BOOKISH

Heavy-hitting authors

Pulitzer Prize winners among writers at Margaret Root Brown Reading Series

By Maggie Galehouse

Racism. Displacement. Trans-Atlantic crossings. Relationships forged—and undone—by war and politics. These are shared threads among the works of 10 acclaimed writers, appearing in Houston as part of the Margaret Root Brown Reading Series.

Imprint, the city’s literary reading nonprofit, hosts the series, which launches its 15th season Aug. 26. It’s a global guest list, with authors from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, Peru, the United States and elsewhere. Most have lived on more than one continent. “No two places are homogeneous and more diverse,” notes Marilyn Jones, Imprint’s associate director. “This is what the world looks like, and this is what writers want to talk about.”

The authors will sit for casual readings, which give the audience a chance to see what they’re like (French? German? Spanish?) And perhaps most incredibly, the price of individual tickets—$5—hasn’t changed since 1980. Among the big names this year is Khaled Hosseini, appearing Sept. 10. Best known for “The Kite Runner,” Hosseini will read from his third novel, “And the Mountains Echoed,” now ranked No. 3 on the New York Times best-seller list. It’s a sprawling, poignant story—Hosseini’s books make everyone cry—that follows a young Afghan boy separated from his sister. Twomore heavy hitters: Pulitzer Prize winners Jhumpa Lahiri on Oct. 13 and Elizabeth Strout, Feb. 24. Lahiri won the Pulitzer in 2000 for her debut story collection, “Interpreter of Maladies.” Her first novel, “The Book of Names,” is the head-chef position at Gordon Ramsay Pub & Grill at Caesars Palace. The job comes with an annual salary of $250,000. “It was like winning for a second time,” Witt said of Thursday’s watch party, which was held in the pub. “It was great seeing Chef Ramsay again.”

Witt spent the spring and summer in Hobart, hosting watch parties at hubs, judging “Hell’s Kitchen” on local television and radio shows and working personally in the kitchen. “I definitely have to pinch myself sometimes,” she said. “It was surreal. I think I would have to even crack a smile when I thought about the series’ outcome.”

“You can’t help but feel like you’ve woken up from a very long dream,” said Witt, who is the head-chef position at Gordon Ramsay Pub & Grill at Caesars Palace. She is the head-chef position at Gordon Ramsay Pub & Grill at Caesars Palace. The job comes with an annual salary of $250,000. It was like winning for a second time,” Witt said of Thursday’s watch party, which was held in the pub. “It was great seeing Chef Ramsay again.”

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“My poker face will serve me well in Vegas,” Witt said, laughing. In Thursday’s finale, Witt won the show as a chef in a kitchen on “Hell’s Kitchen,” ready to take on Las Vegas

By Syd Kearney

“I felt like I was waking up from a very long dream,” said Witt, the morning after she was revealed as the winner of Season 11 in “Hell’s Kitchen,” the Fox reality cooking competition.

Witt spoke from Las Vegas, where she, family, friends and celebrity chef Chad Hauser showed up to watch Thursday’s season finale. The prize for hosting several other chefs, including fellow Season 10 star Mary Pomboll, is the head-chef position at Gordon Ramsay Pub & Grill at Caesars Palace. Witt will also have a chance to take on Las Vegas

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Margaret Root Brown Reading Series 2013-14

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Sept. 23: Khaled Hosseini, Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas

Oct. 13: Jhumpa Lahiri, Wortham Theater Center

Nov. 18: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie & Colum McCann, Alley Theatre, 615 Texas

Jan. 27: George Saunders, Alley Theatre

Feb. 24: Elizabeth Strout, Wortham Theater Center

March 24: Daniel Alarcón and Mohsin Hamid, Stude Concert Hall, Rice University

April 28: Anne Carson, Hobby Center for the Performing Arts

Season tickets
The Margaret Root Brown Reading Series is named for one of the founding directors of the Brown Foundation, the lead underwriter. With season tickets, you will receive:
- Reserved seating at each venue
- Book signed first in the book-signing line
- A signed copy of Jhumpa Lahiri’s forthcoming novel, “The Lowland”
- Two reserved-section guest passes
- Free parking at the Alley Theatre for two readings

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Union worries decision to demand blood tests will take officers off streets

By Brian Rogers

A decision by the Harris County District Attorney’s Office to demand blood tests for every drunken-driving suspect who refuses breath tests has drawn an unusual opponent: Houston police officers.

“We’re just very concerned it’s going to take officers off the street for an extended amount of time,” said Ray Hunt, president of the Houston Police Officers’ Union. Hunt said that, unlike officers specially trained to find and arrest drunken drivers, most officers are not used to navigating the system, which includes swearing out a warrant, waiting for a judge to sign it, then finding someone at a hospital to draw the suspect’s blood. A single arrest could take a full shift, he said. “They’re not going to be as savvy on how to do these warrants, so it’s going to take them six to eight hours, and that means the officer is off the street for that entire time,” Hunt said. “It’s a major issue.”

Houston defense lawyers echoes that concern. “Spending so much time, energy and money to prosecute a Class A or Class B misdemeanor is ridiculous,” said Todd Dupuis, president of the Harris County Criminal Lawyer’s Association. Prosecutors say the change, which takes effect in April, will save time and money in the long run, as drunken-driving cases slow.

By Harry R. Weber

BP’s unrelenting attacks against how the Gulf oil spill civil settlement agreement is being handled aims to win over the public, but the strategy risks antagonizing a key constituent who is following every word — the federal judge overseeing the case.

Legal experts question how BP’s battling newspaper ads, social media commentary, television interviews and news conferences are going to be of any value, even if the U.S. District Court in New Orleans is weighing whether the British oil giant should have to pay billions of dollars in punitive damages.

“It’s very dangerous litigation-wise to engage in that kind of hyperbole,” said Blaine LeCesne, a law professor at Loyola University in New Orleans who has followed the case.

BP said in a statement that it is simply informing its employees, shareholders and the general public that while it remains committed to paying legitimate claims arising from the 2010 disaster, it shouldn’t have to.

Karen Webster, a registered nurse, has been a nurse practitioner, last week during Schwartz Center Rounds at Houston Methodist Hospital, where caregivers are overrun with orphaned animals.

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Dustin, a sweet, under-motivated, 23-year-old— a boomerang kid — is making himself at home in the Chronicle comics pages starting today. The lead character in the comic strip of the same name may be something of a slacker, but he's already a hit with funnies fans across the country. Since the launch of the strip in January 2010, more than 320 newspapers have become hooked on "Dustin."

"I can't tell you how pleased we are to move into the Chronicle," says Steve Kelley, who writes the strip distributed by King Features Syndicate. "It's great to see a newspaper that is still devoting a lot of time and attention to humor."

"Dustin" moves into the Chronicle's funny pages

Author, professor revisits his past for latest book

Antonja Nelson and Robert Boswell are on the faculty of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in Ripton, Vt., this summer. The married couple are writers and professors who share the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

"Tumbledown"

By Robert Boswell

Greywolf Press, 448 pp., $26


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All is well at Hunky Dory

As of late last week, Down House operator Chris Cusack had nailed down a site and a chipper name — Hunky Dory — for the much-anticipated restaurant he will open next fall with Richard Knight, co-creator of the late great Feast, along with current Down House chef Bongi Maseo.

The 300-seat Hunky Dory will be located at the N. Shepherd, Westheimer, and Bissonnet intersection, a block west of both streets and Downtown, in the Heights. For the first time, As-ado-based Down House Concepts will be working with an architect.

Edward Brown

Author appearance

Robert Boswell will appear with James McBride at 7:30 p.m. Aug. 20, at the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, 1600 Bagby, as part of the Houston Book Series. Boswell will read from "Tumbledown" and will be joined by the "Book Club Live" host, Steve Anderson, via Skype, to discuss Boswell's latest novel, "Tumbledown."

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By Graham Sleight

Years ago, there was a "Murphy’s Law" about the world’s funniest jokes told by the Irish in World War II. The joke was that everyone who had ever translated into Ger- man the German phrase that provoked it, devoured a great meal. In its essence, "Irish Lore" is a book-length view of that phrase, and it’s as clever as a riddle.

The premise of Max Barry’s new novel is a secret society of poets who have refined their craft to the point where their words can do anything—unless they are used against them. The poem is a weapon.

Hidden Order

Barry is a postmodern novel in the service of a postmodern theory. The work is an exploration of the idea that language and the language of poetry in particular is the key to making society and the world itself follow our wishes. What matters is the projection of the writer’s ideas and themselves by the poet’s work. The poet is the person who envisions a world that is different from the world we live in, and the poet is the person who projects that world into the world we live in.

In this book, the poet’s work is a weapon that can do anything. The poet’s work is the key to making society and the world itself follow our wishes. The poet is the person who envisions a world that is different from the world we live in, and the poet is the person who projects that world into the world we live in.

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By Dan Brown. Robert Langdon must decipher a series of codes created by a Dante-loving scientist.

