



*Selected excerpts from*

# BOOKS

THE ULTIMATE INSIDER'S GUIDE

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## The Cabala

By Thornton Wilder

1926

The two most important things in life—love and reading—are often accidental. You go to a new acquaintance's party because you're bored, and the attractive stranger across the room becomes, within the hour, your beloved for life. And for how many is a friend's casual recommendation the reason we pick up a book that comes to shape our emotional imaginations? One day in the late 1970s, I was visiting the poet James Merrill at his home in Stonington, Connecticut. We were standing next to a bookcase filled with Fiction—as nearby cases were stacked with Art or Travel or French Literature. For some reason I can no longer recall, he pulled out a copy of Thornton Wilder's *The Cabala*. "I think you'll like this," he said.

I did. . . .

J. D. McCLATCHY

Poet

J. D. McCLATCHY's book *Hazmat* was nominated for the 2003 Pulitzer Prize. He has written texts for musical settings, including eight opera libretti for such composers as William Schuman, Ned Rorem, Lorin Maazel, Bruce Saylor, Lowell Liebermann, Tobias Picker and Elliot Goldenthal. His honors include an Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1991). McClatchy is Professor of English literature at Yale University, and editor of the Yale Review.

## The Transylvanian Trilogy

By Miklós Bánffy

1934-1940

The most remarkable novel I've read in the past few years is *The Transylvanian Trilogy* by Miklós Bánffy. No, it's not a vampire novel but rather a magisterial work about life in Hungary between 1904 and 1914, concluding with

World War I and the destruction of a way of life that's hard to believe existed a mere 100 years ago. Published to great acclaim in Hungary in 1930, the novel makes alarmingly clear, in the most passionately human of terms, the forces that led to the First World War—and the Second—and where we are now, a century later. Subsequent history caused the book to be forgotten until 1999, when Bánffy's daughter Katalin and her collaborator, Patrick Thursfield, did the world a great honor by translating its three volumes—*They Were Counted*; *They Were Found Wanting*; and *They Were Divided*—into English. The *Times* Literary Supplement hailed it as "a genuine case of a rediscovered classic." *London Magazine* wrote that "Bánffy's masterpiece resembles Proust's, [yet] he writes with all the psychological acumen of Dostoyevsky." For me, the infusion of Trollope makes the book all the more irresistible and original—not to forget a scope that rivals Tolstoy's. But I swear this revelatory novel is the fastest 1,700 pages you'll ever read.

JOHN GUARE

Playwright

JOHN GUARE is the award-winning playwright of such plays as *House of Blue Leaves*; *Six Degrees of Separation*; *Lydie Breeze*; and *A Few Stout Individuals*. He also wrote the Oscar-nominated screenplay for Louis Malle's *Atlantic City*. He co-edits the Lincoln Center Theater Review, is a council member of the Dramatists Guild, was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and serves on the executive board of PEN American Center.

## Closely Observed Trains

By Bohumil Hrabal, Translated by Edith Pargeter

1968

Bohumil Hrabal (1914-1997) was a spectacular old soak but, unlike many great writing drinkers, he managed to complete a substantial body of fiction which includes at least two masterpieces, the epic comedy *I Served*

the King of England (1971) and this 90-page novella of 1965, which I believe this is one of the greatest books about the Second World War. It has everything: love, sex, disaster; disobedience, exuberance, class. Surrealistically funny, it is tense as a sprung trap. I can never understand why everybody hasn't taken a couple of undisturbed hours out of their lives to read it. . . .

MICHAEL RATCLIFFE

*Former literary editor and chief book critic, The Times, and former theatre critic and literary editor of the Observer*

## Gogol's Wife and Other Stories

By Tommaso Landolfi

1963

Why Tommaso Landolfi isn't a household name like Gogol or Poe, Kafka or Borges—all authors he is fairly compared to—is anyone's guess. I can easily imagine the parallel universe in which it is a cliché to say of an alarming juxtaposition or when your skin suddenly begins to crawl, "Oh how Landolfian!" Instead, even in his native Italy, where his exquisite stories languish unread, his reputation is rarefied. Landolfi, a passionate gambler obsessed in his life and work with the eternal entanglement of chance and fate, would probably find the state of his literary legacy affirming more than anything else.

Landolfi insisted that in his work he had nothing particular to say, and once he finished a piece of writing he was almost entirely uninterested in the publication process. His stories are darkly weird, always discomfiting, and often biting funny; above all, they're masterful manipulations of language, experiments in the vicissitudes of vocabulary. The rigor of his thought and composition is entirely dedicated to making his reader terrifyingly aware that it's all a senseless waste. As Italo Calvino said of his work, Landolfi is continu-

ously placing the meaninglessness, the nothingness of life, up against the richness, precision and coherence of language. . . .

