BLL Book Reviews - December 2018

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Blue Rider (Groundwood Books, 2018) - Picture Book (for 4-7 year-olds)
by Geraldo Valerio
reviewed by: Nori Morganstein, Youth Services Librarian/Assistant Director

This book was a beautiful surprise. It’s a wordless book, filled with expressionism artwork. The story is about the power of art and the magic of books. Of course as a librarian, I’m drawn to a book about these things. It’s the kind of story that will make any avid reader or lover of art (or both) exhale with an understanding smile.

The story begins with a young girl finding a book on the street of a busy city. The book has a blue horse on its cover. She takes it home and reads it. The pages of the book are opened and all of a sudden there are bright colors. The girl imagines the blue horse flying over the city, spreading bright colors. Pinks, oranges, yellows, and greens fall from the flying horse. And soon the city disappears entirely, to be replaced by colors and various shapes. The horse disappears too. Then there are only bright colors and different shapes. There are pages of art, followed by the young girl riding through it on top of the blue horse.

There’s this one, magical page with a zoomed in image of the girl’s contented face, while reading and imagining. It’s the face we all hope to see on children today, while reading a book. It’s the look of someone who has found the right book for them. Even after the girl has put the book down, pieces of art remain. Her room is brighter and more colorful. Her building is more appealing. And her city now has brightly colored specks in its sky. The message is of course that a good book or a good piece of art changes everything. It can change how you view the world. It can bring color to your life that you didn’t know was missing.

I am a big fan of wordless picture books. I have come to think of them, over the years, as undervalued literacy tools. Often people misinterpret them as easy books for children who aren’t reading yet. It is true that children who aren’t reading yet can enjoy wordless books. However, I think they are most beneficial to children who are already reading. They almost force young readers to observe and think critically. Reading them enables creativity and storytelling. This of course leads to building a better vocabulary, and writing creatively. In a sense, reading wordless books requires you to be both a reader and a writer. You have to come up with the story as you interpret it.

This wordless book, in particular, will lead to discussion about art and literature. What makes something art? Why is there more color at the end of the story than at the beginning? What did the book change for the girl in the story? How might a good book change you? I recommend this one to early readers, but also to book lovers and art appreciators. It’s a good book for the creative thinkers out there. It can also encourage creativity and imagination for those who are less imaginative. The artwork is beautiful and inspired by the German Expressionist group known as Der Blaue Reiter (which included Wassily Kandinsky), as noted in the beginning. I can’t imagine a better way to spend a rainy fall day then reading this book, looking at art, and discussing with a child the magic of a good book.
On August 27, 1928 "The Signing of the General Pact for the Renunciation of War" took place in Paris. Known as the Paris Peace Pact or the Kellogg-Briand Treaty, it outlawed war. Some might look at the subsequent ninety years and ask, "So, how's that working for you?" In this meticulously researched and well-reasoned book Yale Law School professors Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro give their answer: Better than you might think.

Hathaway and Shapiro begin the book by describing what they call The Old World Order. They base this order on the work of a brilliant Dutch thinker Hugo Grotius who developed the just war theory. Grotius, a product of the Enlightenment, based his reasoning on natural rights. All (wo)men have the natural right to determine the course of their lives, to acquire property, to enter agreements, and to protect their rights through the use of force. Grotius realized that as the world globalized and governments sent trading companies out over the earth that the rights of war could not depend on the justice of the war waged. This applied in particular to the oceans. Completing his argument, since war was a means of law enforcement, Might had to be Right. As Hathaway and Shapiro note, in the absence of global courts, if war is legal, Might must be Right, even if it is wrong! Thus, acts committed in war are legal even if they would be crimes in peacetime. Under the Old World Order the only war crimes were the use of poison, treacherous assassination, and rape.

Hathaway and Shapiro then turn to the events that led to the Peace Pact. Following World War I there was a growing sense that war needed to be either curtailed or ended. The first attempt was the League of Nations. As one critic described it, the League charter was "perfume masking the rankness of war." In the United States the charter failed when Republicans reasoned that the requirement under Article 16 that all member states must take up arms if a majority so voted would draw the U.S. into war.

