

FICTION

New York Times
best sellers

■ Fiction

- 1. No Place Like Home** — Mary Higgins Clark. Simon & Schuster, \$25.95
- 2. The Mermaid Chair** — Sue Monk Kidd. Viking, \$24.95
- 3. Revenge of the Sith** — Matthew Stover. Lucas/Del Rey/Ballantine, \$25.95
- 4. The Da Vinci Code** — Dan Brown. Doubleday, \$24.95; special illustrated edition, \$35
- 5. Saturday** — Ian McEwan. Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, \$26
- 6. Ya-Yas in Bloom** — Rebecca Wells. HarperCollins, \$24.95
- 7. Honeymoon** — James Patterson and Howard Roughan. Little, Brown, \$27.95
- 8. The Broker** — John Grisham. Doubleday, \$27.95
- 9. With No One As Witness** — Elizabeth George. HarperCollins, \$26.95
- 10. The Year of Pleasures** — Elizabeth Berg. Random House, \$24.95

■ Nonfiction

- 1. My Life So Far** — Jane Fonda. Random House, \$26.95
- 2. The World Is Flat** — Thomas L. Friedman. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$27.50
- 3. Blink** — Malcolm Gladwell. Little, Brown, \$25.95
- 4. Memory and Identity** — John Paul II. Rizzoli, \$19.95
- 5. A Deadly Game** — Catherine Crier with Cole Thompson. ReganBooks/HarperCollins, \$27.95
- 6. On Bull-----** — Harry G. Frankfurt. Princeton University, \$9.95
- 7. America (The Book)** — Jon Stewart, Ben Karlin, David Javerbaum et al. Warner, \$24.95
- 8. Conspiracy of Fools** — Kurt Eichenwald. Broadway, \$26
- 9. Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way** — John Paul II. Warner, \$22.95
- 10. Idiot** — Johnny Damon with Peter Golenbock. Crown, \$24.95

