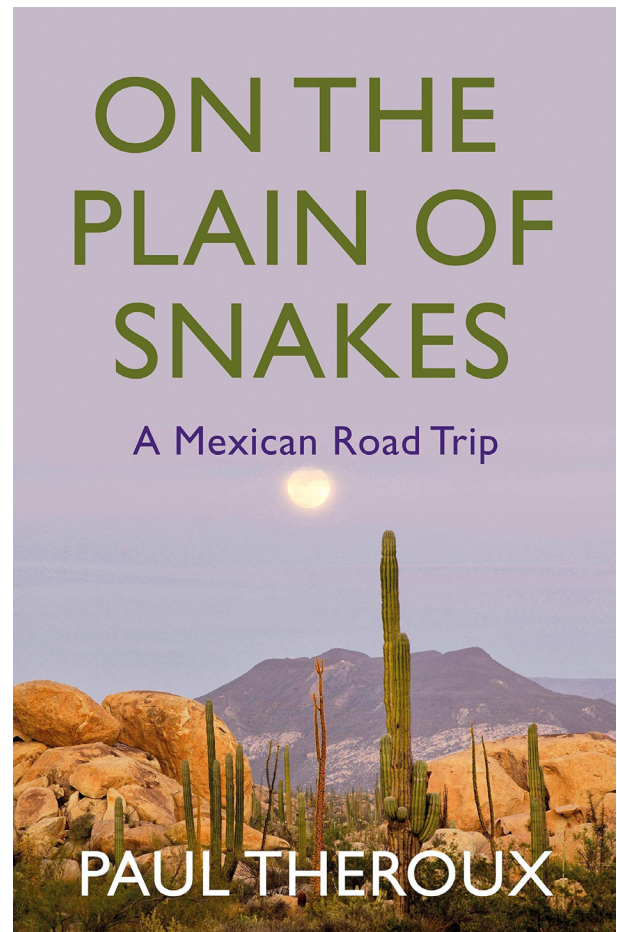
As always, many thanks to those who contributed to this column. Stay safe!

### Scott Campbell, Law Library

I've never been much of a traveler, but now that I can't do it, I'm thinking about it all of the time. At least I have books that can help me scratch that itch. Tony Horwitz's *Spying on the South: An Odyssey Across the American Divide* pulls off the neat trick of being both a travel and a history book, with a little bit of political commentary thrown in. Horwitz retraces Frederick Law Olmsted's pre-Civil War sojourn through the American South and finds a country that is still dealing with a North and South divide. While Horwitz doesn't always succeed in finding common ground between the two, he is able to find the common humanity among both groups.

Shortly after Trump's election, Paul Theroux decided to travel through Mexico to see if he could understand the symbiotic relationship between our two countries. His book relating his experiences, *On the Plain of Snakes: A Mexican Road Trip*, came out in July. He starts by crisscrossing all along the border, where he interviews people in communities whose lives have been disrupted by the stricter border control that has been in place since 9/11. Then he drives down to the southern part of the country, stopping along the way to talk to farmers, writers, students, and revolutionaries. Interestingly, despite all of the warnings he receives about the drug cartels, they never give him any trouble. The police, on the other hand...

*Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* by Sam Quinones was one harrowing read. It tells the story of how two businesses used innovative business models to wreak unimaginable havoc on the country. One was Purdue Pharma and the way they convinced the medical profession, which had always viewed opiates with suspicion, that OxyContin (brand name of the drug oxycodone) was actually non-addictive. And the other story is about how a number of dealers from a small town in Mexico used cell



phones and delivery cars to jump-start a wave of heroin addiction across the country. A depressing subject to be sure, but Quinones is such a good storyteller that it is hard to put the book down. And he even finds a way to end on a hopeful note.

Movie director John Sayles started out as a novelist and lately has gone back to creating novels again. His latest, *Yellow Earth*, is set on and around a Native American reservation in North Dakota where several companies have started fracking oil and gas. Rather than having a central character, Sayles introduces a wide cast from all levels of society: from teenaged residents of the reservation to oil executives, with even some prairie dogs thrown in for good measure. Sayles appears to be sympathetic to all of his characters (well, most of them anyway) while at the same time illustrating the havoc caused by capitalism run amuck.