The road to the Peace Pact was not smooth. In the United States the intellectual and financial driving force was Salmon Levinson. Outraged by the events that led to World War I Levinson argued that we should not have laws of war but laws against war. By analogy, we do not have laws of murder or laws of poisoning, but laws against them. Working with the Pennsylvania Senator Philander Knox and Idaho Senator William Borah, they developed a four-part plan for the outlawry of war. This document, published at Christmas in 1921, set the stage for the Peace Pact. As is the case with many treaties, this pact required detailed and deliberate negotiation between the French foreign minister Aristide Briand and American Secretary of State Frank Kellogg. Article I of the pact condemns recourse to war and a renunciation of it as an instrument of national policy while in Article II the parties to the pact agree that the settlement of all disputes or conflicts shall never be sought except by pacific means.

While the Peace Pact replaced the core principles of the Old World Order, it did not replace it with a new set of institutions. Hathaway and Shapiro argue that it took time before institutions came into being to effect the transition from Old to New. They spend considerable effort to detail the response to the Japanese taking of Manchuria and they beautifully describe the clashing views of Japan and the United States at the outset of World War II.

Perhaps the watershed moment for the Peace Pact came with the Nuremberg trials at the end of the war. Did Germany bear collective responsibility for the war or was it possible to try individuals for war crimes? This was not a mere academic question, although it was legal scholars who framed the debate and advanced arguments. It was a practical question. Was bringing German leaders to trial ex post facto law making? Was the German legal scholar Carl Schmitt correct that while individual Germans could be brought to trial for the Holocaust, they were not liable for individual war crimes, but that Germany instead bore collective responsibility? Hathaway and Shapiro give a detailed account of how these questions were resolved, and how the institutional structures that would allow the Peace Pact to have real meaning evolved. They conclude that while nuclear weapons, democracy, and free trade are explanatory variables for decline in conquest, "the missing element in all of these explanations … is the outlawry of war that began with the Peace Pact." (continued on the next page)
Has the Peace Pact made the world a safe place? Hardly, as Hathaway and Shapiro concede. There are issues of sovereignty for ambiguously defined areas (think of the islands of the South China Sea) as well as failed states that live on as breeding grounds for internal conflict and terrorism. However, there is progress. In a chapter entitled "Outcasting" they describe how cleverly defined sanctions can curb unwanted behavior. Their conclusion is that the success of the system built around the Peace Pact depends on the United States playing a central role in maintaining the legal order. We should keep this in mind as we debate the role the United States will play in the twenty-first century.

If you appreciate authors who can pick through a chaotic historical era and weave a coherent narrative, and who can rescue a seemingly obscure document to give it its rightful place in history and current events, then The Internationalists is an excellent choice for you.

Pokerface: the Rise and Rise of Lady Gaga
by Maureen Callahan
reviewed by Don Boink

This is a biography of the famous Stefani Germanotta that you all have heard about. It may not be apparent to you however at first because she now is better known as Lady Gaga. Maureen Callahan has been a writer and editor for the New York Post and has covered the Lower East Side sub culture as well as local and national politics for several years. The book was published in 2010 when Stefani was 24 years old and had struggled and fought her way up the entertainment ladder from being the leader of her own band in high school to the pinnacle of pop stardom.

Her childhood was from a well to do family living in the upscale neighborhood of the Upper West Side of New York City. When she found her self working in the entertainment field however she gravitated to the slummier section of town called the Lower East Side. Here she had an apartment but still frequently returned to the family home. Her parents were very supportive of her ambitions. Off stage she is the polar opposite of her stage personality. In the show business she is completely in charge and attends to every detail. Otherwise she is isolated, insecure and unable to be alone. She needs someone to be with her at all times.

Her musical heroes were Britney Spears, Billy Joel, and Bruce Springsteen. It is from those and other entertainers that she unabashedly stole ideas. Not that she just copied them but put her own twist on the ideas. Her own vocal and composing skills were great in themselves. An article in a recent New York Times magazine gave a fine account of how her skills evolved. Actually continuing to reinvent herself as she searched for who she was. The recent very popular movie “A Star Is Born”, a fourth iteration of that title, is a wonderful vehicle to showcase her several talents. The book “Poker Face” only covers her career up to age 24. In the movie she is 32. It relates how her popularity was greater in Europe and Asia before it really caught on in the States. The persona “Lady Gaga” came about almost accidentally.

In the coarse of time she created several songs and did videos that became great hits. The videos are available on Face Book and other sites and involve pop art dancing and singing and a series of extravagant costumes as well as effects. I’m a late comer to her fan club as that type of entertainment is not my favorite. I first really became aware her when she appeared with Tony Bennett on TV. When I saw her in “A Star Is Born” I first realized what a wonderful actress she is. I feel her career is destined to only grow more and more as her vast repertoire is showcased more and more.

