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# BOOKS

"Writing for the Internet is one thing that has had a huge impact on the evolution of my writing style. For the last decade, I've been coming from a place where there is always the possibility of an immediate audience. Now, even if I'm working on a novel, I've sort of tricked my brain into thinking my work is always two seconds away from being read."

NEW YORK AUTHOR JAMI ATTEBERG, WHO HAS WRITTEN FOR TRADITIONAL AND WEB-ONLY PUBLICATIONS, INCLUDING SALON. HER NEW NOVEL, "THE MELTING SEASON" (RIVERHEAD), FOLLOWS UP 2007'S "THE KEPT MAN."

## READORAMA

### I-70 travel guide

Think of the drive between Kansas City and St. Louis as a chore? A new book from the University of Kansas Press might change that.

"Driving Across Missouri: A Guide to I-70" (150 pages, \$15.95) not only includes dozens of places to stop and explore, but it's full of stories, history and trivia. (Why are barns red? If Boonville is named after Daniel Boone, why is there no "a"?) The attractions and information are organized by mile marker.

The book's authors are Ted Cable, professor of park management and conservation at Kansas State University and author of 10 books about nature and travel, and Lauren Cadden, a freelance writer and naturalist. Cable also co-authored "Driving Across Kansas: A Guide to I-70" (2003).

### New poet laureate

Gov. Jay Nixon has appointed David Ciewell, a professor of English at Webster University in St. Louis as the state's new poet laureate. He was introduced March 3 by first lady Georganne Nixon at the statewide Poetry Out Loud competition in Jefferson City.

Ciewell has published seven collections of poems. His work has appeared in more than 50 journals and magazines and in many anthologies, including "Best American Poetry" (Scribner). He has been nominated seven times for the Pulitzer Prize.

Ciewell lives in Webster Groves with his wife and 13-year-old son. His term will last two years. He succeeds Missouri's first poet laureate, Walter Bergen, of Ashland. (Bergen has readings in the area next week, Monday in Lawrence and Tuesday in Overland Park.)

### Late writers' latest

New books from best-selling mystery writers who have died in recent months:

"Even Money" (Putnam) by Dick Francis and Felix Francis. The first collaboration with his son, it's the story of a British bookmaker struggling with racketeering and family problems. Former jockey Dick Francis died in February.

"Split Image" (Putnam) by Robert B. Parker. Parker died in January. It's the ninth book in his Jesse Stone series, boasting two mysteries for the police chief as well as ties to Parker's other detective series.

"A Whisper to the Living" (Forge) by Stuart Kaminsky. The final book in the Inspector Rostovlev series, set in Moscow. Kaminsky, a prolific writer and teacher, died in October.

Compiled by Lajlan Keene, keene@kctstar.com

## BEST-SELLERS

### Fiction

1. *Fantasy in Death*, by J.D. Robb (Putnam, \$26.95)
2. *The Help*, by Kathryn Stockett (Amy Einhorn/Putnam, \$24.95)
3. *Black Magic Sanction*, by Kim Harrison (Eos/HarperCollins, \$25.99)
4. *Split Image*, by Robert B. Parker (Putnam, \$25.95)
5. *Big Girl*, by Danielle Steel (Delacorte, \$28)

### Nonfiction

1. *Game Change*, by John H. Garvey and Mark Haverin (Harper/HarperCollins, \$27.99)
2. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, by Rebecca Skloot (Crown, \$26)
3. *I Am Ozzy*, by Ozzy Osbourne with Chris Arnes (Grand Central, \$26.99)
4. *The Politician*, by Andrew Young (Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's, \$24.99)
5. *Never a Little Faith*, by Mitch Albom (Hyperion, \$25.99)

The New York Times

## REVIEW | 'The Possessed'

# TO RUSSIA, WITH LOVE

Elif Batuman takes an entertaining and insightful look at the giants of Russian literature.

By ANDREA HOAG  
Special to The Star

Reading "The Possessed" is like sitting next to the smartest girl in class. Her wisecracks make the hands on the clock whizz past, and her sardonic commentaries behind the teacher's back seem to make life worth living.

If you haven't guessed by now, the genius in question is Elif Batuman, a writer of subtle humor and rigorous learning who has been kind enough to take us along on her personal journey into the great minds of Russian literature. This, dear friends, is a journey not to be missed.