FICTION

Nonfiction

Becoming

osen. Candler puts Billy Atlas, his oldest and best friend, in charge of his signature "sheltered workshop," but Billy is a scatterbrain and has a hard time managing it. Frances Candler is his grandmother, and she has a hard time understanding him. Eventually, Billy comes up with an idea that changes everything. He’s based on a friend I grew up with. He was one of the hardest characters to let go at the end because I liked being with him. I ultimately decided that he needed a life away from me, a life away from his problems, a life away from his troubles.

Q: You share the Chair and "Tumbleweed" with Maggie Galehouse. How do you work together?

Q: You’re writing about your maternal grandmother, who had ALS. How did your interest in language develop?

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BOOK TALK
Inprint's literary world tour begins at home: UH novelist Robert Boswell explores *Tumbiwa* lives

BY TARRA GAINES 8.24.13 | 3:20 pm


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here's been no summer rest for Inprint, Houston's wickedly good literary arts organization. It seems like it only just ended the 30th anniversary season of the Margaret Root Brown Reading Series a few months ago, probably because it just did, with a special party and reading by James Salter in May.

Yet, Inprint is already beginning its 31st season this month in order to accommodate an author schedule bursting at the bookbinding seams.

With award winning novelists Khaled Hosseini, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Colum McCann, on the roster — and that's just for the first half of the season — it's no wonder the full 2013-2014 season subscriptions have already sold out. McCann and Lahiri's books are contenders for the next Booker Prize, so book lovers without season tickets might want to plan ahead to purchase general admission early. The first reading, featuring James McBride and Robert Boswell, sold out a week ago.

The season is set to be a kind of literary world tour with books and authors taking readers...
Pakistan, and Nigeria while introducing them to a multitude of voices over many generations. Before the global flight takes off however, Imprint begins much closer to home with celebrated author and University of Houston professor Boswell. Yet, this season of many voices/many stories is also apparent in his new book, Tumbleweed.

The novel is set in and around a California rehabilitation and therapeutic center, focusing especially on one therapist James Candler, whose career rise disguises a personal life that is falling into chaos, and the lives of his patients who participate in a therapeutic work program together.

Who should readers trust?

One aspect of Boswell’s novel that is getting critical attention is his literary experimentation with an “unreliable omniscient” third-person narrator. As readers, we sometimes expect that we might not be able to believe that first person “I” narrator will always tell us the objective truth. He or she just might have something to hide from us. But we’ve been trained since our first “Once upon a time” that the godlike, all-seeing narrator is ever trustworthy.

Boswell wants to put an end our blind trust.

“I think there’s all kinds of unreliable omniscience in our lives,” he explained to me recently in an interview about the book. “We treat all kinds of technological devices as if they were omniscient even though we know they’re not. We treat various things in the media as if they were absolutely reliable sources of news. The truth, and we know it, is they’re not omniscient and all kinds of biases are built in.”

Boswell’s ideas about whether we should trust the authority of the omniscient narrator came from personal experience in his twenties when he worked as a counselor, much like his character James Candler. These questions about omniscience “grew out of the reports” he was writing as an evaluator.

“I felt they (the client evaluations) were often treated as if they were omniscient when I knew they were far from all knowing,” he says.

Therapy vs. Writing

Besides being a former counselor himself, a novelist and nonfiction author, Boswell is a respected teacher who, along with his wife and fellow author Antonya Nelson, spends the spring semester at UH and has led workshops at many writing programs around the country.

“I think that anytime people are together in some kind of forced intimacy that certain kinds of human behavior emerge and they have things in common.”

Some of the most humorous and lively scenes in the book take place in a sheltered workshop where some of Candler’s patients gain assembly line experience folding and packaging pantyhose for a local business. These scenes as well as Boswell’s own experience as a both a counselor and teacher made me wonder if there’s any similarities between teaching writers and evaluating and counseling patients.

“I think that anytime people are together in some kind of forced intimacy that certain kinds of human behavior emerge and they have things in common,” he says and notes that for workshops in general. “Even though everyone is doing more or less the same thing, personality emerges and the way personality emerges is fascinating.”

However, in any creative process, intent is what matters. “Anytime you have people together, talking seriously, there’s some overlap. I believe writing can be therapeutic, but its intent is always to try to create a work of art,” he explains.

And what of those writers whose intent it is to create art in Houston? Boswell thinks they and a faculty where everyone pretty much likes each other is what makes the UH program distinctive.

“We get absolutely amazing writers,” he says. “We’re also pretty careful to get people who are good eggs. They’re great people to work with. They’re generous and despite their talent they’re not egomaniacs.” He also observes many of those writers also surprise themselves by their reaction to Houston.

“It’s a big, lively, diverse, progressive city and people fall in love with it. I’ve fallen in love with it.” And for Boswell the wealth of arts help to fuel more art.

“There are great visual arts, wonderful museum, a great theater scene. I go to plays almost every weekend down there. I think it’s
Robert Bostell and James McBride open The Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series on Monday (Aug. 26) at 7:30 p.m. in The Hobby Center's Zilkha Hall.
In all three of his best-selling novels, Khaled Hosseini brings readers to an Afghanistan few Westerners have seen with their own eyes.

The Afghanistan of “And the Mountains Echoed,” “A Thousand Splendid Suns” and “The Kite Runner” is a place of extreme poverty and extreme wealth; a place where lives are lost to childbirth and cold; a place of violence and political oppression. At the same time it is a place like any other, rich in culture and tradition, beloved home to those who live there and beloved homeland to those who fled.

Born in Kabul in 1965, Hosseini left Afghanistan with his family at age 11 and landed in California, where he attended high school, medical school and practiced medicine from 1996 to 2004. He spoke to the Chronicle by phone from his home in Northern California.

Q: “And the Mountains Echoed,” released in May, contains multitudes. It is anchored by the separation of Abdullah, 10, from his beloved 3-year-old sister, Pari, in 1982. Their father, a poor laborer named Saboor, sells Pari to a wealthy woman in Kabul who cannot have her own children, thereby providing for the rest of his family and giving Pari a better chance in the world. From this painful act, the plot unfolds across several decades, first meet her as a distant stepmother. But when we’re given a chance to see more of her, we learn that she lived in the shadow of a beautiful sister. That she was neglected. That she had her own hopes and dreams. That there is a person inside her — not an archetype.

Q: The book begins with a fable about a father who must forfeit one of his children to a monster to spare the death of other children in his village. Saboor tells the story to his children before they know they will be separated. Why start with the fable?
A: The fable sets up the whole novel and many of the themes and motifs: the theme of family, of losing someone you love, of self-sacrifice for a greater good. I see it as a peek into Saboor’s mind. How he views the thing he’s about to do and whether it’s a concession.

Q: Was this book born, in part, from an impulse to tidy up or make sense of things individuals can’t control — such as war or death?
A: Quite the contrary. I was very interested in this book in looking at how messy people are and how unpredictable they are, how often they surprise and startle themselves with their own behavior. Virtually none of these characters commits the acts they do in full acknowledgement of doing bad things. No matter how we wince at their decisions, there’s something in them we recognize as human. Even the warlord who is a thug and a criminal believes that he serves a greater good.

Q: How are your novels received in Afghanistan?
A: Urban youth are becoming increasingly media and tech savvy, and among them, I think there’s a significant awareness of my books. My first book (“The Kite Runner”) was quite divisive in Afghanistan because of the tension it described among different ethnic groups. If you have lived outside your homeland for three-plus decades and decide to write a book about it, people who live there are going to have an opinion about who you are and what you write.

Q: Why did you start your nonprofit, the Khaled Hosseini Foundation?
A: I’ve been to Kabul several times with the U.N.’s refugee agency, and I began the foundation because of all the things I saw. I saw people returning to Afghanistan from Pakistan and other countries after the Taliban without food, water, schools. The foundation attempts to address some of these things.

Q: You are 48. “And the Mountains Echoed” strikes me as the work of a writer in middle age, looking back to youth, perhaps consumed in the present with the care of both children and parents, and looking ahead to the end of life. Would you agree?
A: Well, I write about things that feel urgent and immediate and important to me. And yes, I don’t know that I would have written this book 10 or 12 years ago. I lost my dad in 2009. I helped nurse him for two years and watched his decline. I’ve had family members who have become incapacitated, and I’ve begun to see the toll time takes.

Q: Do you ever feel burdened by the fact that, for many readers, you are the voice of Afghanistan — an educator?
A: It is complicated. I have no intention of educating anyone. My job is to write as truthful and authentic and moving a book as I can. That said, I have always been very pleased that my books introduced people to Afghanistan from a different perspective and did challenge the stereotypical depictions of life there. When I get letters in that vein, I feel like this has been a worthwhile thing. But if you take on that mantle and begin to see yourself as a voice for a country, that inevitably will seep into your writing and make it agenda-driven because then you have to write from that perspective. And I may very well write a number of other books that have nothing to do with Afghanistan.

