

Five Best: Max Byrd on Underappreciated Works of Fiction

Selected by the author of the novel 'Pont Neuf'

Wall Street Journal article by Max Byrd

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The Rack

By A.E. Ellis (1958)

1. Derek Lindsay's pseudonym, A.E. Ellis, is taken from the name of the last woman hanged in England for murder. The title comes from King Lear's image of life as torture: "He hates him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer." Mordant humor and Shakespearean tragedy—absolutely right for this astonishing story of a young Englishman's nightmarish three years in an alpine sanatorium. Unlike Thomas Mann's "The Magic Mountain," in which tuberculosis is an allegorical passage to self-knowledge, illness in "The Rack" is all harrowing realism. Pain tears tissue "like claws." A doctor, poised with a needle, jokes that "the best veal has the least blood." Ellis's marvelous prose transmits the eruptions that can transform the inward-looking world of the sanatorium: Patients burst out of an elevator "like shrapnel." Someone wakes "as abruptly as a pane of glass is shattered." And here, for just long enough, a Belgian girl brings love from the world beyond the mountains. At moments, even suffering itself is "dissolved in the onrush of the self-renewing sun."

Paris Stories

By Mavis Gallant (2002)

2. "The distinction between journalism and fiction," said Mavis Gallant, "is the difference between without and within." One reason for her neglect today is that, in a literary scene dominated by without—by crime and plot—she is a superb creator of within—of character. Not a great deal happens in these stories, except that we suddenly arrive in a place and beside a person much as if we had walked into a painting or a play. We hear the wittiest of voices—a man "often did whatever a woman asked, unless it was important"—and phrasing as effortless and magical as poetry: "a long ribbon of sound unwinds in his sleep." And a certain high comedy for a bonus: a woman named Julita is "famous for having tried to strangle Theo, but her hands were too small—she could not get a grip." Gallant has been called a "cubist" writer for her rapid changes of focus and angle and point of view. In fact, she is more like Chekhov in her exquisite sensitivity to the jumble of vulnerabilities and hopes that make up every living moment.

The Barkeep of Blémont

By Marcel Aymé (1948)

3. Spring 1945. As repatriated French prisoners of war gather before the railroad station for their official welcome home, five husky young communists burst from the crowd and hurl a soldier to the ground. “It is with great pride and immense joy,” intones the pompous mayor while they viciously beat and kick the soldier, “that our valiant town welcomes its dearest sons.” The spectators applaud and turn away with “firm and prudent faces,” leaving the victim, suspected of collaborating with the Germans, bleeding on the pavement. Here is Marcel Aymé’s vision of a bleak, liberated France, where there is no purity of *Résistance*, and never was; where everyone has collaborated—and where, as the communist thugs reveal, it is always possible to prefer ideology to truth. The closest we come to innocence is the alcoholic barkeep Léopold, who listens, rapt, to schoolchildren reciting Racine in his ironically named Café du Progrès. A timeless satire on human hypocrisy.

The Towers of Trebizond

By Rose Macaulay (1956)

4. “‘Take my camel, dear,’ said my Aunt Dot, as she climbed down from this animal on her return from High Mass.” After this first sentence, who could stop reading? The camel will accompany the narrator, Laurie, on a hilarious journey from Istanbul to Trebizond on the Black Sea, along with her eccentric Aunt Dot, who wishes to improve the position of women (“that sad and well-nigh universal blot on civilizations”) and the “ancient bigot” Father Hugh Chantry-Pigg, a High Anglican who collects “fragments of saintly bone, skin, hair, garments, etc.” Humor runs rampant in Rose Macaulay’s prose, but it hardly conceals the seriousness of her meditations on the demands of faith and flesh, the solemn comedy of organized religion. Laurie is a painter, an occasional mystic, not above adultery, almost wise, certainly adorable. Aunt Dot is supposed to have been modeled on Dorothy Sayers. The most entertaining band of travelers since Pickwick.

The Bone Is Pointed

By Arthur W. Upfield (1938)

5. Arthur W. Upfield’s Australian detective novels were the inspiration for Tony Hillerman’s celebrated Navajo country stories. Both series demonstrate the unexpected possibilities for a white person inhabiting a radically different culture. Upfield’s Detective-Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte (“Bony”) is a half-caste, a “man of two races,” a suave, impeccably dressed city dweller who can read “the Book of the Bush” like an aboriginal. This is Upfield’s finest novel, to be read for its wonderful sweeping vistas of the glorious, interminable Australian outback and for its intimate knowledge of native Australian life—the author worked for years as a cowhand, shepherd and camel-riding fence-patroller. Above all it is to be read for the moment when Bony is cursed, when “the bone is pointed” by aboriginal enemies—a shamanic ritual that sickens, then kills, its victim. Bony tells himself it is psychological theater, mere superstition, but he cannot “break the racial bond. Their blood flowed through his veins. . . . Their beliefs and . . . superstitions” were his. “All his advanced education could not make him other than what he was.” An invisible force will track him and drive him down to death, unless he can summon the mental strength to conquer his own nature. We suspend our disbelief because of the power of

Upfield's vision and because his language makes some part of us believe that such bewitching is, after all, possible.