



A Newsletter for Employees of the University of Louisville Libraries

Vol. 41, No. 3 ♣ 2025

The Owl

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

Readers' Picks

written and compiled by Christopher Poché,
Ekstrom Library



I started reading the adventures of **Modesty Blaise** in 2018, and I wrote excitedly about her in that year's Summer edition of the Readers' Picks. After many interlibrary loans and frequent eBay shopping for out-of-print titles over the next seven years, I managed to read every comic strip story, novel, and short story featuring Modesty as its hero. So now, looking back, I would like to talk her up once again and consider just why I love her so much. [Editors note: Modesty Blaise comics are now available on the [Internet Archive.](#)]

Click [here](#) if you'd like to check out my earlier, more in-depth introduction to the character, but here's a quick summary. Modesty Blaise is an action-adventure heroine created by Peter O'Donnell in 1963 for a daily three-panel comic strip in the *Evening Standard*. O'Donnell wrote 95 comic strip stories over 38 years along with eleven novels and two short story collections. Before we meet her in the first strip story, Modesty was the leader of a criminal organization called The Network. Having made a considerable fortune by her mid-twenties, Modesty, along with her trusted lieutenant and close friend, Willie Garvin,

retires to a life of leisure. She is occasionally called out of retirement to go on missions for British Intelligence, but mostly, trouble just finds her. Sometimes adversaries from her past come after her seeking revenge, other times villains try to use her for information The Network collected during its operations. But more often, Modesty or Willie just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and so they find themselves in a new adventure (or caper, as they call it).

Many of the stories begin with simple accidents or strange circumstances that lead to more dangerous situations. My favorite opening is to the strip story “The Galley Slaves.” Modesty and Willie are guests on a friend’s yacht. Everyone on board likes Modesty, but they treat Willie, what with his cockney accent and unassuming charm, with condescension. Eventually, Modesty gets fed up with it and decides to jump ship—literally. She and Willie simply leave their luggage behind, dive into the open sea, and swim to a nearby island. There they happen upon a film shoot that leads to the main action of the story.

This opening to “The Galley Slaves” not only provides an example of the narrative inventiveness that makes O’Donnell’s stories so addictive, but it also highlights two essential elements of the characters of Modesty and Willie. First is their absolute loyalty to each other. Modesty has no interest in a situation that does not welcome Willie, so she readily gives up an otherwise pleasant experience. Second is their amazing self-sufficiency. Their wills are so strong and their survival skills so complete that they think nothing of surrendering themselves to the elements in an unknown environment. Indeed, they take it as an invigorating challenge to venture into the wild, provide themselves with food and shelter, and build a raft with whatever is at hand so that they can escape the island.

Related to their strength of will is their stoicism, which I find particularly attractive. This is not the stereotypical emotional coldness or repression with which classical stoicism is incorrectly associated. Modesty and Willie are warm and fun-loving people. But they are also masters of stoicism’s “dichotomy of control.” In any situation, they understand what is and is not in their control and adjust their emotions and actions accordingly. Seeing these fictional characters’ embodiment of a stoic principle play out in stories is more persuasive than many philosophical stoic texts. Often, when Modesty and Willie have been imprisoned by enemies whose plans for them they do not know, they will assess their situation as far as their limited knowledge allows and then acknowledge that they can do no more. They do not wait in fearful anticipation of what will happen next. Instead, they “starve the imagination” and block further anxious thinking with yogic techniques (their deep training in Eastern meditation practices is another one of their incredible skills). Sometimes they simply go to sleep. Their ability to sleep at will is a marvel to this occasional insomniac.

Then there are all the little things that add spice to Modesty’s and Willie’s characters and provide texture for their stories. Modesty is a skilled lapidary, and Willie enjoys nothing more than diving for pearls or prospecting for precious gemstones to give to Modesty. Both are animal lovers. Modesty has a particular fondness for donkeys and has a sanctuary for old and abused ones. Willie is co-owner of and occasional performer in a circus and takes special interest in caring for its elephants. “Return of the Mammoth,” one of my favorite strip stories, involves Modesty and Willie sneaking into the Soviet Union to save one of Willie’s elephants, who has been stolen by Russian scientists who intend to mate it with a revived woolly mammoth that they have found perfectly preserved in a glacier. It’s one of their crazier capers, one that Willie tries to dissuade Modesty from joining. This occasions one of Modesty’s more touching expressions of support for Willie: “You can’t have a problem that isn’t mine too. So, we’ll do this together.”