Khaled Hosseini

countries and points of view. Did you set out to write such a big story?
A: It wasn’t until halfway through the writing that I began to realize the size and number of voices and perspectives and the large span of time I was covering. But I just focused on one person, one voice and finding the connective tissue. What intrigued me was the notion that our first impression of a character is rarely correct or complete. We meet the characters a number of times, and each time we meet them, we are granted a different view. I think the stepmother, Parwana, is a good example. We first meet her as a distant stepmother. But when we’re given a chance to see more of her, we learn that she lived in the shadow of a beautiful sister. That she was neglected. That she had her own hopes and dreams. That there is a person inside her — not an archetype.

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maggie.galehouse@chron.com
**BOOKISH**

**Daniel Woodrell’s stories hit home**

Daniel Woodrell’s stories are set in small towns where old habits die hard, poverty won’t stop knocking on the door, and grudges are coddled. His characters have been kicked around, scarred, and left to hunt, be hunted, grow marijuana, get arrested, drink, get kicked out, and find out Sadness and missed connections abound.

There are bright moments, too. "Give Us a Kiss: A Country Noir" (1996) is a rollicking bit of comic genius - though Woodrell had the subtitle removed from later editions when it threatened to make him stand out.

**Author appearance**

Daniel Woodrell will appear with Haitian author Edwidge Danticat as part of Inprint’s Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m. Oct. 13, Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas. Doors open at 6:45 p.m. $5; inprinthouston.org. (Woodrell and Danticat replace Jhumpa Lahiri, who canceled.)

**Daniel Woodrell’s stories hit home**

Daniel Woodrell also wrote “Winter’s Bone,” which was made into a film.

**FALL PREVIEW**

**‘Ironside’ rolls back to television**

By David Wiegand

"Ironside" and "The Originals," both premiering this week, are moderately entertaining dramas that feed off the success of previous shows. Yes, vampirism is undead and well in the television industry. Raymond Burr starred in the first "Ironside" from 1967 to ’75 as wheelchair-bound San Francisco detective Robert T. Ironside. Blair Underwood ("The Event") stars in the remake set in New York. Other than the fact that Bob Ironside is in a wheelchair, the new version is a fairly standard police procedural.

Through a series of flashbacks, the pilot reveals how Ironside lost the use of his legs.

**’Ironside’**

9 p.m. Wednesday, NBC.

**Priscilla’s closet:**

492 costumes

150 pairs of shoes

200 hats and headdresses

72 wigs

295 ostrich feathers

175 tubes of lipstick (per month)

75 pots of eyeshadow (per month)

2 pounds of glitter (per month)

24 pairs of false eyelashes (per performance)

By Everett Evans

The extravaganically outlandish costumes that parade through "Priscilla Queen of the Desert" may not be the stars of the show, but they sure are the scene stealer.

The stage musical, whose tour opens Tuesday at Hobby Center, is based on the 1994 Australian film about three Band Aid–bound friends – two drag artists and one transsexual – adventuring through the outback in a shattered bus. Tim Chaplin and Lizzy Gardiner created the costumes for both the film and the musical, winning an Oscar and a Tony for their flashy, splashy and frequently wacky designs that reflect the lead characters’ extra- gestious inventiveness and in-your-face style.

The costumes, like the characters, are unashamedly out of the closet – but this closet must be the size of the Vatican. The show features almost 400 costumes for its cast of 23, with each of the leads going through 20 costume changes.

This gang’s got style make Costumes continue on D3

**Dressing the cast of ‘Priscilla Queen of the Desert’**

Joan Marcus
Q: How long have your people lived in the Ozarks? A: A little more than a hundred years. If you ask your grandmother, she’ll tell you it’s at least 500 years.

Q: The central figure in ‘The Maid’s Version’ is Alma, a maid who loses a sister in the explosion and spends her days in the arms of a man who lives far from where you live. In ‘West Table’ a stand-in for the Ozarks, a man lives far from where you live. In Alma’s world, the other characters are shades of gray. What’s the difference between the two? Is West Table a stand-in for a real town? A: Is West Table a stand-in for a real town? A: West Table is a fictional town, a place that I created to explore themes and ideas. It is not based on a real town but is inspired by the history and culture of the Ozarks. The characters in West Table are a mix of fact and fiction, and the setting is a blend of reality and imagination. The town is a place where the past and present collide, and where the boundaries between life and death are blurred.

Q: Why this book now? A: I’ve been thinking about the explosion in West Table for a few years now. I’ve been fascinated by the stories and legends that have emerged around the disaster and the aftermath. The explosion in West Table was a turning point in my life, and I’ve been exploring the themes and ideas that it raises in my work. I’ve been reflecting on the ways in which the past and present intersect, and on the ways in which we navigate the complexities of our lives.

Q: You’ve had two books made into films: ‘Winter’s Bone’ and ‘WoetoLiveOn’, your second novel that became the movie ‘Ride With the Devil’. How did you feel about these adaptations? A: I was very happy with both films. ‘Winter’s Bone’ was an especially rewarding experience, as I was able to collaborate with some of the finest filmmakers in the world. The process of working with a director like Debra Granik was a real thrill, and I was thrilled with the final product. ‘Ride With the Devil’ was a bit more challenging, as it was a difficult film to bring to life. But I was pleased with the end result, and I think the film is a strong interpretation of the novel. Overall, I’ve been very pleased with the adaptations of my work and how they’ve evolved over time.

Q: Any new novels percolating? A: I’m currently working on a new novel, which is set in the post-apocalyptic world of West Table. It’s a dark, dystopian story that explores themes of grief, loss, and the search for meaning in the face of chaos. I’m looking forward to sharing it with readers, and I hope it will resonate with them in the same way that my previous novels have.
BOOKISH

Colum McCann, an Irish writer and winner of a National Book Award, will appear at an Imprint event at the Alley Theatre in Houston Nov. 18.

Author appearance

Colum McCann appears with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in Houston

When: 7:30 p.m. Nov. 18
Where: Alley Theatre, 615 Texas
Information: Tickets for this Imprint event are $5; doors open 6:45 p.m. inprinthouston.org.

Writing his own history

Although he has lived in America more than half his life, Colum McCann still listens to Ireland, where he spent his early years—and I quote—"transmit all sorts of expectations and fuses."

McCann, 46, is the sort of writer who shimmies into history and shapes it to his will, rearing out enough truth to craft a story that feels like life, with all its action and surprises, tragedies and whims.

The author of eight books, including the National Book Award-winning, "Let the Great World Spin" (2009), McCann returns to Ireland in his novel, "TransAtlantic," an alternative Irish history that places big, historical moments alongside smaller moments no less significant to the characters who survive them.

The idea, McCann says, was "acknowledging that they both knit into each other, that they interlace—i.e., that’s a word—from some sort of intimate garment. That the anonymous matter—"

John Ahearn and Arthur Whitton Brown’s historic 1921 flight from Newfoundland to Ireland on a modified bomber, Frederick Douglas’ 1845 tour of Ireland, George Mitchell’s success in brokering the Good Friday Agreement in Ireland in 1998 are juxtaposed with private moments. A mother finding her only son among a pile of dead during the Civil War. A mother mourning her son shot on the Irish coast more than a century later.

McCann lives in New York with his wife and three children.

Author Colum McCann writes ‘from the gut’ in his latest, ‘TransAtlantic’

"TransAtlantic" is McCann’s fifth novel and comes at a time when novels that explore alternate histories and look to the past to examine our present are on the rise.

The book was inspired by McCann’s own history: his parents were part of the wave of Irish immigrants who came to America between 1920 and 1930. This period of mass migration is depicted in "TransAtlantic" through the story of two brothers separated by the Atlantic Ocean but destined to meet.

McCann, who has won several awards for his writing, is known for his ability to write in different voices and perspectives.

In "TransAtlantic," McCann explores the idea of what might have been if history had taken a different course, examining the impact of historical events on individual lives.

The novel tells the story of two brothers, one living in America and the other in Ireland, who are connected by a series of events that shape their futures. The book is divided into different sections, each one focusing on a different aspect of the story.

One aspect of the novel is the way it explores the idea of alternate histories, examining what might have happened if certain historical events had taken a different course. This is particularly evident in the sections that focus on the lives of the two brothers, who are separated by the Atlantic Ocean but are connected by a series of events that shape their futures.

Another aspect of the novel is its exploration of the impact of historical events on individual lives. This is evident in the way McCann portrays the lives of the characters, who are affected by events that are beyond their control.

In addition to its exploration of alternate histories and the impact of historical events on individual lives, "TransAtlantic" is also a novel that is rich in language and imagery. McCann’s writing is descriptive and evocative, creating a vivid picture of the world in which his characters live.

In conclusion, "TransAtlantic" is a powerful novel that explores the idea of alternate histories and the impact of historical events on individual lives. McCann’s writing is descriptive and evocative, creating a vivid picture of the world in which his characters live. The novel is a testament to McCann’s skill as a writer and his ability to create rich and compelling stories.
Dear Readers:

Here is this week’s round-up on how to reach us:

Josh in Colorado

Thank you for asking! There are many, many groups that help our veterans. In fact, there are so many it is hard to keep track of them all. Here are a few that come to mind:

- The Veterans’ Center at Houston University
- The Department of Veterans Affairs
- The American Legion

There are many others, so please check out our website for more information.

