

What Work of Adult Fiction or Nonfiction Do You Recommend to Other Teachers for Summer Reading?

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The pages of my copy of *The Last Time They Met* by Anita Shreve (Little, Brown and Company 2001) are slightly warped—waterlogged from resting against my wet bathing suit, tossed into an overstuffed beach bag and left to air dry on a warm sunny day in the Outer Banks. For me, there's no greater pleasure than reading a page-turner at the beach, and *The Last Time They Met* is a story that will stay with me long after my suntan has faded.

The Last Time They Met is the story of lovers Linda Fallon and Thomas Janes, who first meet at age seventeen and break up after a serious auto accident; meet again at twenty-six in Africa, while each is married to another, and begin/resume their affair, which ends disastrously; and meet once again at fifty-two at a convention of writers and poets. Shreve cleverly writes the novel in reverse in three parts: Part One "Fifty-Two," Part Two "Twenty-Six," and Part Three "Seventeen."

In Part One, Linda and Thomas meet as fifty-two-year-old poets. Both are now successful, although Thomas has long been internationally famous for a collection of award-winning poems called "The Magdalene Poems," "[a] series of poems about a girl who did not become a woman. An elegy for a life not lived" (32). Thomas's fans assume (wrongly) that the poems were written in memory of his daughter, who drowned in a boating accident when just a child. Linda and Thomas treat each other kindly, tenderly, and without bitterness, for both their lives have left them fragile. Will they reconnect as friends or lovers? After two previous af-

fairs that ended badly, could they finally find happiness together?

In Part Two, we gain further understanding of the couple's torturous past, of their devastatingly unhappy marriages, and of Linda's desperate attempt to find a way to be together with Thomas permanently.

Finally, in Part Three, we learn how Linda and Thomas originally met as high school seniors; page by page Shreve gives readers subtle, yet important, nuances of the lovers' relationship. The clues slowly fall into place, and finally the puzzle of unanswered questions is revealed. We learn of Linda's troubled and secret past, the special bond she and Thomas share, and the terrible car crash that is the foundation for the entire novel. Shreve's ending is both shocking and controversial. Upon finishing the final page, readers may find themselves wanting to read the book again, looking for clues and signs that lead to the truth. They are there but may be overlooked on the first reading. Just as in Shreve's other novels, *The Pilot's Wife*, *Fortune's Rocks*, and *The Weight of Water*, the characters are believably human, subtly flawed, and absolutely unforgettable.

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If you could have dinner with the living author of your choice, who would your companion for the evening be? My selection certainly varies from time to time, but the current candidate is Barbara Kingsolver. She has probably been on my short list ever since I read her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, but, much to my surprise, since I am generally not much of a nonfiction reader, it is her latest book of essays

entitled *Small Wonder* (HarperCollins 2002) that has raised her so high in my esteem.

The twenty-three essays in this volume, only a few of which have appeared in print before, discuss topics as far ranging as raising chickens, television viewing habits, patriotism, parenting, apologizing in Japanese, and seed banks. Yet the concerns of these seemingly far-flung essays are ultimately always about our place in the world and the ways in which we must vigilantly struggle to preserve that place. Kingsolver takes her readers to foreign lands and to remote regions to comment upon the inescapable interdependency of our species with the uncounted other forms of life on the planet, and she invites us into her home to illustrate how her own life is shaped by an awareness of this interdependency. But she never preaches to her readers, or at least never preaches any philosophy other than mindfulness—an attitude that easily transcends political, religious, or social divides.

In the introduction to *Small Wonder*, Kingsolver explains that the book is intended as a response to the tragedy of September 11, 2001. The ways in which tragedy and death impinge upon us is never far from the surface of most of the essays, but the tone of the book is ultimately optimistic, as the title implies, wondering about life and savoring the wonders around us.

I first enjoyed *Small Wonder* as a book-on-tape that I listened to for a few minutes in my car each day, stopping occasionally to rewind when the strains of “Jingle Bells” and “Happy Birthday” from my toddler in the back seat overwhelmed Kingsolver’s narration. The essays not only stood up to this test, but also moved me enough to acquire the text so that I could read them myself. They are a fine choice for a summer’s, or any season’s, reading. Satiating my appetite with Kingsolver’s thoughtful and witty prose is the next best thing to having my own lingering dinner table conversation with her.

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Whether you recognize her as the creator of irreverent *Ernie Pook’s Comeek*, a comic populated by madcap characters such as Marlys and Maybonne, or you are a newcomer to Planet Barry, you will find Lynda Barry disarmingly dark and unerringly skilled at capturing the rhythms of spoken language in

Cruddy (Simon & Schuster 1999), an illustrated novel directed to grown-up readers.

To be sure, the book is not for everyone, even all adults. Far from the standard kidlit-nostalgia fare targeted to today’s boomers, this tale really reaches into the violence and pain of youth. Set in the seventies and offered in the form of a suicide note, this tragicomic fiction intertwines stories of adolescent angst to stunning effect, never shrinking from the era’s enthusiasm for profanity, drugs, and all the rest. Even Barry’s previous work, underworldly as it is, could not prepare the reader for this outing, literally mapped on the book’s inside covers one brutality at a time.