In this column and my previous one, I have focused primarily on the strip stories, but the novels and short stories are just as fun and interesting. The strip stories demand narrative economy, but the novels and short stories can be more expansive and develop character more fully. Two of my favorite novels feature emotional set pieces that rival the action of the stories. In *A Taste for Death*, Modesty suffers an injury



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Co-Editors: Robin Harris (robin.harris@louisville.edu, 852-6083) and Amy Purcell (apurcell@louisville.edu, 852-1861).

Editorial Board: Cecilia Durbin, Matt Goldberg, Destiny Minton, Jessie Roth.

Book Editor: Chris Poché. Layout: Amy Purcell.

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as she dispatches one of the villains in a fencing duel. In order to escape from their other enemies, they must make an arduous journey through the Sahara Desert. All seems well at first, but Modesty's injury becomes infected, and Willie must nurse her back to health. His thoughts and fears are revealed as his ministrations are carefully detailed through the course of nearly half a chapter. And in *The Impossible Virgin*, Modesty witnesses what appears to be Willie's death. (Of course, he hasn't died and will reappear in the nick of time at a crucial moment later in the novel, but that's not my point here.) For five pages the reader sits with Modesty's thoughts and emotions as she recalls her history with Willie.

After I wrote my first column about Modesty Blaise, I had some interesting conversations with fellow Modesty fan Scott Campbell from the Law Library. Scott told me that he prefers the strip stories to the novels because he thinks O'Donnell overdoes it with his explorations of the Modesty-Willie bond in the novels. As Scott puts it, O'Donnell tells more than he shows in the novels. He certainly has a point here, but it is a measure of my sentimentality as a reader in general and my love for Modesty and Willie in particular that I enjoy this aspect of the novels just fine.

Thank you to all who contributed to this column—with a special shout out to Kaelin Harris, who contributes for the first time. Happy reading!

James Adler, Kornhauser Library

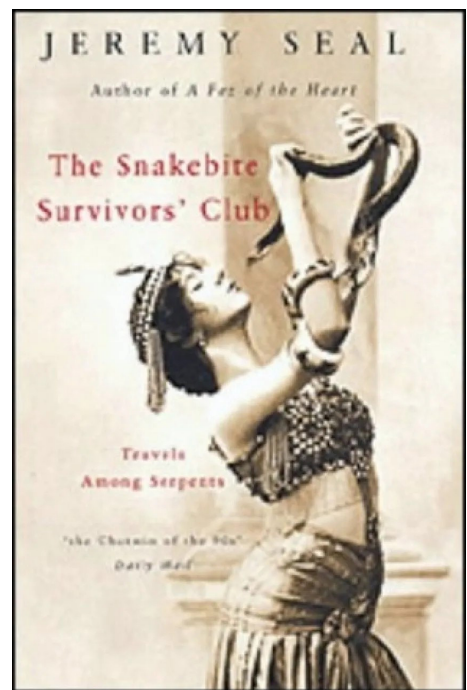
"Round the world and home again, that's the sailor's way!" It's also the reader's way. You can go anywhere in the world between the covers of a book, and the travel book is one of my favorite genres to dip into. Reading a travel book is a great way to learn about history, geography, customs, culture, and the various peoples that populate our world. Here are a few of my favorites from the last year or two.

Great Plains by Ian Frazier

I've read this one a few times over the years (maybe even was a reader's pick many years back?). It's an enjoyable journey through and across the great "American sea of grass." It's a humbling and beautiful place. This is one of those books, like William Least Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*, that makes you want to get in the car and start driving, all points West. I was fortunate enough to spend a short time in the Dakotas a few years ago. The Black Hills is a particularly lovely place. The energy there is hard to describe, but it's palpable; there's a clean dryness that promotes clearness of mind.

The Snakebite Survivor's Club: Travels Among Serpents by Jeremy Seal

The author, while professing a fear of snakes, nevertheless decides to face his fears head on by travelling to areas of the world where venomous snakes abound: Australia, USA, India, Africa. There are cobras and kraits, taipans, rattlers, the dreaded black mamba and more! Seal seeks out people who have been bitten by snakes, and recounts not only their adventures and experiences, but the cultural elements – religion, myth, medicine etc. – attached to one of the world's most feared animals and potent symbols: the snake.



