

Back to the Bookmobile: Three Wonderful Books

Written by Jack Sparacino

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Since I was a little boy, reading books has been an absolute passion, ever since the bookmobile visited our neighborhood in rural Kutztown, PA (population then about 3,200). I well remember walking home with an armful of books, ready to burrow into my favorite wicker chair and dive into them.

Readers of this column will find that no surprise, as I frequently begin with a quote from a book that inspired me and may well reference one or two more in trying to make a point. Somewhat to my surprise, my reading pattern is not terribly unusual, as the average number of books read or listened to in the past year is 12 (!) and the median is 5, i.e., half read more than five and half read less. This pattern has not changed much from past years. We Americans are readers and Amazon only makes it easier for those without the time or wherewithal to visit their neighborhood bookstore, if they have one.

Here are three of my recent favorites. They vary widely in subject and style. I hope you find at least one of them worth pursuing.

Lee Child, *The Midnight Line* (Delacorte Press, 2017)

Mr. Child's Jack Reacher series has been spellbinding ride for millions of readers, and this novel is no exception. Unlike his previous Reacher tales, however, this one is distinctly different. The macho action figure scenes are still there, though in much reduced volume. Instead we find Reacher involved in a mesmerizing epic about a man on a moral mission and a woman—like Reacher, a former Army major— for whom destiny and bad luck made a bargain with the devil and left her deformed, ravaged and addicted to opioids. If this rings a bell, it should. America suffers more PTSD veterans and those with severe physical disfigurements than most of us would care to acknowledge.

The Midnight Line begins with Reacher wandering through a nowhere Wisconsin town's pawnshop and spotting a tiny class ring. Not just any class ring, this one belonged to a West Point graduate. What would cause a woman, presumably, to sacrifice something as precious as her class ring for a few dollars? Knowing Jack Reacher, unemployed, homeless, living on his wits and out of his pockets—and a West Point Graduate himself – it should come as no surprise that this thread of a story is a perfectly good reason to go on a life threatening quest for the truth and some small bit of fairness in this achingly unfair world.

Reacher's journey takes him into the netherworld of the opioid black market in the Midwest. For anyone comfortable with seedy bars, motorcycle gangs, crooks, killers and ne'er-do-wells, this is your book. And if you have the slightest sympathy for our mangled war veterans, **Midnight** is your call to arms. When Reacher finally finds the ring's owner, he is in for the fight of his life, the moral, physical and even metaphysical fight to define his post-Army stint as an MP who pays little attention to rules that need breaking.

In the end they save each other's lives, Reacher and the one-time ring bearer. For social commentary, this is Mr. Child's tour de force. His absolute best.

Kristin Hannah, *The Great Alone* (St. Martin's Press, 2018)

For anyone who has ever thought about tossing their current life out the window and starting fresh, as in really stunningly fresh, this is your book. As long as fresh connotes desperately rugged wilderness and bizarre local inhabitants with a gigantic dollop of horrendous weather and domestic violence thrown in.

Leni Albright is the central character in this cross between "The Shining" and "The Call of the Wild." She is trapped in a family dominated by her father Ernt, a former POW who proclaims his undying love for his lovely wife Cora and their daughter Leni in a 'lets-run-away-to-Alaska-and-start-all-over-again' novel. One is thankful that this is a work of fiction, but it is only that on a technicality. Ernt drinks to excess, engages in flights of fantasy concerning his family's success in dealing with extremely rugged terrain and unending winters, and takes out his endless frustrations and mental illness on his nearly endlessly forbearing wife and daughter.

Leni is the only one who has the foresight to recognize that the dreamer in Ernt is only part of a fatally flawed character who has virtually no insight into why he habitually beats and torments his nearly ever-forgiving wife. I say nearly because in the end Cora comes to finally understand that Ernt is irredeemably out of control and will punish beyond all bounds their precious daughter. At which point she shoots him and leaves herself and her daughter to the whims of the justice system and their own moral compass.

Read this book if you love Alaska. Or if you cherish warm, loving families and shudder at the existential threats these families must often endure. And if you just can't help looking for a happy ending in any tale of misery. Ms. Hannah is a gifted writer who is as deft in laying bare the gorgeously unforgiving Alaska landscape as she is at painstakingly sketching the wide range of oddball creatures who inhabit it. Read this one with a warm blanket and your loved ones close by.

Tiffany Haddish, *The Last Black Unicorn* (Gallery Books, 2017)

First things first. This delightful book, while loaded with painfully funny insights into one black woman's rise to fame from a ghetto blasted upbringing and seemingly unending "if only's," is a wall to wall exercise in foul language. You get used to that fairly quickly, however, and ride along on the author's no holds barred journey into her life as a rising, if frequently whacked around, comedy star. In this autobiography, Lenny Bruce meets Joan Rivers meets Richard Pryor meets your Aunt Birdie with four vodka tonics under her belt.

This oddball book has been on *The New York Times* best seller list for weeks now, in no small part because it reads like Ms. Haddish didn't so much write this book as dictate it after smoking a joint or two. Which is to say she is no writer but rather a human MRI platform, ever seeking the flaws and foibles of human nature, from the screwball (I'm being kind here) boyfriends she commits to, sort of, to the true friends she makes in show business as she wiggles and waggles her way into the glittery world she was meant to inhabit.

Though Ms. Haddish is a comedian, don't look for a string of one liners or funny stories or even humorous anecdotes. Rather, she offers an amazingly insightful "you're the therapist, I'm on the couch" series of revelations into her soul. Should you be up for a ride into a young woman's psyche and view of reality TV before we even knew what that was, this is a book for you. Read it and weep, or laugh, or just sigh out loud. Her comic's warm heart is there for the taking.

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So much for my Kutztown bookmobile, sixty years later. I can still imagine that lovely musty fragrance one inhaled while springing up the steps. Seems like the really lovely things in life never really fade away.