

# FICTION

# Fairy tales with a twist

## New York Times best sellers

### Fiction

- 1. Glorious Appearing** — Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Tyndale, \$24.99
- 2. The Da Vinci Code** — Dan Brown. Doubleday, \$24.95
- 3. Nighttime Is My Time** — Mary Higgins Clark. Simon & Schuster, \$25.95
- 4. The Five People You Meet in Heaven** — Mitch Albom. Hyperion, \$19.95
- 5. Reckless Abandon** — Stuart Woods. Putnam, \$25.95
- 6. The Last Juror** — John Grisham. Doubleday, \$27.95
- 7. Angels & Demons** — Dan Brown. Atria, \$17.95
- 8. Can You Keep A Secret?** — Sophie Kinsella. Dial, \$21.95
- 9. Firestorm** — Iris Johansen. Bantam, \$24.95
- 10. The Confusion** — Neal Stephenson. Morrow, \$27.95

### Nonfiction

- 1. Against All Enemies** — Richard A. Clarke. Free Press, \$27
- 2. Eats, Shoots and Leaves** — Lynne Truss. Gotham, \$17.50
- 3. Three Weeks With My Brother** — Nicholas Sparks and Micah Sparks. Warner, \$22
- 4. Worse Than Watergate** — John W. Dean. Little, Brown, \$22.95
- 5. Ten Minutes From Normal** — Karen Hughes. Viking, \$25.95
- 6. Deliver Us From Evil** — Sean Hannity. ReganBooks and HarperCollins, \$26.95
- 7. Founding Mothers** — Cokie Roberts. Morrow, \$24.95
- 8. Caddy For Life** — by John Feinstein. Little, Brown, \$25.95
- 9. Farewell, Jackie** — Edward Klein. Viking, \$23.95
- 10. The Passion** — Tyndale, \$24.99

## Local best sellers

### Fiction

- 1. The Da Vinci Code** — Dan Brown
- 2. The Five People You Meet in Heaven** — Mitch Albom
- 3. The Shadow of the Wind** — Carlos Ruiz Zafon
- 4. The Full Cupboard of Life** — Alexander McCall Smith
- 5. Dancing With Einstein** — Kate Wenner
- 6. The Birth of Venus** — Sarah Dunant
- 7. The Jane Austen Book Club** — Karen Joy Fowler
- 8. Dark Matters** — Paul Levitt
- 9. The Bookman's Promise** — John Dunning
- 10. The Confusion** — Neal Stephenson

### Nonfiction

- 1. Plan of Attack** — Bob Woodward
- 2. Eats, Shoots & Leaves** — Lynne Truss
- 3. South Beach Diet** — Arthur Agatston
- 4. A Woman With a Minute** — Barbara Stoker
- 5. Alexander Hamilton** — Ron Chernow
- 6. Bush Country** — John Podhoretz
- 7. Against All Enemies** — Richard A. Clarke
- 8. The Power of Intention** — Wayne W. Dyer
- 9. The South Beach Diet Cookbook** — Arthur Agatston
- 10. Mothering Without A Map** — Kathryn Black

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

By Jessica Slater

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

A.S. Byatt is best-known for her Booker Prize-winning novel, *Possession*. Her wide-ranging works, including novels, short stories and essays, have established her as a dominant voice in British literature.

Her writing explores the paradoxical territories between reality and fantasy, story and storyteller, life and art, body and mind.

The five new tales in *Little Black Book of Stories* are full of such explorations. They are fairy tales with philosophical depth and postmodern twists.

They include: young evacuees during World War II who come across a monstrous creature in the forest and don't speak of it again until they return to the forest as adults; a young artist who creates a work of art from body parts stolen from a hospital collection; a grieving woman who gradually turns into stone and finds surprising liberation in her new form; a creative-writing teacher who gets more than he bargained for when he involves himself with a talented student in his class; and a man who encounters the spirit



Byatt displays masterful control of language.

of his living wife, whose mental state has been deteriorated by Alzheimer's.

Amid the weighty metaphors and often-dark subject matter, Byatt displays masterful control of language.

Her style can be sparse and matter-of-fact, as in the descriptions in *The Thing in the Forest*: "The two little girls had not met before, and made friends on the train. They shared a square of chocolate, and took alternate bites at an apple. One gave the other the inside page of her Beano. Their names were Penny and Primrose."

Or it can veer into lavish celebrations of nature in *A Stone Woman*: "Time too was paradoxical in Iceland. The summer was a fleeting island of light and brightness in a shroud of thick vapours and freezing needles of ice in the air."

But within the island of the summer the daylight was sempiternal, there was no nightfall, only the endless shifts in the color of the sky, trout-dappled, mackerel-shot, turquoise, sapphire, peridot, hot transparent red, and, as the autumn put out boisterous fingers, flowing with the gyrating and swooping veils of the aurora borealis."

Despite such skill, however, Byatt's

authorial control can sometimes feel excessively deliberate, interfering with the evolution of the story.

