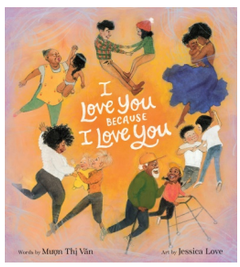
Brewster Ladies' Library

BLL Book Reviews - March 2023

Brewster Ladies Library
1822 Main Street
Brewster, MA 02631

In this issue…

I Love You Because I Love You (Picture Book 4-8 year-olds) (HarperCollins, 2022)
by Muron Thi Van and art by Jessica Love
reviewed by: Nori Morganstein, Youth Services Librarian/Assistant Director



I Love you Because I Love You is a book about all different kinds of love shared by different types of people. It explains the many reasons people share their love. It's about mothers picking up their babies and loving them just because they are their babies. It's about babies loving their parents because they carry them. It's about siblings loving each other because they let each other speak. It's about twins loving each other because they grow together. It's one big book of love and all the reasons people love. You can't read this book without smiling. It will make you and any child who reads or listens to it, think about those you love or they love.
It's a book about connection and happiness. It's full of color, flowers, grins, stars, trees, laughter, sport, and celebration. The artist does an amazing job of capturing joy on every page. You feel love and exuberance emote from each face that you see. It's a book that will make you want to call family members you haven't spoken to in a while. The author and illustrator do a good job of representing all different types of families too.

This book would make a great Valentine's Day gift, but it's also just a sweet story to read aloud to anyone at any age, at any time of the year. It's always a good time to share happiness and love.

Act of Oblivion
byRobert Harris
reviewed by Doug Wilcock

Robert Harris is a masterful writer of historical fiction, and he is at his best with his latest effort, *Act of Oblivion*. The title of the book comes from the act, passed in 1660 at the insistence of Lord Chancellor Edward Hyde, that largely spared republicans from revenge by the royalists who came back into power after the death of Oliver Cromwell. The republicans not spared by this act were fifty-nine individuals who committed regicide against Charles I by signing his death warrant leading to his execution in January 1649.

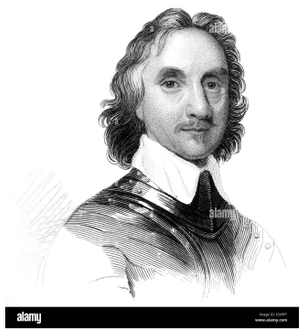
The story begins in two parts, one set in England and one here in Massachusetts. For the former, Isabelle Hacker, wife of Colonel Francis Hacker, is accompanied by Richard Nayler, sent by the House of Lords, as she returns to her Leicestershire home where she will retrieve and hand to Nayler the death warrant for Charles I. For Mrs. Hacker it is her one hope that her husband will be spared beheading and dismemberment if it shows that he did not sign the warrant. Whether that hope, because the warrant is addressed to him, proves to be real is for the court to decide.

The Massachusetts story begins with the arrival in Boston of the ship *Prudent Mary* carrying Cambridge resident Daniel Gookin and two of the signers of Charles' death warrant, Colonel Ned Whalley and Colonel Will Goffe. The latter two have come to the colonies to escape the certain death they would have faced had they stayed in England. They count on the protective shield of the Puritan community to keep any royalists at bay. This tension is the driving force of the story.

In the his introductory note author Robert Harris describes tracking down of the 'regicides' as the greatest manhunt of the 17th century. He tells us that events, dates, and locations are all real and, except for Richard Nayler, all characters are real. Who the real Nayler was is lost to history but Harris suspects that there must have been such a person - "you cannot sustain a manhunt without a manhunter."

Harris has chosen an interesting period in British and colonial history and a series of events that highlight the complexity and moral ambiguity of 17th century life in both Great Britain and the colonies. While the manhunt is the focus of the story, who would have suspected that the fallout from the restoration of Charles II to the throne would somehow overlap with King Philip's War? It does, with the war providing a dramatic turn in the action of the story. For those who enjoy history but want a story that moves quickly through more than four hundred and fifty pages, this is an ideal read. In addition to the story line, Harris gives us insight into Puritan religious fervor, the moral decadence of Charles II's court, the timing of the Plague's reemergence in England, the great London fire, a war with the Dutch and the implications of the same, and the tension and lost possibilities in the relations between the Native Americans of New England and the colonists. Robert Harris is to be congratulated on another excellent account of historical fiction, *Act of Oblivion*.