JENNY MCPHEE

*Author*

JENNY MCPHEE is the author of *The Center of Things*, a novel, and the coauthor of *Girls: Ordinary Girls and Their Extraordinary Pursuits*. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous literary journals, including *Glimmer Train*, *Zoetrope*, and *Brooklyn Review*, and her nonfiction has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *Bookforum*, among others.

## Single Lady

By John Monk Saunders

1931

John Monk Saunders was a handsome and dashing flyer in World War I. He was married to King Kong's inamorata, Fay Wray, and he behaved recklessly and romantically most of the time. But in between all this he wrote novels of exquisite beauty, including *Single Lady*, which I first read in serial form in *Liberty Magazine*.

Its central character is a mysterious young beauty whose name is Nikki. She is based on Wray, but when First National filmed it, Helen Chandler played Nikki enchantingly. She appears out of nowhere at the Ritz bar and is adopted by four ex-fliers: Cary, Shep, Bill, and Francis the Washout. Actually, they are all washouts—smashed by the insanity of war. To the unseeing eye, they are just a bunch of drunks, but delve deeper and you will fall in love with each of them—especially Shep, who stays drunk because there were lice under his bandages in the Army Hospital, and the only way he can quiet his "tic" is to stay mildly tight.

Critics dismissed *Single Lady* as pseudo-Hemingway, but not in the whole life's work of tough old Ernest will

you find characters of such sweetness and vulnerability and, yes, nobility, than these five train wrecks from World War I. There is a scene in Père Lachaise cemetery that surpasses almost everything else I've ever read for tender and sensitive dialogue. You will adore Shep—and Nikki and Cary and Bill and Francis the Washout. And I don't think you will ever forget them.

HUGH MARTIN  
*Songwriter*

A native of Birmingham, Alabama, HUGH MARTIN began his career in New York as a vocal arranger. With Ralph Blane, he wrote the score of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, for Judy Garland. Two of its songs, "The Trolley Song" and "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," have become classics.

## A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches

By Jesús Colón  
1961

One of my favorite books of all time, a scrappy 202-pager, is *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches* by Jesús Colón, a writer who has one of the most human and humane voices I've ever encountered in any kind of literature, Latino or otherwise. I found my copy in one of those now extinct Fourth Avenue bookstores—the best few bucks I've ever spent.

Jesús Colón writes about everything that pops into his head—about food, music, books, and ordinary folks he's known during his life in New York. Plain-spoken, down-to-earth and funny (with a knack for touching, tossed-off lines), his portrait of New York City as he found it as a newcomer from Puerto Rico in the 1920s, onwards for four decades, is as good as it gets.

Through sketches with titles like "On the Docks It Was Cold," "Hiawatha into Spanish" and, long before my own novel about the Mambo epoch of

the 1950s came out, "The Origin of Latin American Dances (According to the Madison Avenue Boys)," this wonderful writer, who died in 1974 and has since been recognized as a founder of the Nuyorican movement (think humanist lyric hip-hop), has given us a book that all writers and readers will love, not only for its subtle, hip crafting, but for its beautiful, no-nonsense heart.

OSCAR HIJUELOS  
*Writer*

OSCAR HIJUELOS's second novel, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, received the 1990 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. It was adapted for the film *The Mambo Kings* in 1992 and as a Broadway musical in 2005. He is the first Hispanic to win a Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

## The Third Kind of Knowledge: Memoirs and Selected Writings

By Robert Fitzgerald  
Edited by Penelope Laurans Fitzgerald  
1993

One of the most moving books I know about the life of writing is Robert Fitzgerald's *The Third Kind of Knowledge*. The title refers to Spinoza's idea that beyond sense perception and reasoning, a "third kind of knowledge," which he called "scientia intuitiva," allows glimpses of the Real, and perhaps even aspects of the divine. Fitzgerald ran across this notion as student of Classics and Philosophy in Trinity College, Cambridge, and it helped him make sense of certain states of intensified, glowing, almost trance-like awareness into which he fell from time to time.

Fitzgerald's book is a lovely composite of memoir, literary portraiture and critical essays. It leads from evocations of his boyhood in Springfield, Illinois, a life shared with his crippled and bedridden father after the deaths of both his mother and his younger brother; it

moves into portraits of his close friends, James Agee and Flannery O'Connor, and into a sequence of studies of Homer, Virgil and Dante. Fitzgerald's soul and intelligence are mobilized as eloquently in the literary essays as in autobiography and memoir, and all the pieces are integrated into a rare, un-self-centered wholeness. His prose has the pace, texture, and density of life observed in unusual keenness and sympathy. . . .