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Destiny of the Republic; a tale of Madness, Medicine and the Murder of a President (2012)
by Candice Millard
reviewed by Sue Carr

Now, for a large pot of money…Answer the following questions:

Was James Garfield…
1 Born in a log cabin;
2 President of the US before Chester Arthur;
3 President of the US after Rutherford B Hayes;
4 Shot while in office?

You left with the pot of money, if you answered “YES” to all of those questions. (Gail Collins helped me with this.)

My history classes in grammar school and high school must have run out of steam after we dealt with the Civil War. I had absolutely no idea who those men were, other than recognizing their names. Or perhaps my memory failed to keep the events that occurred in those years in the critical category…the “spoils system” did not resonate with the same importance as the “Boston Tea Party” or the “shot heard round the world.” Yet the spoils system dominated the government for many decades, influencing mightily the way the government was run.

James Garfield was, indeed, born in a log cabin. His father died, as a result of fighting a fire to save his farm when James was not two years old. His mother was left with four children and a large debt. She sold most of the land to pay off the debt, and with a much reduced farm she and her oldest son worked hard to keep the family together. Their circumstances were indeed “desperate.” At the age of 16, Garfield became a canal man, driving a boat on the Erie and Ohio Canal. After a fall from a boat and nearly drowning, contracting malaria which kept him in bed for weeks, he changed his life around. His mother asked him to consider returning to his studies and offered him $17 that she and Tom (elder brother) had saved for him. He did so. Soon realizing that he had a good mind, he became a dedicated and ambitious scholar. He worked as a janitor to pay the bills and after a year, the school promoted him from janitor to assistant professor. He taught 8 classes as well as continuing with his own. From there he went to Williams College.

In 1859 he was asked to step in for an Ohio state senator who had died – this was his entry into the political world. In 1861 he enlisted in the Union Army and by 1862, he was a Brigadier General having masterminded the Union victory of the Battle of Middle Creek. That year he was elected to the US Senate. He was reluctant to leave the army but when Lincoln asked him to take his seat in the Congress he agreed. He served there until his nomination as the Republican candidate for the Presidency in 1880. He did not covet the position of president, but agreed to run for the office. He won.

Now… a tale of madness, medicine and the murder of a president. Destiny of the Republic, features:

1) Charles Guiteau, a madman, shot James Garfield in July of his first year as president because of disappointment from his not being appointed ambassador to France. He stalked him for several days and with no security, Garfield was a perfect target. Garfield did not die from the wound – he died from infection, caused by the ignorance of his doctor, Willard Bliss.

2) Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, worked furiously to come up with a device to locate the bullet with his “induction balancing”…a precursor to the x-ray.

3) Also featured was the development of theories about antiseptic treatment of wounds and surgeries, from the findings of Louis Pasteur and Joseph Lister. Unfortunately Dr. Bliss did not adhere to these principles. He probed the wound with unwashed fingers and instruments.

4) And of course, Garfield.

Candace Millard tells of a remarkable page in US history. The country was still reeling from the impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction, with the north and the south still fighting. Although Garfield wasn’t given the time to turn this around, his death helped bring the country together. From the grief and anger, the realization that this murder was caused by political corruption, allowed by the “spoils system”, encouraged reform. A year after the vice president, Chester Arthur, became president, the Pendleton Civil Service Act was made into law. No longer were appointments made as a thank-you to friends, legal but were required that they be awarded for merit.

Millard weaves the stories of Garfield’s rise to power, the evolution of Guiteau’s madness, and the medical inadequacies of the time with great skill. She presents the heart-rending tale of Garfield’s last weeks in sobering detail. It is a superb rendition of history across many spheres. In spite of the sadness of the story – the loss of a magnificent man and possibly a magnificent president - it was a pleasure to read - well organized, understandable and informative.
When I first picked this book up a year ago, I’ll admit that I couldn’t really get into it. As the third and final installment in a YA romance trilogy, *Always and Forever, Lara Jean* picked up where its precursor left off—with Peter and Lara Jean happily in love, the Song Covey family tight as ever, and nothing but rainbows and butterflies on the horizon.

In case you haven’t read the first two books, let me briefly summarize: Lara Jean’s old love letters accidentally get sent out to the five recipients of her biggest crushes, including class athlete and popular kid Peter, bright and soft-spoken John Ambrose McClaren, and her older sister’s boyfriend Josh. The resulting chaos is awkward, hilarious, and endearing. As Lara Jean fumbles her way through these new revelations, she engages in a faux relationship with Peter out of a mutual hope to incite jealousy in the true objects of their desires. But like even the best-laid plans, Lara Jean and Peter’s strategy backfires when they end up falling for each other instead.