In Search of King Solomon's Mines: A Quest in Ethiopia by Tahir Shah

According to legend, King Solomon of Biblical fame left behind a vast amount of treasure, including the famed Ark of the Covenant. The treasure, if it did exist, has been lost over time, though many have searched for it. Our intrepid author procures a curious map, which creates a desire, which leads to a trip to Ethiopia and a search for King Solomon's legendary mines. There are encounters with half-wild hyenas, mysterious monasteries on nearly inaccessible cliff tops, open-earth gold mines where desperate miners risk death and danger at every moment. Does our guide find the treasure? You'll have to read to find out.

Rosemary Mahoney wants to go to Egypt and travel **Down the Nile: Alone in a Fisherman's Skiff**, but no one wants to sell or rent her a boat. She has two dilemmas to face: she's a woman and she's a tourist, and in Egypt's very traditional society, it's considered crazy and dangerous to undertake a rowing trip

down the Nile, especially if one is a woman tourist. But, she is skilled with a boat, and through persistence and maybe a little luck, she procures the use of a small skiff. Mahoney is a good observer, intelligent and curious in her dealings with people, and has an amusing dry sense of humor. I particularly enjoyed the section where she spends her first night on an island in the middle of the Nile, but is prevented from sleeping by her inability to stop thinking about the book on crocodiles that she had just read.

The Places in Between, by Scotsman Rory Stewart, recounts a trip on foot taken through Afghanistan in 2002, just after the fall of the Taliban. Most would consider that foolhardy, but it makes for a great travel book. There's something about Central Asia...

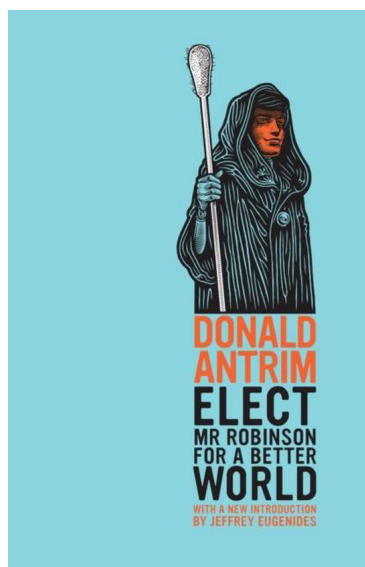
We travel not for trafficking alone;
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:
For lust of knowing what should not be known,
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

- James Elroy Flecker

J.R.R. Tolkien's ***The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*** sees the titular character, one Bilbo Baggins, leave his cozy and comfortable hole for an unexpected adventure through the wilds of Middle Earth. There are wizards, dragons, dwarves, elves, trolls and treasure, deceit, loyalty, courage, and the best bread and honey you'll ever eat. There is burgling to be done. Not to mention a curious little fellow called Gollum and an extraordinary ring. "The road goes ever ever on."

The book I'm currently working on is J. Maarten Troost's ***Lost on Planet China: One Man's Attempt to Understand the World's Most Mystifying Nation***, (using my Dalai Lama bookmark to keep my place), and it's been quite an enjoyable read (so much so, in fact, that I found another book by the same author, *The Sex Lives of Cannibals*, that I'll be reading soon). *Lost on Planet China* is a breezy read, and quite funny. The author makes his way through the rapidly growing and industrializing "Middle Kingdom" accompanied by endless crowds of people, foul air, phlegm, and a never-ending variety of interesting food stuffs. Live squid, anyone? "Pork-that-tastes-like-fish?"

On tap for this Winter is Apsley Cherry-Garrard's ***The Worst Journey in the World: With Scott in Antarctica, 1910-1913***, named by *National Geographic* as its number one travel book of all time. We'll see.