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* is a heartbreaking novel based on real events. It is the story of two African American teenagers who end up in a reformatory in Florida during the 1960s where they encounter extraordinary violence and racism. The novel alternates between the boys' experiences and the later story of one the character's adult life as he struggles to deal with his past. The book is at times a horrifying read and is not for the faint of heart, but it ends on an ultimately hopeful note.

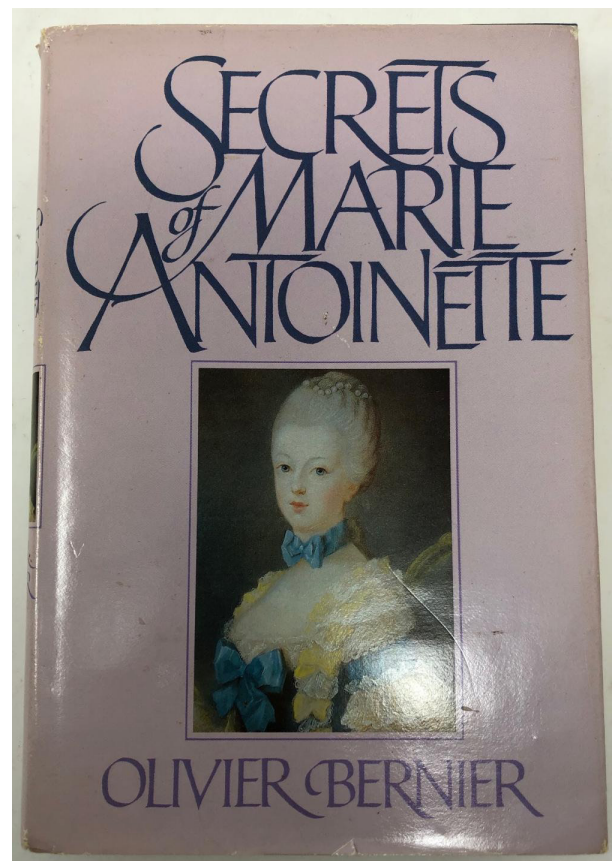
### **Rob Detmering, Ekstrom Library**

*In the Court of King Crimson: An Observation over Fifty Years* by Sid Smith This is an exhaustive and sometimes exhausting biography of King Crimson, one of the most influential progressive rock bands. I learned a lot from the book and especially enjoyed the details on musical composition and production. Unfortunately, the book is also repetitive and poorly edited, such that it wasn't always clear who was speaking in some of the quotations. The author's own fandom also gets in the way at times, but I won't bore readers of *The Owl* with additional tedious complaints. Ultimately, anyone interested in this band or progressive rock in general would find something to enjoy here.

### **Cecilia Durbin, Ekstrom Library**

Like most readers, I go through phases of what intrigues me, juggling a couple of books to (try to) keep both sides of my brain working. Recently, I rediscovered my interest in the French Revolution. For those who have visited France, you know that the Bastille no longer stands (it was torn down by the sans-culottes), and the Concorde is littered with tourists and commuters, noisy buses, and blue and yellow rickshaws. The Palace of Versailles on any given day is packed with visitors mesmerized by the characteristic opulence of France and its monarchs. Oliver Bernier's *Secrets of Marie Antoinette: A Collection of Letters* introduces the reader to the thoughts, insights, and experiences of one of those figures, a woman popularly despised both then and now. Aside from the introduction and afterword, only letters written to, from, and about France's best-known queen constitute the text.

Most of the exchanges are between Marie Antoinette and her mother, Maria Theresa, Holy Roman Empress. The letters portray a realistic mother-daughter relationship



and are sprinkled with parental advice and criticisms, as well as the homesickness Marie Antoinette felt throughout her life at Versailles. In one correspondence, Maria Theresa urges the young Marie Antoinette to be kind to and protective of “the less important ones,” for being compassionate “is a talent which [she has] mastered so perfectly!” In the same paragraph, she reminds her daughter that, in order to win the adoration of her kingdom, she should not rely upon her “beauty (which is in fact not so great), nor to [her] talents or culture ([she] knows very well [she has] neither)” (64). Ouch. Marie Antoinette responds that if Maria Theresa “could have seen the sorrow that [her] dear letter caused [her],” she would understand that she only wishes to respect and love her “dear Mama” (80-81).

