



My dad used to tell me about the guy who would hit his thumb with a hammer, because it felt so good when he stopped. That's the way some of us felt after reviewing books from the New York Times Fiction Best Sellers list in the previous issue of Spectrum. To recover our equilibrium, we decided to review books we really liked, books we would consider excellent with a Christian audience in mind, books we would highly recommend to friends. We opened these second reviews to either fiction or non-fiction books published in 1990 or after. The choices include some previous best sellers, as well as more hidden treasures. Of course we have different opinions about the relative merits of one another's choices—that's part of the fun. But all of these books have a level of insight and use of language that impressed the reviewer. It was a rewarding experience to spend time with a book we

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Adventists Review Their Favorite Contemporary Books

by Scott Moncrieff

really liked, and to try to communicate some of that book's special quality in our reviews. We discovered that it is often easier to write clever things about a book you despise than

to appropriately praise what you admire. But don't stop with what we had to say. Go out and borrow or buy a few of these books of good report and settle into your easy chair.

Snow Falling on Cedars

Snow Falling on Cedars, by David Guterson (Vintage, 1995)

Reviewed by Norman Wendth, Atlantic Union College

You can't tell a book by its title. *Snow Falling on Cedars* doesn't sound like a murder mystery, but it is one. Carl Heine, a not-so-simple fisherman on the Pacific northwest island of San Pedro, has drowned under "suspicious circumstances." As the novel opens, fellow fisherman Kabuo Miyamoto is on trial for his murder, and Ishmael Chambers, editor and only reporter for the *San Pedro Review*, is trying to make sense of the trial. Most of the time the reader follows the proceedings through Ishmael's eyes.

David Guterson knows how to please a crowd, and you can happily read this novel as you would

any popular whodunit. *Snow Falling on Cedars* offers us so much more, however, that to call it a "mystery" is misleading. Rather than limit the story to the methodical search for rational knowledge of the crime, as in a Sherlock Holmes tale, Guterson quickly broadens our vision to encompass social and moral questions. For example, the accused fisherman is nisei, and the trial occurs a scant decade after World War II. Not only is the San Pedro community, which includes a significant Japanese-American component, struggling to come to terms with the war's aftermath, but Ishmael also finds himself less and less able to separate private issues of personal innocence and guilt from his professional covering of the trial. He has lost both an arm and a lover to the war, and finds his memories affecting how he interprets the events of

the trial. The readers must consider issues beyond Ishmael's, too. Can San Pedro bystanders avoid guilt for evil observed? Can love ever be "guilty"? What are appropriate responses for victims of tragedy and loss? Before the story ends, Guterson has led the reader through a roller-coaster of moral and emotional struggles that don't end until most readers recognize their own private dilemmas somewhere in the story.

And "most readers" definitely includes Seventh-day Adventists. Many of us struggle with a (too?) highly polished sense of guilt, yet limit our guilt to obvious sins of commission. Bystanders—maybe even collaborators—are innocent; sins of omission or neglect don't even register on our moral seismographs. *Snow Falling on Cedars*, however, teaches a sensitivity our subculture is only

just beginning to recognize that it lacks. Perhaps we have protected ourselves against more than evil; perhaps our deepest sin is not being fully enough engaged in life. We must know our neighbors before we can love them.

Moral tales are out of fashion, of course. A postmodern world seeks to understand rather than judge, and moralists are avoided for their presumed harsh inflexibility. It is therefore all the more remarkable that *Snow Falling on Cedars* was on the best-seller list for so long. When that happens, Adventists—even those trying to escape guilt—should take notice. Popular novels give people what they know they want; literature shows people that they want more than they know. *Snow Falling on Cedars* is a ripping good yarn. It is also literature.

who cannot forsake all others, and has two little girls, Bunny and Sunshine. Suddenly he finds himself painfully released from his marriage by a fatal automobile accident, and, with the help of a newly resurfaced maiden aunt, makes the decision to return to his ancestral home, Killick-Claw, Newfoundland.