Charles 1



Oliver Cromwell

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.

Dutch Shea Jr.
by John Gregory Dunne
reviewed by Jeffrey Brodrick

That body over there, that just blew up, that's Dutch Shea Jr.'s daughter, or whats left of her. Dutch is our hero for this one. Who's his favorite person? The one joy in his life? His daughter, of course, except that she just blew up in the first sentence. Terrorists got her in the restaurant. Dutch made the reservation. And just so you know where we're heading, we're going down Welcome to John Gregory Dunne country: Catholics, pimps, arsonists, bad fate.

As befits a book whose climax is in the first sentence, Dunne presents not so much a plot that unfolds as a character that unravels. Once the bomb goes off we do little more than follow the vibrations, the shudders through Dutch's head. Dutch doesn't blow up, he collapses inward for the remaining 352 pages of the novel. Dutch Shea Jr. is broken from page one. He's a cooked bird and he doesn't even care.

At the same time, nonetheless, Dutch is one cool cuke, one of the coolest, most offbeat heroes since - well it's as if Holden Caulfield got tough and went to law school after running numbers for the mob for twenty years and working out in Harlem. Dunne's strongest character to date? That's like calling Willie Mays the best outfielder that the Giants ever had. Dutch Shea Jr. is an inverted powerhouse who's in total control in the courtroom. He wins cases for absurd pimps. He dismantles prosecution witnesses effortlessly. Nothing fazes the guy, he's untouchable, he never flinches. Try this on for size: could you appear in court and defend someone who tries to murder you? Dutch does. There's more. His girlfriend's the judge. "Not in my chambers", she protests. Yes, in the judge's chambers.

Dutch Shea Jr. was born to take the rap just like his father. Is this why we love him? Because he acquiesces in his fate, a loser by choice, utterly resigned and without ambition or malice? Dutch remembers too much for his own good. I am a victim of memory, he says. "All my sweethearts were supposed to protect me against memory." He likes to snoop out oddball details so as to block his bad memories. He sneaks into the restroom in the courthouse, props his feet up on the side of the stall so he can't be seen, and eavesdrops on the other lawyers.

Dutch takes care of his memories. He keeps a tape he made one night to prove to his ex-wife that she snored. Most of his memories are about his wife and the affair that she had and his father who committed suicide. They visit him every other second, it seems, these memories, and he can't kick them out - he makes love to his girlfriend and thinks about his wife. You could make a board game out of this novel, there are so many subliminal mysteries loose in Dutch's head. Everybody is connected. Dunne has created a sinister and incestuous web.

This may be one of those works more brilliant than it is entertaining or even feasible: like listening to the Sex Pistols for more than twenty seconds - genius, okay but why hurt yourself? Dunne is playing with magnets, never letting them touch. The tension in Dutch's head over his wife is mind-boggling. But it's all in his head. He never sees her. They do fight on the telephone every night. God, to have them meet - the pages would spark up.

Dutch almost spoils the novel for us. It is such a weird book: at once thrilling, comedy, farce, absurdly sleazy and morose. When he released his delightful collection of essays, *Quintana & Friends,* in 1978, Dunne confessed to being a mimic from an early age. This talent shows up here in the form of some hip, scatological dialogue, wacky vivid voices, and more live-wire characters than in any one novel since Thackeray: underworld, underbelly riffraff to the max. A gangster just out of the slammer tells Dutch he wants to date his ex-wife. "You wouldn't have her number, would you, Dutch." When Dutch defends a woman facing manslaughter charges for running over a baby with a power mower it's clear some contradictory instincts are at work. Dunne the Hollywood pro is unable to stop himself from turning out a little skit for us. Should we be laughing? Or comparing John Gregory Dunne to Faulkner for writing the best 42 pages of any novel for the last ten years?

Ultimately Dunne just wears us down. It's not that there's too much doom, but too much interior. Unlike *True Confessions*, not enough people to absorb the madness, the tensions are played out internally. As it is, it's an entire novel given to one man's ruin.