Happy Veteran’s Day!

HINTS FROM HELLOSE

Many ways to help veterans

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Happy Veteran’s Day!
Characters cross time, paths in ‘Transatlantic’

By Mike Snyder

A writer who deals happily with time-bending around wildly among days and months and years, Nick Flynn is a dedicated sense of the past. Flashbacks and flashforwards are common literary devices, of course, but above all in fiction, when these are most comfortable with stories of what comes next, yesterday and and tomorrow. Alternations can transform this form but hardly ever helps us.

None of this is a problem for Colin McCann. In his new book, ‘Transatlantic,’ he moves seamlessly among continents and locations, helpingfullyto time and to find the proper chapter headings. He proves himself清新 Aires de la nada, perfectly aware of his situation — the truly萍水相逢的境遇 of a literary legerdemain. Indeed, our admiration for this feart of literary legerdemain almost makes our admiration for the device.

‘Americanah’ is a thought-provoking tale

By Catherine Chung

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s dazzling and thought-provoking new novel, ‘Americanah,’ is a story of a woman from a Nigerian immigrant woman in the diaspora. It begins with Ifemelu leaving from Preston to Toronto to have a baby, and opens up into a much larger story, one that goes over decades, continents and continents. It is a story of a woman with a wife and a son.

Ifemelu is an immigrant who is going to leave the country that seems like the embodiment of love. She has a husband who has a dream. She has finished a degree in English at university and has decided to leave her home in Nigeria. She is a successful This is a wonderful novel. It is a novel of a woman who has a dream.

Ifemelu has her hair, we are told in a longish story of flashbacks and stories of flashbacks that take her back to Ifemelu’s childhood and adolescence and adulthood and early adulthood and early adulthood and early adulthood. It is a story of a woman and of a woman, a woman, a woman and of a woman, a woman and of a woman, a woman and of a woman, a woman and of a woman.

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BOOK EXCERPT

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is the author of a handful of works, including the novel “Half of a Yellow Sun,” which won the Orange Prize, and the recent novel, “Americanah.” Adichie appears in Houston with writer Colum McCann, 7:30 p.m. Nov. 18, at the Alley Theatre, 615 Texas. Tickets for this Inprint event are $5. Information: inprinhouston.org.

“The gods, the hovering deities who gave and took teenage loves, had decided that Obinze would go out with Ginika. Obinze was the new boy, a fine boy even if he was short. He had transferred from the university secondary school in Nsukka, and only days after, everyone knew of the swirling rumors about his mother. She had fought with a man, another professor at Nsukka, a real fight, punching and hitting, and she had won, too, even tearing his clothes, and so she was suspended for two years and had moved to Lagos until she could go back.

It was an unusual story; market women fought, mad women fought, but not women who were professors. Obinze, with his air of calm and inwardness, made it even more intriguing.”

from “Americanah” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

BEST-SELLERS

Fiction

2. The Goldfinch: By Donna Tartt. A painting smuggled out of the Metropolitan Museum of Art after a bombing becomes a boy’s prize, guilt and burden.
3. Doctor Sleep: By Stephen King. Now grown up, Dan, the boy with psycho-intuitive powers in “The Shining,” helps another threatened child with a gift.
4. We Are Water: By Wally Lamb. About to marry the woman who is her gallery owner, a divorced artist and mother must confront secrets from her past.
5. The Longest Ride: By Nicholas Sparks. The lives of two couples converge unexpectedly.
6. Identical: By Scott Turrow. Paul Giannis, running for mayor of Kindle County, is accused of having played a role in the murder of his identical twin brother’s girlfriend.
7. Storm Front: By John Sandford. Minnesota investigator Virgil Flowers becomes involved in the hunt for an ancient inscribed stone smuggled out of the Middle East.
8. Gone: By James Patterson and Michael Ledwidge. Detective Michael Bennett is pursued by the head of a Mexican drug cartel he once put in jail.
9. Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy: By Helen Fielding. Bridget, now 51 and a mother and widow, is once again looking for love.
10. Just One Evil Act: By Elizabeth George. In the 18th Inspector Lynley novel, Lynley’s partner, Barbara Havers, searches for a friend’s kidnapped child in Italy.

Nonfiction

1. Killing Jesus: By Bill O’Reilly and Martin Dugard. The host of “The O’Reilly Factor” recounts the events leading up to Jesus’ execution.
2. David and Goliath: By Malcolm Gladwell. How disadvantages can work in our favor; from the author of “The Tipping Point” and “Outliers.”
3. I Am Malala: By Malala Yousafzai with Christina Lamb. The experience of the Pakistani girl who advocated for women’s education and was shot by the Taliban.
5. 40 Chances: By Howard G. Buffett with Howard W. Buffett. What Warren Buffett’s son and grandson have learned in their efforts to feed the hungry.
7. Extortion: By Peter Schweizer. A Hoover Institution fellow argues that politicians shape legislation in order to extract donations.
8. My Story: By Elizabeth Smart with Chris Stewart. A woman kidnapped from her Utah home in 2002 at age 14 describes her captivity and rescue.

A 13-year-old boy with autism answers questions.

New York Times
A year ago, the New York Times Sunday Magazine ran a cover story about George Saunders, then set to release his fourth collection of stories, “Tenth of December.”

The headline, in that first week of 2013, was actually a prediction: “George Saunders Has Written the Best Book You’ll Read This Year.” To which many readers likely wondered, “Who on earth is George Saunders?”

People who read literary fiction have known Saunders for decades. His stories have been published in the New Yorker since 1992. The term “genius” is thrown around. During the past decade, he has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a MacArthur Fellowship and an Academy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The Times piece cranked up his fame in a big-time, bold-face way. “It was huge, strangely huge,” said Saunders, from his home in the Catskills, where he’s nursing a cold after a few days on the road. “It was like if you were jogging along and a big hand comes along and throws you four miles ahead. Like being shot out of a cannon. All along, everybody at the Times is saying, ‘We can’t guarantee the piece will run.’ We [Saunders and his wife, Paula] were here with our daughters for Christmas. About a week before the story came out they said, ‘We’re running it.’ And then it was, ‘Oh, by the way it looks like it’s going to be the cover.’ And then it’s out of your hands. So we’re up here, sledding, and suddenly the emails start coming in. And something is happening to you that has an uncertain relationship to the work that spawned it.” Then in July, a convocation speech Saunders delivered at Syracuse University, where he teaches creative writing, went viral. In it, he confessed that his biggest regrets in life are “failures of kindness” and implored the new graduates to do “those things that incline you toward the big questions, and avoid the things that would reduce you and make you trivial.”

All of which is to say that Saunders, who’ll appear at the Alley Theatre on Monday for a sold-out Imprint event, gets a lot more attention than he used to. Saunders grew up in Chicago but was born in Amarillo.

“Emotionally as a kid I always identified as a Texan,” Saunders said. “My mom's from Amarillo. My dad was in the Air Force. They met at a dance in Amarillo or something. I think we left there when I was 1, but every summer there was this big ritual of the 25-hour drive to Amarillo. My grandpa was a salesman who sold beauty products in those Panhandle towns. ... I remember my grandpa giving me a Texas-shaped paperweight. When I went around with him, I could really feel that 1940s, 1950s Texas.”

While Saunders was in college at Colorado School of Mines in Golden, his parents moved back to Amarillo and the city became a kind of home for him during his 20s.

“I played guitar in a country-and-western band at a huge dance palace where you could two-step for hours,” he said. “It was in Amarillo that Saunders stumbled upon a copy of People Magazine in which Jay McInerney and Raymond Carver were profiled. At the time, he had never heard of an master's of fine arts program, but he applied to Syracuse and got in.


Most of Saunders’ stories are strange and some are vaguely futuristic. “The Semplica Girl Diaries,” for example, features young girls from impoverished countries who agree, for a fee, to be strung together by their temples (a surgical procedure), outfitted in long white dresses and hung together a few feet off the ground in the yards of affluent Americans — a sort of living, breathing installation.

Other stories are more traditional in terms of voice and plot. The title story from “Tenth of December,” for example, involves a chubby boy with an overactive imagination and an old man dying of cancer who save each other in a frozen landscape.

For Saunders, stories should be urgent, tight and complex.

“Trying to give a story the maximum amount...”
of energy — sometimes that sabotages your initial idea,” he explained. “The Semplica Girl Diaries’ is about political oppression, but it had to be more than that or else it's a lecture. You're trying to start readers on a certain path and complicate it. You want readers to be surprised in a nonrandom way — it can't be a spaceship that comes in and kills everyone — but you also want some kind of expectation realized in a way that you didn't see coming.”

Canada's great short-story writer Alice Munrowon the Nobel Prize in Literature last fall. Does Saunders anticipate a renaissance of the short form? “My honest answer is that it makes me feel really happy that someone that good got rewarded fairly,” Saunders said. “Ever since 'Tenth of December' came out, people have been asking me if it's now OK to write short stories. I never really thought about it. You do whatever you can — with power. I have a feeling the question about the short-story form is a bit like, you know how in Vogue they'll say, 'Short skirts are back!' Well, I never felt the story was out of fashion.”