Quoyle, the aunt, and the children restore and move into the aunt's girlhood home, a large green, foundationless house cabled to a bare point of Newfoundland rock. Quoyle hires on with the eccentric crew of the local newspaper, *The Gammy Bird*, and begins his assignment of covering auto wrecks and the shipping news. As he drives to and from work, Quoyle finds himself more and more frequently giving a lift to "a tall and quiet woman" by the name of Wavey Prowse.

Proulx's poetic prose, laden with a rich and particular vocabulary, redeems the barren Newfoundland setting as surely as Quoyle's newfound home redeems him: "Quoyle, turning, could look down to the cup of harbor, could turn again, look at the open sea, at distant ships heading for Europe or Montreal. Liquid turquoise below. To the north two starched sheet icebergs. There, the smoke of Killick-Claw. Far to the east, almost invisible, a dark band like rolled gauze."

Proulx then peoples this stark but enchanted locale with a cast of memorable characters (endowed with names such as Beety Buggit, Tert Card, and Diddy Shovel) and lets us in on their lives and the tapestry of stories with which their lives are woven together. Quoyle and the reader become enfolded in this small shipping and fishing community. On the one hand it is prone to "inventive violence" and sexual abuse. On the other it tolerates kindly human foibles and sticks together in the face of an inhospitable environment, letting no member go unaided.

The Shipping News

The Shipping News, by E. Annie Proulx (Simon & Schuster, 1993)

Reviewed by Meredith Jones Gray,
Andrews University

"Here is an account of a few years in the life of Quoyle, born in Brooklyn and raised in a shuffle of dreary upstate towns," begins E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*. It is a modest beginning for a novel which unfolds the story of a life-changing journey and a heartening metamorphosis of the protagonist.

Quoyle is, on the outside, an antihero. A huge, clumsy "loaf" of a man with an abnormally large chin that he is constantly trying to cover with his hand, he was ridiculed and abused as a child and, as an adult, succeeds at nothing. One of the headlines with which Quoyle mentally labels his life says it all: "Stupid Man Does Wrong Thing Once More." But we discover that Quoyle is, on

the inside, a man of great sensitivity, capable of profound passion and compassion, gifted with the eye of an artist and the heart of a poet.

As the story begins, Quoyle is barely holding down an on-again, off-again job as a small-town newspaperman. His only true friend has moved away to California. He makes a disastrous marriage to Petal Bear,

This is a story about love, redemption, and resurrection, beautifully and enticingly told. Readers will go away celebrating their humanity and the magical powers of love.

This is a story about love, about redemption, about resurrection. It is beautifully and enticingly told. By the end Quoyale has been transformed from misfit to a whole hu-

man being. Readers will go away sorting through the layers of the story and celebrating their own humanity and the magical powers of love.

the nails in his mouth." Of his honeymoon in Venice we are told, "We had the whole day ahead of us and for that whole day, I felt we could never be harmed or hurt or diminished by the life ahead." And at one point he wistfully admits, "I am still addicted to impossible wishes." (As soon as I can find someone to translate that last quotation into Latin, or perhaps Russian, I will have a family crest.)

Scar Tissue

Scar Tissue, by Michael Ignatieff (Chatto & Windus, 1993).

Reviewed by Beverly Matiko, Andrews University

Perhaps I have read a novel that moves me more and that matters to me more than Michael Ignatieff's *Scar Tissue*. If so, I have forgotten. Appropriate, this recess of recall, as much of Ignatieff's book is about forgetting—the unwilling surrender of memory, of others, and ultimately the self.

Scar Tissue begins by acknowledging a memory battle: "I do not want to remember her last hour," the narrator tells us. The illness and death of the narrator's mother, bequeathed by heredity "dark starbursts of scar tissue" in the brain, becomes the novel's focus. (This condition is referred to elsewhere in the novel as "premature senile dementia.") While describing the paring away of his mother's self, the narrator, a professor of English, traces his own concurrent spiral of losses.