The Three Body Problem

by Cixin Lui. Translated by Ken Liu

reviewed by Don Boink

The Three Body Problem is an unusual from Sci - Fi book. That is principally because it is written by a Chinese author and the action is in China. The author states he has been fascinated by Sci - Fi since he was a young person and always wanted to write in that genre.

The characters all have Chinese names and that adds to the uniqueness of the story. The plot begins with the structure of a giant observatory for the purpose of studying the other planets in the universe. The search for other life forms is not strange to us since we too wonder if we are alone. The big difference is that in the story we are not on Earth but on a planet called Trisolanus. This name comes from the fact that it has three suns. Time here has a different meaning. There are periods of order and periods of chaos. During the chaotic periods the inhabitants dehydrate and enter dehydratories to hibernate. Once order is restored they rehydrate and go on as usual.

The order is upset when the observatory receives a message that bears the warning not to answer it because it would leave a trail leading to Trisolanus and an invasion by unfriendly beings. There is a great deal of scientific back and forth that includes prohibition of aiming directly at the sun. A scientist named Ye has been trying out a variety of schemes to mitigate the effect of sun spots and other flares that disrupt radio transmissions. In the course of her investigation she realizes that the sun acts like a mirror and an amplifier at the same time. Thus anything aimed at the sun is reflected and retransmitted in a much stronger mode. Ye decides that humanity has become unmanageable and needs help. She decides to broadcast a plea for help from some more honorable civilization.

A lot of things transpire in the next few years. Humanity is recognized as the prime cause of the world's problems. The educated class leads the movement to remedy the situation . Ye had becomes acquainted with the Trisolarans and is a prime mover in establishing the Earth - Trisolaris Movement, frequently referred to as ETO. The objective of the movement became the elimination of the human race. Many people had abandoned all hope in human civilization. For the good of the world they are willing to betray their own species. There is a lot of activity between the Trisolarans and the group led by Ye.. This is a perplexing story of what transpires between the two entities.

Science fiction is not my favorite genre. To wade into a Chinese one was a surprise to say the least.

Cixin Lui

G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century
by Beverly Gage
reviewed by Jim Mills

For 50 years, in the public mind, J. Edgar Hoover was the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Hoover was born in Washington, DC in 1895 and lived there for the rest of his life. His college life was at George Washington University where he was a member of the Kappa Alpha fraternity. Kappa Alpha was formed following the Civil War and was a home to southern gentlemen who lionized the memory of the ante-bellum South. Much of Hoover's Civil Rights attitudes were formed during this period. At the start of America's entrance into WW1 in 1917, Hoover avoided the draft by starting his career working for the U. S. Government's Justice Department.

Following the war, as a response to a wave of terrorist bombings, he participated in the then Attorney General's battle to combat leftist, mainly Communist, influences in America, the so-called Red Scare. In 1924 Hoover was named director of the Bureau of Investigation, soon to become the FBI. Hoover's orientation was towards the collection and organization of information related to criminal activity. One of his first major achievements was the practical use of fingerprint data as an aid to local policing efforts around the country. During the 1920s and the early 1930s the advent of Prohibition led to the rise of organized crime in the U. S. The FBI earned its crime fighting reputation during this period combating the likes of Pretty Boy Floyd, John Dillinger and Machine Gun Kelly. These crime confrontations enhanced Hoover's reputation as a tough, honest public servant.

At the end of the Second World War, the threat of Communism in American became a potent political issue with Hoover in the forefront of the battle. Through the years Hoover had managed to please his Presidential bosses by emphasizing, at least on the surface, their political concerns. The Bureau continued to grow under presidents Republican or Democrat. Hoover reached the height of his popularity by the late 1950s, where his reputation was considered to be above reproach. During this period his prime activity was supporting the anti-communist crusades. Unlike the firebrand, Senator Joseph McCarthy, Hoover kept his activities mostly out of public sight. His popular appeal began to gradually decline during the 1960s with the rise of the Civil Rights movement. His distrust of the Civil Rights leaders, particularly, Martin Luther King, led to extensive surveillance of their activities and the use of "dirty tricks" in an attempt to destroy their reputation and disrupt their movement. With the start of the Vietnamese War this close surveillance extended also to anti-war demonstrators. His activities against southern attacks on Civil Rights workers, both official and un-official, was, by comparison, relatively subdued. One factor in his hesitation was the difficulty in obtaining convictions with southern juries.