Happily, readers of "The Possessed" are treated to the Gen-X Stanford professor's wry revelations about the great books and, frankly, quite a few other things. Batuman has intense feelings on a variety of subjects ranging from not limited to doomed grad school romances, the vagaries of Uzbek plumbing, Turkish bodyguards, what really might have happened to Tolstoy and the unpredictable nuttiness of academic life, the last of which our heroine documents with high hilarity.

In her first great flush of love for the Russian author Isaac Babel, for example, our guide explains that she "read the 1920 diary and the entire Red Cavalry cycle in one sitting, on a rainy Saturday in February while baking a Black Forest cake."

"As Babel immortalized for posterity the military embarrassment of the botched 1920 Russo-Polish campaign, he immortalized for me the culinary embarrassment of this cake, which came out of the oven looking like an old hat and which, after I had optimistically treated it with half a two-dollar bottle of Kirshwasser, produced the final sensory impression of an old hat soaked in cough syrup."

No matter how devoted a fan the author remains, however, when she's offered the unique chance to meet Babel's elderly daughter Nathalie at a literary conference, she makes it clear Babel was nothing short of a monumental pain.

Scholars, biographers and graduate students (looked to hear the daughter speak, and when one ventured to ask if it was true she still



Some of the Russian writers who inspired Elif Batuman to write "The Possessed," clockwise from left: Anton Chekhov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Isaac Babel, Alexander Pushkin, Andrei Platonov and Leo Tolstoy.

possessed a cache of much-desired letters belonging to her father, one thing was clear: She'd never tell.

Batuman also exposes the academic study of Russian authors as something of an exclusive fraternity she had to elbow in to.

"The resistance can be especially high when it comes to Babel," she explains, "because he wrote in an idiosyncratic Russian-Jewish Odessa vernacular. ... On these grounds I once became impatient with a colleague at a conference, who was trying to convince me that the Red Cavalry cycle would never be totally ac-

cessible to me because of (main character) Lynton's "specifically Jewish alienation." Right, I finally said. As a six-foot-tall first-generation Turkish woman growing up in New Jersey, I cannot possibly know as much about alienation as you, a short American Jew. He nodded: "So you see the problem."

The whole book is filled with funny interchanges like this, recounted with such novelistic charm one can only pray Batuman has a long-promised piece of fiction put

her sleeve. It is impossible not to gush a bit about the undeniable magic in Batuman's ability to create tangential story lines and find the gossamer thread that ties them all together. The pursuit of literary mysteries for the sheer pleasure of undertaking them is what renders this book about books so enchanting.

There now. Don't you feel a bit smarter already? Andrea Hoag is a Lawrence book critic.

## BEST-SELLERS

## REVIEW | 'Savage Lands'

# Louisiana swamp breeds historical betrayals

By SYBIL STENBERG  
The Washington Post



Following her acclaimed "The Great Stink" and "The Nature of Monsters," British historical novelist Clare Clark returns with a powerful third novel, set in the early 1700s in the struggling French colony of Louisiana. Clark's descriptions of the land brutally hot, swampy, fetid with stagnant, mosquito-breeding water, unprotected from floods and hurricanes — provide a richly atmospheric backdrop for the intertwined lives of three settlers.

Sent from France in 1704 as part of a group of "casket girls" committed to marry the soldiers and shopkeepers in the nascent colony, Elisabeth Savaret, a bookish and outspoken young woman, is immediately smitten with Jean-Claude Babelon. There is a passionate marriage, interrupted by Jean-

## BookWorld Digest

**Savage Lands**, by Clare Clark (384 pages; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$25)

Clark's frequent expeditions to nearby Indian tribes friendly to the French. He distributes gifts and muskets, secures food for the colony and tries to ensure that each tribe will not succumb to the blandishments of the English.

Elisabeth, absorbed in her misery as she miscarries, only gradually realizes that Jean-Claude is ruthless in his pursuit of wealth and all too willing to compromise his principles by engaging in gun-running and slave-trading.

Meanwhile, Auguste Guichard, a 12-year-old boy forced by the colony's

commandant to remain with a tribe to learn its habits, develops an ear for the tongues of many tribal nations. When he returns to the settlement as a young man, he cherishes his friendship with Jean-Claude but also falls in love with Elisabeth. This never-acquainted triangle and its complications eventually provoke tragic acts of betrayal.

Clark keeps her plot fresh and compelling by immersing us in the primitive conditions these colonists endure. Starvation when the crops fail, fear of attack by natives and frequent epidemics are constant challenges.

Equally potent as the encompassing sense of place, the moral complexities that influence these characters infuse "Savage Lands" with emotional resonance. Clark's commitment to historical color is matched by the dramatic arc of an engrossing story.