Two books later, despite a love declaration by Bachelor Number Two (John Ambrose) and some unwanted advances from a few persistent exes, Peter and Lara Jean remain happily ever after. Lara Jean’s father has a new girlfriend, her sisters are content at home and abroad, and all seems right in the world. The End. At least, that’s where this story ended for me last year. But when I decided to give it another shot, I was glad I did.

The perfect harmony in Lara Jean’s universe comes crashing down when she receives a rejection letter from her top college of choice—the same college where Peter is already enrolled early decision. What’s more, her other choices are several hours away from the town Lara Jean has called home all her life. Riddled with despair over the complications of long-distance relationships, as well as the many moments of her family’s lives she will inevitably miss out on, Lara Jean opts to distract herself from these important life decisions by becoming obsessed with inventing the perfect chocolate chip cookie.

As someone who handles difficult life decisions with avoidance and busy work, I can relate well to Lara Jean’s strife. Several times, I wished that I could reach into the pages of the book and shake her awake, remind her that this is her future and not anyone else’s. At times, Jenny Han pushed her character a bit too far, rendering Lara Jean an irritating caricature of a person. But she ultimately found redemption by choosing to attend a faraway school, not because it was what Peter wanted, or her family wanted, but because it was the best choice for her.

I think high school girls could learn a lot from this book. It is so easy to make huge decisions based off a desire to please other people, or to stay in the comfort and safety of the familiar. Lara Jean wrestles with her choice for most of the book, but when she finally makes it, she experiences a sense of freedom and wonderment that all young girls should experience when they come of age. And it is this freedom that surrounds *Always and Forever, Lara Jean* with a maturity level far beyond that of its prior installments.

The college question is just one of the many themes Han handles with maturity and grace in this book. For the first time, Lara Jean begins to contemplate whether or not she is ready to have sex with Peter. And Peter, much to my approval, displays a heroic amount of respect for his girlfriend by turning down the temptation after sensing Lara Jean’s apprehension. It seems young men can learn a lot from this book, too!

One of the darker moments in the novel comes when a minor but beloved character dies unexpectedly. Han delicately weaves this death into the fabric of changes Lara Jean must face during her senior year, and Lara Jean’s response is to live her life in tribute of the lost character’s advice: “Never say no when you really want to say yes.” A beautiful sentiment, and wise words to live by.

Perhaps my favorite aspect of this story was the changing family dynamic in the Song Covey household. With Lara Jean’s older sister home for break, a tension erupts between the eldest Song girl and her father’s new girlfriend-turned-fiancé. Margot’s perfect façade is finally shattered in this book, and we see her rebel against her father while dismissing his new love with bristling disapproval. Ultimately, Margot mends her relationship with her father and grows to appreciate her new step-mom, but not without some serious turmoil leading up to the truce. I enjoyed this version of Margot much more than her previous cookie-cutter self, and found her character development to be a high point in the story. In fact, Han does a wonderful job of developing many of her secondary characters more fully, from Lara Jean’s youngest sister Kitty—who fights for her right to wear a tuxedo at their father’s wedding—to Lara Jean’s best friend Chris—who postpones college to travel around the world without so much as a backpack full of essentials and a devil-may-care attitude.
Like the other books in this series, the ending resounds with love and promise. But unlike the other books, everything is not tied up neatly and topped with a bow. Lara Jean and Peter make a pact to stay faithful, seal the deal with a contract and a letter-writing pledge (an homage to the first installment), and go their separate ways … together. It’s a beautiful resolution to their love story, and not a resolution at all. I wonder if Han plans to turn this series into a tetralogy, or a pentalogy, or at the very least give us a “Nineteen Years Later” epilogue like all the best series do. But if not, I’m okay with not knowing how Lara Jean and Peter’s story ends. To tear them apart would be a sin, and to keep them together would go against everything Lara Jean’s mother stood for. So why not have it both ways? And yet, for the true romantics, we know exactly how this story ends. It’s written right there, in the title, *Always and Forever, Lara Jean.*

**Presidents of War: the Epic Story from 1807 to Modern Times**

by Michael Beschloss

reviewed by Jim Mills

A large proportions of our presidents have had their term of office dominated by wars, both foreign and domestic. *Presidents of War* covers the presidencies of James Madison, James Polk, Abraham Lincoln, William McKinley, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, and in an epilogue, the two Presidents Bush. These wars had wide ranging causes and history has shown that many were definitely preventable. Two wars, the two World Wars, were forced on the US by foreign events.