Through the years there were many questions about Hoover's sexual orientation. Hoover never married and lived with his mother until she died. He had very close relationships with two working FBI agents, Melvin Purvis in the !930s and later on Clyde Tolson. For many years Hoover and Tolson would vacation together in the summer in California and in the winter in Florida. This was during a period when homosexual activities were considered to be criminal. Several reporters had made accusations that Hoover was Gay, but in a few instances visits by FBI agents ended the reports. Hoover during his career did follow up on police reports of Gay activity in particular in the case of President Johnson's aide, Walter Jenkins.

Hoover was a survivor, his directorship spanning the presidencies of Coolidge through Nixon. His FBI files on the activities of political leaders factored into the leaders treating him with kid gloves. When Hoover died in 1972 he was awarded the honor of lying in state in the nation's capitol, the first for a government civil servant. At the time of Hoover's death the number two figure in the FBI was Mark Felt. The opinion in the Agency was that Hoover's successor should come from within the FBI. Nixon's choice, however, was Patrick Gray, who was not a FBI agent. In the 1990s it was revealed that a key figure in the Watergate Investigation that led to Nixon's resignation, was Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward's "Deep Throat", none other than Mark Felt. Aside from his revulsion at Nixon's activities, Felt may have had other motivations.

In the late 1970s a Senate investigation of the FBI led by Senator Frank Church exposed many of the tactics that the FBI had been employing through the years. This information has led to a more critical view of Hoover's tenure. Today, Martin Luther King's birthday is a national holiday, not J. Edgar Hoover's. Beverley Gage's *G-Man* is an interesting compilation of the ups and downs of the man who led the FBI for close to half a century. At 732 pages this account makes for fascinating reading for those who are willing to put in the time.

The Years
by Annie Ernaux
reviewed by Doug Wilcock

In her memoir, *The Years*, Nobel Prize recipient Annie Ernaux tells us that "between what happens in the world and what happens to her, there is no point of convergence. They are two parallel series: one abstract, all information no sooner received than forgotten, the other all static shots." She illustrates such a static shot, using a simple photograph and a few short lines to convey how life has changed from the France in which she grew up. Ernaux appears in a 1999 photo taken on the beach in Normandy. She is one of four people pictured in the photograph, standing with her two sons and a black-haired woman, the girlfriend of her older son. Ernaux describes the scene, the way the four people stand, the gentle, distant smile of the indeterminate aged older woman, the cut of her hair, her scarf and shoulder bag, all of which might suggest a well-off city woman on a weekend seaside visit.

Ernaux delves deeper, showing the disparity between her life and those of her children. She acknowledges that "the woman has enjoyed the comfortable income of a teacher with seniority" and that she continues to contribute to her children's material welfare "to compensate for any pain they may endure in their lives." She has decided that "they should enjoy life in spite of the short-term contracts for which they are overqualified." She furthers the contrast, commenting that their lives are typified by the "pure present of music, American TV series, and video games, as if they continued to live as students… far removed from the settled life that had been hers at their age."

As she reaches the conclusion of the book, she contemplates writing the memoir. It will not be a work of remembrance "aimed at putting a life into story." She will go within herself only to retrieve the world, as she does with the beach photograph. She will look at ritual, the family Sunday dinner, watching as it is transformed from her childhood recitation of memories from the war and the Occupation to mid-60's chatter about the arrival of the supermarket and the Renault 4L to later anxious discussions of child-rearing styles and dealing with permissiveness.

Ernaux's memoir is of her life from her 1940 birth in World War II France through 2006 when she turned 66. While there is a chronological arc to the story, it is not driven by her life. Rather, she wrestles with how to portray "an existence that is singular but also merged with the movements of a generation." She is extremely reflective, wondering how she can represent the passage of historical time, how she can illustrate changing things, ideas, and manners, and how she can portray the private life of this woman. She wrestles with whether to write about the woman as "I" or "she". By choosing the latter, Ernaux becomes observer as well as participant. This creation of perspective, of being the observer and observed, of reflecting within the memoir about writing it, and of seeing the larger society through the lens of the individual has its parallel in the mathematical object, a fractal, with its infinity of self-similar layers in which the microscopic part is perfectly representative of the whole.