While witnessing the disintegration of his mother's body and mind, the narrator becomes obsessed with defining selfhood. He is not the only one on a quest. Ignatieff creates a story of two brothers, sons of a soil scientist and an amateur artist, who seek to solve their own mysteries in different ways. The narrator mines literature (King Lear), philosophy (St. Augustine), and art (Willem de Kooning). The physician brother immerses himself in medical literature, the hospital ward, and the laboratory. Ultimately the "answers" come from an intersection of realms,

through the painstakingly typed words and fragile moments both brothers share with Moe, a man dying of motor neurone disease.

Ignatieff's characters, and subsequently his readers, wrestle with difficult questions. How do we endure the death of a loved one? How do we live with the haunting knowledge that from birth we ourselves are dying by degrees? Why are we so tormented by life's few certainties—its tenuity and brevity?

These questions hardly sound like the starting point for pleasurable reading. Enter what is stunning about Ignatieff's novel: the beauty and force of his language. He infuses an exploration of death with breath-taking, life-affirming prose. The narrator describes his father building the family home: he is "stripped to the waist on a ladder banging in shingles, singing in off-key Russian, the songs garbled by

I heard Michael Ignatieff speak at a literary festival in Wales a few years ago. This Toronto-born writer, now living in London, was moderating a discussion on nonfiction and in particular family histories. I felt at that point that I was in the presence of an amazingly compassionate and enlightened writer. Now that I have read one of his novels, I am prepared to trust my first impressions all the more.

Scar Tissue reminds me again of well-crafted fiction's mystery and power, of its ability to be a repository and conveyer of truth. Since first reading *Scar Tissue* several weeks ago, I have bought every copy I can find. They are being handed out and mailed to people I love. Rarely have I believed with such conviction that I am sharing the best.

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, by John Berendt (Random House, 1994)

Reviewed by Andrew Woolley, Southwestern Adventist College

Do you understand the South? It's a question that Shreve, a Canadian, asks Quentin Compson, his Mississippi roommate at Harvard, in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*. In some ways, it's the same question John Berendt tries to answer in *Midnight in the Garden of Good*

and Evil. Berendt has moved to Savannah to find his own version of the South. Yet, as all Southerners know, all Southerners are created equal, but some Southerners are more equal than others. Savannah is just such a place, so steeped in the southern past that it can look down on Charleston as being too progressive.

The ostensible story of the book is one of a trial of a local antiques dealer for murder. The plot is based on an historical event; the antiques dealer has national prominence. The

plot is constructed with the tightness of a Grisham novel. The story of the trial, however, is not really the focus of the book. In many ways, the plot of the book doesn't begin until page 175. Instead, Berendt captures the atmosphere and life of Savannah, its architecture, its squares faced with stately homes, its past which so much still structures the social life of the city. The early half of the book is made up of vignettes and character sketches, some of them important for the later story, some of them told for the sheer interest and enjoyment of the telling. Berendt tells them with a Dickensian accuracy of detail and forgiveness of foibles. An old man walks his dog every day for 20 years—without a dog. There's the woman of 6,000 songs, a piano player who travels the state for every wedding, funeral, garden party, and bar mitzvah that requires music. Other stories take us deeper into the heart of Savannah. One man resents film companies using Savannah as a location and hangs out a Nazi flag so that every shot will be ruined. A black drag queen called the Lady Chablis crashes a debutante ball.

Montana 1948

Montana 1948, by Larry Watson (Washington Square Press, 1993).

Reviewed by Douglas Jones, Andrews University

The title of Larry Watson's short novel *Montana 1948* offers setting and time, but it does not hint at the morality play that's tightly spun into young David Hayden's remembrance of growing up. The son and grandson of sheriffs, the nephew of the local doctor, David senses the importance of his family's role in the community, but he's not prepared for the aftermath of abusive author-

The antiques dealer must have his annual party, even though he's on trial; the local citizens must attend the party. One central incident is a midnight trip to a cemetery with a local seer, a moonlit journey into a garden to place a hex on the enemies of the defendant. The details of the trail become more sordid, breaking up any clichés of moonlight and magnolias one might harbor. Proceeding into the darkness, Berendt maintains his detached observation and sense of humor. Along with him, we learn that Savannah has had a rich and weighty culture which has collapsed in on itself in its isolation.