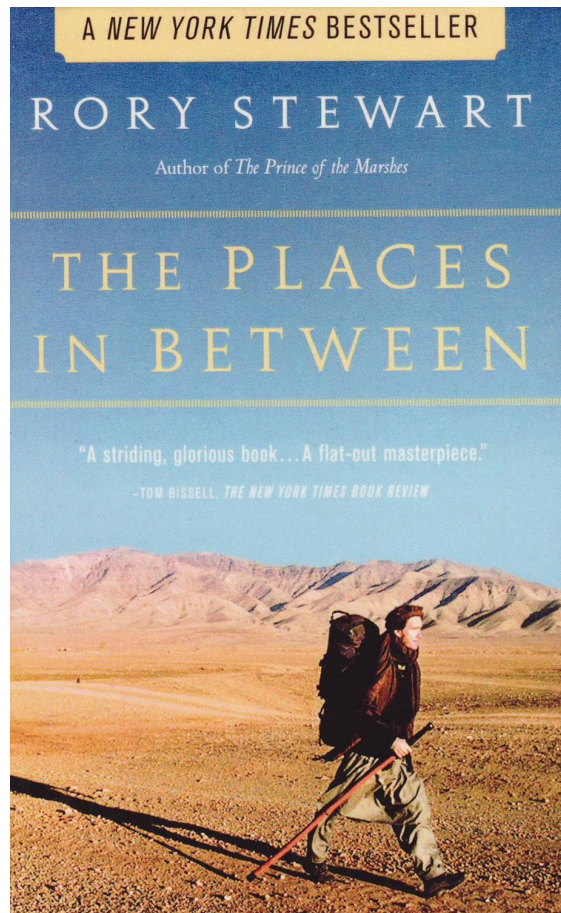
Scott Campbell, Law Library

The best novel I have read this year is ***Elect Mr. Robinson for a Better World*** by Donald Antrim. It is a scabrously funny, yet horrifying, post-apocalyptic, novel about a (presumably Florida) town where everyone has gone slightly insane. Yet the maddest of them all seems to be the narrator, who despite everything that happens in the book, believes he should run for mayor. While most definitely not a book for everyone, I personally found it hilarious, although I did have to suspend a lot of disbelief. (There is no mention of the outside world, so where is the newspaper coming from? And where did the mayor get that Stinger missile?) A great read if you like your humor coal black.

Chloe Forsting, Ekstrom Library

Roadside Picnic by Boris and Arkady Strugatsky

The book from which Tarkovsky adapted *Stalker*. Here is the Zone, set in America, a remnant of a brief but violent alien invasion that went just as



quickly as it came. Here are the Artifacts, mysterious bits of machinery with properties so strange they may as well be magical and which fetch high prices on the black market. Here are the stalkers, people who venture into the Zone to retrieve Artifacts. The Zone has its own nigh-inscrutable laws; one step off a circumscribed path can leave you dead. The cloud of politics and intrigue and commerce surrounding the Zone affects the outside world irreparably, not to mention the strange children born by those who spend too much time there. An existential tale. Happiness for all mankind, free of charge.

***The Idiot* by Elif Batuman**

Slow, downright arcadian campus novel set in the 90s. Blossoming romance framed by and tied up in intellectual pursuits, hampered by uncertain and immature but ambitious decisions. Eloquent interiority. Pre-internet, but contains email. Best read by those who can tolerate philosophy majors.

***Blindsight* by Peter Watts**

Hardest of hard science fiction, first contact edition. A mysterious structure appears at the edge of the Oort Cloud. Humanity is falling apart but finds the resources to send a team of specialists to ascertain the nature of the structure and its occupants. Think of the Chinese Room, from the point of view of the room. What is consciousness? What is a mind? Oddly, has vampires, but not the sexy kind. Trust me on this one.