Throughout the book Ernaux delivers sharply drawn sociological insights. She suggests that changing social and economic norms created "a profusion of things" that concealed "a scarcity of ideas and the erosion of beliefs." Or that "the more immersed we were in work and family, said to be reality, the greater was our sense of unreality." Even though the memoir ends in 2006 in what we might think of as the relatively early days of the Internet, Ernaux is prescient in describing it. She finds a superficiality to it that plays a part in the abundance of everything: objects, information, and "expert opinion." She describes pleasure seeking as the alpha and omega of human activities.

Like many who grew up or came of age in the 60's, May 1968 in France is the marker against which to measure social change. Ernaux describes it as "the first year of the world." For those readers who are close to Ernaux's age, not only will this book be a reminder of events that they lived through but, as she describes her experience talking to students in 1985, for example, it will illustrate how dramatic was the social revolution in Western society and how wide was the gulf between the pre-1968 society and the contemporary one, between the older generation and the younger.

The Years is a fascinating book, fascinating both for the story she tells, the times in which it is set, and the use of the third person to achieve the narrator/subject dichotomy. After what I would describe for me as a somewhat rocky start to the book, I found that I could not put it down. The multi-layered richness that Ernaux creates is compelling. Were it not so popular (15 holds in CLAMS as I write this) I would reread it just to linger on the richness of the writing. I hope that others will get the same pleasure from this astounding memoir.

Master, Slave, Husband, Wife: An Epic Journey from Slavery to Freedom
by Ilyon Woo
reviewed by Jim Mills

During the half-century before the Civil War, the immense oppression of slaves in the United States triggered wave after wave of blacks fleeing from the slave states to the relatively free states to the north. In 1848 a slave couple devised a unique plan to escape from bondage. Ellen and William Craft were both slaves living in Macon, Georgia about 70 miles south of Atlanta. Ellen worked as a domestic maid and William was rented out by his owner as a carpenter's aide. Both Ellen's mother and grandmother had been raped by their owners, making Ellen 1/4 black or a quadroon in the parlance of the time. Ellen's appearance was such that she could readily pass as white. In the South any individual, even the smallest part black, was considered a slave.

Ellen was able to make use of her appearance as white to effect their escape. With her work as a seamstress she was able to create fine male clothing to use as her disguise as a male slave owner. Her husband could then travel with his master as "his" slave without being questioned. Through the years he had managed to earn and save sufficient funds to cover their trip expenses. Like most slaves of her time Ella could not read or write, so she devised a scheme to place her right arm in a sling, using her handicap as a reason not have to sign her name. The couple were able to convince their owners that they needed four days off to visit a sick relative allowing for a four-day grace period before they would be missed.

Early one November morning they made their way separately to the Macon rail station to board the Savannah train, she in first class and her slave in the slave's car. Throughout the trip she was drawn into conversations with other passengers but managed to say little with her slave aiding the process. In Savannah they took a steamship to Charleston, South Carolina and thence to Wilmington, North Carolina. They went by rail to Washington and then on to Baltimore. At this point there was special questioning since their next destination was the free city of Philadelphia. Once more they were able to bluff their way, without having to show slave ownership papers. They had managed to leave the slave states behind within the four-day grace period. In Philadelphia they were able to do away with the disguise and could then travel more or less in the open on their way to Boston.

In Boston they were able to obtain funds by going on lecture circuits and working as a carpenter and seamstress. They thrived in this northern city for a year and a half. The resultant publicity allowed their Georgia owners to locate them. In 1850 the U. S. Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act promoted by Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster and signed into law by the new President Millard Fillmore, a New York native. This law required government forces in the free states to aid in the return of runaway slaves to their southern owners.

The Craft's owners then sent two agents to Boston to bring William and Ellen back to Georgia. The couple was forewarned and managed to hide in the city while the local population aggressively went after the two Georgia agents driving them back to New York for their personal safety.

