

### Beloved Exile (Avonova Fantasy)

By Darke Godwin

I could not resist grabbing this novel about Guenever, as I am fascinated with all Camelot lore. The story begins when the Queen is told, "Lady, The King Is Dead", and it chronicles her struggle to rule England, (then Brittanca) until her final days. The plot does not follow the "true" Arthurian legend, but who cares? It was an interesting read, almost making me believe I was living the tale.

Even if you don't particularly care for the story of King Arthur, Lancelot and Guenever, this is a tale almost anyone could enjoy. There are two faults: 1) The last page...rip it out and the whole thing is greatly improved, and 2) There is a dryness to the first chapter while they get the political background out of the way; however, it is worth it for this fresh view of the Queen of Camelot. She seems more human, not the untouchable goddess of previous stories. This book makes you think this must have been the true Guenever.

-- Aldera Chisholm

### Viking (Avon) By Fabio

This was the worst book I have ever read. Given, I was not expecting great literature when I took this home. There has been so much hype about the "wonderful Fabio" that I had to see for myself. Our hero is an actor who is starring in a Viking movie with his lover. In the movie finale, the actor is sent off for burial on a burning ship. All of a sudden, in a freak accident, he finds himself thrown back in time as a great Viking king risen from the dead. He is then determined to bring peace to the Vikings and "tame" Reyna the Ravisher, the ancestor of his modern-day lover. Sound contrived? You are right. It's also trite, predictable, corny, and extremely sexist. What else can you expect of a novel containing a fold-out, inscribed centerfold of Fabio? Don't buy it. Don't borrow it from a friend. Don't even read the back cover. In fact, don't read this review.

-- Aldera Chisholm

### The Stone Diaries (Vintage)

Carol Shields

I feel rather ignorant trying to review the wonderful work that Carol Shields has penned. I can't sufficiently describe the simple beauty of her language and the intimacy I felt with her characters. The spell Shields is able to cast over her readers is amazing, and rarely demonstrated by contemporary authors.

Page by page, the novel traces the path of Daisy Goodwill's existence. Her life is one of tragedy, but not a kind of tragedy that is insurmountable. Daisy is an orphan, a young widow, a mother and a journalist during the nine decades of her life, and all the time, she is desperately uncertain of what her life station should be. The family tree and photographs of various ascendants and descendants make reading this book, based on the life of a Canadian-born woman, an even more intimate experience.

Shields has a wonderful talent for making her characters come alive. The images she paints with her characters' thoughts are intricate and vivid. Particularly disturbing, yet fascinating, is her representation of the mind of a person near death.

The most striking feature of this book is not something found in the text. What Shields has been able to do with her wonderful book is encourage self-revelation and self-discovery. The book forces readers to take a walk through their own lives and ponder the relevance of their existence.

*The Stone Diaries* has won many accolades, including the Governor General's Award in 1993, and a nomination to the short-list for the prestigious Booker Prize. As well, the book spent forty weeks on the Best Sellers list when the first edition came out in hard-cover. Truly, when you read the book, there is no doubt it deserves the praise it has received. *The Stone Diaries* is a perfect book for the soul-searcher, and for anyone who enjoys a beautiful story.

-- Steve Ellis

### The Ant Book and See-Through Model Set (Andrews and McMeel)

By Luann Colombo,

Illustrated by Susan Hernday

*The Ant Book* is sold as one half of the *Ant Book and See-Through Model* packaged set. This 48-page book contains the directions for putting together the pieces of your very own ant, as well as information on the anatomy, ecological importance, and society of various ant species. Colombo's language is sophisticated for children's reading, but many of the big words are defined in the text to make it more accessible. The directions were simple to follow and the ant can be constructed within a few minutes, easily within a child's attention span. I have taken university-level invertebrate zoology courses and I found the story of my ant very interesting. The reading level of *The Ant Book* is late elementary. With someone reading the directions, a younger child could easily figure out the model.

Susann Hernday's artwork is excellent. Her ants are lifelike-- you can almost feel the hairs on an ant's antenna.