As for Munro's work, which is less overtly political than that of many previous Nobel winners, Saunders said: “With Munro, the difference between the personal and political disappears. You feel human suffering, the loss of power, all those things that writ large, make up politics. To me, that's the best kind of political writing.”

In his creative writing classes, Saunders teaches short stories to show students the “tricks” that writers use. On his go-to list of authors: Pushkin, Babel, de Maupassant, Tolstoy, Joyce, Hemingway, Flannery O'Connor.

He doesn't teach his own stories. “That would be weird,” Saunders said. “Especially if you make them buy the book.” Occasionally, though, he'll give students a peek at his own editing process.

“Two years ago, I had just completed the edits of the title story from ‘Tenth of December,’” Saunders said. “I had sold the story to the New Yorker at 13,000 words, and when I sent it, I had been working on it for almost a year. But we cut it to 9,000 words. The editor found a way to cut it and make it better. I'm always advocating cutting and extreme edits with my students, so I brought in versions of my story to class, and that was useful.”

Saunders has worked with three editors at the New Yorker: Daniel Menaker, Bill Buford and Deborah Treisman. Of Treisman, his current editor, he said: “She's incredible. She's, like, in my mind and she just knows. She sees what the story is doing and she says, 'Let's get to work and make that better.'” Even stories that are pretty much ready to go, we do eight, nine, 10 passes on. You get into that mode where you're in the piece so much you know where the commas are. You can feel every little thing.”

But the New Yorker doesn't accept everything he submits. “I just got something rejected three weeks ago,” he said. “Deborah works with some of the best writers. She considers it part of her responsibility to make sure the writer is doing their best work, that the story represents a meaningful advance in that person's work.”

Even Saunders' darkest stories have many moments of comedy. What, in the real world, makes him laugh? Jack Handey — who does the “Deep Thoughts” bit on “Saturday Night Live” — makes him laugh. Also, Monty Python, “Parks & Recreation,” Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, George Carlin, and early recordings of Bill Cosby, which he’d “chain-listen to.”

But Steve Martin rises above this pack. “‘Around the time of ‘The Jerk,’” Saunders said, “there was something in his comic persona, a class element that got under my skin. I had uncles with the same kind of self-deprecating humor. Sweet and naive.”

And, of course, the Marx Brothers. “We watch the Marx Brothers when the family gets together,” Saunders said. “My daughters are grown up but we do this thing — you know, the bad guys in old movies, how they always get the worst actors? There’s a gangster in one of the Marx Brothers movies who says ‘We’re big SHOTS now baby’ [instead of the expected ‘BIG shots.’] That’s a catch phrase around our house.”

Saunders likes absurdist humor. It lays in wait in his stories. He also hopes that his stories encourage readers to abide in a state of uncertainty.

“I think when I get it — there are two or three times when I feel I’ve gotten to the upper registers of what I can do — I have four or five possibly complimentarily views all sitting there resonating very well,” Saunders said. “I like it when I can walk out of a story and say, ‘Yup, all those things are true.’ The truth is different things, and they're all correct. If a person isn't called upon to act — which mostly they're not — the highest form of truth is the various contradictory opinions existing. Chekhov says, ‘It’s this way and this way and this way, isn't it?’”

Maggie Galehouse is book editor at the Houston Chronicle.
SHORT ON STORIES, LONG ON TALENT

A literary master discusses his craft.

GEORGE SAUNDERS’s latest collection of short stories, Tenth of December, was nominated for a National Book Award, and dubbed “the best book you’ll read this year” by the New York Times. In advance of his Imprint Reading Series visit this month, we talked with Saunders about his life and art.

You have a very Houston background! You were trained as a geophysical engineer and worked in the energy industry before moving into fiction. How has that experience influenced your work? Well, four years of barely hanging in at engineering school gave me a pretty good work ethic, which is useful for a writer. If, as an engineering student, three hours a night of study gets you a D in Complex Variables (which it did), well then, you buck up and study four hours a night. If, as a writer, draft #56 is still crummy, you get going on draft #57. Both things require the same kind of tank-like stare-down. Secondly, and more importantly, engineering got me out of America for the first time. My first job was with a company called GSI, in Sumatra, Indonesia—and that travel opportunity remade my whole worldview.

It seems you used to be a bit of a libertarian. What happened? Going to Asia happened. I’d been an Ayn Rand fan in college, but seeing the brutality of Asian poverty, and the rampaging rude imperialism we young Americans brought down on the local people, made me think differently about power and privilege.

Many of your stories present a darkly satirical take on American consumerism and militarism. They’re hilarious, but also unsettling, and often bleak. Yet you seem personally very calm, happy, and well-adjusted. How do you do it? The relation of a person’s art to his personality is pretty complicated and non-linear, I think. I feel really good to be alive and very aware of how conditional everything is—health, and sanity, and good luck, life itself. My stories are ways of reminding myself of this. Chekhov once wrote, “Every happy man should have an unhappy man in his closet, to remind him, by his constant tapping, that not everyone is happy, and that, sooner or later, life will show him its claws.” So in this sense, when I’m writing a story, the happy man—me—is creating his own unhappy man. When I get myself of certain truths: good luck is conditional, not everyone is happy, my luck may change, my life is not simply the result of virtue, etc., etc. In other words, stories can serve as little training exercises in empathy and sympathy.

You’re famous for nailing casual, vernacular American voices in your fiction. Yet two stories in your new collection feature protagonists who are given drugs that make them talk with rather fancier diction. Are you getting tired of your trademark voice and looking to branch out? Yes, actually—or at least that was true when I was writing those stories. I think a writer is always looking for ways to extend his range. Otherwise, it’s stagnation. The drugs seemed like a good way to justify a higher register in the diction. That sounds like something you might have heard in a paddy wagon circa 1976.

You’re best known as a master of the short story, which a lot of people take less seriously than the novel. Why do you think that is? I think it’s because they’ve never tried writing one.—Will Wilkinson

GEORGE SAUNDERS will read at the Alley Theatre as part of the Imprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series on Jan 27, 3:30. 615 Texas Ave. 713-521-2026. imprinthouston.org

MERCURY


HOUSTON GRAND OPERA

Jan 24–Feb 9 Rigoletto The title character of this classic Verdi opera is a hunch-backed jester at the decadent court of the Duke of Mantua. Rigoletto, whose greatest joy is his beautiful daughter Gilda. But when Gilda is seduced by the procuress, Duke, Rigoletto vows revenge against his master, with tragic results. $30–290. Brown Theater: Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas Ave. 713-228-5707. houstongrandopera.org

MOORES OPERA CENTER

Jan 23–26 The Consul This Kafkaesque operatic drama, with music and libretto by Gian Carlo Menotti, is set in an unidentified European country that has fallen under totalitarian rule. A political dissenting tries to keep one step ahead of the secret police, while his wife and family struggle under bureaucratic persecution. The work won the Pulitzer Prize and New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award when it premiered on Broadway in 1950. Sung in the original English with surtitles. All performances $20; students & seniors $12. Moores Opera Center, The University of Houston, 120 School of Music Building. 713-743-3313. uh.edu

DANCE

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP

Jan 31 & Feb 1 at 8 Called “one of the greatest living choreographers” by The New Yorker, Mark Morris and his company have been presenting cutting-edge dance for over 30 years. Their Houston show features work from the company’s extensive repertoire, including A Wooden Tree, The Argument, and Festival Dance. $23–63. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas Ave. 713-227-4772. saphouston.org

JIMMIE DALE GILMORE

AND BUTCH HANCOCK

Jan 4 at 7 & 9:30 In 1972, three Texas singer-songwriters founded the pioneering grassroots band The Flatlanders. Although the band received little notice at the time, all three musicians went on to notable solo careers, which led to multiple Flatlanders albums and myriad reunion tours. Two of the original three Flatlanders come to Houston this month (the lone man out is Joe Ely) to show why they’ve been deservedly called some of the best musicians in country music today. Mary will recognize Gilmore from his small role as Smokey in the cult classic The Big Lebowski. $25. McGonigel’s Mucky Duck, 2420 Norfolk St. 713-526-5999. mcgonigel.com

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Author of best book of the year reveals how he survived the Colbert Report

BY TARRA GAINES 1.26.14 | 2:01 pm

With the myriad of things 2013 was the year of, we might also add the year of the short story, in no small part thanks to author George Saunders.

The award-winning writer has been considered one of America's great short story writers for decades, but the literary fan favorite became a best-selling author and bit of media darling in 2013 with the publication of his short story collection, Tenth of December.

I recently spoke to Saunders before his visit to Houston for the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series to ask him how he put together a collection that the New York Times Magazine called the best book we would read last year.

CultureMap: While your previous books have certainly been successes, the publication of Tenth of December made 2013 a particularly good year for you.

George Saunders: At times it was like being shot out of a cannon. I loved it. It was a great year. You always worry about the opposite happening, your book

CM: When I look at a story collection, I wonder how important the order of the stories are within the book. Is that something you craft as much as the individual stories themselves?

