

BLL Book Reviews - July 2022

Brewster Ladies Library
1822 Main Street
Brewster, MA 02631

In this issue...

*Tisha and the Blossom: Picture Book (4-8 year-olds) by Wendy Meddour
and illustrated Daniel Egneus (Nori Morganstein)*

On Consolation by Michael Ignatieff (Doug Wilcock)

White Birds by R. J. Palacio (Susan Carr)

Benjamin Franklin: An American Life by Walter Isaacson (Jim Mills)

*The Atlantis Blueprint: Unlocking the Ancient Mysteries Of A Long-Lost Civilization
by Colin Wilson and Rand Flem-Ath (Don Boink)*

*River of the Gods: Genius, Courage and Betrayal in the Search for the Source of the Nile
by Candice Millard (Jim Mills)*

Fly Girl: A Memoir by Ann Hood (Jim Mills)

Shakespeare Unbound: Decoding a hidden life by Rene' Weis (Don Boink)

Tisha and the Blossom: Picture Book (4-8 year-olds) (Candlewick Press, 2022)

by Wendy Meddour and illustrated Daniel Egneus

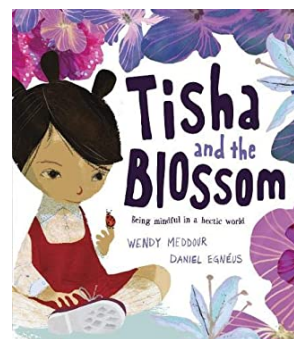
reviewed by: Nori Morganstein, Youth Services Librarian/Assistant Director

This is a sweet, comforting story that reminds us all to appreciate the small stuff. I found myself calming down and relaxing as I was reading this book. I can see it having this effect on children and the adults in children's lives as well. Tisha is a little girl who loves the small stuff. She picks up flowers in her backyard. She listens to sounds on the way to school. She finds books she wants to read in school. She counts spots on ladybugs at Recess. But, literally everyone tells her to "Hurry up," or she'll be late for the next thing or miss the bus.

Finally, someone asks her what's wrong and she asks her mother, "Can we please have a little slowdown?" They walk home instead of taking the bus. They notice things, sit down together on a bench, and even decide to have a picnic for dinner with Dad. The whole family slows down together.

Sometimes it's okay to take a break from a busy routine. And sometimes we all need to slow down and just enjoy each other's company. Tisha is the one who points this out. Kids will love reading about another child knowing this. It's not always the adults who have all the answers.

The book is full of bold, beautiful flowers. Tisha is always looking for them. Her mother plays a game of looking for things on their walk home, so there are plenty of animals, people, and vehicles to look for as you turn the pages. The illustrations are big and unique. Certain objects or elements that Tisha is looking at (or maybe a small child would look at) are zoomed in. All the pages with flowers have enormous, bold, painted petals that seem to be floating in air. The artwork makes me want to see more by this illustrator. Overall, the feeling of this book is just one of relaxing mindfulness. It would be a great book to read before bed.



On Consolation

by Michael Ignatieff

reviewed by Doug Wilcock

Michael Ignatieff's *On Consolation* is subtitled *Finding Solace in Dark Times*. By choosing an eclectic group of individuals, Ignatieff gives us a spectrum of personal responses by those who used their lives and experiences to find consolation in troubled times. He frames the discussion in his introductory remarks, suggesting that those who have experienced loss search for how to go on, how to recover the belief that life is worth living. He suggests that an essential element of consolation is hope, the belief that we can recover from loss, defeat, or disappointment. Ignatieff qualifies this message in his first chapter on Job and the Psalms, suggesting that hope is possible only if life makes sense. "The hope we need for consolation depends on faith that our existence is meaningful." In a later chapter, he refines this further, drawing on the work of Vaclav Havel that hope does not equate with optimism. "Human beings do make their history, but not as they intend, nor even as they hope."

Ignatieff acknowledges that how we define a meaningful life has changed over time. Religious tradition held that life had meaning as it fit into a divine or cosmic plan. In a chapter entitled "The Body's Wisdom," Ignatieff looks at Montaigne's views of a "gay and sociable wisdom" as pointing the way to a modern sensibility that consolation is attentive to the demands of ordinary life and the people around us. I think that perhaps part of Ignatieff's motivation in writing this book was how to reconcile his need for consolation when he did not hold religious beliefs.