***Throw Me to the Wolves* by Patrick McGuinness**

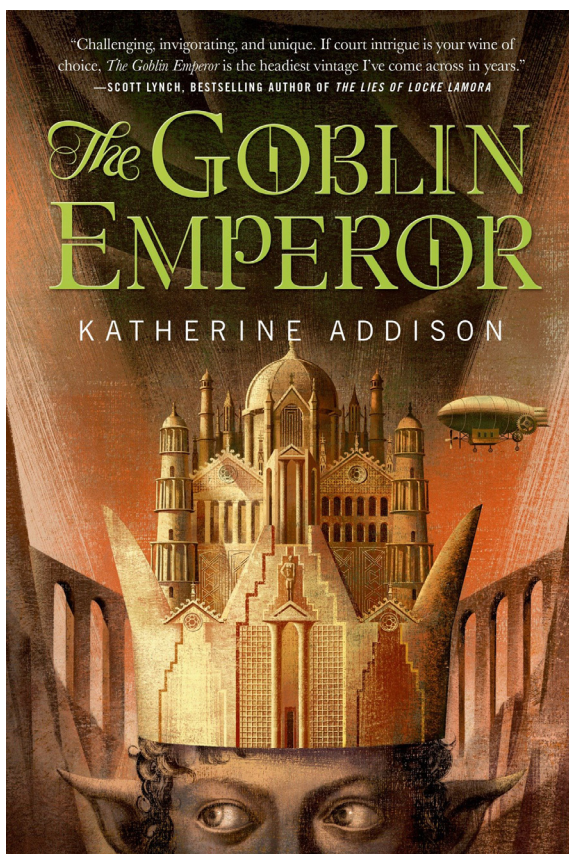
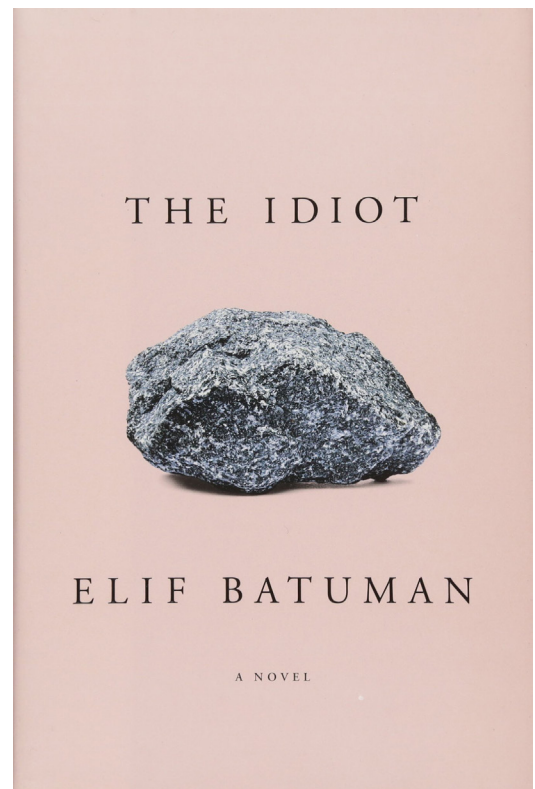
Based on a true story of a schoolteacher wrongfully accused of murder and smeared by the press. A police procedural on one level; also incorporates a school narrative in flashback. A scathing critique of the abuse and casual cruelties aided and abetted by mass media and the eternal institution that is British boarding schools. Starts cynical; comes by winding turns to something hopeful. Prose like a jungle river. (Note to the curious and the sensitive: contains a scene of politically motivated abuse of a pupil by a teacher that I had to skip almost completely.)

***Light* by M. John Harrison**

Laughably predictable from me, another Harrison pick. This is the first novel in the Kefahuchi Tract series, which I have yet to finish. Dissociative space opera. Detached writing and a whole bunch of weirdness that borders on the whimsical but doesn't deign to explain itself beyond the bare minimum. Too gritty and gross to be really whimsical, anyway. Follows the connections across time and space between a girl who is also a spaceship, a physicist who is also a serial killer, and a man in a tank who turns into another kind of man in another kind of tank. There are also cats, a really skeezy magician, and a monster resembling the Mari Lwyd.

***The Goblin Emperor* by Katherine Addison**

The story of a cold and dysfunctional system told from the point of view of its inheritor. Despite the stakes of conflict, the tale is delivered gently. Despite the inherent cruelty of the world, there are moments of peace and pleasure. Despite the politics and dense worldbuilding—the kind that requires two distinct preambles in the form of a fictitious travel guide and a glossary of terms—the narrative retains