Local
best sellers

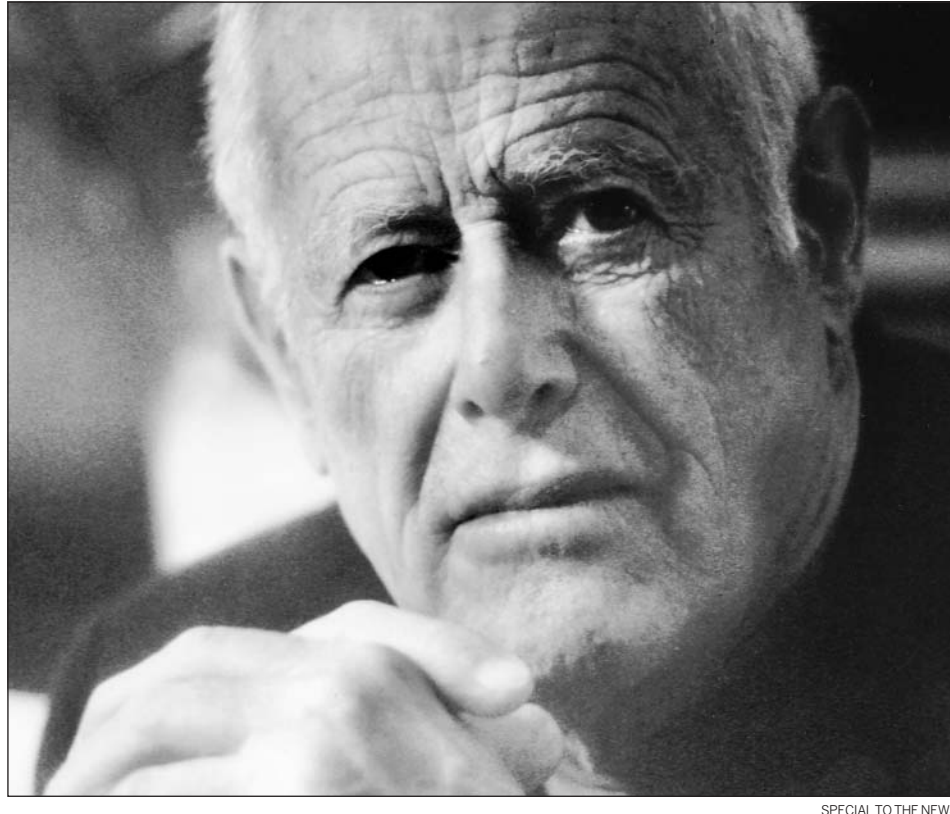
■ Fiction

- 1. The Mermaid Chair** — Sue Monk Kidd
- 2. In the Company of Cheerful Ladies** — Alexander McCall Smith
- 3. The Da Vinci Code** — Dan Brown
- 4. Saturday** — Ian McEwan
- 5. Long Spoon Lane** — Anne Perry
- 6. Ya-Yas in Bloom** — Rebecca Wells
- 7. Missing Persons** — Stephen White
- 8. The Five People You Meet in Heaven** — Mitch Albom
- 9. Gilead** — Marilynne Robinson
- 10. The Journeys of Socrates** — Dan Millman

■ Nonfiction

- 1. The World Is Flat** — Thomas Friedman
- 2. Blink** — Malcolm Gladwell
- 3. Chain of Command** — Seymour Hersh
- 4. And One More Thing Before You Go . . .** — Maria Shriver
- 5. My Life So Far** — Jane Fonda
- 6. The Old Ball Game** — Frank Deford
- 7. Winning** — Jack Welch
- 8. Urban Sanctuaries** — Stephen Anderton
- 9. Body for Life for Women** — Pam Peeke
- 10. Freakonomics** — Steven D. Levitt, Stephen J. Dubner

Information for the local best sellers comes from the Tattered Cover, Borders Books in Englewood and the Boulder Book Store.



SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

James Salter writes in such a way that allows readers insight into the characters' emotions while also maintaining a sense of detachment.

Shared truths, personal touch

Author masterfully guides readers into emotional territory

By Jessica Slater

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

In his new collection of 10 short stories, James Salter displays the kind of precise mastery of language that has led him to be described as a "writer's writer." However, these explorations of love, dreams, disappointment and betrayal show that his insight into universal themes is more than a match for his literary prowess: This stunning collection confirms that he is also undoubtedly a reader's writer.

Salter captures the essence of a moment or character using only its sparest elements. Like light striking water at just the right angle, his language makes these stories shimmer with life:

"She came out of the ocean and dried herself like the gypsy girl, ankles caked with sand. She could feel the sun burnishing her shoulders. Hair wet, deep in the emptiness of days, she walked her bicycle up to the road, the dirt velvety beneath her feet . . . The noon was bottle-green, large houses

among the trees and wide farmland, like a memory, behind."

He limns the subtle layers of relationships that Hollywood tends to forget; the moments that reach deeper into the heart than histrionic epiphanies and sunset endings because they acknowledge the shad-

owy illogic of human emotions. For example, the first story, "Comet," depicts one man's realization about the limitations of his marriage and the mistakes of his life, but also his absence of regret:

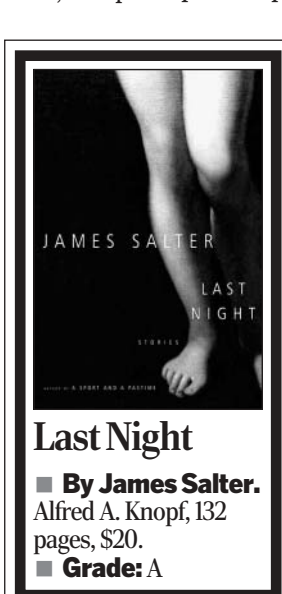
"He stood up. He had done everything wrong, he realized, in the wrong order. He had scuttled his life. 'Anyway, there's one thing I can say truthfully. I'd do it all over again if I had the chance.'"

Similarly, in "Bangkok" a woman tries to entice her ex-lover to travel with her in Asia. She taunts his commitment to a "pretend life" — the wife he loves, his baby girl — "I didn't know that real happiness lies in having the same thing all the time." But despite temptation, he refuses her:

"The room was swimming, he could not hold on to his thoughts. The past, like a sudden tide, had swept back over him, not as it had been but as he could not help remembering it. The best thing was to resume work. He knew what her skin felt like, it was silky. He should not have listened. . . . It was not a pretend life."