The earliest war covered is the War of 1812. President Jefferson had skillfully avoided conflict with Great Britain despite provocations but his successor, James Madison, gave in to pro-war forces and entered a war that did not benefit the country and resulted in the burning of the White House. Three decades later President Polk triggered a war with Mexico over the boundary between Mexico and the soon to be state of Texas. The overwhelming military force of the US resulted in a rapid defeat of Mexico with the occupation of their capital, Mexico City. This war resulted in a significant increase in the size of the United States adding the entire southwestern part of the country including what is now our most populous state, California.

The president whose term was most dominated by war has to be Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln’s election as president triggered the secession of southern states even before Lincoln’s inauguration five months later. The resulting Civil War killed more Americans than any other war and only ended a week before Lincoln’s assassination in 1865. Certainly no American president has had to face the challenges that confronted Lincoln. His successful resolution of the war, reunification of the country and the abolition of slavery make Lincoln, in the view of most historians, our greatest president.

Like the War of 1812, the Spanish-American War was clearly preventable. War fever in the US over Spanish rule in Cuba was at a boiling point when a US naval ship, The Maine, exploded in Havana harbor. A US military investigation quickly blamed the explosion on hostile Spanish action, removing culpability from the Maine’s commander and triggering the resulting war. More recent investigation have shown that the likely cause of the explosion was a fire in the coal compartment which was located right next to the munitions storage area. Similar explosions had occurred, at the time, on other US naval vessels. In addition to invading Cuba, the US expanded military action by occupying the Spanish Philippines and annexing Hawaii. Of course, Hawaii, is now one of our 50 states but the Philippine occupation resulted in a following insurrection that the US bloodily suppressed in the early 1900s. The Philippines were finally given their independence in 1946 following WW2.

Hostile German military action against US ships and passengers forced President Wilson into the Great War, now WW 1. US forces in France tipped the balance of forces after Russia had left the allied cause in 1917 leading to the November 1918 armistice. Similarly the Japanese aerial attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 pushed the US into the Second World War. Franklin Roosevelt was less reluctant to take this step than Wilson had been since the survival of Great Britain and a democratic Europe was clearly on the line. Again the US entry plus the forces of the Soviet Union (attacked by Germany in June 1941) resulted in the complete defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan by 1945.

The Korean peninsula had been occupied by Japan for a half century and the country’s presumably temporary occupation at the end of WW2 was split between the US and the Soviet Union. In June1950 the northern section invaded the south with the southern forces being rapidly vanquished. President Truman was forced to make a quick decision to use US military forces to turn back the onslaught. The was was to go on for three years with an initial US success followed by the entry of Communist China producing a stalemate. The war essentially ended with the pre-war status of a divided Korea. (continued on the next page)
A similar split between North and South also triggered a war in Vietnam in the 1960s. This war involved Presidents, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. The war initially a guerrilla conflict was considered to be damaging to US interests and Johnson decided to introduce US forces on a major scale. Initially, Johnson seemed to recognize that Vietnam was a quagmire but felt that he had no other choice. Later on he angrily rejected those who differed from his Vietnam policy such as his Vice-President Hubert Humphrey. When Nixon became president the new president continued the war for another four years gradually reducing US forces with hope that South Vietnamese forces could prevail. By 1975 the South had collapsed with the reunification of the country under Northern rule. The fact that this defeat did not result in a communist domination of the region, as feared, indicates that the terrible losses that US and Vietnamese forces suffered could have been avoided. By the 1990s US fears had shifted to the Middle East with President George H.W. Bush deciding to reverse the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. This reversal was skillfully accomplished with widespread allied support and President Bush halted his forces short of an Iraqi invasion. His son the second President Bush did not show such restraint and decided, without provocation to invade Iraq in 2003. The resulting war and occupation upset the balance of powers in the Middle East and resulted in more than 4,000 American lives, greater than the toll of the 9/11 Al Qaeda attacks on the US in 2001. Clearly this war along with the Vietnamese conflict was avoidable and were in the long run against American interests.

Presidents of War is a fascinating account of US participation in warfare and the influence of American presidents in initiating and conducting these conflicts. Michael Beschloss took almost a decade to produce his newest work. Due to the wide scope of the research required he felt that writing this latest effort was equivalent to writing several different works. His painstaking labors were not in vain. Beschloss has provided an interesting perspective on our country’s history and the motivation and skills of our presidents in times of war.