GS: This was a seven year project. You get somewhere around 200 pages, and also more importantly it feels like the aesthetic assumption that I've been making throughout is coming to a close. You're done with a phase. At some point you finish all those and you feel you have the right players. What I do is take a bunch of index cards, put the title of the story the first and last lines on them, and I get down on the floor and start moving things around, almost like a Rubik's Cube... The goal is very simple that when someone starts it they'll be powered through to the end of it.

CM: I have a question about an analogy you made when you were on the Colbert Report last year, but before I ask, I have to know, how do you prepare to be interviewed by the “Stephen Colbert” persona?

GS: You don't. You tremble and shake.

There's no pre-show prep, except they give you a little coaching about how to conceptualize the rhetoric of the show. They say you should have two or three points you want to make and then come in and continue to try to make them, in spite of the fact you're getting your butt kicked. He's a master improviser. You can't beat him. He's so quick, you can't believe it.

CM: One of the aspects of your stories I love is the inner thoughts of the characters. It feels like you have very authentically mapped the cadence and language of our thoughts, especially of the interior life of people living in the 21st century. But this made me wonder if you believe that we think differently than people did in the past, say even a 100 years ago.

GS: That's an interesting one because I'm working on something now that's set in the 1800s kind of in a sly way. But I have to say no, because I think it's the same as it ever was, in a certain way. I think people's basic thought patterns are always going to be informed by a person's notion of his own centrality. So somebody walking through a 14th century market place is still kind of...
thinking: Me, Me, Me, I would imagine. A lot of our thought patterns comes from that basic human dilemma that we're the only real person in the world, that everyone else is in our show.

I would imagine though, contradicting myself, that from time to time that would change. I think we live in an intensely narcissistic culture, but I can imagine a culture that was maybe more communal where those thoughts would be softened. But basically I guess my premise is no... I think we've always been what we are.

The George Saunders imprint reading at the Alley Theatre on Jan. 27 is sold out. He will give a craft talk that is free and open to the public at 2:30 p.m. on Monday, Jan. 27, at the UH Honors College Commons in the M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Central Campus.
Q&A With Elizabeth Strout

Bringing out the inner lives of characters

By Maggie Galehouse

Set mostly in small, fictional Maine towns, Elizabeth Strout’s novels mine extraordinary moments in otherwise ordinary lives.

Her characters keep secrets. They worry about their kids. They fret about money. They lose loved ones. And occasionally, they find their way home.

Strout won a Pulitzer for “Olive Kitteridge,” a novel whose bracing titular character was revealed in 13 short stories. An HBO miniseries based on the book is in the works, starring Frances McDormand, Richard Jenkins and Bill Murray.

Strout, 58, will appear in Houston on Feb. 24 as part of Inprint’s Margarett Root Brown Reading Series.


A: I’ve always been interested in interiority, in the inner lives of people juxtaposed with the outer world they live in. As a young person, that was always intriguing. From a young age I lived in my head. I think children do. I recognized that the world in my head is different than the world outside.

Q: You won a Pulitzer for “Olive Kitteridge.” Does that sort of attention ever affect your work?

A: What bothered me was an added sense of responsibility, even more than I usually have. I have a great sense of responsibility to my reader. I want to make sure I deliver something worthwhile. Now I’ve got a lot more readers because so many people liked “Olive Kitteridge.” It’s a great problem to have. But it’s like anything. My next book will be a book for them — or it won’t.

Q: Compared to “The Burgess Boys,” which at times feels full to overflowing with characters, “Amy and Isabelle” is less crowded and more intense. What were you after in that first novel?

A: I had been circling that story for many years in many ways, taking the leap from being a short-story writer to realizing that I wanted and needed to write a novel. What was intriguing to me was the claustrophobic nature of the mother and daughter, their relationship. Of being stuck inside each other’s heads. The horror and deep love. Also, Isabelle was dealing with class. She thought she belonged to a different class and for her to accept the women she worked with, that cracked the shell that encased her.

Q: Why does “The Burgess Boys” open with a prologue?

A: I’ve never liked prologues. I used to tell my students be careful if you write a prologue. But we all get back together with friends or relatives later in life and say, remember that woman? ... And that appealed to me. It’s like saying to the reader: I’m going to tell you this story. In Maine, where I grew up, people don’t talk about things that happen to them. One high school reunion I went to, the things people said about what they lived through were astonishing. I thought, that’s New England, for you. In the book, the town knows this tragedy occurs but the town absorbed it — didn’t talk about it.

Q: Let’s talk about endings. How would you char-

Author appearance

Elizabeth Strout appears 7:30 p.m. Feb. 24 at the Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas, as part of Inprint’s Margarett Root Brown Reading Series. General admission tickets are $5; doors open at 6:45 p.m. Information: inprinthouston.org.

Elizabeth Strout

Courtesy photo

‘The Burgess Boys’

By Elizabeth Strout. Random House, 336 pp., $26; $15 paperback

Q: You mean like Olive, ending up — maybe — with a boyfriend?

A: Olive earned it. She took her hits. She deserves it, or a chance at it. And the Burgess siblings, they really slipped around a bit. But they did all eventually come together, taking care of each other at the end.

Q: In your introduction to “The Best American Short Stories 2013,” you write...
LAST CALL

“Failure” stars, clockwise from top, Brittany Halen, Luis Galindo, Courtney D. Jones, Nina L. Garcia, Michelle Elaine and Lex Laas, center.

‘Failure’ is a good option

You’d think a playwright might be tempting fate naming a play “Failure” — yet Philip Dawkins’ fanciful fable, which premiered to acclaim last season in Chicago, proves a formidable success in its delightful Houston premiere at Stages Repertory Theatre. This weekend’s shows are your last chance to experience the extravagant tall tale set in 1920s Chicago. In wildly unpredictable fashion, it chronicles the lives and abrupt deaths of the three distinctive Fail sisters, daughters of an immigrant clock-making couple, and the dashing suitor who successively loves and loses each of them. A serendipitous blend of whimsy, romance, philosophy, tragedy and absurd comedy, “Failure” reflects on the random nature of life, love and death. As briskly directed by Leslie Swackhamer and rousingly played by Stages’ cast, the most refreshing aspect of the whole enterprise is that it gets at something profound by playful, seemingly spontaneous means. 3 p.m. Sunday; Stages Repertory Theatre, 3201 Allen Parkway; $19-$45; 713-527-0123, stagestheatre.com.

Strout from page H13

about the authority of a successful narrator. Can you expand on that?
A. Every writer has a sound or a voice and that voice is going to be modulated to some degree according to the story he or she is writing. You have to learn what your voice is because we’re taught at such a young age to use false voices. How often are we told, “That’s not nice!” or, “Don’t say that!” Now, that’s not all bad or we’d all be Olive. But it’s a writer’s job to go back and find the voice that says what they and only they can see.

Q: Olive Kitteridge seems like such a quintessential New Englander. She is brisk, determined, capable, righteous and impatient. She loves hard and suffers no fools. Did you worry about how she would play in other parts of the country? If readers in the South or West would get her?
A: She’s very much a New Englander — but she’s also a human. On steroids. I didn’t think about how she would play. Actually, my instinct was to protect her, but then I’d think, no, don’t protect her. Let her go. Don’t hold back. My job was to let her be an outrageous person.

I have been amazed how many people have said, “I’m Olive” or “I really relate to her.” One man told me his wife was Olive Kitteridge and my mother asked me, “Is that a compliment?”

Maggie Galehouse is the Houston Chronicle books editor.

Craig H. Hartley

Everett Evans
A MAINE EVENT

Elizabeth Strout, Pulitzer Prize-winning author, appearing at the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, set her latest book, The Burgess Boys, in New York and Maine. The family drama is about two adult brothers who live in New York and their sister, who lives in Maine. The woman's teenage son is accused of throwing a bloody pig head into a local mosque, and the brothers, both of whom are in the legal profession, come home to help with his defense.