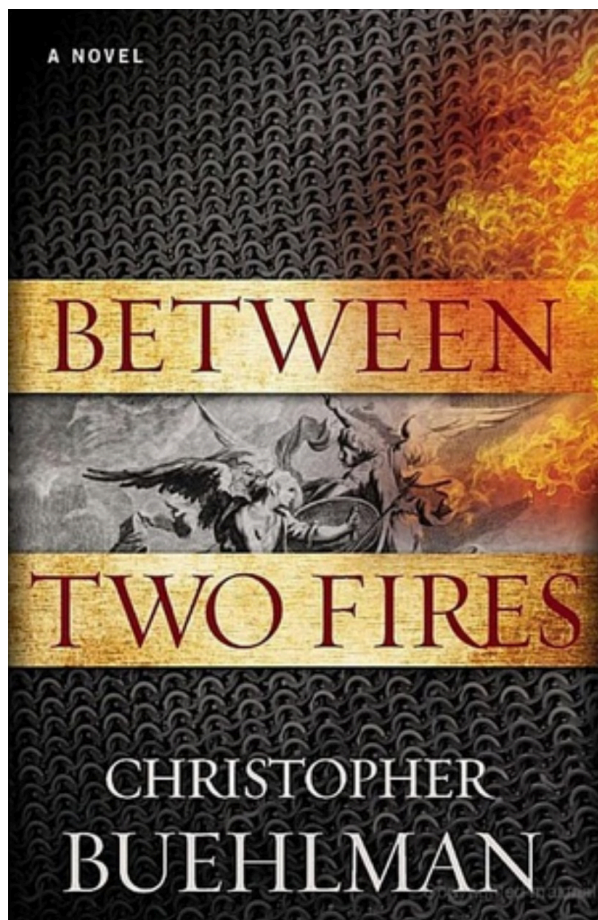
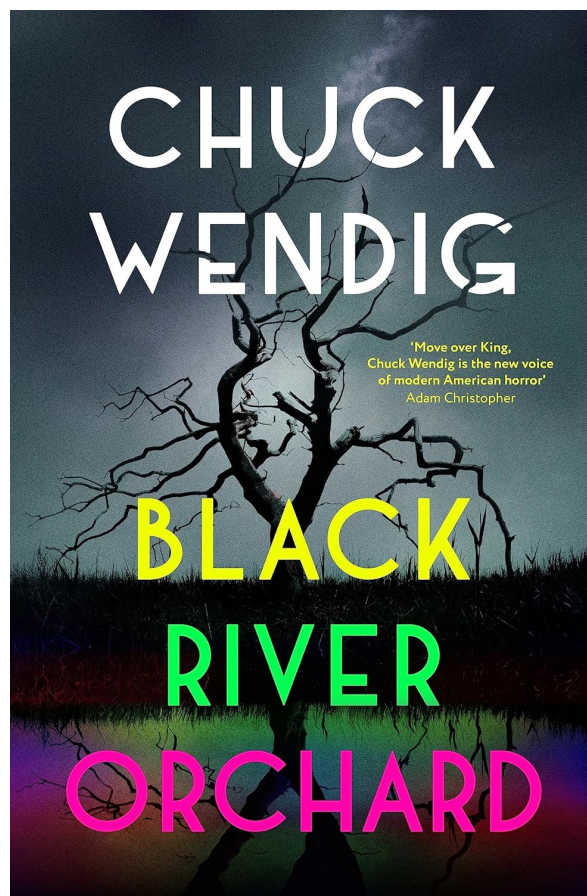


a singular, personal scale. The word “cozy” is overused in marketing, but apart from *Howl’s Moving Castle* (the book), I can think of no cozier fantasy than this.

Kaelyn Harris, Ekstrom Library

Scotland Yard: A History of the London Police Force’s Most Infamous Murder Cases, by Simon Read, was the perfect nonfiction read for me this summer. The book has both breadth and depth, covering Scotland Yard’s long history (and pre-history) as an institution while offering detailed insights in little-known but no less impactful cases. I thoroughly enjoyed Read’s use of primary sources in bringing long-dead people back to life. This book is perfect for anyone interested in historical criminology or have Sherlock Holmes living rent-free in their mind 24/7.

I cannot possibly overstate how much I love ***The Wife Upstairs*** by Rachel Hawkins. It’s among the best of the many, many *Jane Eyre* retellings I’ve read. If you’ve ever had a qualm with Jane’s naivete, despised Rochester’s creepy behavior, or wanted better for Mrs. Poole, this book is for you. It follows Jane, a dog walker for the rich families of the Thornfield Estates, as she falls deeper into the Southern high society drama of her clients, including but not limited to arson, attempted murder, and blackmail. I highly recommend all of Rachel Hawkins’ other Southern Gothic thrillers as well, particularly her most recent publication, *The Heiress*. Eat your heart out, Flannery O’Connor.