Perhaps the most moving chapter of the book is "The Consolations of Witness" which features the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova; an Italian survivor of Auschwitz, author Primo Levi; and the Hungarian poet Miklos Radnoti, author of "Picture Postcard." All three are dramatic stories of witnessing atrocities. As Akhmatova explained to Isaiah Berlin, whose 1945 visit to her Leningrad apartment was her first visitor from the West in twenty years, writing the Requiem cycle had given voice to the torment of her people. She had not chosen to be a witness, but it was a calling she was prepared to assume. As she told Berlin, she never chose exile or escape, she never looked away from horror, and she fulfilled her duty as a witness.

Ignatieff concludes the book with a chapter about Cicely Saunders, the founder of Hospice. It is a powerful chapter about the ability of one individual to change lives for the better. Ignatieff tells us the story of how her bedside visits with a dying patient (she was a social worker at the time) gave her the germ of an idea for how Hospice could treat people who were dying and then Ignatieff tells us how Saunders used her skills, and acquired new ones, in the service of that idea. Her ideas about consolation depended on the belief that we are not masters of our bodies and that the task facing us is to make peace with the larger portion of our life that is not in our power.

It would be churlish of me to suggest that Michael Ignatieff should have stepped outside the Judeo-Christian tradition to examine how individuals in non-Western societies attempted to console themselves over their losses. While the first half of the book may seem to be a journey on a well-trodden path, within that half he writes, for example, about Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* to highlight Aurelius's candor about loneliness, discouragement, fear, and loss that make us seek consolation. In so doing, Ignatieff gives us timeless insight that will not be displaced by modern sensibilities as to what and who are proper subject matter.

Ignatieff writes well and deeply about loss and about the varied ways individuals cope with that loss and the accompanying grief. For those who have experienced loss and who understand that it is painful, quite often very private, and in its particulars unique, it is instructive to read these stories about the universality of seeking consolation. Within this relatively short book are stories that may resonate with the reader.

Read a fascinating or intriguing book lately?

Write a review (300 – 900 words) and share your experience with the BLL community.

E-Mail to Jim Mills jlmills43@comcast.net and have your review printed in an upcoming BLL Book Review.

If you have any comments on our reviews

or if there are any particular books that you would like to see reviewed

Please contact us at: jlmills43@comcast.net

The BLL Book Reviews

Also appear on the Brewster Ladies Library Web Site

<http://www.brewsterladieslibrary.org/>

Thanks to JoAnn Phillips for her skill in editing these reviews.

White Birds

by R. J. Palacio

reviewed by Susan Carr

A graphic novel for young adults probably would not appear at the top of your “read next” list. However, you might find that *White Bird* by R.J.Palacio appeals to you for many reasons. All of the talk about Critical Race Theory and Banned Books, has made me curious... what ideas presented in these books have caused them to be challenged or banned? After consulting two on-line lists (American Library Association – “Ten most challenged books of 2021”, and “Here are 50 books Texas Parents want banned from school”), I read a number of books and found one that jumped out at me ... *White Bird*.



White Bird is a graphic novel in which Sarah Blum offers to tell her grandson the story of her life growing up in a French village during the Holocaust. She explains that there are parts that she has never told anyone before. He asks her if she is sure she wants to do this. She replies, “Yes, *mon cher*, I’m sure...those were dark times, yes...but what has stayed with me the most...is not the darkness...but the light.” Sarah Blum lived with her parents in the Free Zone of France. The northern part of France was occupied by German troops, in 1940. However...as the war continued, the German presence moved south into the Free Zone. Since they were Jewish, Sarah’s parents knew danger lay ahead.

The story that follows is very compelling. One day, trucks arrived at Sarah’s school and the Jewish students were required to move outside. As this was happening, Sarah slipped away from the group and hid in the bell tower. Another student, Julien, had seen where she went and came to get her after the school closed. They left the school for his home, and he and his parents made a hiding place for her in their barn. Sarah knew nothing about what had happened to her own parents.

