

Chicago Tribune

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Favorites of 2011: Chicago-area authors

At the end of this year, we stop to recognize the wonderful work put out by authors living in or originally from Chicago and the surrounding suburbs. Here is the list of our favorite titles from 2011:

"The Year We Left Home" by Jean Thompson

An Iowa family transverses the globe — and nestles into the farm — in this elegant decades-long saga that touches on war and roots. (Simon & Schuster, \$25)

"The Steal: A Cultural History of Shoplifting" by Rachel Shteir

Shteir offers a magnetic look at this petty crime. (Penguin Press, \$25.95)

"The Fates Will Find Their Way" by Hannah Pittard

Sad, yet tantalizing, this novel explores what could have happened to a vanished teenage girl as imagined by her male peers over the years. (Ecco, \$22.99)

"The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb" by Melanie Benjamin

This is a delightful imagination of a woman's life, which was anything but small. Mercy Lavinia Bump, who grew to be only 2 feet, 8 inches tall, moved from sideshow freak to superstar wife when she married General Tom Thumb, of P.T. Barnum fame. (Delacorte Press, \$25)

"If I Bring You Roses" by Marisel Vera

A young Puerto Rican couple grapple to survive married life in Chicago. (Grand Central Publishing, \$13.99)

"Treasure Island!!!" by Sara Levine

A modern college graduate reads Robert Louis Stevenson and decides to jump-start her life with a few bold acts. (Europa Editions, \$15)

"Everyone But You: Stories" by Sandra Novack

This fabulous collection of stories focuses on the inner turmoil of ordinary people. (Random House, \$26)

"Taliban Shuffle: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan" by Kim Barker

In this hilarious memoir about her years covering the war for the Chicago Tribune, Barker reveals a keen eye for the human stories that emerge when people are forced to live and work closely together under strange conditions. (Doubleday, \$25.95)

"This Burns my Heart" by Samuel Park

Park tackles one heck of a fictional love affair as he follows the trials and travails of a young South Korean woman who rails against tradition, yet feels helpless to make any big changes. (Simon & Schuster, \$25)

"Once Upon a Time, There Was You" by Elizabeth Berg

Prolific novelist Berg writes of a long-estranged couple who are thrust into each other's lives when their beloved 18-year-old daughter needs help. (Ballantine Books, \$15)

"County: Life, Death and Politics at Chicago's Public Hospital" by Dr. David A. Ansell

A behind-the-scenes look at one of the nation's most desperate urban hospitals from a Chicago doctor who has spent his career fighting health inequities. (Academy Chicago Publishers, \$29.95)

"A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War" by Amanda Foreman

If your wrists can handle the heft of 1008 pages, this extraordinary historical tome provides an entirely new perspective on the Civil War, rife with novel characters and fresh insight. (Random House, \$35)

"Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice" by Ivan Brunett

Elegant guide to the elements of cartooning from a master. This slim book will charge the heart and soul of anyone who has ever blackened their fingers with a pencil and a dream. (Yale University Press, \$13)

"Claim of Innocence" by Laura Caldwell

It's always a bad idea to poison your best friend. (Mira, \$7.99)

"We All Fall Down" by Michael Harvey

You were right to be worried about germs on the el. The Emmy Award-winning journalist and documentary producer Harvey has penned a terrifying apocalyptic tale in which a deadly pathogen has been released in the Chicago train system. (Knopf, \$24.95)

"Relative Strangers: Italian Protestants in the Catholic World" by Frank Cicero Jr.

Cicero Jr. turns to his ancestors to understand how Italian immigrants carved a new life for themselves in Chicago despite the vast religious differences. (Academy Chicago Publishers, \$32.50)

"Paris Without End: The True Story of Hemingway's First Wife" by Gioia Diliberto

All eyes are trained on the ever-fascinating Hadley Richardson whose life, thanks to magnificent works like this biography, is only now being more carefully considered. (Harper Perennial, \$15.99)

"Cabin Fever: A Suburban Father's Search for the Wild" by Tom Montgomery Fate

This tech-swamped, married suburbanite's musings have been compared to Thoreau. (Beacon Press, \$24.95)