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil has been on the non-fiction bestseller list for more than a year. Ironically, its popularity has brought visitors to a city that shuns tourism, increased attention to a past which would just as soon lie sleeping. With style and charm, the book evokes Savannah as Savannah evokes the past: letting the viewer have glimpses into the mysteries of the garden, yet confirming that no matter how much one understands, one cannot live within its limits.

ity that's almost legendary in his family.

Essentially a coming-of-age story, *Montana 1948* pits justice against family ties. When David's uncle Frank is rumored to have sexually molested native American women in his medical practice, David's father, the sheriff, has to decide how to deal with the allegations. The novel examines the bonds of brotherhood effectively, and it portrays a loyalty that is disabling. The sheriff tells his wife, "I think the problem's been taken care of. Frank said he's going to cut it out."

"Oh, Wes-ley!" Her words came

out in a moan . . . "What?" my father replied, his confusion apparent and sincere. "What is it?" . . . My mother's voice became so low and tender it seemed better suited for an expression of love than what she actually said. "That's not the way it works. You know that. Sins—crimes—are not supposed to go unpunished."

And therein lies the morality play. David's father's dilemma is apparent. He is the one whose moral course will wreck the family. If he pursues justice (as his position requires), the Hayden family honor will shatter. Watson sets up a fragile balance. *Montana 1948* is about conscience—the conscience of a man, of a family, and ultimately of a nation.

Watson forces his readers to examine the Hayden family's past and its effect on the present. Of course, the present is paramount for a child; therefore, David's impression of the immediate situation—he must rely on overheard conversations to piece together the sordid details—drives the book emotionally. David finds himself, though, possessed of too much knowledge, and he's ashamed of his desire to know more about something so horrible, "but I was on the trail of something that would lead me out of childhood." Throughout, the narrative assumes an urgency that underscores David's sense of justice, disbelief, and disgust.

Although the novel deals with sensational crimes, violence, and tragedy, *Montana 1948* is a quiet book in many ways. Watson's style is restrained and respectful, yet his images are striking, unforgettable, and truthful. The young narrator's sense of disbelief as he senses his family's honor unraveling before him adds to the poignancy of the story. And his expectation of his father to do right fuels the tension.

Watson's book is reminiscent of other recent novels; notable among them are Richard Ford's *Wildlife* and Michael Dorris's *A Yellow Raft*

on *Blue Water*. Both set in Montana, the two novels portray a young person's moral commitment to family in the face of bewildering circumstances. Like these other fine

novels, *Montana 1948* is a powerful study of right and wrong, loyalty and justice, played out in the wide-open and lonely spaces of the soul.

Absolute Truths

Absolute Truths, by Susan Howatch (Ballantine Books, 1994).

Reviewed by Winona Howe, La Sierra University

Frank Harris, turn-of-the-century author and editor, once mentioned an acquaintance "who was an English clergyman, and yet, wonder of wonders, a Christian." It is this nexus between clergyman and Christian that Susan Howatch explores in her six-volume series about spiritual and temporal conflict among Anglican churchmen, a series that has been compared to Anthony Trollope's *Chronicles of Barsetshire*. Howatch lacks Trollope's humor, however, and a further difference between the two is that sexual relationships are an important aspect of the current novels, an approach that was not allowable in Trollope's Victorian times.

Absolute Truths, the final volume of the series, focuses on Charles Ashworth, the bishop of Starbridge. Ashworth's life should be perfect: his professional achievements are numerous, he enjoys an enviable marriage, and he does not neglect his spiritual life. But, as Job could have told him, perfect happiness is likely to be both precarious and brief. Ashworth never loses his children, livelihood, or health, but he is rocked by one disaster after another: problems with his adult children, reverberations of long-past events and errors, ongoing rancorous wrangling with the dean of Starbridge Cathedral (repeatedly described by Ashworth as "my enemy"), and the final catastrophe, the

death of his adored wife, Lyle, shortly followed by his discovery of her secret diary.

