

books:

After the Apocalypse by Maureen F. McHugh

Author Maureen F. McHugh conjures up ten ways that everything can go wrong in her sci-fi short story collection, *After the Apocalypse*. Unlike sci-fi stories that read like alternate versions of reality, *After the Apocalypse* is a truly futuristic collection that envisions a new future of zombies, bird flu, dirty bombs or a plague of a Mad Cow-like disease. According to McHugh's scenarios, everything will go to shit.

Not all of the stories have a global apocalyptic theme; some are hard-luck tales of people trying to get by in the future, when gas is a gazillion dollars a gallon and water is scarce due to climate ruination. Sure, it's scary, but is it only conceivable as sci-fi?

After the Apocalypse is a fantastic gift for the sci-fi lover, for a friend who adores *Dr. Who* and droned on and on about the merits and demerits of *Battlestar Galactica*'s finale, or even someone with a fantastic imagination who could use a thought-provoking and well-written introduction to the genre. — Shannon Finnell

**Swamplandia!** by Karen Russell

Centered on grief and a family of fake-Indian alligator wrestlers, Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* is a sort of bouilla-book: The story feels alternately like a novel, young adult fiction, dark comedy and tragedy. Ava, the youngest Bigtree child, narrates her family's emotional and financial unraveling after her mother's untimely death from cancer.

Each surviving Bigtree copes in a different way: Chief Bigtree by dreaming up plans to save the Swamplandia! theme park without his wife to act as the headlining alligator wrestler; brother Kiwi gets a job at a hell-hole of a competing theme park where he jumps head-first into the mainland culture for the first time; and sister Ossie scours the obituaries for dead young men to date psychically. All this leaves Ava fairly helpless and alone in her family, a new experience for the strong young alligator wrestler.

It's only Russell's skilled writing that makes the novel's pile of elements join together to tell a great story. The book is strewn with unexpected details and plot elements that arise from the swamp's thick air. Ava's scant 13 years and the authenticity of her honest, painful adolescence make parts of the book feel like a bizarre and beautiful Judy Blume novel, but the girl's insight and phrasing is full-grown. — Shannon Finnell

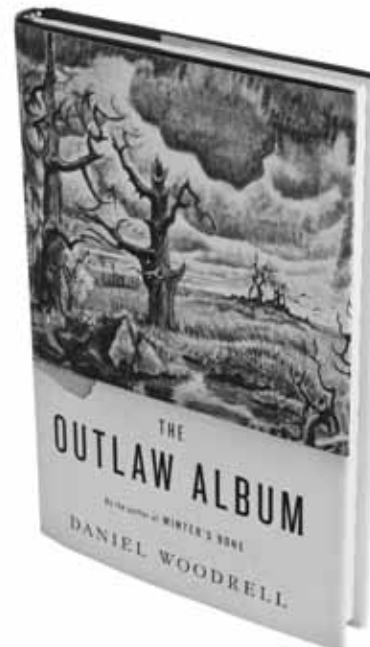
Pauline Kael: A Life In The Dark by Brian Kellow

Ten years after her death, Pauline Kael remains such a divisive figure in film criticism that the *Los Angeles Review of Books* ran two reviews of Brian Kellow's new biography: One, by Richard Schickel, takes the slightly weary, I-was-there tone; the other, by Laurie Winer, begins, "When I discovered Pauline Kael circa 1977, I loved her immediately and deeply."

To his credit and the strength of his book, Kellow takes neither side. He's clearly an admirer of Kael, but his admiration is of the sort that obliges him to show the whole picture, even when it's ugly. *Pauline Kael: A Life in the Dark* starts slowly but delivers a solid grounding in Kael's early life, from her childhood in rural California to her time in the Bay Area, where she was a radio film critic and wrote program notes for Berkeley's Cinema Guild. In 1948 in Santa Barbara, Kael gave birth to her daughter, Gina, whose complicated place in her mother's life is a tale of its own.

In 1965, Kael's first book came out. *I Lost it at the Movies* got excellent reviews and set Kael on a more visible path, leading to writing assignments at *McCall's*, the *Atlantic Monthly* and, eventually, *The New Yorker*, where she wrote for almost 25 years. Kellow traces Kael's history through her writing, which was always forceful, enthusiastic and sharp but grew "shriller, more insistent" over the years as she wrote in support of the movies she felt were in danger of being washed away by a blockbuster tide. Her prickliness is apparent, but so is her interest in taking certain young critics under her wing. And her successes are prominent, but Kellow also explores her failures, including her arguably most egregious misstep: the flawed 1971 piece on *Citizen Kane*, for which she appropriated UCLA professor Howard Suber's research without a drop of credit.

An awareness of Kael's position within the changing world of film criticism runs through the book, which is rich with both film history and perfectly chosen snippets from Kael's reviews. Kellow's honest, engrossing look at her life and work reveals a difficult, admirable character, a stubborn, passionate, idiosyncratic woman whose unmistakable voice, outsized personality and love for cinematic storytelling made her a vibrant — and divisive — figure for anyone who cares about film. — Molly Templeton

**The Outlaw Album** by Daniel Woodrell

Born and raised in the Missouri Ozarks, a high-school dropout, ex-Marine and graduate of the vaunted Iowa Writer's Workshop, author Daniel Woodrell is quietly, steadily composing a body of work that ranks among the finest fiction writing of the past thirty years. His 2006 novel *Winter's Bone*, a haunting, meth-addled domestic drama raised to the pitch of Greek tragedy, became one of last year's best movies, and several of his books — including *Tomato Red* and *The Death of Sweet Mister* — have garnered awards and loads of critical praise. As a Southern writer mining the Ozarks' claustrophobic, psychic terrain of poverty, pride and defeat, Woodrell is often compared to Faulkner, though in style and tone he is more in line with Flannery O'Connor, Raymond Chandler and Chris Offutt — a bewitching combination of hard-boiled and swamp gothic that Woodrell himself calls "country noir." His writing is beautiful, his stories terrifying.

Woodrell's first collection of short fiction, *The Outlaw Album*, is a stunner. Delving into the harsh realities of life in the Ozarks, his stories often read like peremptory obituaries for perpetual outcasts, and the topography of his mortal coil is defined by vengeance, retribution, alienation, loyalty and sudden violence. This new collection contains at least two genuine masterpieces of the form, "Black Step" and "Woe to Live On," but there's not a misstep in the bunch. Whether set during the Reconstruction or dealing with the implausible rage of Gulf War veterans returned home, each story deposits an eerie aftertaste of gunpowder and rye. Woodrell hits quick and hard. The first sentence of "Florianne," a four-page story heavier than most novels, reads: "If they ever catch who took my daughter, I'll probably know him," and the last line, "How much of our world is in on this?" The question is rhetorical. — Rick Levin