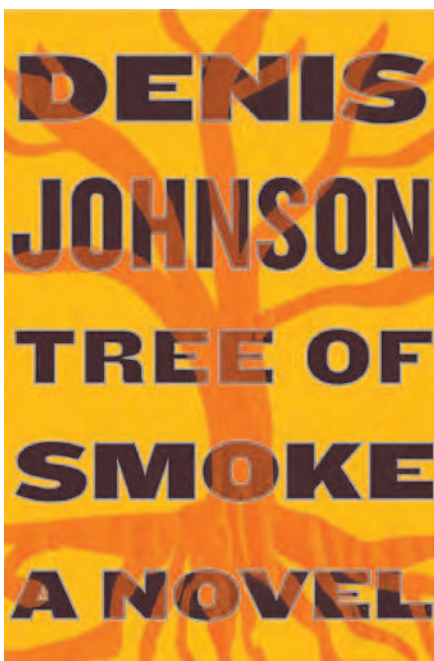


winterREADING

Every year, selecting the few books that we'll review in the annual Winter Reading section is a challenge. We have to pick early, so we don't always know what we'll want from the fall publications; we have to pick widely so we don't overload on young adult fiction, historical fiction, food-centric nonfiction or whatever else we've been heavily reading during the year. This year, we've managed to sustain a fairly regular books column, meaning some things we might have included here (Oregon Book Award fiction finalists, for example), have already been reviewed in *EW's* pages. We've written about *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* and Alex Ross's *The Rest is Noise*; we've reviewed debut novels, nonfiction love letters to lost magazines and new books from UO professors such as Lauren Kessler and Ehud Havazelet. But we can never get it all, much as we'd like to (though we're not quite finished; check next week for one last 2007 books column and a few last-minute gift suggestions!).

Winter Reading, then, isn't exactly a best of the year reading list; instead, we like to think of it a bit like the way Douglas Wolk explains the comics he chose to discuss in his engrossing, entertaining *Reading Comics*: They're just some of the books we found interesting to read, review and, hopefully, discuss. We hope you'll find a few things of interest in here, too. — Molly Templeton

fiction



Fire Water Burn

TREE OF SMOKE by Denis Johnson. FARRAR, STRAUS & GIRoux, 2007. HARDCOVER, \$27. WINNER, 2007 NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FOR FICTION. A *NEW YORK TIMES* BEST BOOK OF 2007.

The Vietnam War gets its first great postmodern treatment in Denis Johnson's sprawling, cautionary epic *Tree of Smoke*. The author of *Jesus' Son*, the widely praised minimalist collection of short stories about junkies and thieves, brings us a maximalist novel that begins with John F. Kennedy's assassination, crescendos with the Tet offensive and gently recedes from this tumultuous time period to a coda set in the corporate cool of 1983. It is as daring in its structure as in its ambition.

As Laura Miller correctly observed in a review for *Salon*, a scene where army grunts torture a Viet Cong prisoner because their sergeant was injured and a colonel must intervene and execute the

prisoner in order to stop the madness is the "hinge of the novel, its heart of darkness, and the rest of the story's events radiate from that point, forward and backward in time, with an impressive symmetry." This two-part structure allows Johnson to frame the war in its dominant tropes: unable to withdraw, unable to advance and doomed to repetition (the very definition of hell).

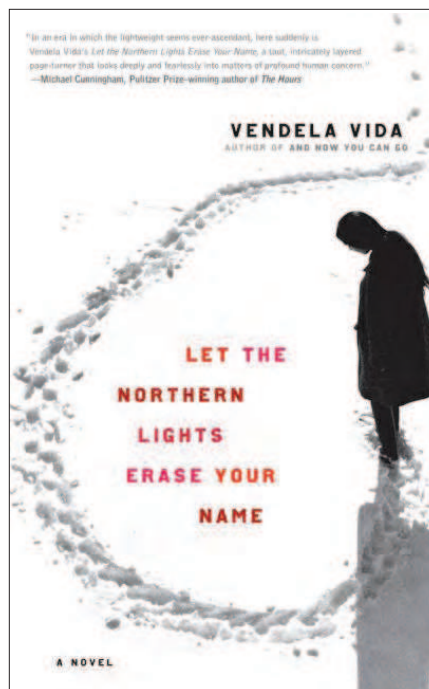
The story proper follows freshman CIA operative William "Skip" Sands as he is sent to the jungles of Southeast Asia to work for his uncle, Col. Francis X. Sands, who commands a small brigade despite the fact he's retired from the U.S. military. Skip researches local folklore for his uncle — who believes war is "90 percent myth" — while his patience and patriotism are slowly corroded. *Tree of Smoke* collects the myths of that era, boils them in a pot and adds dashes of *Apocalypse Now!*, *The Quiet American* and a host of other literary references to make this searing, violent novel a work of strange beauty — with knowing winks. — Chuck Adams

Sparkling in the Cold

LET THE NORTHERN LIGHTS ERASE YOUR NAME by Vendela Vida. ECCO, 2007.