At this point in the book I was thinking: I've read this book before. In a fictional context, the surviving spouse finding evidence that makes the happy marriage become (in retrospect) a sham, or the survivor's pilgrimage to find another mate with whom he or she can be happy is fairly stereotypical. *Absolute Truths*, however, surprised me. The basic situations may have been familiar, but their development definitely was not. The diary, for example, does not contain information about Lyle's secret life and loves; instead, it is a spiritual diary in which she alternately prays to God and rages against him, and records her concerns over her husband's dangerously wrong perceptions of his family and his perilous complacency about his spiritual life.

Ashworth's life, following this discovery, is not then just a record of how he worked things out with his enemy, arrived at a healthier balance between himself and his sons, and located the most appropriate woman among his female acquaintances, should he indeed choose to remarry. Each of these quests is informed by a far more important quest: refinding the spiritual path from which he had unintentionally wandered. This means that he must exchange his judgmental approach for Christian understanding, and become truly (instead of nominally) Christ-centered, recognizing that only through Christ can one find "that kingdom of values, those absolute truths, which gave all creation meaning."

It's clear in *Absolute Truths* that religious rank is meaningless without inner spirituality. It's also clear that achieving that state is neither simple nor automatic; belonging to the right church (or even being employed by it) is no guarantee of true spirituality. *Absolute Truths* is a thoughtful book that challenges any assumptions the reader may have made about the ease of living a truly Christian life.

Typical American

Typical American, by Gish Jen (Plume Contemporary Fiction, 1991)

Reviewed by Renard Donesky, La Sierra University

Typical American tells the story of several Chinese immigrants to the United States and their subsequent Americanization. The book focuses on Ralph Chang, or Chang Yifeng, as he was known in China. Ralph's parents, wealthy Chinese in the pre-revolutionary days, send him to America to study engineering, with the hope that he will return to China and bring honor and increased

wealth to the family. On shipboard, Ralph sets forth his goals: cultivate virtue, bring honor to the family, do five minutes of calisthenics a day, stop eating when others do, and have nothing to do with girls. Most of these goals collapse under the pressures of life in America. The novel, then, studies changing values in cross-cultural situations.

Many of Ralph's challenges are prompted by the differences between American and Chinese values, especially regarding money and gender roles. For example, Ralph soon comes to believe that in America, prestige comes not from

an academic degree but from wealth: "Money. In this country, you have money, you can do anything. You have no money, you are nobody. You are Chinaman. Is that simple." With that belief, Ralph forsakes his work in academia and starts a chicken restaurant—his chance at the American dream. His initial success leads to increased greed and he begins cheating on his daily receipts to lower his taxes.

He moves from a rat-infested, one-bedroom apartment in the city, to a luxurious home in the suburbs. But these physical "upward" moves come at the cost of failing moral values.

As Ralph changes his business goals, his family goals also become increasingly problematic. Ralph continues to believe that a Chinese man is the ruler of the family: "I'm the father of this family! Do you hear me? The father, not the son!"

However, the women in his family (his sister, Theresa, his wife, Helen, and his two daughters) adapt themselves to American gender roles, at least to some degree, as they too become "Americanized." Theresa studies to become a physician and eventually passes her medical

boards. She begins to earn her own money and concomitantly wishes for increased control of her own life. She eventually has an affair with a married Chinese-American. Helen undergoes similar changes. Initially she subsumes her wishes to Ralph's every desire. Often he tests her understanding of their respective roles: "At home, the husband would command, the wife obey." But as Ralph becomes increasingly obsessed with money, Helen begins a flirtation with another man, accompanied by an increased desire for equality in the home.

Ralph's Americanization, then, continually tests his values. How much will he adapt? What Chinese values will he maintain and which relinquish? The resulting tragedies clearly bring Ralph's fall into focus.

Typical American is not just a study of a minority group (whether Chinese or immigrant). It's theme—moral values in relation to adaptation and acculturation—is relevant for every person living in a world which seeks us to adapt to its mores. But it's also funny, engaging, and very well-written—one of the best books I've read in the past five years.

