

Raft of Stars by Andrew J. Graff

It's the summer of 1994 in Claypot, Wisconsin, and the lives of ten-year-old Fischer "Fish" Branson and Dale "Bread" Breadwin are shaped by the two fathers they don't talk about. Fish and his mother are still reeling from the death of his father, a soldier who died in the Gulf War. Unfortunately, Bread's mother is dead but his father is quite alive, and uses every opportunity to beat Bread for no reason – and especially when he's drunk. Fish and Bread hang out together during the lazy days of summer, but Bread is always reluctant to go home. One night, tired of seeing his best friend bruised and terrorized by his no-good dad, Fish takes action. Picking up Mr. Breadwin's gun, carelessly lying on the kitchen counter, he shoots Bread's father, who falls to the floor. Believing themselves murderers, the boys head for the woods, where they build a raft to escape down the river. However, the forest that seems so familiar to them changes as they go farther downriver, and there are unknown natural terrors downstream, including the gorge that threatens to overwhelm them.

The story centers on the boys and their journey, but there are also four caring adults who are desperate to find them. Fish's grandfather Teddy who is "quiet" after his stint in the Korean War but wise in the ways of young boys and finding his way through the woods. Unfamiliar with moving through a forest wilderness, city boy Sheriff Cal teams up with Teddy, but then must strike out on his own to find the boys and maybe find himself in the process.

Following the boys on the river in her canoe, Fish's mother Miranda is determined to find her son. She believes unquestioningly in her God, and His ability to intercede on her son's behalf, and protect him until he is found. With her is Tiffany, a young and lonely gas station attendant and budding poet. Half in love with Sheriff Cal, she becomes involved in the chase when she loses the Sheriff's dog. Tiffany is no woodswoman but resolves to help Miranda reunite with her son.

Raft of Stars will appeal to those of you who enjoy adventure and coming-of-age stories. It is at times reminiscent of Mark Twain's Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, but with a darker edge.

Before the Coffee Gets Cold by Toshikazu Kawaguchi

In a small back alley in Tokyo, there is a café which has been serving carefully brewed coffee for more than one hundred years. But this coffee shop offers its customers a unique experience: the chance to travel through time. However, there are rules to follow.

First, you can only interact with people who have been in the café. Secondly, none of your actions during your trip will change the present. Also, there is a specific chair in the café that one must sit on, but it is almost constantly occupied by the same woman. You must watch carefully and take her seat when she gets up. And then, of course, the trip can last only as long as it takes for the coffee to get cold. Over the course of one summer, four of the café's regular customers will make use of the café's time-travelling offer.

When Fumiko learns over coffee that her boyfriend has accepted his dream job in America, but she is desolated to learn that he wants to break up with her in the process. A few days later, she travels back in time to that last conversation to speak more openly about how much she loves him.

Kohtake is her husband's caretaker now that he has Alzheimer's and she must live with the fact that he no longer remembers who she is. However, she learns that Fusagi wrote her a letter several years ago when he was first diagnosed that she never received, so she travels back in time to see if she can find out where it is.

Hirai's sister Kumi often visits the café to talk to her, but because of an estrangement with her family, Hirai refuses to speak to her. When Kumi dies unexpectedly, Hirai is devastated and travels back in time to apologize to Kumi for not speaking to her.

And then there is Kei, the happily pregnant wife of the café owner. While she is cheerful and happy, she is also fighting a life-threatening illness, and there is a chance that she will die in childbirth. But if she dies in childbirth, she will never meet her child! What can she do? Yes, traveling to the past is not the only option; it is possible to travel to the future.

If nothing can be changed in the present, are their journeys in time worth it? You decide. Read the book to find out!

One Night Two Souls Went Walking by Ellen Cooney

As a child, the chaplain was a little wild and very imaginative. She was very interested in souls, especially where her soul was actually resided in her body. At age 7 or 8 she decided that she was going to be a priest when she grew up. She has now been a chaplain at the medical center for many years. Recently her canine companion, a therapy dog named Bobo Boy died, and lately, she has felt spiritually tired and worn out – perhaps it is time to call it quits. But it's 11:00pm. Showtime on the night shift.

Tonight's shift has a variety of patients to attend to. There's the former airport employee who never flew and, in his last moments of life, wants her to speak to him as if he's in a plane that's about to take off. The fifteen-year-old surfer who is the sole survivor of a rock-climbing accident and must now learn how to surf in his head. A frail elderly woman who has had a stroke and is unable to speak but does not want to be admitted. A demanding lawyer who tells her about his out-of-body experience while he was undergoing surgery.

And all of this is perfectly normal, until all of the sudden it's not. <PAUSE>

The author gives depth to her characters without using a lot of words, but still convinces you of their complexity as human beings. Her writing style is both poetic and moving.

As an example of this poetic style, I'll leave you with my favorite line in the book.

"In the stacks of the library where I wandered a ray of sunlight came in, filled with swirling bits of dust when nothing else was moving, and I saw it wasn't dust but particles of the spirits of those books, free and out playing around, like no one was watching."

The War Widow by Tara Moss

In post-World War II Sydney, returning war correspondent Billie Walker must find a way to make a living. She survived the war, but her photojournalist husband is missing and presumed dead. Deciding to reopen her father's private inquiry office, she hires war veteran Sam as her assistant. He is suffering from his own war wounds, both internal and external, but serves Billie well with his willingness to take direction from a woman.

