2024 Book Descriptions

Homecoming by Kate Morton

Adelaide Hills, Christmas Eve, 1959: At the end of a scorching hot day, beside a creek on the grounds of a grand country house, a local man makes a terrible discovery. Police are called, and the small town of Tambilla becomes embroiled in one of the most baffling murder investigations in the history of South Australia. Many years later and thousands of miles away, Jess is a journalist in search of a story. Having lived and worked in London for two decades, she now finds herself unemployed and struggling to make ends meet. A phone call out of nowhere summons her back to Sydney, where her beloved grandmother Nora, who raised Jess when her mother could not, has suffered a fall and is seriously ill in the hospital. At Nora's house, Jess discovers a true crime book chronicling a long-buried police case: the Turner Family Tragedy of 1959. It is only when Jess skims through its pages that she finds a shocking connection between her own family and this notorious event -- a mystery that has never been satisfactorily resolved. An epic story that spans generations, Homecoming asks what we would do for those we love, how we protect the lies we tell, and what it means to come home.

The Night Watchman by Louise Erdrich

Based on the extraordinary life of Louise Erdrich's grandfather who worked as a night watchman and carried the fight against Native dispossession from rural North Dakota all the way to Washington, D.C., this powerful novel explores themes of love and death with lightness and gravity and unfolds with the elegant prose, sly humor, and depth of feeling of a master craftsman.Thomas Wazhashk is the night watchman at the jewel bearing plant, the first factory located near the Turtle Mountain Reservation in rural North Dakota. He is also a Chippewa Council member who is trying to understand the consequences of a new "emancipation" bill on its way to the floor of the United States Congress. It is 1953 and he and the other council members know the bill isn't about freedom; Congress is fed up with Indians. The bill is a "termination" that threatens the rights of Native Americans to their land and their very identity. How can the government abandon treaties made in good faith with Native Americans "for as long as the grasses shall grow, and the rivers run"? Since graduating high school, Pixie Paranteau has insisted that everyone call her Patrice. Unlike most of the girls on the reservation, Patrice, the class valedictorian, has no desire to wear herself down with a husband and kids. She makes jewel bearings at the plant, a job that barely pays her enough to support her mother and brother. Patrice's shameful alcoholic father returns home sporadically to terrorize his wife and children and bully her for money. But Patrice needs every penny to follow her beloved older sister, Vera, who moved to the big city of Minneapolis. Vera may have disappeared; she hasn't been in touch in months, and is rumored to have had a baby. Determined to find Vera and her child, Patrice makes a fateful trip to Minnesota that introduces her to unexpected forms of exploitation and violence, and endangers her life.Thomas and Patrice live in this impoverished reservation community along with young Chippewa boxer Wood Mountain and his mother Juggie Blue, her niece and Patrice's best friend Valentine, and Stack Barnes, the white high school math teacher and boxing coach who is hopelessly in love with Patrice. In the Night Watchman, Erdrich creates a fictional world populated with memorable characters who are forced to grapple with the worst and best impulses of human nature. Illuminating the loves and lives, the desires and ambitions of these characters with compassion, wit, and intelligence, The Night Watchman is a majestic work of fiction from this revered cultural treasure.

The Children’s Blizzard by Melanie Benjamin

The morning of January 12, 1888, was unusually mild, following a punishing cold spell. It was warm enough for the homesteaders of the Dakota territory to venture out again, and for their children to return to school without their heavy coats, leaving them unprepared when disaster struck. At just the hour when most prairie schools were letting out for the day, a terrifying, fast-moving blizzard blew in without warning. Schoolteachers as young as sixteen were suddenly faced with life and death decisions: keep the children inside, to risk freezing to death when fuel ran out, or send them home, praying they wouldn't get lost in the storm? Based on actual oral histories of survivors, this gripping novel follows the stories of Raina and Gerda Olsen, two sisters, both schoolteachers, one who becomes a hero of the storm, and one who finds herself ostracized in the aftermath.

Verity by Colleen Hoover

Whose truth is the lie? Lowen Ashleigh is a struggling writer on the brink of financial ruin when she accepts the job offer of a lifetime. Jeremy Crawford, husband of bestselling author Verity Crawford, has hired Lowen to complete the remaining books in a successful series his injured wife is unable to finish. Lowen arrives at the Crawford home, ready to sort through years of Verity’s notes and outlines, hoping to find enough material to get her started. What Lowen doesn’t expect to uncover in the chaotic office is an unfinished autobiography Verity never intended for anyone to read. Page after page of bone-chilling admissions, including Verity's recollection of the night her family was forever altered.   Lowen decides to keep the manuscript hidden from Jeremy, knowing its contents could devastate the already grieving father. But as Lowen’s feelings for Jeremy begin to intensify, she recognizes all the ways she could benefit if he were to read his wife’s words. After all, no matter how devoted Jeremy is to his injured wife, a truth this horrifying would make it impossible for him to continue loving her.

Cilka’s Journey by Heather Morris

n a Siberian prison camp, Cilka faces challenges both new and horribly familiar, including the unwanted attention of the guards. But when she makes an impression on a woman doctor, Cilka is taken under her wing. Cilka begins to tend to the ill in the camp, struggling to care for them under brutal conditions.