The See-Through Ant Model is not a toy; once it has been put together all you really can do with it is look at it. That said, building the model was just plain fun. The internal organs are big enough that adult-size fingers can put the pieces together without frustration. I would have been happier if the pieces snapped together more firmly, especially the two-piece exoskeleton, which does not snap together at all. The see-through dome that houses the ant is snug, but my ant comes apart if one picks it up to look from another angle.

-- Shannon Younker

### It's The Thought That Counts...

### A For Better or For Worse Fifteenth Anniversary Collection (Andrews & McMeel)

By Lynn Johnston

It's two, two, two books in one! *It's The Thought That Counts* is the latest annual collection of daily *For Better or For Worse* cartoons by Canadian cartoonist Lynn Johnston. The book chronicles the heartwarming and sometimes heart-rending nuances of day-to-day life with the Patterson family (based on Johnston's own real-life family).

Ah, but there's more! This jumbo volume includes not only the usual collection of daily strips, but also a lengthy selection of favourite Sunday colour pages hand-picked by Johnston, accompanied by amusing and touching anecdotes about her life and how some of these strips reflect it.

Johnston's accompanying text, like her strip, is candid, warm and accessible. It's a tantalizing snippet of autobiography, as well as a revealing insight into how Johnston creates her beloved comic strip (something she alludes to at length in the book's foreword).

*For Better or For Worse* itself is the undisputed champion of family comic strips. None of Johnston's peers can surpass her blend of realism and gentle humour. The beauty of it is that the Pattersons could be any of us. *For Better or For Worse* is a universally recognizable picture of family life and life in general, with well-rounded characters who evolve over time and with whom the reader grows to care about like their own family.

From first dates to mid-life crises and beyond, Johnston crafts a timeless slice of family life; and, for all its warmth and wit, the book remains topical and relevant-- touchy issues (like the pseudo-infamous revelation of supporting character Lawrence as a gay teen) are addressed with sensitivity and intelligence, and Johnston often makes the reader think-- whether for better or for worse. As this latest collection illustrates, Johnston continues to successfully combine humour and heart without sacrificing substance.

-- Sean McQuaid

### The Friendly Shakespeare (Penguin Books)

By Norrie Epstein

Shakespeare bashers take heed: this is a fun book! Whether you're the last of the red-hot Bard boosters or sick to death of the fuss about Willie, this is the book for you.

As Epstein says in her foreword, she wrote this book for "the intelligent common reader who is tired of the academic jargon and the patronizing tone of the standard handbook." For those of you who cringe at the mention of Shakespeare in the belief that he is too "intellectual" for you to appreciate, this book is for you. It is an unpredictable, concise and deliciously diverse grab bag of history, biography, art appreciation and out-and-out trivia of all kinds. The same of *Jeopardy* could probably milk this Shakespeare categories until long after Aristotle Trebek keels over dead.

At the same time, this book is by no means condescending. Included in the volume are numerous intelligent discussions of Shakespeare and his works, with special chapters for his various plays, including tragedies, comedies, histories, romances and problem plays. But it's all presented in a straightforward, accessible prose style, so the book is padded with zillions of quotes from the Bard (by everyone from Virginia Woolf to Mel Gibson), tons of trivia sidebars, reams of short articles on various aspects of all things Shakespearean.

Among the topics of discussion are Shakespeare's popularity, why many find him boring, how Shakespeare is taught (or mis-taught) in schools, the Elizabethan Theatre, Shakespeare's life and mysterious death, Shakespearean language, actors, directors, hoaxes, merchandising, adaptations in a variety of mediums-- you name it, here (although mention of the delightful *Wayne and Shuster* Shakespeare sketches is surprisingly and depressingly absent in the spoof section). It's a heady blend of history, superstition, folklore, myth, and the literature that inspired it-- everything from the "curse" of *MacBeth* to which play involves the most spitting (if you're curious, it's *Merchant of Venice*).

In short, *The Friendly Shakespeare* is a very readable, accessible guide to the Bard, his works, his world, and how it affects our world. It's only a taste of Shakespeare, but a tasty, eclectic mix it is.

-- Sean McQuaid