

A dozen recent books prove fiction is alive and well

by Lois Wadsworth

I'm excited about the state of fiction today; after reviewing 16 novels this year, I believe fiction is better than ever. Whether you're looking for a good book to curl up with on a wintry evening or deciding to give one to someone you love, the selection is great. Here are my favorites for the year.

Two novels published in 1984 won their authors the American Book Awards' \$10,000 prizes. Ellen Gilchrist was honored for *Victory Over Japan*, her collection of short stories featuring a bevy of fascinating new Southern women. Harriet Doerr was honored for *Stones for Ibarra*, her lyrical evocation of an American couple living in a small Mexican mining town. I predict the American novelist to win the big prize this year will either be Anne Tyler for *The Accidental Tourist* or Bobbie Ann Mason for *In Country*, my personal favorites for 1985. Tyler's writer of guidebooks for travelers who hate to leave home,

slain Chilean Socialist President Salvador Allende). Reminiscent of a Marquez fantasy, *The House of the Spirits* demonstrates the reconciling love between an old man (a macho landowner and former right-wing politician) and the joy of his life, his sassy leftist granddaughter.

If you're in the mood for something light, Garrison Keillor's best selling *Lake Wobegon Days* shows the master of nostalgia at his best. He witnesses all the important (if mundane) moments of growing up in "the little town that time forgot and that the decades cannot improve," much as he does on *Prairie Home Companion* Saturday and Sunday nights at six on KLCC.

If you're looking for a book of poetry, consider *When Waves Sprout Birds*, Eugene writer (and activist) Peter Jensen's collection of poems assembled in a beautiful edition available locally. These poems are often intensely personal, always compassionate. I particularly like this short piece:

Like a far away lover

the snow coated volcano shines
across a complicated sea of firs.
Blue air races between us
like a symphony written in exile.

Other novels I reviewed and liked include Frederick Barthelme's tale of the comic trials of married life in the New South in *Second Marriage*, Louise Erdrich's powerful and hilarious portrait of contemporary Native American life in *Love Medicine*, J. G. Ballard's amazing account of his wartime childhood in Shanghai in *Empire of the Sun*, and Lore Segal's charming immigrant who finds her way around in the Jewish/black bohemia of 1950s New York in *Her First American*. Check out any of these 12 books—once you start reading (and buying) good fiction, you're hooked.

REVIEW

his eccentric family, friends, and resentful dog make *The Accidental Tourist* a delight to read. Bobbie Ann Mason tells us how it is to be a 17-year-old girl in a small town in Kentucky grieving over the Vietnam War in *In Country*; hailed by the critics, it contains passages of great healing power.

A couple of other stunning novels come to mind. Marguerite Duras' autobiographical love story set in French Indochina at the end of the colonial period, *The Lover*, is a blockbuster; this emotional and dramatic tale is cinematically imagistic and haunting. The other work in translation I loved is a Latin American family saga, *The House of the Spirits*, written by Isabel Allende (niece of

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