ROSANNA WARREN

*Poet*

ROSANNA WARREN is the author of *Departure*; *Stained Glass*, which was named the Lamont Poetry Selection by the Academy of American Poets; *Each Leaf Shines Separate*; and *Snow Day*. She has received numerous awards for her poetry, including the Pushcart Prize, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award of Merit in Poetry, and the Witter Bynner Poetry Prize and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Rosanna Warren is currently the Emma MacLachlan Metcalf Professor of the Humanities and a University Professor at Boston University.

## A Giacometti Portrait

*By James Lord*

1965

*A Giacometti Portrait*, by James Lord, is an account of Lord's sitting for Giacometti, over the course of nearly three weeks, in a year that isn't specified but that one guesses is during the early Nineteen-sixties. It is a straightforward description of the days—how Giacometti behaved, what he said, how the portrait progressed—and it is interesting, of course, because Giacometti was a superb artist and so every decision and every gesture he made is singular. It is also interesting because, as the friend who gave it to me said, it reads like a brief comic novel with two characters, the great artist and the American from New Jersey who is fortunate enough

to be his friend. One of them cares deeply that the painting be completed, and the other is convinced that to portray anything as it really appears is impossible.

The painting, in black and white, is planned to take a few hours, "an afternoon at most." Lord is visiting Paris, where Giacometti, although rich and famous the world over, lives and works in four rooms down a passageway off a street in an overlooked part of the city. Lord arrives around three. For a time he sits in a chair, while Giacometti works on a bust of his brother, Diego, and occasionally looks over at Lord. Giacometti's mood is gloomy. Several times he remarks that nothing he does is any good and that he will never be any better. He moves to another sculpture. Nearly an hour passes. Giacometti seems to be doing anything he can to avoid starting something new. Finally, he positions an easel according to red marks on the floor and chooses a canvas. He does not suggest a pose, but he insists that Lord face him directly. He looks at him for a minute or so and then says, "You have the face of a brute," which amuses Lord. As Giacometti paints, starting with black, he talks and smokes and sometimes leans back and squints through his glasses. When Diego calls him to the phone in another room, Lord jumps up to examine the painting and sees that it is a sketch of the room behind him and his figure. Except for the details of the background it strikes Lord as complete. He assumes they are done. Giacometti returns and paints for half an hour without speaking and finally says, "Now it's beginning to look like something, only now." . . .

ALEC WILKINSON

*Writer*

ALEC WILKINSON is a writer who has been on the staff of *The New Yorker* since 1980. He is the author of nine books, including *The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait of Pete Seeger* (April 2009), *My*

*Mentor: A Young Writer's Friendship with William Maxwell* (2002), and *The Happiest Man in the World* (2007), the latter about Poppa Neutrino, the only man to cross the Atlantic in a raft made of trash.

## Not Since Carrie: Forty Years of Broadway Musical Flops

By Ken Mandelbaum

1991

A gem of a theater-world book—and much more successful than the shows it reports on—Ken Mandelbaum's *Not Since Carrie: Forty Years of Broadway Musical Flops* is a breezily readable, insiderly look at tuners that may have looked good on paper but were veritably unwatchable on stage. Mandelbaum takes you from misguided “star flops” (Robert Preston as Ben Franklin, Anthony Newley as Chaplin) to misbegotten film adaptations (a musical of *The Yearling* with real wildlife, but a turkey nonetheless) and beyond, entertainingly relaying what went wrong while making you almost wish, out of morbid curiosity, that you'd seen these shows.

The gold standard here—as witnessed by the book's title—is *Carrie*, the grisly 1988 musical based on Stephen King's story of a weird girl who uses telekinesis to avenge her fellow prom-mates. That show sank into deserved camp obscurity, but Mandelbaum's book cries out for a wider audience.

MICHAEL MUSTO  
Columnist, *The Village Voice*

MICHAEL MUSTO writes the popular column “La Dolce Musto” in *The Village Voice*.

## EDITOR'S BIOGRAPHY

MARK STRAND is the author of numerous collections of poetry, including *Man and Camel* (2006); *Blizzard of One* (1998), which won the Pulitzer Prize; *Dark Harbor* (1993); *The Continuous Life* (1990); *Selected Poems* (1980); *The Story of Our Lives* (1973); and *Reasons for Moving* (1968). He has edited a number of volumes, including *100 Great Poems of the Twentieth Century* (W. W. Norton, 2005).

His honors include the Bollingen Prize, three grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a National Institute of Arts and Letters Award, the 1974 Edgar Allen Poe Prize from The Academy of American Poets, and a Rockefeller Foundation award, as well as fellowships from The Academy of American Poets, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Ingram Merrill Foundation.

He has served as Poet Laureate of the United States and is a former Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets. He currently teaches English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York.

A portion of the proceeds from *Books: The Ultimate Insider's Guide* will be donated to FIRST BOOK, a national organization that gives children from low-income families the opportunity to read and own their first new books. To date, FIRST BOOK has distributed more than 50 million books to children in over 1,300 communities around the country.