In *The Thing in the Forest*, for example, the central metaphors are powerful but the story itself doesn't come to life. One can imagine writing an extensive essay analyzing the symbolism of the monster in the forest, childhood fears in the context of wartime, the shift into adulthood and attempts to deal with disturbing memories. In other words, the ideas are interesting but the story itself lacks momentum and falls flat.

Elsewhere in the collection, Byatt has greater success. Her writing is at its most engaging when she allows her characters to develop in their own right, rather than simply existing to represent ideas.

In *Body Art*, three characters — self-centered doctor Damian Becket, flighty young art student Daisy Whimple, and Martha Sharpin, an attractive thirtysomething arts coordinator at the hospital — get caught in a tangle of attraction, jealousy and ambition. Although it's a smoother read than *The Thing in the Forest*, *Body Art* is still heavy on the symbolism: Dr. Becket is outraged when Daisy steals medical artifacts — includ-

**Little Black Book of Stories**  
 ■ By A.S. Byatt.  
 Alfred A. Knopf,  
 236 pages, \$21.  
 ■ Grade: B-

ing body parts — from the hospital collection to create a shocking work of art, yet at the same time he thinks nothing of taking "possession" of her body, forcing her to go through with the pregnancy that resulted from their one-night fling.

But in this case, Byatt anchors her conceptual themes with down-to-earth dynamics among the three main characters, and a healthy dose of dry English irony.

Byatt has characterized the competing elements in her own life as the rational, skeptical, ordered realism that she thinks she "ought" to pursue and the impulsive energies of mythology and imagination that fuel her writing.

When she finds a balance between the two, she breathes life into her characters and transforms philosophical ideas into startlingly original and powerful fiction.

But when rationality and order override, her writing feels wooden, like a writing exercise executed with great skill and persistent cleverness, but lacking the essential guts and soul of a good story. Too often, this is the case in her latest offering.

Jessica Slater is technology editor at the Rocky Mountain News.

# Unsatisfying 'Body' of work bereft of passion

By Mike Pearson

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Never let it be said that novelist David Leavitt is a one-trick pony.

Just when you think you've got him pegged — as chronicler of the alternative family in *The Lost Language of Cranes*, or the gay aesthetic in *The Page Turner* or *The Marble Quilt* — he manages to surprise you with something different and, often, equally adept.

The common thread of his stories is the search for love — or at least for acceptance — regardless of narrative bent. And so it continues in *The Body of Jonah Boyd*, in which the author plays it straight, literally. His protagonist/narrator is a frumpy secretary in the psychology department of a small California college. Yet even as she haunts the sidelines of life, Judith "Denny" Denham becomes a lover, personal assistant and confidant to members of the Wright family.

To her boss — department chair Professor Ernest Wright — she is both proofreader of manuscripts and a secret paramour. To his wife, Nancy, she is someone to confide in and partner at the piano. Daughter Daphne views her as an older sister, while pensive youngest son Ben sees her as a rival for his parents' affection.

Only eldest son Mark seems immune to Denny's charms. That's because the year is 1969 and he's fled to Canada to avoid the draft.

The conflict arrives in the form of the title character, a suave, charming poet who is married to Anne, Nancy's best friend from back east. For years Nancy compares poor Denny unfavorably to the saintly Anne, who arrives one Thanksgiving with her husband in tow and proves a bitchy drunk, one step shy of a nervous breakdown.

Jonah Boyd is something else. His prowess as a poet/novelist captivates young Ben, who is entranced by Boyd's eccentricities. For one thing, he can only write longhand in special journals ordered from Italy. For another, he keeps losing them.

When he misplaces these journals over Thanksgiving — never to find them — the course of his life, Anne's

and nearly everyone else's is altered. Only Denny remains the detached observer who, decades later, pieces together exactly when things went wrong.

A half dozen lives over 30 years impacted by a single weekend — it's a lot of ground to cover, especially for a book that clocks in at less than 220 pages. In fact, *The Body of Jonah Boyd* suffers not from a lack of imagination so much as from a lack of heft.

The Wrights are borderline cliché, Jonah Boyd is an enigma and Denny may be the most frustrating heroine Leavitt has ever created. It's one thing to let your main character pour out her dreams, and quite another to do so in a way that's bereft of passion. Save for her timidly rendered affair with Ernest, Denny Denham is a bit of a bore.

Which makes for a book that will leave readers conflicted. Leavitt has a way with words; he can turn a phrase with the best of them. And give him props for covering a lot of ground in short order.

The Vietnam War, campus and marital politics, jealousies and muses in art — it's all there.

Yet Leavitt's most sympathetic character is also his most tragic, and the narrator's regard for Jonah Boyd is just shy of antiseptic.

It's not the length of a novel that satisfies our hunger, but its ability to make us care about its characters. By that measure, *The Body of Jonah Boyd* is like the diet plate at a diner: lean and filling, but short on flavor.

Mike Pearson is features editor.  
 pearsonm@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-892-2592

**The Body of Jonah Boyd**  
 ■ By David Leavitt.  
 Bloomsbury, 215 pages, \$23.95.  
 ■ Grade: C+



BILL GREENE/BOSTON GLOBE

► **David Leavitt** tends to write about the search for love.