"The Borrower" by Rebecca Makkai

When a children's librarian discovers a 10-year-old boy camped out in the library, she becomes determined to help him run away from his parents. Once on the road, she has some second thoughts. (Viking, \$25.95)

"Backstage Stuff: A Jane Wheel Mystery" by Sharon Fiffer

Antiques lover Jane Wheel again finds herself in a mysterious pickle. (Minotaur Press, \$24.99)

"The Magnificent Medills: America's Royal Family of Journalism During a Century of Turbulent Splendor" by Megan McKinney

No doubt, hundreds of journalists have graduated from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University without a clue about their esteemed school's namesake. This fabulous book

will educate them and enthuse anyone else interested in Chicago or the evolution of journalism in America. (Harper, \$27.99)

"The Paperbark Shoe" by Goldie Goldbloom

Goldbloom taps into a little publicized bit of Australian history in this soulful novel about Italian prisoners of war banished to the continent in the 1940s. (Picador, \$15)

"The Countess: A Novel of Elizabeth Bathory" by Rebecca Johns

This spooky gothic novel begins just as a 17th century Hungarian countess is being walled away forever in her castle tower — a just punishment for the rivers of blood she has flooded across the land. (Broadway, \$15)

"Verdi's Shakespeare: Men of the Theater" by Garry Wills

A glorious exploration of Verdi's staged Shakespearean operas from the Pulitzer Prize winning Wills. (Viking, \$25.95)

"Rome and Rhetoric: Shakespeare's Julius Caesar" by Garry Wills

Wills, professor of history emeritus at Northwestern University, turns to one of Shakespeare's most famous plays and explains how the playwright single-handedly created an everlasting image of Rome. (Yale University Press, \$25)

"The Wilder Life: My Adventures in the Lost World of Little House on the Prairie" by Wendy McClure

McClure attempts to follow America's favorite pioneer family's wagon trail. Churning butter and the Ingalls' primitive digs made her realize that perhaps pioneering isn't as romantic as it seems. (Riverhead, \$25.95)

"The Lost Summer of Louisa May Alcott" by Kelly O'Connor McNeese

Despite the fact that the "Little Women" author never married, McNeese imagines Alcott embroiled in a brief love affair in this twinkling novel. (Berkeley Trade, \$15)

"Everyone Remain Calm" by Megan Stielstra

Stories to help you sort fantasy from reality. (Amazon Digital (Kindle Edition), \$9.95)

"162-0: Imagine a Cubs Perfect Season" by Dan McGrath and Bob Vanderberg

Sometimes it sure is nice to fantasize! (Triumph Books, \$16.95)

"Girl Ascending" by Melissa Ann Pinney

A stunning compilation of photographs that Pinney has been snapping of American women and girls for more than 30 years. (Center for American Places, \$50)

"L-vis Lives!: Racemusic Poems" by Kevin Coval

A poetic shout-out to all those "whiteboys" who have enjoyed, borrowed and misappropriated black music over the years. (Haymarket Books, \$16)

"The Other Felix" by Keir Graff

This children's novel is a dreamy take on what to do when scary things attack in your sleep. (Roaring Brook Press, \$16.99)

"The Ninth Day" by Jamie Freveletti

In this novel some marijuana plants are laced with a flesh-eating toxin — and they are about to be released in America. (Harper, \$9.99)

"ToxiCity: Georgia Davis Prequel" by Libby Fischer Hellmann

Lovers of Hellmann's novel, "Easy Innocence", will enjoy learning how heroine Georgia Davis survived her Chicago cop rookiehood. (Red Herrings, \$12.99)

"Voyager" by Srikanth Reddy

A transformative second collection triggered by the UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim, who turned out to be a Nazi. (University of California Press, \$22.95)

"The Two Deaths of Daniel Hayes" by Marcus Sakey

A man wakes up naked on a beach with a shattered memory. Either it's a really bad hangover or...the beginning of a sweat-inducing thriller. (Dutton, \$25.95)

"Queen of America" by Luis Alberto Urrea

A saint struggles with her identity. (Little, Brown and Company, \$25.99)

"Throwaway Girl" by David Heinzmann

The latest mystery in this Augustine Flood's mystery series, the detective investigates a Lake Michigan drowning death, and ends up looking into America's child sex trade. (Five Star, \$25.95)