I was unable to put the book down. It tells of the horrendous activities of the Nazis, but at the same time, illustrates the incredible kindness and strength of which people are capable.

The drawings of Sarah, as a girl, and as a grandmother and of Julien portray beautifully, the myriad of emotions they experienced.

Why was the book banned? The story, just like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, (that often appears on banned lists) tells the story of a young girl and her dreams caught in the horror of the Holocaust. The challenger felt the book was “biased.” Although the story is very grim, it must be told. And this is told in a very straight forward way, without unnecessary embellishment. Yet... is the bias or grimness of the story, the reason for its being banned?...perhaps. But, one wonders whether the real reason for its being banned appears on p198...a picture of a very sad *grand-mere* looking at a newspaper illustrating the policy which involved separating children from their parents at the Mexican border!

R. J. Palacio



Benjamin Franklin: An American Life

by Walter Isaacson

reviewed by Jim Mills

For most Americans, it seems that Benjamin Franklin is the favorite of our “Founding Fathers”. He was certainly the oldest, with a varied career extending back to the earliest years of the 18th century. Leaving home in Boston at the age of 17, Franklin went off to the then far away city of Philadelphia to establish himself in the world of colonial America. Starting out as a printer, Franklin began to generate his own material when he created the Poor Richard’s Almanac and started his own Philadelphia newspaper. Despite having a minimum of conventional education, he displayed an impressive ability to learn and adapt, becoming a leading philosopher and scientist in the evolving colonial society.

Today, after three hundred years, the aphorisms that Franklin created in his almanac continue as guides for our lives. His endless curiosity and legendary powers of observation allowed Franklin to pioneer in many disparate field of science. His equating electricity to lightning with his famous kite experiment is well known. Less well known is his characterization of the nature of electricity leading to the invention of batteries. Modern terminology such as positive, negative, charge, conductor and battery originated with Franklin. The Franklin stove demonstrated a more efficient way to heat homes. Bi-focal glasses allowed simultaneous close/far vision. In later years Franklin’s many ocean trips to Europe allowed this observant passenger to describe in detail the nature of the Gulf Stream and its function in warming Europe.

With all of these achievements, Franklin’s memory lives on today because of his activities as a political leader and his role in formulating the very nature of the United States. Initially due to his press activities, Franklin became involved in local politics. He was instrumental in developing the first library and fire department in Philadelphia. Franklin was named to head the colonial postal service. In this role he was able to travel to the other American colonies and was one of the first to view the colonies as an integrated whole. Later on he organized support for the British side in French and Indian war. His reputation in Pennsylvania had grown to the point where he was selected to represent Pennsylvania’s interests in England in 1757. This activity confirmed his love for the home country and established him as a dedicated loyalist. Over the next two decades he was to spend most of his time in Great Britain establishing contacts with many prominent British leaders. In Europe his reputation as a philosopher and scientist preceded him and he was feted as the best known American celebrity of his time. His continual absence over this period and after the start of the Revolutionary war meant that he had very little contact with his wife who remained in Philadelphia.

From the mid 1750s to the mid 1770s actions by the British government gradually soured the relations with the American colonies. Franklin very gradually adopted the new American attitude towards Britain and he was actually on his return to America when war broke out at Lexington and Concord. Almost immediately the emerging American government decided to send Franklin back to Europe, in this case to France to encourage French support in the war for independence. As it turned out, Franklin was a natural for this role. His warm personal traits and his renown as an astute thinker had major impact on French society greatly increased his influence as an American envoy. The French support over the next six years was critical to the American wartime success. In 1781 the final American victory at Yorktown, Virginia would not have been possible without French ground and naval support.

With the achievement of independence, Franklin, still in France, was part of the team that negotiated the peace treaty with Britain. In the later part of the war, John Adams joined Franklin in France. The contrast between the two American envoys could not have been more pronounced. Adams, always so businesslike, thought that Franklin was not a serious negotiator but failed to see that Franklin’s personal warmth and prestige was a major factor in encouraging French support. With the peace treaty concluded, Franklin return to the United States as a revered elderly statesman. In his final decades Franklin was plagued with painful health problems (gout, kidney stones). Despite these problem Franklin endured numerous trans-Atlantic crossings and extended rough carriage rides in pursuing his duties and pleasures. In his later years Franklin participated in the creation of the American Constitution in 1787. Three years later after a lifetime of continual creative activity, Franklin died at the age of 84. (continued on the next page)