In "Palm Court," a man receives a phone call from the woman he has longed for since she left him 20 years earlier to marry another man. When they are finally reunited, he finds his desire for her is gone and, rather than a celebration of rediscovered love, the encounter leaves him mourning the loss of his dreams: "They were not really going to meet for lunch sometime. He thought of the love

that had filled the great central chamber of his life and how he would not meet anyone like that again. He did not know what came over him, but on the street he broke into tears."



Last Night

■ **By James Salter.**
Alfred A. Knopf, 132 pages, \$20.
■ **Grade: A**

Shallow protagonist sinks 'Mermaid Chair'

By Eric J. Blommel

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Sue Monk Kidd, author of the hugely popular *Secret Life of Bees*, crafts a second novel, this time for women of the "Me" generation. The story chronicles events as one woman, Jessie Sullivan, throws off the golden handcuffs of an upper-middle-class marriage.

Engaging in an almost childish self-indulgence, Jessie battles vague dissatisfaction in the search for new levels of self-fulfillment. Along the way, her acts of cheating and lying are painted in a poetic and mystical light by Kidd, who apparently aims to turn her feats into heroic feminine empowerment.

The novel is lovingly crafted. Rich and lush like the landscape described on the island setting, Kidd weaves an intricate fabric of spirituality, poetry and emotion into her story. Yet, since the story fails to elicit sympathy for the main character, the elaborate decorativeness does nothing to enhance the meaning of the story.

When we meet Jessie, she is forced to decide whether or not to go back to her home, Egret Island, off the coast of South Carolina. Jessie's mother lives there and, according to reports

of self-destructive behavior, is slowly going insane. Jessie opts to go out and deal with this problem, even though it will bring her back to the childhood home where her father died in a freak boating accident.

Jessie's psychiatrist husband, Hugh, offers to go along for support and to help take care of Jessie's mother. However, his ability to always fix things and take care of people oppresses Jessie, and she refuses to invite him. Once on the island, Jessie practically ignores her mother. She embarks on a search to uncover the reasons for her restlessness. Part of the search takes her to the abbey, where her mother served as the cook.

At the abbey, she meets Brother Thomas, the young widower with the tortured soul who

seems to be hiding from the world. He's not quite sure he belongs there, and isn't yet ready to take his most solemn vows. His challenge in being married to the church seems to parallel Jessie's struggles.

For Jessie, Brother Thomas is just what the doctor ordered. Adding to his mystique for her is the fact that he belongs to the abbey with the Mermaid Chair that so enthalls Jessie's mother (and had enthralled her father as well).

Legend has it that a mermaid named Asenora once swam ashore, doffed her tail and was witnessed by a monk of the monastery. The monk hid the tail in his chair so the Mermaid could not escape. Trapped on land, she lost her wildness and eventually became Saint Senara.

This is something of a metaphor for Jessie's life, especially with the coda that Father Dominic of the Abbey recorded in his published book for tourists:

"An interesting footnote to the legend states that after her conversion Asenora sometimes missed the sea and her former life so strongly that she prowled the monastery at night in search of her tail. Conflicting stories exist about whether she ever found it. One story suggests she not only found her fish tail but donned it whenever she wanted to revisit her lost life, always returning, however, and replacing it inside the abbot's chair."

Jessie spends several months swimming, painting and engaging in an affair. Ignoring all responsibilities to her husband, daughter and mother, she retreats deep into herself. As a result, she's not present for another of her mother's medical and psychiatric disasters.

As the story unfolds, there turns out to be more to Jessie's mother's insanity than old age and grief. Jessie's father's death, the monastery and the Mermaid Chair become linked into a story that was meant to be a family secret. When resolved, the secret also helps Jessie resolve her feelings.

All well and good, but the focus on Jessie and her emotions seems contrived in the extreme. Each character in the story appears more focused on Jessie's well-being than on her needier mother. The entire plot revolves around the protection of Jessie's feelings, a concern that feels undeserved.

Kidd's novel displays a lush emotional tapestry, yet — because the protagonist lacks the depth a reader needs to appreciate her — it's hard to care. Well-furnished but lacking in character integrity, *The Mermaid Chair* fails to hold water.

Eric J. Blommel is a freelance writer living in Centennial.

Flip to NIGHT on 33CHASE