If you are still reading, then perhaps you can appreciate how *Cruddy*, despite its subject and candor, makes for entertaining—even funny—reading. It is the same convergence of candor, grit, and incongruity that makes *The Simpsons* such a franchise in animation. (*Simpsons* creator Matt Groening is a Barry fan.) The book is replete with well-seen cultural details, from sock monkeys to pulp movies, paired with ghoulish drawings worthy of Edward Gorey. With her untamed wit and flair for slang, Barry proves as spellbinding as her characters’ lives are harrowing. As Marlys, “incredible #1 groover-on-life” might say, it is “so cinchy” to see why Lynda Barry’s *Cruddy* isn’t.

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How can a terrible time in history be portrayed with such charm? In *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, translated from the French by Ina Rilke (Knopf 2001), Dai Sijie, himself reeducated during China’s Cultural Revolution, enchants us with his story of two teenage boys, considered intellectuals because of their middle school education, who are sent off to a remote village to be reeducated by the peasants. Both boys, as well as the village girl they fall for, are indeed reeducated, but not in the way Chairman Mao intended.

The year is 1971 when the seventeen-year-old narrator and his eighteen-year-old friend Luo, the sons of doctors who have been classed as enemies of the state, are sent to Phoenix Mountain to haul manure and work in the fields under the watchful eye of the village headman. Luo’s quick wit often

saves them: when the narrator's violin raises the headman's suspicions, Luo impulsively retitles the sonata the narrator is playing, "Mozart Is Thinking of Chairman Mao." But when they discover that another youth who has been sent to the mountain harbors a secret stash of forbidden Western novels, books the two boys dream about reading, their wits are put to the test: how can they get the books for themselves? When they succeed, they share their secret treasure, the stories that have introduced them to new worlds and new ideas, with the Little

Chinese Seamstress. Luo fancies himself in love with "the lovely mountain girl in need of culture," and he brings volumes by Balzac along on their trysts, never anticipating the effect these stories will have on the young woman.

The author's gentleness and generosity in portraying such a dark time, his humor, and his creation of a flawed yet loveable narrator make this an enchanting novel that will leave readers pondering its implications, and thinking about the power of literature, long after they have turned the last page.

answers for **SCREEN SAVORS** (page 22)

1. THE FISSURE (FISHER) KING 2. CENT (SCENT) OF A WOMAN 3. DYE (DIE) HARD 4. ANNIE HAUL (HALL) 5. BORNE (BORN) YESTERDAY 6. THE DEAR (DEER) HUNTER 7. DAZE (DAYS) OF THUNDER 8. HI (HIGH) NOON 9. STEAL (STEEL) MAGNOLIAS 10. THE MOURNING (MORNING) AFTER 11. BOOGIE KNIGHTS (NIGHTS) 12. RAZING (RAISING) ARIZONA 13. THE GRATE (GREAT) ESCAPE 14. BUSS (BUS) STOP 15. CRIMSON TIED (TIDE) 16. ONLY EWE (YOU) 17. MEMPHIS BELL (BELLE) 18. THE HEIR (AIR) UP THERE 19. SEAMS (SEEMS) LIKE OLD TIMES 20. BROADCAST GNUS (NEWS) 21. WAYNE'S WHIRLED (WORLD) 22. A PATCH OF BLEW (BLUE) 23. WIDOW'S PIQUE (PEAK) 24. ATE (8) MILE 25. WEIGHT (WAIT) UNTIL DARK 26. OVERBORED (BOARD) 27. CARRY (CARRIE) 28. THE CANE (CAINE) MUTINY 29. ROWED (ROAD) TO PERDITION 30. NEVER ON SUNDAY (SUNDAY) 31. NORMA RAY (RAE) 32. THE PRINTS (PRINCE) OF TIDES 33. DAM (DAMN) YANKEES 34. THE BERTH (BIRTH) OF A NATION 35. THE KING AND AYE (I) 36. MONSTER'S BAWL (BALL) 37. AMERICAN PI (PIE) 38. METE (MEET) THE PARENTS 39. CASTE (CAST) AWAY 40. YOU'VE GOT MALE (MAIL) 41. THE HOARSE (HORSE) WHISPERER 42. THE SANTA CLAWS (CLAUSE) 43. GUERRILLAS (GORILLAS) IN THE MIST 44. PAY IT FOREWORD (FORWARD) 45. THE OPPOSITE OF SECTS (SEX) 46. THE LORD OF THE WRINGS (RINGS) 47. GUISE (GUYS) AND DOLLS 48. LIEN (LEAN) ON ME 49. AIR FORCE WON (ONE) 50. LYRE LYRE (LIAR LIAR)
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Search for New Editor of *Voices from the Middle*

NCTE is seeking a new editor of *Voices from the Middle*. In May 2005, the term of the present editor, Kylene Beers, will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received **no later than September 30, 2003**. Letters should include the applicant's vision for the journal and be accompanied by the applicant's vita and one sample of published writing. Do not send books, monographs, or other materials which cannot be easily copied for the Search Committee. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee in February 2004 will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in September 2005. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be addressed to Margaret Chambers, *Voices from the Middle* Search Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Questions regarding any aspect of the editorship should be directed to Margaret Chambers, Division Director for Publications: mchambers@ncte.org; 800-369-6283, extension 3623.