Accessory to War: the Unspoken Alliance Between Astrophysics and the Military
by Neil deGrasse Tyson and Avis Lang
reviewed by Don Boink

Tyson is an astrophysicist and the director of the New York Hayden Planetarium. A popular scientist, he even has a TV program called Cosmos. He and his assistant Avis Lang have put together this lengthy book explaining the historical connection between the military and astrophysics. The first hundred pages cover history in general back three thousand years to the Egyptians. It tells what observations were made that limited the information available to the military at the time. The next hundred pages went into detail the about the evolution of the telescope and its usefulness to the military. This of course dealt with terrain and not celestial uses. The next hundred pages includes the history of the chronometer, the clock used in a ship, mounted on gimbals that allowed the clock to remain level in spite of the roll of the ship. This development enabled navigators to determine the ships longitude in addition to celestially determining its latitude.

Cameras were also described and their evolution over the years to become essential devices in studying the stars and planets. Over the years the resolution has increased many fold. This enabled astronomers to detect more distant planets and objects like asteroids. As these improvements came about the military became increasingly interested in the military implications. Funds for research were jealously guarded. A law was passed after the Vietnam War that gave the Defense Department oversight regarding appropriations for astrophysical research. The main emphasis pertained to infra red frequencies used in astronomical research. Astrophysicists welcomed that development because it helped them. It also emphasized the close tie in between the two.

Radio is explained as well as electromagnetic waves of many frequencies and how they were discovered and employed in so many ways. Radar was a very significant element in WW II. Not only was it militarily essential it also was useful in astronomical research. One of the problems to overcome has been the deluge of data that constantly flows from the telescopes. To the rescue has been the innovative software of algorithms. These clever, efficient and effective devices turned the light of cosmic objects into analyzable data.

The Hubble telescope has become fairly well known. What isn’t common knowledge is the secret devices that have been in use by the military now for several years. One such set of items had the code name Keyhole. This intriguing story is told in detail and has all the fascination of a spy novel. One long chapter is titled “Making war, seeking peace”. This is a discussion of current efforts to develop weapons and or means for offense and or defense. Space is the battle ground and the choice of weapon is explosive or cyber. The arsenal acquired serves both as deterrent and offense. The variety and number of devices is both scary and bewildering. Again the discussion is detailed and exhaustive. Once again I’ll say that this is a serious history book. The detailed recounting of all the political and international machinations is tedious unless that is the exact information one is seeking.
On Desperate Grounds: the Marines and the Reservoir, the Korean War’s Greatest Battle 
by Hampton Sides 
reviewed by Jim Mills 

It has been four long years since Hampton Sides’ last major work, In the Kingdom of Ice. For most of that time I had been aware that the topic of his next book would be the tragic Battle of the Chosin Reservoir during the Korean War. I had been anticipating his view on that event and his newest book does not disappoint.

The Korean War started on June 25th, 1950 with the sudden invasion of South Korea by its northern counterpart. President Truman quickly decided that this aggressive act could not stand unchallenged and ordered American troops to intervene. The US took action in the United Nations which resulted in committing several other nations to support the US effort. The North Korean army quickly drove the allied forces into a small perimeter in the southeastern part of the country centered around the port of Pusan (now Busan). On September 15th US made an amphibious landing at the port of Inchon only a few miles from the South Korean capital of Seoul changing the whole nature of the war. By October the North Korean forces were in full retreat and US forces had penetrated deeply into North Korea. The possibility that the newly formed Communist China would intervene was considered but President Truman was reassured, at a Wake Island meeting, by the US commander Douglas MacArthur that there were no signs that China would intervene militarily.

Part of the invasion of the North was another amphibious invasion at the port of Hungnam about half way up the eastern coast. This US assault was led by the First Marine Division and these forces immediately penetrated northward inland in the direction of the Yalu river separating Korea from China in an effort to bring the war to a quick conclusion. As the forces entered the sparsely inhabited mountains on the way north they were hit by the full fury of a North Korean winter with high winds descending from Siberia driving temperatures well below zero. By late October and early November this misery was compounded by an unanticipated vicious assault by Chinese forces numbering in the hundred thousands. These forces had crossed the Yalu river from China and had penetrated a hundred miles or so through the mountains, essentially undetected. Once again the direction of the war had reversed and the advancing US forces found themselves, as the author states, On Desperate Grounds.