Walter Isaacson, in addition to writing *Benjamin Franklin*, has become the master of the biography with excellent reviews of the lives of Leonardo DaVinci, Steve Jobs, Henry Kissinger, and Albert Einstein. His creative skills are instrumental in presenting these landmark lives in fascinating detail. This reviewer has read the *Steve Jobs* book and is preparing to take on *Leonardo DaVinci*. *Benjamin Franklin*, though not a new book (2003), comes with this reviewer's highest recommendation.

The Atlantis Blueprint: Unlocking the Ancient Mysteries Of A Long-Lost Civilization
by Colin Wilson and Rand Flem-Ath
reviewed by Don Boink

This is an unexpected find at the library where I have been reading mystery thrillers for too long. The name Atlantis caught my eye as a subject that had interested me for a long time. It was mentioned by Plato as a remarkable land of very advanced people that had been lost in antiquity and whose existence been relegated pretty much to mythology. The book starts right off with an account of a New England college professor named Charles Hapgood a map buff who saw some interesting characteristics in ancient maps that aroused his curiosity. These maps dated back thousands of years and appeared to give a different perspective than current ones.

The "Blueprint" is a result of connecting several "sacred locations" on lines drawn from connecting points on the base of the Great Pyramid in Egypt and extending it in both directions across the globe. This became known as the "Giza prime meridian". The motivating objective is the search for the ancient land of Atlantis that is mentioned in the Timaeus Dialogue of Plato, where he describes a highly advanced civilization that mysteriously disappears. Through the ages many locations for Atlantis have been speculated but none have been substantiated.

Complicating the search is the shifting of the earth's crust. A scientist named Alfred Wegener came up with the theory of plate tectonics after noting the shape of the eastern coast of the South American continent and the shape the western coast of Africa and how well they seemed to fit together. Studies showed similar rock formations on both sides. Also the magnetic polarization matched exactly on the ocean bottom on either side of the Atlantic central ridge. Thus it turned out that the earth surface contained discrete plates that rested on a molten core and what was once a single land mass called Pangea had broken up into the several individual plates. These plates have recombined to form the world's present configuration. One example of the extent of the drift is India which started out down where Australia is and collided with the Asian continent causing the up thrusting of the Himalayan Mountains.

Hapgood's study of ancient maps led him to surmise that Atlantis was located possibly down in the region of Antarctic. The South Pole was in a different location then. He sent his idea to Albert Einstein, then a professor at Princeton. Einstein thought there was merit in the professor's idea and encouraged him to pursue it. A fortuitous turn of fortune occurred when a map of great antiquity was placed on Hapgood's desk. Reputedly going back thousands of years and attributed to a seafarer named Peri Reis, the map showed what early Greeks had found, including a method for measuring the circumference of the earth.

The evidence accumulated as more maps confirmed the notion that Atlantis existed and suggested where it was located. The book goes a roundabout way of syncing the several "clues" found in the several maps that came into existence over several thousands of years. The notion started with Hapgood and drew a lot of attention. A man named Rand became an important investigator and when Hapgood met an untimely death Rand assumed the leadership and became one of the authors of this book.

The notion that an "advanced" civilization existed before the "flood" that necessitated its evacuation and dispersal across the globe is given as an explanation of how the Egyptians were able to build the great pyramids and Sphinx. The Atlanteans were also apparently able to survey the entire globe. Investigation of ancient geological history and local legends strongly hint at confirmation of Plato's description of an island continent in the Antarctic that could have been occupied by the reputed advanced civilization. A number of appendices to the text seek to amplify the premise of the "blueprint" described in the book. The explanations offered are not always easy to follow. I found the book a fascinating read. I'm satisfied that Atlantis existed and its location substantiated.

