

WINTER READING

If there's one thing *EW*'s writers like to do it's read. We're selfish about it — unabashedly so. We read what we love, and that's what we offer to you. This year we tried, more than ever, to read Oregon and Eugene authors, including those brave enough to self-publish. This area is awash with rain all winter long, but it's awash with literary talent and good local bookstores, too. Head over to Tsunami, Black Sun, Smith Family, J. Michaels or the unfortunately named but full of good books UO Duck Store, to name only a few, and support books, local bookstores and those among us willing to put their words and their selves onto page and out into the world. — *Camilla Mortensen*

■ = OREGON AUTHOR

fiction

■ The Listeners

By Leni Zumas. Tin House Books, \$15.95.



Portland author Leni Zumas' latest novel *The Listeners* tells the story of Quinn, a thirty-something ex-punk rocker, whose band, once on the verge of stardom, fell apart at the last minute. Now she works at a failing bookstore, otherwise drifting through life, running into ex-bandmates with names like Cam and Geck, haunted by memories of childhood trauma and observing the world from a caustic distance.

Parallel to Quinn's story is the story of her conservative brother; by some measures his life is more on-track than Quinn's, but by others he's just as lost, and locked in orbit with his bottoming-out sister. Zumas' prose is stark, her chapters brief — many only a paragraph long. The narrative jumps back and forth in time from the present, to Quinn's days on the road with her band and even further back to her childhood, retelling a tragedy in Quinn's family with morbid and grisly detail. She paints the edges of the event with imagery of violence, menstruation and death — never quite clarifying detail. Zumas' book is full of many dark passages, so rich in dense imagery they're best read like poetry, gleaning feeling over substance, atmosphere instead of narrative.

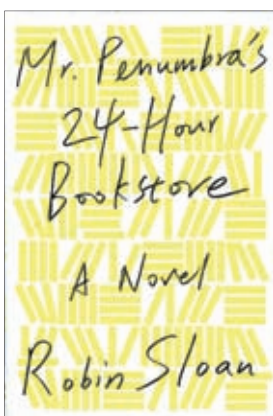
I love stories of damaged people hammering out family on their own terms, sometimes with bandmates, drinking buddies or actual relatives like Quinn's brother, mother and father (whom she dryly calls Mod and Fod.) Quinn is flawed but big hearted, and I loved getting to know her, like the tattooed girl you just met at the bar: She drinks too much, she smokes too much, you're fairly certain half of what she says is complete bullshit, but you're falling a little bit in love with her anyway. — *William Kennedy*

■ Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore

By Robin Sloan. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$25.

Print is dead! Long live print! Print is irreplaceable; it's destined to last as long as humankind!

Thus is the age we live in, the age Robin Sloan addresses in his first novel. Clay Jannon, a graphic designer by trade, begins work in Mr. Penumbra's bookstore, and a mystery meshing ancient lore, modern technology, codes, puzzles and a fun group of obsessive friends. Through giggle-inducing twists and turns, Clay and company try to solve a puzzle to unlock the secret to immortality.



Sloan doesn't use the book to advocate for one side of the print-digital divide. Instead, the lighthearted story gives credence to that sane notion that owning a bookcase and a Kindle won't create a rift in the time-space continuum and cause the world to implode. You're not with us or against us. It's writing that's really immortal. — *Shannon Finnell*

■ Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving

By Dean Evison. Algonquin Books, \$23.95.

There's a lot that's not quite *there* in Dean Evison's *Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving*. But, you know, there's a lot not quite there in much of real life and Evison captures that well: embarrassing jealous fits, crass jokes that fall flat and clumsy attempts at romance. The novel tells the story of the repetitively named Benjamin Benjamin, a likeable if somewhat schlubby former stay-at-home dad trying to get back in the game after a divorce. Until now he's let life happen to him, dabbling in writing poetry but generally finding purpose in taking care of his kids and being a husband. Like a lot of divorce stories, children involved in trauma drives Benjamin and his wife apart. In *Revised Fundamentals* this tragedy feels somewhat hackneyed, a plot device preventing petulant adults from owning up to their own shortcomings instead of an actual trauma.