Vendela Vida doesn't waste any time. Her second novel begins with a young woman on a plane that's landing in Helsinki. When the driver of the shuttle that takes her to her hotel calls, she feels only relief that it's not her fiancé. What brings this woman, Clarissa, so far from her New York home is carefully and quickly revealed: The day of her father's funeral, she found that he wasn't her biological father and that her fiancé had known this for years. Feeling betrayed and rootless — her mother left when she was 14 — Clarissa took off for Finland, the home of the man whose name was on her birth certificate.

In the cold, far north of Lapland, Clarissa finds the Sami priest she thinks is her



father, and she meets a young reindeer herder whose aunt, a healer, takes her in. And, in her self-imposed exile from everyone she knew before, she finds both questions and answers. *Let the Northern Lights Erase Your Name* is a literary cousin to Diana Abu-Jaber's *Origin*, which also concerns a woman in search of her own history in a cold, beautifully evoked setting. Vida is more concerned with the people than the place, though. While Abu-Jaber painted icy, gray portraits of upstate New York, where her protagonist searched for a murderer and herself, Vida's Clarissa notes the red frostbite scar on the face of Henrik, who helps on her quest, and the movement of the hands of Eero, the man she thinks is her father. As Clarissa explores the story of the year her mother came to this small northern town, when the indigenous Sami protested the building of a dam that would flood one of their towns, her own tale overlaps with her mother's in ways even more difficult than the burden of family and the habit of running away. Vida writes with clarity and grace, giving us an aching, lost girl, not always sympathetic but always grieving, always searching. Her small book has a coolness that's not the product of distance, though it's something like it; isolating herself in an isolated, frozen land, Clarissa puts space between herself and the things she both wants and fears to know. But it's a space that somehow serves to pull a reader in, a suggestion of warmth in a land of ice, snow and memory. — Molly Templeton

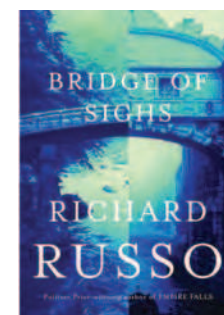
Mr. Hooper Lives Upstate

BRIDGE OF SIGHS by Richard Russo. KNOPE, 2007. HARDCOVER, \$26.95. A *NEW YORK TIMES* NOTABLE BOOK OF 2007.

The thing about writing in the first person is that it's very challenging to give any kind of outside view on your character. Perhaps the most famous 20th century first-person work, *Lolita*, reveals its narrator's untrustworthiness early on and never looks back. But in Richard Russo's new work, his first novel since the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Empire Falls*, he alternates first-person chapters in the voice of convenience store owner Louis C. ("Lucy") Lynch with third-person chapters about Lynch's two main touchstones: his sometime-friend, Robert Noonan, and Sarah Berg, who has been married to Lynch for years. Russo chronicles the small class differences in mostly white, blue-collar towns like no one else, and in *Bridge* he also writes brilliantly about the ways children learn to become adults in such a

place. In Thomaston, a town in upstate N.Y., parents work, and often work over, their children; 40 years later, the children's paths will cross again. The book seemingly weighs in on the side of small-town life with occasional jaunts to other places, for the characters who end up the happiest (and, of course, still alive) stay where they're planted. They don't up and flee to Paris and Venice; they don't pursue their large dreams; they don't do anything but try to live the best and most honest way they can.

Or do they? Sarah and Noonan are both painters, but only Noonan has fame. In fact, Noonan never painted a thing until he escaped the dye-stained stream of Thomaston, where the tannery has been poisoning its residents slowly and surely. And Sarah, whose artistic gift, readers are given to learn, is quite large, remains mostly content with teaching the occasional



high school art class. Meanwhile Lynch, jovial and sentimental, writes about his past in a way that both shines a light on his parents' marriage and obscures his emotions and some of his less

honorable actions, which we nevertheless discover as Sarah and Noonan weigh in. Russo's plot goes off the rails about 75 pages from the end of the lengthy book, which encompasses almost all of Lynch's life; it's as if he thought Lynch somehow needed more explanation while the storyline needed another character. Neither is true, and the melodrama of the Noonan narrative thread ends with a whimper as Lynch and Sarah soldier on. From Lynch's point of view, things are pretty much just fine, but we know his reliability has its limits. We also know that parents damage their children in various and sundry ways and that the next generations already show damage and partial recovery, all based around the corner grocery. — Suzi Steffen



The Graces, Revealed

THE GREAT MAN by Kate Christensen. DOUBLEDAY, 2007. HARDCOVER, \$23.95.

In *Jacob's Room*, Virginia Woolf constructed the young man of the title by having a variety of characters talk about him and around him. He's not there, and discovering why opens up a vision of loss