My book recommendations wouldn’t be complete without a horror novel, and ***Black River Orchard***, by Chuck Wendig, is the perfect fit. As ridiculous as it sounds, this book put me off eating apples for at least two weeks—and I love a crisp apple. The novel begins with one farmer’s last-ditch gamble on an apple cultivar to reinvigorate his dying legacy, with somewhat monstrous consequences as the town swiftly develops an insatiable hunger for his apples. But such a bountiful harvest isn’t without a cost, and the town is about to discover what, exactly, they have sacrificed with that first bite. I don’t usually go for ensemble casts, but this one was orchestrated quite nicely. Be prepared to dazzle friends and family with your apple knowledge after finishing this.

Colten Hoot, Ekstrom Library

Between Two Fires by Christopher Buehlman

This book is a horror story set in plague-riddled medieval France, perfect for those who are new to horror but like history. The main characters, a disgraced knight and an orphan girl, are wonderfully paired as you see what monsters, saints, martyrs, and demons they encounter. I



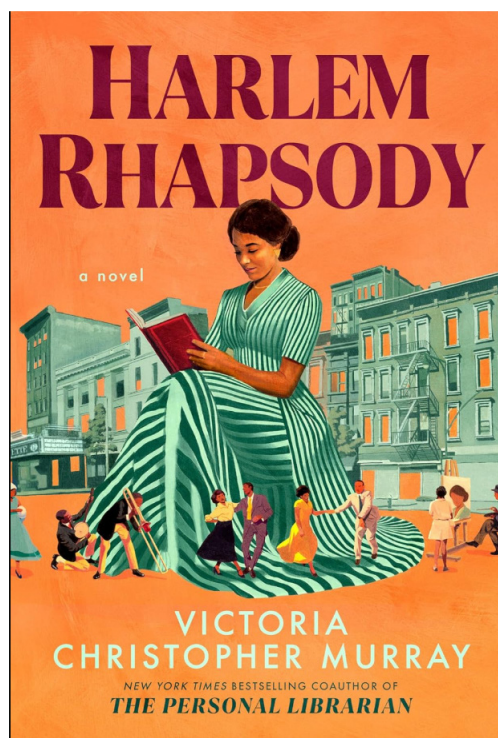
absolutely love how the author makes the ineffable fit his narrative and creates a one-of-a-kind world.

Courtney Shareef, Ekstrom Library

***Black in Blues: How a Color Tells the Story of My People* by Imani Perry**

In this concise but expansive text, Perry traces the color blue throughout African American history—from centuries-old indigo plants and dye pits along the West African coast to her grandmother's bedroom ceiling and funeral flowers. Blue skies meet blue oceans, blue hopes, blue dreams, blue artistry and belonging. This book is fascinating. It taught me things I never knew. For example, George Washington Carver, credited most often for all the ways he revolutionized the peanut, was also an artist and the first in the West to recreate the color Egyptian Blue. And it affirmed an affinity I've always felt. Like Perry's initial appreciation of blue, mine is connected to my grandmother, who used to live in a two-story powder blue house with royal blue carpets and who introduced me to B.B. King's kind of blues.

Harlem Rhapsody By Victoria Christopher Murray



This historical novel, based on a chapter in the life of Jessie Redmon Fauset, literary

editor of *The Crisis* magazine, would make a great ten-episode television series. The novel centers around Jessie's affair with Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, who was not only her boss but also married and the father of a teenaged daughter at the time. Accomplished within her own right, Jessie discovered and nurtured the works of many of the Harlem Renaissance writers we know, including Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Jean Tomer, Nella Larsen, and worked with countless others, and I enjoyed seeing their personalities come alive on the page. But because of the time period, Jessie risked losing her career and the respect of her peers if anyone discovered the affair. So, to stay or not to stay—with W.E.B., with *The Crisis*, in New York? Eventually, Jessie must choose for the sake of her future, or it will be chosen for her. I won't spoil anything, but Jessie does something so outrageous at one point as she tries to keep the affair a secret that I thought it had to be fiction. But Murray anticipated this and explains in the Historical Note at the end, "Yes, that really happened. In a letter to his daughter, Yolande,

W.E.B. described every detail.... Without that letter, [it] never would have been inside the pages of this novel.... My imagination doesn't run that deep." Speaking of the Historical Note, I recommend it as a stand-alone instructive take on how to craft story from archives and records.