David Brock, a conservative journalist, and former senator and current Episcopal clergyman John C. Danforth. Two *Wall Street Journal* political reporters, Jane Mayer and Jill Abramson, have written what reviewers generally agree is the most detailed analysis yet, the *Age of Reason's* response to Danforth's *Age of Faith*. Their book delves into the strengths and weaknesses of both characters with the gusto of William Faulkner, and when the authors weigh the two individuals in their balance of apparent objectivity, Clarence Thomas is found wanting.

What intrigued me most about their book, though, is the way their dispassionate, carefully reasoned prose raises issues from the realm of religion. It must be the feminist in them that makes Mayer and Abramson cluck with disapproval when they describe Thomas's well-documented fascination with pornography. The Christian Coalition might strike the more self-righteous pose when it comes to this topic, but a holier-than-thou stance can also come from the other end of the political spectrum, especially when sexual harassment is the context.

When Mayer and Abramson chronicled the extent of the Religious Right's involvement in the nomination and confirmation of Clarence Thomas, they probably did not realize they would make my Adventist blood run cold; they were just exposing an agenda. They reveal how conservatives such as Gary Bauer, James Dobson, and Pat Robertson molded public opinion with well-timed propaganda and attack ads against liberals who might oppose Thomas. Although the Religious Right spent a great deal of energy encouraging American blacks to support Thomas, they did not see the appointment in racial terms at all. It was simply another step in working toward a Supreme Court majority congruent with their agenda, and their well-practiced

Strange Justice: The Selling of Clarence Thomas

Strange Justice: The Selling of Clarence Thomas, by Jane Mayer and Jill Abramson (Houghton Mifflin, 1994)

Reviewed by Terrie Dopp Aamodt,
Walla Walla College

OK. So I complained that David Baldacci's *Absolute Power*, a novel of sex and intrigue in the highest circles of Washington, D. C., wasn't nearly as interesting as stories about the "real" Washington. For my money, the various accounts

of the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill saga provide many more layers of fascination than the rather predictable tale Baldacci spins. Is the Thomas/Hill story pure "political pornography," as one reviewer put it, or is it something more complex, a layering of politics, morals, sociology, psychology, literary language, and religious values? It depends on who is telling (and who is reading) the tale.

Varying accounts have been rendered by Timothy Phelps (journalist-as-hero), novelist Toni Morrison,

strategies were both efficient and effective.

Learning about the success of these Christian soldiers in molding the opinions of a public that might have objected if it had figured out what was going on, I did not have to make a very big leap to imagine how such an event might coincide with Adventist end-time expectations. An apocalyptic scenario with the Christian Coalition as the bad guys is a little bit intriguing and a

little bit scary, capable even of producing that not-quite-delicious sensation of "fear analogous to terror" associated by Edmund Burke with the sublime. Since the sublime triggers the most powerful emotions that humans are capable of feeling, and since nothing is so purely sublime as the apocalypse, is it any wonder that this story is so fascinating? Political pornography, indeed. Truth is infinitely stranger than fiction.

Just Before Dark

Just Before Dark, by Jim Harrison
(Clark City Press, 1991)

*Reviewed by Dan Fabrbach, Editor,
New York City*

FOR my money, some of the best American writing today is by men and women who spend time outside, for whom landscape, along with the life and history of it, becomes a character: Tom McGuane, Richard Ford, Barry Lopez, Pam Houston, Terry Tempest Williams. They are the payoff for a childhood of Sam Campbell.

An Adventist upbringing promises lifelong learning from God's "second book." But those covers snap shut early, around the age you realize what stories rocks can tell, or that Darwin's finches really are out there on Galapagos. The issues of earth age and species adaptation are hardly the toughies, but they seem to arrest deeper thought. So two roads diverge, Adventist preachers latch onto the beauty of nature, the scientists explore what's really going on, and seldom their paths do cross.

This stunted inquiry and experience of creation has consequences. Adventism leaves a century, during which humans have awfully fulfilled the command to be fruitful, multiply, and dominate the earth,

with a noticeable limp.