The major theme in this book is the story of the attempt to save these US forces trapped near the Chosin Reservoir high in rugged winter bound mountains while being continually assaulted by superior enemy forces. General MacArthur was very slow in recognizing that the reports of Chinese soldiers in action in Korea represented a significant impediment to a quick victory in the war. Once it was recognized that the survival of US forces was critically endangered, it was almost too late to effect a successful withdrawal. Sides concentrates on the efforts of a few key individuals in this conflict and tells of their fates as the battle progressed over the next couple of weeks. The courage and ingenuity of numerous individuals eventually allowed the bulk of the troops to survive but only after widespread suffering and death at the hand of the Chinese and the unforgiving wintery weather. One key story is the rebuilding of a vital bridge, destroyed by the Chinese, that had blocked passage on the only available evacuation route.

A major part of the story of the Korean War involves the misjudgment and over confidence by key leaders including General MacArthur. The fact that American troops were committed to an essentially indefensible position once they were faced by significant opposition. When that opposition appeared the survival prospects of the Americans rapidly deteriorated. The courage and professional judgement of one key figure stands out, the commander of the First Marine Division, General Oliver Prince Smith. Smith argued against the rapid deployment of his forces into essentially indefensible positions. When he couldn’t convince his superiors of the folly of their strategy, he tried to slow the advance so that he could consolidate his position in case of a reversal. His judgement and his decisive actions after the Chinese assaults essentially saved the American forces from destruction. Within a few weeks close to 100,000 Americans were evacuated from the port of Hungnam, rivaling WW 2’s Dunkirk evacuation. 

(continued on the next page)
Hampton Sides is a master at converting historical events into compelling stories. He has done so with *On Desperate Grounds*. My appreciating of his earlier works led me to anticipate the publication of this Korean War story. Other fascinating works by Hampton Sides that readers may enjoy are: *Blood and Thunder* (Kit Carson’s adventures as a trapper and guide during the Mexican War); *Ghost Soldiers* (rescue of American POWs in the Philippines in WW2); *Hellhounds on His Trail* (the assassination of Martin Luther King and the apprehension of his assassin); *In the Kingdom of Ice* (an 1879 attempt sponsored by the New York Herald to reach the North Pole).

**The Soul of America. the Battle For Our Better Angels**
by Jon Meacham
reviewed by Don Boink

In our present national situation with its turmoil and controversy it is a pleasant experience to read of previous periods that also posed dire threats to our piece and tranquility and were dealt with, eventually, and overcome, at least temporarily. The introduction to the book is boldly titled: *TO HOPE RATHER THAN TO FEAR*. This sets the tone of Meacham’s book and is its theme throughout. By taking historical incidents that have occurred over the time of our nation’s existence and pointing out the essential elements under contention he makes plain that there are persistent and recurring emotional reactions that rouse large segments of our population to a fever pitch and even violence.

One such example arose in the South and was directly related to the aftermath of the Civil War. It was the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan. The driving force behind this organization was Fear. Fear of the loss of white supremacy as the result of freedom for the blacks. In order to intimidate blacks the Klansmen dressed in white sheets covering their heads with hoods. Their activities usually were at night, riding in large groups and selecting isolated blacks or black communities to terrorize with blazing crosses. The group originated in 1925 and died out for a time only to re-emerge some time later.

Another Fear dominated event was the infamous McCarthy anti Communist era of the 50s. The Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, initiated hearings for the purpose of ferreting out Communist sympathizers in the Federal Government. One of his assistants was a young lawyer named Roy Cohn, who’s name has re-emerged in the Trump White House. The tactics he employed were vicious and demeaning as he sought to establish connections that various officials were accused of having with Communist organizations or individuals. This went on for most of three years. Eventually his activities were themselves investigated by Senate hearings which led to him being censored by he Senate for his intemperate behavior.

Also described were a number of instances where legislative actions were obstructed by Fear on the part of legislators that their constituents would not be happy with the results. During the Kennedy Administration a Civil Rights Bill was introduced guaranteeing the voting rights for all citizens. When Kennedy was assassinated and L. B. Johnson was inaugurated as President we had a new President, from the southern state of Texas, who was suddenly confronted with the task of shepherding a bill that was anathema to the South. His intuition told him that it was morally right but he fully understood the opposition that the Southern states would provide. With patience and persistence he overcame that opposition and this landmark legislation was passed. Fear had been overcome with Hope.