Among many subjects discussed within the letters are Marie Antoinette’s relationship with King Louis XVI of France (initially awkward but eventually very close, perhaps because court members alienated them both, surprisingly); the female members of the court who specifically ostracized the Austrian-born queen (think eighteenth-century *Mean Girls*); and her constant desire to win the approval and affection of a people who never quite warmed to their queen (and, of course, ultimately executed her and her entire family).

The humanization of Marie Antoinette through these letters makes her a sympathetic character whose sincere despair and loneliness call into question the legitimacy of her negative legacy. It seems unlikely that a writer as authentic, relatable, and insightful as Marie Antoinette could be capable of the evil, callousness, and detachment with which she is commonly associated.

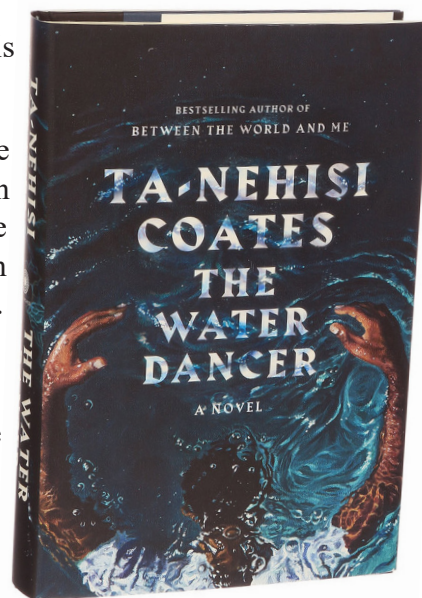
### Mary Marlatt, Kornhauser Library

I have found myself reading about a somewhat gentler time during this pandemic.

English “between-the-wars” mystery fiction has been my go-to genre. One of my favorite authors in this genre is Charles Todd, who writes the Ian Rutledge and Bess Crawford mysteries. Ian Rutledge is a police detective and Bess Crawford is a former Army nurse who finds herself involved in murders and mysteries after the war. Ekstrom holds three Rutledge mysteries.

### Amy Purcell, Archives & Special Collections

I recently read *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, a story of a slave named Hiram and his experience with the Underground Railroad. I always enjoy a book with a bit of magic and I was surprised with the supernatural aspects of this book. Hiram discovers his ability of water-induced conduction and its touching connection to his African ancestors.



I also read *Strangers and Cousins* by Leah Hager Cohen, a story filled with quirky (love a bit of quirkiness!) multigenerational characters. Clem, a student of experimental theatre, is marrying Diggs, a serious black woman law student in Clem’s family’s home north of New York City.

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Opinions expressed in *The Owl* are not necessarily those of the University Libraries or the University of Louisville.



# Working Remotely

Tech Services personnel did lots of database maintenance work at home. As a group, we corrected 24,550 bibliographic records, corrected 4,715 WMS bookplate addresses and deleted 2,574 serials public notes (obsolete).

And judging by the pictures on our “teams” conversations, we all have enjoyed spending time with our cats and dogs! –Tyler Goldberg

Archives & Special Collections has many opportunities for remote work. Early in our work-from-home time, I learned how to transcribe oral histories using the *oTranscribe* web page. I enjoyed listening to people talking about different aspects of life in Louisville from decades ago. I have also continued working with Digital Collections, adding metadata to our scans of Caufield and Shook images. I have updated and created new records using the Caufield and Shook invoices. I have mostly been working with invoices dating from the 1920s. I monitor our service account and am surprised how much we can do remotely utilizing both the VPN client and my colleagues’ knowledge of the collections! – Amy Purcell

**THANK YOU**

**Cecilia Durbin  
Tyler Goldberg  
Christopher Poché**

...for contributing to this issue of *The Owl*



Military personnel and others are standing or sitting in the Young Women’s Christian Association Hostess House at Camp Taylor in what is now Louisville, Kentucky. The hostess house is being used as a telegraph office. They are wearing masks due to the 1918 influenza outbreak.

Caufield & Shook Collection, Photographic Archives [CS 024322](#)