The current batch of nature writers show what Adventism is missing. For a reader new to the field, Terry Tempest Williams, a devout Mormon, is a good start. But for the unvarnished stuff, I recommend Jim Harrison, a Michigan outdoorsman, poet, and novelist. In *Just Before Dark*, Harrison admits that although he has "spent over forty years wandering around in the natural world," he is not certain what he has learned. I take that as encouraging. Harrison says he avoids hiking trails as "an insult to the perceptions" and in the short works that make up this collection of essays, there's plenty of bushwhacking through swamps and swales and not much swooning on mountaintops. Harrison is no New

Age bliss-ninny. His rowdy style inevitably veers into the incorrect and would never do as a vespers meditation. Often in these accounts, he is afield with a shotgun or fishing rod in hand, and lordy, the things he eats! But with biblically redolent turns such as "forty years wandering" and references to Rilke and Kierkegaard, Harrison isn't really after Larry Lunker, wise trout of the deep. Whatever the topic—the moronic aspects of ice fishing; a passacaglia on getting lost—Harrison can't help but shape it into "stories in the same dimension as life at its most severe, words that cannot be outflanked by experience" as another outdoorsman, Ted Hughes, poet laureate of England, says of popular ballads.

Fear not, it's easy reading. Harrison uses vignettes to power along with cinematic drive. (Harrison's fiction occasionally makes it to the big screen: *Legends of the Fall* and *Wolf*, most recently.) The landscape is ever near: the north woods of Michigan, Sand Hills of Nebraska, Absarokas in Montana, and never scarred by strip-mining for object lessons. It's like fresh eyes on that second book.

Fair warning: this is a collection of book reviews, magazine columns culled from 25 years. It even includes excerpts from Harrison's master's thesis!

Young Men and Fire

Young Men and Fire, by Norman Maclean (University of Chicago, 1990).

Reviewed by Scott Moncrieff, Andrews University

It's hard to find an excellent contemporary book, a book you are bursting to praise—especially if your usual reading goes from Defoe to Woolf, leavened with a weekly in-

terlude of *Sports Illustrated*. After killing two days reading a "just OK" book, I was fearing endless trips to the public library and Barnes and Noble, searching for the elusive gem I needed. But then a good samaritan recommended *Young Men and Fire*. I think it is a great book.

On August 6, 1949, a fire at Mann Gulch, Montana, killed 12 men of a 15-man "smokejumper" firefighting crew. Author Norman Maclean (A

River Runs Through It) tries to render justice to this tragedy by recreating it as accurately as possible—a task of enormous complexity. The book has twin interests, each uniquely fascinating: the fateful story of young men who suddenly found themselves scrambling up a steep slope with a wall of fire in close pursuit; and the story of how a man in his 70s and 80s patiently assembled the details of the tragedy over many years, and turned them into a masterful story.

The tragedy immediately became controversial because one of the three survivors, foreman “Wag” Dodge, had at a crucial moment created an “escape fire”: after igniting a patch of grass, he lay face down in the ashes in a fuelless bubble of protection as the main fire roared by around him. The other two survivors raced upslope to the

ridge just ahead of the fire. The rest died in the flames on the slope. A lawsuit raised by one of the victims’s fathers asserted that Dodge’s fire had cut off the escape route of the others.

The complexity of the subject requires all Maclean’s knowledge as backwoodsman, firefighter, scholar, and storyteller. And he gives it everything. He collects documents, studies photographs and diagrams, consults fire scientists. He visits the remote site of the fire several times, and brings the two remaining survivors back to study their recollections. Piece by piece, detail by detail, he assembles a convincing and detailed account of every key moment, the life and death choices, the final race from death.

He writes of men who, in their final moments, had one all important goal: to make it to the top of that

ridge. No time for idle musings about the meaning of life; just one clear purpose. Their direct line is complimented by Maclean’s circuitous journey, circling around and around the events of August 6, wherever he can find a clue, patiently putting details together. Their work was a matter of minutes; his, of years. And through his patient attention to their final moments, Maclean performs a redemptive act for the dead. Their brief lives, which would otherwise be forgotten, are given a momentous meaning through his story.

Maclean states that “in this cockeyed world there are shapes and designs, if only we have some curiosity, training, and compassion and take care not to lie or be sentimental.” In the shape and design of *Young Men and Fire*, the author unforgettably achieves his standard.