Throughout the book these inspirational instances are cited and it is refreshing to realize that good things do get accomplished in Washington. The WW II GI Bill was strongly opposed initially as being too expensive. As a grateful recipient of that benefit I feel it has been repaid many times over by the economic benefit it has been for the country. In these days of uncertainty and so many Fear based decisions it is important to put it all in perspective and to not be disheartened. This book is a great antidote for that feeling.

Jon Meacham
In her most recent work, Doris Kearns Goodwin describes how four American presidents used exceptional leadership attributes to overcome significant obstacles during their presidencies. The four presidents covered in Leadership had been the topic of previous Goodwin works: Abraham Lincoln (Team of Rivals - 2005); Theodore Roosevelt (The Bully Pulpit - 2013); Franklin Roosevelt (No Ordinary Time - 1994); Lyndon Johnson (Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream - 1977). Goodwin did work for a period of time in the Johnson White House and after his retirement assisted Johnson in drafting his memoirs.

The early lives of these four presidents differed widely. The two Roosevelts were born to great wealth, Lincoln and Johnson were not. A common trait to all four was a great drive to succeed and an amazing capacity for incessant unremitting work. Another common trait was gregariousness, what one might call the common touch. Lincoln was renown for his story telling ability, configuring each story to make a particular point. FDR was renown for his weekly Fireside Chats where he would make use of the radio to communicate to the people just what he was trying to do to pull the nation out of the terrible Depression. TR and Johnson were known for their “people’s skills”, their ability to convince other politicians and leaders to see their perspective and convince them of a certain course of action.

Goodwin highlights certain traits that guided each of these presidents and helped make them great leaders. Lincoln: Gather firsthand information, ask questions; Anticipate contending viewpoints; Assume full responsibility for a pivotal decision; Understand the emotional needs of each member of the team; Be accessible, easy to approach; Set a standard of mutual respect and dignity; Keep your word. Theodore Roosevelt: Use history to provide perspective; Keep temper in check; Don’t hit unless you have to, but when you hit, hit hard; Find ways to save face (for your opponents); Share credit for the successful resolution; Be visible. Cultivate public support among those most directly affected by the crisis. FDR: Restore confidence to the spirit and morale of the people, Strike the right balance of realism and optimism; Infuse a sense of shared purpose and direction; Tell people what to expect and what is expected of them; Lead by example; Set a deadline and drove full-bore to meet it; Tell the story simply, directly to the people; Stimulate competition and debate. Encourage creativity; Adapt. Be ready to change course quickly when necessary. Johnson: Make a dramatic start; Lead with your strengths; Drive, drive, drive; Know for what and when to risk it all; Rally support around a strategic target; Know when to hold back, when to move forward.; Honor commitments.

These four men shared many traits in common. All were well-read. Even a man considered “a man of action”, TR spent much of his waking hours reading, particularly history. He also authored several historical works. In the major coal strike in 1902 he broke with Republican orthodoxy by encouraging business to deal with Labor and his primary concern was the impact a prolonged coal strike had on the general population. Each president carefully considered the repercussions of any steps that he would take. Lincoln took many months of consideration and requested the option of many experts both in and outside his administration before he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. His major concern was the effect it would have on slave states that had remained loyal to the Union such as Kentucky and Missouri.

FDR was in a crisis mode at the start of his term in March 1933. The nation was close to collapse with 25% unemployed. Many banks had failed and more were on the brink. Roosevelt needed to act fast and even more importantly restore the confidence of the American people. Many remedies were tried in the famous first 100 days. Not all of these programs worked out and some had to be rescinded. Flexibility was key. It did take most of the 1930s to pull the nation out of the Depression but the downward spinal had been stopped and faith in the future had been restored. Lyndon Johnson had long been aware of the terrible impact that segregation had on the daily lives of black citizens. One of his first priorities was to enact a landmark Civil Rights bill to ensure equal access to all services for every citizens. With his background in Congress and his contacts with other southern politicians Johnson was able to pull out all the stops to deliver the most important civil rights legislation in a century. In his first few years much landmark legislation was passed including the Voting Right Act and Medicare.

Doris Kearns Goodwin has been one of our major historians for over 40 years. Her newest work reinforces her reputation as an outstanding chronicler of American history with a warm writing style that holds the readers interest throughout. Leadership in Turbulent Times is a pleasure to read and Goodwin gives a fascinating account of the qualities that some of our presidents have employed to produce major achievements. The author memorably gave the very first of the BLL Nickerson Lecture Series in 2013.