The resistance exhibited in Boston and in other northern cities drove President Fillmore to arrange for the use of federal troops to enforce the letter of the Fugitive Slave law. This, convinced the Crafts that they needed to leave the country. With local help they took a train to Portland, Maine and then travelled by ship to Halifax, Nova Scotia where they were able to board a steamship destined for the British port of Liverpool. After a very rough winter crossing in steerage, the Crafts began a new life. They found an accepting and receptive welcome in their new home. They were to live and prosper in Britain for two decades or so well after their fellow slaves were freed during the Civil War. During this time they raised six children. Returning to the U. S. in the 1870s they moved initially to South Carolina and finally to their origins in Georgia. They started a school to educate fellow former slaves and were able to lead a reasonably normal life. Ella lived until the late 1880s and William until the turn of the new century. Their life span covered, possibly, the greatest transition in American history with their lives being at the very center. Today slavery is far behind us but its effects lingers on, initially with a segregated century and now with Blacks still striving for equal treatment. The first slaves arrived here in 1620 and over the centuries creating a growing economic dependency in half of the nation that took the bloodiest war in our history to erase. Someday, the impact of that sordid history will be behind us.

Empire of Ice and Stone: The Disastrous and Heroic Voyage of the Karluk
by Buddy Levy
reviewed by Jim Mills

The history of Arctic and Antarctic exploration is replete with stories of poor planning and poor judgement leading to disastrous results. The voyage of the Karluk in 1913-4 took place near the end of the so-called heroic era of polar exploration. This story involves two key figures, the explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson and the ship's captain Robert Bartlett. The purpose of the voyage seemed somewhat murky but involved scientific exploration of the Arctic Ocean region north of Alaska with the possible discovery of new lands in the far north. Stefansson was in charge of this exploratory operations. The ship departed from Nome Alaska on July 13, 1913 passed through the Bering Strait, entered the Arctic Ocean and within a month was stuck in the arctic ice pack. Apparently the ice formed earlier in 1913 than in most years.

Soon after the ship was imprisoned in the ice, the expedition leader, Stefansson, decided to take a small group across the ice with the stated purpose of hunting caribou. The trip leader reached the Alaskan mainland and never returned. He started searching for another ship to pursue his explorations and abandoned the Karluk and its crew stuck in the ice. At this point the fate of the remaining ship's company of 26 individuals was in the hands of the Captain Robert Bartlett.

Bartlett's arctic experience and his dedication as ship's captain was crucial to the survival of most of the passengers and crew. The ship was destined to endure the upcoming polar winter as the ice ceaselessly moved the crew to the northeast. This route passed north of Siberia to within striking range of a small arctic island, Wrangel Island. One small group prematurely decided to try to reach Wrangel but was never heard from again. The pressure of the all-encompassing ice became too great, crushing the Karluk and sending the ship to the bottom. Bartlett, anticipating this event, had prudently moved most of the ships vital supplies onto the ice. He set up a camp there prior to the attempt to reach Wrangel. This became possible once the sun had returned from the long arctic night.

At this point the trek becomes one of survival. The pressure of the competing ice flows created immense ice ridges greatly slowing down the group's progress. Once the group reached the north shore of the island, a base camp was established. Bartlett decided to make a dash himself with one of the Inuit natives to reach civilization and provide for a rescue mission. This route meant circumnavigating Wrangel, reaching the south shore and again crossing the ice to reach the Siberian mainland.This effort took many weeks with Bartlett reaching primitive outliers of civilization, eventually a Siberian harbor where he could arrange passage across to Alaska.

The effort to mount a rescue voyage was very taxing, with the ice surrounding Wrangel finally giving way by September 1914. The survivors of the group experienced their rescue with news of the opening of a World War in Europe with some of them becoming immersed in the conflict. Bartlett's courage and expertise in saving a majority of the trip's participants brought praise from many in Canada and Great Britain. Stefansson was never held to account for his brazen abandonment of the expedition that he had initiated. Technological changes such as radio communications, motorized surface transit and air travel in succeeding decades changed the future of polar exploration, ending the heroic era and improving the survival prospects of those who participated.