“Strout has been touted as crafting a vivid portrayal of life in a small town in Pennsylvania and doesn’t feel like he belongs anywhere. That’s the premise of Odyssey’s End, a special reading being staged by Stark Naked Theatre Company and sponsored in part by the Houston Press. A group of actors will read the play, written 25 years ago by professor William S.E. Coleman. Coleman fought under Patton in World War II and came home to Pennsylvania, where he went on to become a theater professor. In Odyssey’s End, the main character is named Jim Martin, who gets a hero’s welcome on his return, Stark Naked co-founder Phillip Lehl says. “He’s a hero who doesn’t feel he deserves to be a hero. It looks at post-traumatic stress disorder before it had a name. It is a semi- autobiographical work,” he says. “We decided to do it because it is a play that was written by [Bill Coleman], Phillip’s mentor at Drake University. They have a long relationship. He saw it done at the university and wanted to remount it after it had a rewrite,” says Kim Tobin-Leh, co-founder of Stark Naked. Directed by Leslie Sinclair, the actors at the reading will be Phillip Lehl, Kim Tobin-Leh, Joanna Hubbard, Matt Hune, James Belcher and Joe Kirkendahl. 7:30 p.m. Spring Studio Stirs, 1824 Spring. For information, call 832-866-6514 or visit starknakedtheatre.com. $5. MARGARET DOWNING

Fool’s Gold

In playwright and Pulitzer Prize-nominee Theresa Rebeck’s latest work, Fool, now headed for the Alley Theatre, the setting is a medieval kitchen in which she pits two court jesters against each other with potentially disastrous consequences for one of them (the loser will be beheaded). According to Alley Artistic Director Gregory Boyd, “One of the things the play is, is a ‘comedy about comedy,’ as Theresa says. And the situation allows her to put the characters in a desperate situation, which I think is a way of making vivid the fears and anxieties of any performer, or artist — it’s always life and death for an artist, even if it’s not literal for most. Alongside that is an idea she is fascinated with in the play — how comedy can speak truth to power. There’s something anarchic and wickedly spirited about comedy, and some rulers don’t always find that amusing.” Alley company members Jeffrey Bean (King) and Elizabeth Bunch (Joss) join with Joey Collins (in The Glass Menagerie with Jessica Lange on Broadway) and others in this world premiere. 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sundays. Through March 16. 11500 S Sam Houston Pkwy West. $26 to $65. MARGARET DOWNING

HAPPY ENDINGS

In Evenings Stars, the final book in best-selling romance novelist Susan Mallery’s Blackberry Island trilogy, published by Harlequin, one character sees the island off the West Coast as a place of retreat, while another feels trapped by it. Mallery, whose first two books in the series have sold more than 400,000 copies, will appear at Katy Men’s Club on her publication date of February 25 for an afternoon luncheon, as well as for an evening book club event, which is open to all. Lots of her fans are expected to attend.

Mallery, who lived in Houston in the early ‘90s and is now based in Seattle, says she was in line to become a CPA, even had a job offer with benefits while still in college, but she decided to try writing romance novels first (because she’d always really liked reading them) and gave herself two years to get going. She sold her first book within three months of graduation. “By the two-year mark, I had sold seven books,” she says. She says she promises “a happy ending,” but her plots take a lot of different routes to get there. Unlike some other authors, Mallery, who maintains a Facebook page, says she welcomes the social media aspects of being a successful author.

“Writing is really isolating. This way I get to be friends with 80,000 people and I don’t have to put on makeup,” she says. “After all these years of being myself all day working, I finally get to be social, and I really like it a lot.”

In fact, she’s already got fans doing the “heavy lifting” by helping her name businesses around town in her upcoming series entitled Mischief Bay — “It’s much bigger [than Blackberry Island], so I’d be able to stay there a long time.” 12:30 to 2:30 p.m. discussion, signing and lunch, 6 to 7 p.m. meet-and-greet with the author, 7 p.m. reading and signing. 2450 Fry Road. For information, call 281-578-7770 or visit katybooks.com. Free. MARGARET DOWNING

TUES

2/25

LITERARY EVENTS

HAPPY ENDINGS

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WED

2/26

THEATER

FOOL’S GOLD

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Q&A With Mohsin Hamid

Author seeks to connect with universal ideas

By Maggie Galehouse

Mohsin Hamid’s third novel, just out in paperback, is a scalding, hilarious and tender satire of self-help books. “How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia” follows the arc of one life — through odd jobs and education, businesses aboveboard and below, marriage and fatherhood and divorce, health and then sickness and death.

This brisk 220-page march through a life reminds readers, on the one hand, of how brief and globally insignificant any life can be. On the other hand, the featured “you” represents each and every one of us, and so it could not be more precious.

Hamid’s first novel, “Moth Smoke,” features a downwardly mobile ex-banker who falls for his best friend’s wife. “The Reluctant Fundamentalist,” his second, a monologue told by a Pakistani man who chased success on Wall Street, was made into a film by Mira Nair in 2012.

A regular contributor to Time, the New York Times and other publications, Hamid appears in Houston on March 24.

Q: You were born in Pakistan, lived in California as a child, attended college and law school in the U.S., took up residence for awhile in London, and now you’re back living in Lahore, Pakistan. Does this give your writing a certain point of view?

A: I think now my point of view is that I can fit in in lots of places and yet, inside myself, feel like a bit of a foreigner everywhere. ... When you’ve lived out of the country for so long, you can’t help but look at a place as a foreigner. What I find myself doing is trying to remind people that the ideas we have that Americans are like this or Pakistanis are like that, aren’t really true. When you look at any group closely, it starts breaking apart into individuals. In Pakistan, people will ask, “How do Americans respond to your books?” There’s no such thing as how Americans respond. There are more than 300 million Americans, and they all read in a different way.

Q: Do you find it easier to write about a place when you’re living somewhere else?

A: That’s what happened with my first two novels. I was living in America on the East Coast when I wrote “Moth Smoke,” a novel about Pakistan. My second novel, “The Reluctant Fundamentalist,” is about a Pakistani guy in America. It was written while living in the UK and Pakistan. But “How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia,” which I wrote in Pakistan, doesn’t say where it is. Sometimes, I think distance can be helpful when writing about a place, so I defamiliarized Pakistan. It allowed me to look at the place with fresh eyes, to be kind of an expat while living at home. Not having names for the cities or the characters is, for me, a way to touch on universal ideas. In the novel there is the “you” character and the “you” reading the book and the writer, who is “me.” In the end, all three of those people start to appear on the page.

Q: Is this a comment on the writing process or on reading?

A: I really feel that novels aren’t entirely written by writers. They’re a series of prompts for readers to enter their own land of make believe.

Q: You made a bold formal decision in “How to

Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia,” modeling the text after self-help books, with chapter titles such as “Move to the City” and “Work for Yourself.” Why?

A: I guess the idea began with the question, “Why do I write novels?” I’m a 42-year-old man who sits by himself in a room and writes. To do this for hours and days and weeks upon years, it must be doing something for me. So maybe the novel is self-help for the writer. And then I thought maybe fiction can help readers. So it started off as kind of a joke but, as I wrote, it became more and more sincere and earnest. It’s interesting that so many of our spiritual, religious and mystical texts have been stories. Christianity. Buddhism. Hinduism. Islam. So often, the way spiritual ideas are conveyed is through storytelling. That’s a kind of

Hamid continues on H16
self-help also. So I wanted to write a novel that wasn’t religious per se but is trying to address these spiritual themes. Part of the reason I think that’s important is that all over the world, instead of traditional ways of coping with change, people are getting more and more uncomfortable. It’s a global spiritual crisis if you’re religious and a global mental health crisis if you’re not. A young Pakistani kid puts on a vest and blows himself up in a shopping mall or a young American kid picks up a gun and shoots kids in a school.

Q: In Pakistan, do you live with your extended family?
A: Yes. Downstairs in the same house are my parents. Upstairs, my wife and I and our two children. My daughter turned 5 this past summer, and my son turns 2 next month. So there are three generations, two of each. I grew up in a tri-generational mode and there’s a time in life when it works really well. Living tri-generationally again and seeing the full arc of life was a big part of why I wrote this book.

Q: You have a law degree from Harvard. What’s up with that? Was law your Plan B?
A: It wasn’t Plan B. It was Plan A and writing was Plan B. I didn’t know anybody who made a living writing books. In Pakistan, in particular, there are so many groups that don’t have adequate legal protection. I thought getting into constitutional law would be a good idea. Then I discovered I didn’t really love the law. I didn’t like the adversarial system of arguing two positions. So I never practiced, but I did graduate with $100,000 of debt!

Q: You enjoy television, I’ve read. What do you watch?
A: My wife and I watch TV together. We’re huge fans of “Game of Thrones” and “Girls.” And “Mad Men” and “Breaking Bad.” We’re pretty omnivorous.

Q: When you read, what is it you hope to get from a book?
A: I want to encounter another consciousness, another person’s way of thinking. And I want it to provoke me. In telling the story I want writers to reveal themselves... The nicest thing I’ve had any filmmaker say to me is, “Your books are almost impossible to adapt for the screen.” Yes. Exactly. Because they’re books.
BOOK EXCERPT

Daniel Alarcón will discuss "At Night We Walk in Circles," and Mohsin Hamid will discuss "How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia," followed by an on-stage interview and book-signing, as part of the Inprint Margarett Root Brown Reading Series. Event begins 7:30 p.m. Monday, Stude Concert Hall, Rice University, entrance 18 off of Rice Boulevard. $5. Doors open 6:45 p.m. Information: inprinthouston.org.

“During the war — which Nelson's father called the anxious years — a few radical students at the Conservatory founded a theater company. They read the French surrealists, and improvised adaptations of Quechua myths; they smoked cheap tobacco, and sang protest songs with vulgar lyrics. They laughed in public as if it were a political act, baring their teeth and frightening children. Their ranks were drawn, broadly speaking, from the following overlapping circles of youth: the longhairs, the working class, the sex-crazed, the poseurs, the provincials, the alcoholics, the emotionally needy, the rabble-rousers, the opportunists, the punks, the hangers-on, and the obsessed.”

from "At Night We Walk in Circles," by Daniel Alarcón

NEW YORK TIMES

COMING TUESDAY

In Bookish, Maggie Galehouse talks to the author behind ABC's new series, "Resurrection."