IMANI PERRY

National Book Award-Winning Author of

SOUTH TO AMERICA



BLACK IN BLUES

How a Color Tells the Story of My People



Library and Department News

Archives & Special Collections

Doing Americana

This Spring semester, Sarah Melloy was part of a group of twelve graduate and undergraduate students that curated an exhibition using photographs from Archives & Special Collections (ASC). This effort was part of Dr. Jennifer Sichel's Photography and Curating course. Her role in this class was unique; Melloy was both a student finishing up her MA in art history, and working as Imaging Manager in ASC, so she thought of herself as somewhat of an archival liaison throughout the process.

As a class, students were introduced to many of the collections in the photographic archives by curator Elizabeth Reilly. After Reilly's introduction, the students decided to pair photographs from the Standard Oil (New Jersey) Collection with photographs from the Fine Prints Collection. The two collections each represent a different type of photography project. While the Standard Oil (New Jersey) Collection represents a blend of documentary and commercial photography for a specific project, the art photographs in the fine print collection span the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, with a broad coverage of subject matter. As a class, they drew photos from both collections that demonstrate how the idea of the American dream has been constructed and spread through photography.

Over the summer, Sarah worked with two curatorial studies students, Gray Koesters and Chenoa Buster, to bring the exhibition to life. They met regularly to fine-tune the exhibition checklist, edit and design a catalog, mat and frame over 60 prints, and install the show. The exhibition will be up through October 31, 2025 in the Schneider Hall Main Gallery. We hope you'll stop by and check it out!



Curators and Dr. Sichel, Professor, at the opening reception for *Doing Americana*. From left to right: Chenoa Buster, Dr. Jennifer Sichel, Gray Koesters, Sarah Melloy. August 28, 2025. Photo by Cassidy Meurer.

Life's Rich Pageant opening



Cassidy Meurer introducing Pat McDonogh at the exhibit opening. Photo by Elizabeth Reilly.

Archives & Special Collections kicked off its participation in the 2025 Louisville Photo Biennial with the opening of *Life's Rich Pageant: Photographs* by Pat McDonogh, a retrospective of his work as a photojournalist. Cassidy Meurer, Archivist for the Barry Bingham, Jr. *Courier-Journal* photograph collection, introduced McDonogh. Among her comments, she shared, "We at Archives & Special Collections are especially grateful for Pat's role in us acquiring the Barry Bingham, Jr. *Courier-Journal* photograph collection. While with the newspaper, Pat was essentially the archivist for the *CJ's* photographic materials, locating, digitizing, and describing important and impactful imagery. Through committed advocacy over decades, Pat played an instrumental part in ensuring that the University of Louisville Archives & Special Collections would be the final home for the massive pictorial legacy of our city and our region, preserving the archive for future generations."

Art Library

New Artists' Books

The Bridwell Art Library presents our latest exhibit, *New Artists' Books*. Come by the Art Library and see the exciting and magical books we have chosen this past year. They comprise many different subjects, materials of construction, and creative techniques. Our staff has also curated their favorite books with personal statements about specific books. This exhibit will be up until December 12, 2025. With this exhibition of new Artists' Books, we say goodbye to our favorite book dealers, Vamp & Tramp Booksellers out of Birmingham, Alabama. They were our preferred vendor due to the knowledge, commitment, and personal styles of Bill and Vicky Stewart, owners of Vamp & Tramp for over twenty years. While Bill passed away in 2019, Vicky continued their mission until her retirement when she closed Vamp & Tramp.

in June 2025. Thank you to Vamp & Tramp for the camaraderie, knowledge, and insight into helping create our ever-growing [Artists' Book collection](#).



THANK YOU

**Chris Poché
Sarah Melloy
Cassidy Meurer**

**Elizabeth Reilly
Justin Davis**

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

Library Exhibits

LIFE'S RICH PAGEANT

PHOTOS: PAT MCDONOGH

September 17, 2025 - February 27, 2026

Opening Reception Sept. 17, 5-7pm

Julius Friedman Gallery
Archives & Special Collections
Ekstrom Library, Lower Level 17
University of Louisville



2215 S. 3rd Street
Louisville, KY
502-852-6752



1967, photograph by Harvey Osterhoudt
Fine Prints Collection, ASC

DOING AMERICANA: PHOTOGRAPHY, MYTHOLOGY, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Exhibition

August 28 - October 31, 2025

Schneider Hall, Galleries
Coffee and Art tour

September 24, 2025, 11:45

Coffee bar opens at 11:30