Demon Copperhead by Barbara Kingsolver

Set in the mountains of southern Appalachia, Demon Copperhead is the story of a boy born to a teenage single mother in a single-wide trailer, with no assets beyond his dead father's good looks and copper-colored hair, a caustic wit, and a fierce talent for survival. Relayed in his own unsparing voice, Demon braves the modern perils of foster care, child labor, derelict schools, athletic success, addiction, disastrous loves, and crushing losses. Through all of it, he reckons with his own invisibility in a popular culture where even the superheroes have abandoned rural people in favor of cities. Many generations ago, Charles Dickens wrote David Copperfield from his experience as a survivor of institutional poverty and its damages to children in his society. Those problems have yet to be solved in our generation. Dickens is not a prerequisite for readers of this novel, but he provided its inspiration. In transposing a Victorian epic novel to the contemporary American South, Barbara Kingsolver enlists Dickens' anger and compassion, and above all, his faith in the transformative powers of a good story. Demon Copperhead speaks for a new generation of lost boys, and all those born into beautiful, cursed places they can't imagine leaving behind.

The Seed Keeper by Diane Wilson

A haunting novel spanning several generations that follows a Dakhóta family's struggle to preserve their way of life, and their sacrifices to protect what matters most. Rosalie Iron Wing has grown up in the woods with her father, Ray, a former science teacher who tells her stories of plants, of the stars, of the origins of the Dakhóta people. Until, one morning, Ray doesn't return from checking his traps. Told she has no family, Rosalie is sent to live with a foster family in nearby Mankato—where the reserved, bookish teenager meets rebellious Gaby Makespeace, in a friendship that transcends the damaged legacies they've inherited. On a winter's day many years later, Rosalie returns to her childhood home. A widow and mother, she has spent the previous two decades on her white husband's farm, finding solace in her garden even as the farm is threatened first by drought and then by a predatory chemical company. Now, grieving, Rosalie begins to confront the past, on a search for family, identity, and a community where she can finally belong. In the process, she learns what it means to be descended from women with souls of iron—women who have protected their families, their traditions, and a precious cache of seeds through generations of hardship and loss, through war and the insidious trauma of boarding schools.

The First Ladies by Marie Benedict

The daughter of formerly enslaved parents, Mary McLeod Bethune refuses to back down as white supremacists attempt to thwart her work. She marches on as an activist and an educator, and as her reputation grows she becomes a celebrity, revered by titans of business and recognized by U.S. Presidents. Eleanor Roosevelt herself is awestruck and eager to make her acquaintance. Initially drawn together because of their shared belief in women's rights and the power of education, Mary and Eleanor become fast friends, confiding their secrets, hopes and dreams--and holding each other's hands through tragedy and triumph. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt is elected president, the two women begin to collaborate more closely, particularly as Eleanor moves toward her own agenda separate from FDR, a consequence of the devastating discovery of her husband's secret love affair. Eleanor becomes a controversial First Lady for her outspokenness, particularly on civil rights. And when she receives threats because of her strong ties to Mary, it only fuels the women's desire to fight together for justice and equality.

Sea of Tranquility by Emily St John Mandel

Edwin St. Andrew is 18 years old when he crosses the Atlantic by steamship, exiled from polite society following an ill-conceived diatribe at a dinner party. He enters the forest, spellbound by the beauty of the Canadian wilderness, and suddenly hears the notes of a violin echoing in an airship terminal—an experience that shocks him to his core. Two centuries later a famous writer named Olive Llewellyn is on a book tour. She’s traveling all over Earth, but her home is the second moon colony, a place of white stone, spired towers, and artificial beauty. Within the text of Olive’s best-selling pandemic novel lies a strange passage: a man plays his violin for change in the echoing corridor of an airship terminal as the trees of a forest rise around him. When Gaspery-Jacques Roberts, a detective in the black-skied Night City, is hired to investigate an anomaly in the North American wilderness, he uncovers a series of lives upended: The exiled son of an earl driven to madness, a writer trapped far from home as a pandemic ravages Earth, and a childhood friend from the Night City who, like Gaspery himself, has glimpsed the chance to do something extraordinary that will disrupt the timeline of the universe.

Remarkably Bright Creatures by Shelby Van Pelt

After Tova Sullivan's husband died, she began working the night shift at the Sowell Bay Aquarium, mopping floors and tidying up. Keeping busy has always helped her cope, which she's been doing since her 18 year old son, Erik, mysteriously vanished on a boat in Puget Sound over thirty years ago.Tova becomes acquainted with curmudgeonly Marcellus, a giant Pacific octopus living at the aquarium. Marcellus knows more than anyone can imagine but wouldn't dream of lifting one of his eight arms for his human captors—until he forms a remarkable friendship with Tova.Ever the detective, Marcellus deduces what happened the night Tova's son disappeared. And now Marcellus must use every trick his old invertebrate body can muster to unearth the truth for her before it's too late.

Plainsong by Kent Haruf

From the unsettled lives of a small-town teacher struggling to raise two boys alone in the face of their mother's retreat from life, a pregnant teenage girl with nowhere to go, and two elderly bachelor farmers emerges a new vision of life and family as their diverse destinies intertwine.

The Stranger in the Lifeboat by Mitch Albom

Adrift in a raft after a deadly ship explosion, ten people struggle for survival at sea. Three days pass. Short on water, food and hope, they spot a man floating in the waves. They pull him in."Thank the Lord we found you," a passenger says."I am the Lord," the man whispers. The story is narrated by Benji, one of the passengers, who recounts the events in a notebook that is discovered—a year later—when the empty life raft washes up on the island of Montserrat. It falls to the island's chief inspector, Jarty LeFleur, a man battling his own demons, to solve the mystery of what really happened. A fast-paced, compelling novel that makes you ponder your deepest beliefs, The Stranger in the Lifeboat suggests that answers to our prayers may be found where we least expect them.