BEST-SELLERS

Fiction

2. The Bootlegger: By Clive Cussler and Justin Scott. Early-20th-century detective Isaac Bell tracks a wide-ranging international criminal enterprise.
3. The Goldfinch: By Donna Tartt. A painting smuggled out of the Metropolitan Museum of Art after a bombing becomes a boy's prize, guilt and burden.
4. The Invention of Wings: By Sue Monk Kidd. A wealthy Charleston, S.C., girl, Sarah Grimké, who will grow up to become a prominent abolitionist, is given a slave for her 11th birthday.
6. The Chase: By Janet Evanovich and Lee Goldberg. Nicolas Fox and Kate O'Hare team up to steal back a Chinese artifact taken from the Smithsonian.
8. Concealed in Death: By J.D. Robb. Lt. Eve Dallas is on the case when the demolition of a building that once sheltered troubled teenagers reveals skeletons hidden in the walls; by Nora Roberts, writing pseudonymously.
9. Still Life With Bread Crumbs: By Anna Quindlen. An aging photographer rents a rural cottage and discovers sparks of creativity and desire.
10. Sycamore Row: By John Grisham. A sequel, about race and inheritance, to "A Time to Kill."

Nonfiction

2. The Future of the Mind: By Michio Kaku. A theoretical physicist examines research at the intersection of neuroscience and physics that points to the day when science has a complete map of the brain, making telepathy, mind-controlled robots and uploading memories possible.
3. Killing Jesus: By Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard. The host of "The O'Reilly Factor" recounts the events leading up to Jesus' execution.
4. Unbroken: By Laura Hillenbrand. An Olympic runner's story of survival as a prisoner of the Japanese in World War II when his plane goes down over the Pacific.
5. David and Goliath: By Malcolm Gladwell. How disadvantages can work in our favor; from the author of "The Tipping Point" and "Outliers."
7. Lean In: By Sheryl Sandberg with Nell Scovell. The chief operating officer of Facebook urges women to pursue their careers without ambivalence.
9. The Sixth Extinction: By Elizabeth Kolbert. The New Yorker writer examines the role of man-made influences in causing the planet’s current spasm of plant and animal loss.
10. I Am Malala: By Malala Yousafzai with Christina Lamb. A Pakistani girl who advocated for women's education was shot by the Taliban.
TV's OK, but best-selling writer contends novel is much more intimate

By TARRA GAINES

3.23.14 | 12 pm

Three weeks ago, the award-winning and best-selling novelist of The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Mohsin Hamid made a very embarrassing and perhaps even taboo confession in the New York Times on behalf of contemporary novelists. Some of them (maybe the honest ones) are spending as much time watching television — like the rest of us binge viewing Mad Men and Game of Thrones — as reading their fellow writers' fiction.

As someone who reads an awful lot of books but at the time of that the Times article's publication had fallen deep into the Louisiana literary swamp of HBO's True Detective, I knew one question I had to ask Hamid when I had a chance to speak to him before his trip to Houston for his appearance at the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series Monday night.

If television has the time to tell expansive stories and the quality of that storytelling has
TV's OK, but best-selling writer contends novel is much more intimate - CultureMap Houston

If television has the time to tell expansive stories and the quality of that storytelling has surged in the past decade, does the novel still have its own unique qualities to give to readers?

For Hamid the answer is a definite yes, and it all comes from the one-on-one, very intimate relationship between writer and reader.

"I think the fundamental difference (between the novel and television) is that the novel operates at the level of thought," explained Mohsin. "Those words are thought; therefore, the novel remains a way for one human being to contain the thoughts of another human being. That connection and the need for that connection will always be there."

Mohsin gives tribute to our new golden age of television, not just in the U.S but across the globe, as a very powerful form of storytelling, but for him the novel goes beyond storytelling.

"There's value when one human being encounters another human is this incredibly intimate form. I think that's what the novel can do better than any other form and will continue to do," he said.

The relationship between you and the author

This intimacy between the writer and reader is obviously something that Hamid was thinking much on during the creation of his latest acclaimed novel How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia. The book is framed as a self-help book where an authoritative narrator advises and observes a nameless "You" throughout the book in You's quest to go from a sickly child shivering under his mother's bed in a nameless village to becoming the multi-millionaire king of bottled water in a nameless rising Asian country.

As the book progresses, something strange happens within the relationship between narrator, author, character and reader, as it becomes difficult to know where one ends and the other begins.

"There are times in the novel where the book actually speaks from me the person actually writing the book, not a narrator, not a character, but a human being writing the book," described Hamid when I asked about the relationship between the You character, the narrator, and the reader. "That kind of moment for me is at the heart of what the book is about. Trying to create that sort of bridge between writer and reader, between reader and character, between writer and character, that kind of blurring was very important to me."

As the reader becomes submerged in You's struggles, failures, loves and losses, the distinctions between character, reader, and narrator become less certain. Yet for Hamid, this is what novels should do, "blur" that line between the living writer and reader and the imagined characters.

A nameless city, a timeless present

Hamid continues that blurring intimacy in two other ways in the book. How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia contains almost no names of people or places and 70 years pass in the life of You while the reader remains always "in the present moment" and in the technology of the first two decades of this century. Consequently, the novel seems to always be set in the reader's city and present.

Hamid's current hometown of Lahore, Pakistan (at times in his life he's also called California, London, and New York home) serves as the template for the novel's setting, and there are certain qualities it possess that seem specifically Asian. However by giving the city no name even as it pulses, grows and changes throughout the novel, Hamid makes any and every real sprawling city in the world into You's city, again bringing the reader closer into the novel which could easily be set in their city, whether Mexico City or Shanghai.

"I wanted to assert the view that any place can be central," Hamid explained. And even the advice the book dispenses to become filthy rich could almost work anywhere where capitalism reigns. "It very easily could be set in Africa or Latin America and possibly in parts of the United States."

The city could almost even be Houston. Though he's traveled to Texas in the past, Hamid has never been here, but is looking forward to the visit because old friends have settled here and because "Houston symbolized — at least to somebody coming from abroad — symbolizes a certain vision of what an American city can be."

Mohsin Hamid shares the Stude Concert Hall stage at Rice University with novelist Daniel Alarcón on Monday, March 24 at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are $5 for general admission.
H-TOWN PICKS

READER

ANNE CARSON

A poet, essayist, translator, classicist, and scholar, Carson made her reputation in the 1990s with two volumes of achingly sharp verse: Plainwater and Glass, Irony, and God. Since then, she has published translations of Sappho, Euripides, and other ancients, burnishing her credentials as one of the most erudite writers of her generation, as well as one of the most inventive.

April 28 at 7:30. $5. Zilkha Hall, Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, 800 Bagby St. 713-223-2026, inprintshouston.org

FESTIVAL

Japan Festival

For the past 20 years, the Japan-America Society of Houston has hosted a festival in Hermann Park celebrating all things Japanese. Taking place near the park’s Japanese Garden, the festival features the country’s cuisine, taiko drums, ikebana flower arrangements, tea ceremonies, martial arts demonstrations, and children’s activities. With 20,000 annual attendees, the festival can hardly be considered a hidden gem, yet many Houstonians still don’t know about it. This is the perfect year to change that.

April 12–10, Free. Japanese Garden at Hermann Park, 6000 Fannin St. 713-963-0121, japan-fest.info

POP

Arcade Fire

Undeniably the greatest band to ever emerge from The Woodlands, Arcade Fire was founded by Josh Deu and Win Butler—the grandson of swing-era bandleader Alvino Rey, whose 2004 death helped inspire the band's breakthrough album, Funeral. Although now based in Montreal, Win and his brother Will (who’s also in the band) haven’t forgotten their Houston roots—their 2010 album Suburbs was based on memories of their Woodlands childhood. They return to their old stomping grounds this month behind their latest album, Reflektor, featuring the band’s most ambitious, eclectic music to date.


CLASSICAL

ROCO Celebrates France

The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra pays homage to France by performing the world premiere of their commission from composer Carter Pann, Le Tombeau d’Henri Cartier-Bresson, inspired by the legendary Parisian photographer, as well as Jacques Ibert’s Divertissement and Debussy’s Petite Suite. But the program’s most intriguing piece is a little-known bassoon concerto by Classical composer François Devienne, the partial score to which was discovered by orchestra principal bassoonist Kristin Wolfe Jensen and reconstructed by ROCO’s dedicated librarian, Jason Stephens.


DANCE

#WOMENFORDANCE

Though the choreography trade has long been dominated by men, the other sex has recently made major strides. MET Dance celebrates these pioneering women in a two-night program, featuring a dance by Andrea Dawn Shelley about Frida Kahlo’s painting “The Broken Column,” a work by MET Dance resident choreographer Kiki Lucas, and additional pieces by Sidra Bell, Kate Skarpetowska, and the Rhode Island–based Island Moving Company.

April 11–12, $15–$5. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas Ave. 832-487-7041, metdance.org