Benjamin finds work after the split with his wife taking care of a young man with muscular dystrophy named Trev. In his relationship with Trev, Benjamin owns up to his mistakes, comes to terms with his divorce and begins to make early and awkward attempts at finding romance again. When Benjamin and Trev set off on a road trip to patch up Trev's relationship with his own dad, they pick up a motley crew of characters on the way, helping Benjamin reestablish himself as a gifted caretaker.

What redeems the novel's occasional shortcomings are well-drawn characters, laugh-out-loud scenarios and a dead-on eye for what makes life hurt so much sometimes: "Listen to me: everything you think you know, every relationship you've ever taken for granted, every plan or possibility you've ever hatched, every conceit or endeavor you've ever concocted, can be stripped from you in an instant. Sooner or later, it will happen. So prepare yourself. Be ready not to be ready. Be ready to be brought to your knees and beaten to dust. Because no stable foundation, no act of will, no force of cautious habit will save you from this fact: nothing is indestructible." — *William Kennedy*

■ The Yellow Birds

By Kevin Powers. Little, Brown and Company, \$24.99. Amazon.com Editors' Pick Book of the Year.

I've never shot a gun. I'm opposed to violence on many levels. The act of enlisting in the service is totally foreign to my being. Yet I find stories of young men going to war endlessly fascinating, stirring in me a primal thought, a question central to the identity of many men: "Could I march into combat?"



I picked up *Yellow Birds* because of the blurb on the cover comparing it to one of my favorite war novels, *All Quiet On The Western Front*; it stands up well to the classic. Written by a veteran of the Iraq war, *Yellow Birds* is about friendships forged in impossible circumstances between young boys lured into war by romantic notions of becoming men, much like myself, clouded by too

much Hemingway. But as is often the case, idealistic boy-soldiers come home profoundly broken men.

The slim novel opens with the brilliant line, "The war tried to kill us in the spring," and it continues to alternate back and forth between life on the frontlines in Iraq and stateside, showing how combat can make the foreign feel like home and home feel strange. Depicting violence and its aftermath in simple and graphic prose, *Yellow Birds* is at other times lyric and almost beautiful, and should be required reading for anyone interested in joining the service. — *William Kennedy*

■ Canada

By Richard Ford. HarperCollins, \$27.99.

Canada is not a happy story. The simple plot isn't awful, but alone it's nothing to write home about. So what makes it a good read? It's the simple language, the clarity with which the author builds isolation and the way he writes loyally from 15-year-old protagonist Dell Parsons' point of view, even when the late-blooming boy's interpretation of the world feels improbable or frustrating.

At the onset, Dell explains that he's telling a story: first about his parents' ill-fated bank robbery and then the murders that follow. It's 1960, the Parsons live in Great Falls, Mont., and their lives have been a chronology of standard events for a family following a father's Air Force career. More and more, it becomes clear that the Parsons are each strange and isolated, both from greater Great Falls and from each other. No one is quite likable, and Ford makes clear that nothing is going to end well.

All the while, Dell is starting to figure out himself and the world, and that's where the beautiful writing and heartbreaking realities arrive. Central to the bank robbery portion are questions about relationships, questions that are as hard to answer in fiction as in life: Why do two miserable people stay together? What does love look like in the absence of happiness and closeness? He says of his father, whose only real relationships are with his family, "In truth, we were never very close, although I loved him as if we were." — *Shannon Finnell*

■ The Age of Miracles

By Karen Thompson Walker. Random House, \$26. National Book Award Finalist.

Karen Thompson Walker's *The Age of Miracles* tells the story of 11-year-old Julia, whose arrival to adolescence