At first, she is kept busy with domestic cases, especially those involving cheating husbands. But then she is asked to find 17-year-old Adin who has gone missing. His mother assures Billie that Adin is a "good boy", but Billie discovers that Adin

was hanging out with some rather shady characters at a local dance hall and was fixated on attending a high-class auction. When a possible source is murdered, and a friend makes Billie aware of the abduction of aboriginal girls who become sex slaves, Billie and Sam have their hands full. But Billie is a woman of many talents – equally comfortable with dancing the night away at a club, confronting mobsters, and rescuing captive girls.

This is the first book in a planned series of mysteries featuring Billie Walker. Billie is a more brash yet vulnerable detective than Phryne Fischer, but just as classy and elegant, and post-war Sydney in the late 1940s serves as an excellent backdrop for this noir crime fiction.

Fuzz: When Nature Breaks the Law by Mary Roach

Author Mary Roach uses her inquiring mind to dig into things both fascinating and repellent in the scientific world. Her quirky sense of humor makes what could be dry information fun and interesting. In *Fuzz*, she explores the boundary of where the natural world meets human law. She asks, “What is the proper course when nature breaks laws intended for people?”

In the animal kingdom, the perpetrators range from bears – doing a little breaking and entering of both cars and houses – to birds (eating crops of sunflower seeds or bringing down aircraft), to deer, moose and the like jaywalking in front of speeding cars at night. What can be done to reduce recidivism? Roach journeys to the India Himalaya to learn more about dealing with dangerous leopards, to Sandusky Ohio to scare deer off the road at night, and to Italy’s St. Peter’s Square to protect the thousands of floral arrangements from desecration by marauding gulls.

The “crimes” covered are not just from the animal world. Plants are criminals too. Consider the legume as an accomplice to murder. Did you know that the poisons ricin and abrin come from plants? A more disturbing fact is that the plants are all around us in the form of castor beans and ornamental rosary peas (of which Roach has a pot living in a sunny spot on her windowsill). In addition to these, larger plants (i.e. trees) are known killers. The fruit of the coconut palm and the durian tree are heavy and hard, especially when they make contact with a human being, and then there are the trees that are dying in place that suddenly and quietly fall to earth.

Combining little-known forensic science and conservation genetics with a motley cast of laser scarecrows, langur impersonators, and trespassing squirrels, Roach reveals as much about humanity as about nature’s lawbreakers. When it comes to “problem” wildlife, she finds, humans are more often the problem—and the solution.

The Premonition: A Pandemic Story by Michael Lewis

In 2005 then-President George W. Bush read a book by John Barry entitled *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, an account of the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic. This became the motivation to create a plan to deal with future pandemics. The plan’s author, Rajeev Venkayya was tasked with pulling together a group of physicians, and other public health experts to flesh out the plan in more detail. This group came to be known as the Wolverines. They studied the 1918 pandemic. They looked at a 13-year old’s science fair project that modeled how quickly infected people could infect others, and what effect various strategies to reduce the spread of the disease had upon infection rates. The pandemic response plan showed the need to take steps early to prevent person-to-person transmission before development of vaccines. With their newly detailed plan they convinced the CDC to adopt it, and over the years they were able to test its usefulness when MERS and H1N1 (swine flu) threatened the U.S. But the real test was to be COVID-19.

When COVID arrived in the U.S., several issues come to light. The federal government had acted on January 31st by requiring any Americans returning from China to quarantine for 14 days, but by then the virus had already had time to spread from people who had traveled to the U.S. earlier (the first American tested positive on January 19th). The CDC was slow to respond due to a lack of data, and they didn't test new arrivals into the country unless they developed a fever. As time wore on, more problems were revealed. There was a lack of test kits, tests took too long to process (10 days), and the supplies (chemicals, machines, even nasal swabs were not to be found). State health officials were still waiting for guidance from the CDC before they did anything.

Luckily, this expanding group of doctors, researchers, university faculty, public health officers, and volunteers was ultimately able to implement the measures required to manage the spread of COVID before a vaccine was developed and was made widely available.

This is an absorbing, enjoyable and eye-opening book on the early days of the pandemic. A must-read book!

Confidence Men by Margalit Fox

Imprisoned in a remote Turkish prison camp during World War I, British officer Harry Jones receives a postcard from his aunt suggesting that he use a Ouija board to pass the time with his fellow prisoners. Jones makes a board out of an abandoned piece of iron, a glass, and a raised wooden ring onto which the men paste the letters of the alphabet. At first nothing happens, then they asked the board a question. The glass goes to random letters but doesn't spell out anything that makes sense. This goes on night after night. One night, looking at the disappointment in the men's eyes, Jones takes over "control" of the board. He has memorized the placement of the letters around the board and closing his eyes is able to move the glass to spell something that makes sense. From then on, the Ouija board becomes a regular source of entertainment for his fellow soldiers, and eventually even the Turkish interpreter is lured in by the board. At this point Jones begins to think about escape.

Jones realizes that he will need help with pulling this off and decides to let fellow officer Cedric Hill – who demonstrates a talent in slight-of-hand – in on the trick of the Ouija board. Together they use the Ouija board with the interpreter, and eventually the commandant of the camp to rig their escape. But things don't always go according to plan, and in the end Jones and Hill become involved in a treasure hunt, go without food until they are shadows of their former selves, and ultimately "go mad".

This true and entertaining story is a fascinating look into the psychology of deception, the uses of magic, and the amazing ability of two men to prepare for (almost) every eventuality.