River of the Gods: Genius, Courage and Betrayal in the Search for the Source of the Nile
by Candice Millard

reviewed by Jim Mills

The Nile River has been the primary mainstay of Egyptian society going back to the beginning of recorded history, for at least 6,000 years. The early Egyptians were thankful for the apparent miraculous annual Nile floods allowing bountiful agriculture in the midst of the world's largest desert but had no idea just where this blessing originated. By the mid 19th century the search for the source of this longest of Earth's rivers had become a passion among European geographers and explorers. Candice Millard's *River of the Gods* describes in detail that search and the driving ambition of several British adventurers to solve this enduring geographical puzzle.

Early attempts to follow the Nile to its source had repeatedly failed due to an extensive marshy area in central Sudan blocking naval attempts to proceed farther south on the river. A new approach, in the 1850s, was to penetrate central Africa from the island of Zanzibar in the Indian Ocean, hopefully approaching the Nile's origin from the south. Reports from European missionaries indicated that an immense inland lake occupied central Africa roughly where the present countries, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania are found. The first attempt on this route was led by Richard Burton, a life long British adventurer. Burton started out as a soldier in India, was a lifetime scholar with an in-depth understanding of Asian and African cultures and fluently spoke at least two dozen languages. On an earlier adventure, Burton disguised himself as a local muslim pilgrim on his way to the center of Islamic religion the Great Mosque in Mecca. This Mosque was explicitly off limits to any non-muslim. Had Burton been found out he would most likely have been killed.

As Burton prepared his African safari, he hired a second in command. John Hanning Speke, like Burton, was a soldier but in other respects was quite different. Speke was not a scholar. He did not understand any of the local languages. His main passion was big game hunting. Once the expedition was underway, the differences between the two primary figures led to outright contempt. Their first discovery was that instead of one immense lake there were several separate lakes in central Africa. Proceeding westward the expedition reached a very long, narrow lake, Lake Tanganyika. Burton found out that a river was connected to the northern coast of the lake. At first Burton thought that river was the Nile but additional information indicated that the river flowed into the lake not out. On the return to the Indian coast, Speke talked Burton, who was ill with one of the endemic tropical diseases, into allowing him to make a separate trip northward to investigate another reported immense lake. Speke reached the lake's southern coast and was informed that several rivers flowed out of the lake's northern edge. Even though Speke had not seen these rivers, he was convinced that the Nile flowed out of this lake which he named Lake Victoria.

A major aspect of these penetrations of Africa was the susceptibility of Europeans to the ravages of local infectious diseases. Each safari was repeatedly delayed as the European leaders would be disabled for weeks at a time nearly succumbing from a variety of infectious diseases. More than any other factor, these tropical diseases blocked the European penetration of equatorial Africa. One principal explorer on these early safaris was a native African, a former slave, Sidi Mubarak Bombay. Bombay's drive, good humor and knowledge was key to the success of the search for the Nile's origin. Because Bombay was not a European his contributions have been repeatedly overlooked.

At the end of the expedition Richard Burton was too ill to return right away to Britain. Speke returned immediately, contacted the Royal Geographical Society and took personal credit for the discovery of the Nile's source. Since he did not actually see the Nile leaving Lake Victoria, the Society agreed to fund another expedition in 1860. Speke included Bombay but not Burton on this trip. He did add a new British explorer, James Grant., as a co-leader. This journey was also plagued by health issues but the explorers did manage to witness the Nile draining from the Lake. They continued north along the river meeting with an expedition that had followed the Nile south from Egypt. (continued on the next page)

Upon his return to Britain, Speke was hailed for his discoveries but he refused to share credit with anyone else, particularly with Burton. A debate between Speke and Burton was arranged to take place in the town of Bath. The day before the confrontation, Speke, a skilled hunter, was killed in a hunting accident when his firearm discharged while he was crossing a stone wall. Candice Millard has produced a fascinating account of these British African explorations in *River of the Gods*. Her skill in bringing to life historical events has been demonstrated in earlier highly recommended works. *Hero of the Empire* tells the story of a young Winston Churchill's exploits as a journalist in the Boer War (1899 - 1902). *Destiny of the Republic* describes the details of a little reported event, the 1881 assassination of President James Garfield and the impact that had on U. S. history. *The River of Doubt* tells the story of former President Theodore Roosevelt's participation in a discovery expedition into an unknown section of the Amazon wilderness (1913-14).

Fly Girl: A Memoir

by Ann Hood

reviewed by Jim Mills

Most of us who have flown on commercial aircraft have developed a curiosity about the lives of the helpful flight attendants who work so hard making our flights a pleasant experience. Ann Hood has written in *Fly Girl*, an absorbing memoir of her years as a flight attendant, on American based airlines particularly on TWA.

The role of Flight Attendant originated in the early 1930s. For decades this job had become one of the few open to women and for decades they were known as Stewardesses. The criteria for entering and staying in this profession were very stringent. TWA ran a school for Stewardesses in Kansas and the acceptance rate there was lower than that for Harvard. For years the entrants had to be single and stay within a narrow weight range. Personal appearance was a major factor in hiring for and in flight retention. During the 50's through the 70's airlines used the sex appeal of their stewardesses as a major attraction for their largely business class customers. Their employees were forced to wear very revealing clothes. Advancing age, weight gain, pregnancy and any personal appearance issues result in termination.

By 1978 when Ann Hood, who like many applicants had a college degree, entered the profession, these business practices were beginning to change. Men were by then being allowed into a profession that was then known as Flight Attendant. The lure of being a Flight Attendant was so strong that, despite low pay and a strenuous work environment, there was no shortage of applicants. One big lure was the ability to fly to many exciting parts of the world at little or no cost. Hood, in particular, enjoyed this perk and the opportunity to offer free travel to members of her family.

On the downside, attendants were expected to be on call at short notice, and had to live near enough to their home base airport to respond on time. They endured long hours and disruptive passengers and had to be prepared for rare but demanding emergencies. The work demands on relatively short flights with large passenger loads could at times be overwhelming. By the late 80s the effects of airline deregulation were making the job even tougher. TWA was taken over by the Wall Street tycoon, Carl Icahn, and he bled TWA eventually leading to the airline's bankruptcy. As industry cut backs proceeded, job furloughs increased. Ann Hood by this time had established herself as an author and was able to transition to a new profession. Fortunately her shift in professions allows us to view in detail the airline world and the pleasures and demands of those working to keep planes in the sky and bring us the modern convenience of rapid access to the marvels of our planet.

Ann Hood



Shakespeare Unbound: Decoding a hidden life

by Rene' Weis (A professor of English at University College, London)

reviewed by Don Boink

This book is a compendium of references to Shakespeare's several plays as well as his numerous sonnets. The most interesting aspect of *Shakespeare Unbound* is the reference in the plays to personal experiences of the playwright himself. Thus the several characters, through their dialogue, convey not only the plot but the consequences to the author. Only an astute scholar of the era or a colossal reading "between the lines", so to speak, can recognize the subtle innuendoes contained in the play's dialogue.

Previous works about the poet/playwright have not delved as deeply into Shakespeare's personal life. One learns in *Shakespeare Unbound*, for example, that Anne Hathaway was pregnant before the marriage and there were several affairs and intimacies during their marriage. Apparently these behaviors were not uncommon among the theatrical community of the time. In order to appreciate plots and characters in Shakespeare's works, one might do well to understand the controversy between the Anglican Church and Catholicism, which was a running battle and at times very brutal. *Shakespeare Unbound* helps the reader assemble the puzzle pieces. Cited also is the death of his son, Hamnet, which spawned Shakespeare's most ambitious tragedy.

I was disappointed by the brevity of the lines quoted in most instances. My remedy for that was recourse to a book I had picked up years before which includes the complete works of Shakespeare together with the sonnets. I recalled my first experience with Shakespeare was in high school when we read the play Macbeth.

Occasionally the dispute arises as to who really wrote the plays. A contemporary of Shakespeare named Marlowe is usually cited. The two men did belong to the same company at one time but Marlowe, although very witty, was not Shakespeare's equal. He left the company at an early date. One of the things the book did was clear up some question about who was who. There is a great deal of detail in the compendium and at times I found it boring: 440 pages. But there is no doubt a lot of research went into the writing.

**Brewster Ladies' Library
Summer Book Sale
Starts Tuesday July 19th
10 -4
Continues for 3 Weeks
Tuesday through Saturday
10 - 4
Last Day Saturday Aug 6th
Tens of Thousands
of Books, DVDs, CDs, Puzzles
Books on Tape/CDs
Archival Newspapers/Magazines**