

bookstobuy

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE BIBLIOPHILES' ARMCHAIR

Andrea Sisco of Edon Prairie and Connie Anderson of Bloomington are the book lovers behind Armchair Interviews, which is a Web site featuring book reviews and downloadable 20-minute fee-based author audio interviews. Several of those book reviews are published monthly in this newspaper. Launched in January 2005, Writer's Digest named Armchair Interviews one of the Top 101 Web Sites for Writers in 2006. For more book reviews and audio author interviews go to www.armchairinterviews.com.

Here, their suggestions for holiday gift-giving books.

Kiss the cook

"The Family Christmas Cookbook," edited by Andrea Lee Schieber, Lois Wallentine and Abby Coles is published by Augsburg Fortress. Each of the delicious recipes is accompanied by a story or poem from "Christmas: The Annual of Christmas Literature and Art" that was first published in 1931 and continued for sixty-five years. The recipes are from around the world.

Gifts for girlfriends

"I am Amazed" written and illustrated by Jodi Hills, published by TRISTAN Publishing. "I am Amazed" is a tribute to the people around us... those who inspire and those who often overlook. The great gift book is a stirring, yet tender portrayal of life as a dance.

"Slap on a Little Lipstick. You'll Be Fine" written and illustrated by Jodi Hills, published by TRISTAN Publishing. "Lipstick" celebrates the beauty of all women, their triumphs, tears, strengths and struggles and through it all the smiles that mark survival. A great girlfriend gift!

"On Christmas Eve" by Ann M. Martin, published by Scholastic Press, tells the story of Christmas Eve, 1958. Eight-year-old Tess McAlister believes in the magic of Christmas and when she meets Santa Claus, she has many questions and a wish for her best friend, Sarah. (Middle Reader)

"A Christmas Secret" by Anne Perry and published by Ballantine. Perry writes and reflections of and about Lake Superior. It's a stunning coffee table book. For more information, go to www.whisperwood.net.

"Lake Superior Secrets" by photographer Bruce Montagne, published by Ann Arbor Media Group. It is a spectacular gift book of photographs

and reflections of and about Lake Superior. It's a stunning coffee table book. For more information, go to www.whisperwood.net.

Inspire adults

"The Twelve Days of Christmas: Unwrapping the Gifts" by Curtis G. Almquist and published by Cowley Publications. This book offers an inspirational message of hope that includes the topics of love, revelation, forgiveness, joy, hope, humility, companionship, gratitude and peace.

"A Cup of Christmas Tea" written by Tom Hogg and illustrated by Warren Hanson, published by Waldman House Press. Now in its 25th year, this New York Times Bestseller is the story of a young man's reluctant visit to an elderly aunt at Christmas and the unexpected joy it brings!

"Believe" written and illustrated by Jodi Hills, published by TRISTAN Publishing. "Believe" is an inspiring story about finding the ability to believe in yourself and others. The timeless art of believing is something that the human spirit, both young and old struggles to embrace everyday.

"The Station" written by Robert Hastings, illustrated by Marilyn Brown and published by TRISTAN Publishing. "The Station" brings a profound message that reminds one to embrace the journey of life. Designed as a keepsake, the beautiful illustrations and texture make this a great gift.

"Comfort and Joy" by Kristin Hannah and published by Ballantine. There are times in every person's life when they would like to start over. This is the heartwarming story of Joy Candelario and her journey of acceptance and reconciliation as she begins a new life. You'll shed a tear or two. (Fiction)

"A Christmas Secret" by Anne Perry and published by Ballantine. Perry writes

a wonderful Christmas mystery that is both sinister and hopeful. Her vivid characters and sense of time and place helps you lose yourself in the story. (Mystery)

For middle school to young adult

"Notes from the Midnight Driver" by Jordan Sonnenblick is published by Scholastic Press. Geared towards ages 10 to 16. And you think you're life is tough. 16-year-old Alex Gregory miscalculated the consequences of his anger and now he's doing hard time in a nursing home attending to Sol, a cantankerous old curmudgeon who's writing the last chapter of his life. Sonnenblick delivers a great, quirky story with snappy patter rapped up nicely in a life lesson.

"I'd Tell You I Love You, But Then I'd Have to Kill You" by Ally Carter and published by Hyperion. Cammie Morgan is a second-generation Gallagher girl who speaks fourteen languages and knows how to kill a man seven different ways (one of which makes use of uncooked spaghetti), so she's no dummy. Except when it comes to boys. Don't expect to hide this book with the local paper and get by with the subtleties while reading it. Giggles and guffaws will blow your cover.

"Exploratoria" by Pat Murphy, Ellen Macaulay and the Exploratorium staff, published by Little, Brown and Company. If you have a curious child or a budding scientist, "Exploratoria" is a book that will teach and entertain. Watch the excitement build and the desire to learn and explore grow.

"On Christmas Eve" by Ann M. Martin, published by Scholastic Press, tells

the story of Christmas Eve, 1958. Eight-year-old Tess McAlister believes in the magic of Christmas and when she meets Santa Claus, she has many questions and a wish for her best friend, Sarah. (Middle Reader)

Children

"PEEF the Christmas Bear," "PEEF and the Baby Sister" and "A Silent Night for PEEF" all written by Tom Hogg and illustrated by Warren Hanson, published by Waldman House Press.

"Christmas Bear" is the tender story about a teddy bear, handmade by Santa. PEEF and Santa become best friends, but PEEF knows that he needs to belong and bring happiness to a child. "Baby Sister" is the fourth book in the PEEF series. PEEF and the Baby Sister celebrate the changing dynamics of a family with the introduction of a new sibling. In "Silent Night" PEEF and Santa are reunited in this warm sequel. Santa visits his little friend and sees that he is a little faded and torn. But PEEF teaches him a lesson about knowing who you are where you should be in life.

"The Mark of the Maker" written by Tom Hogg, illustrated by Warren Hanson and published by Waldman House Press. "The Mark of the Maker" tells the biblical story of Joseph. Timeless and universal themes unfold the relationship between father and son, faith and wisdom and a legacy of excellence.

'A GOOD YEAR' IS A VERY AVERAGE FILM FOR A GREAT DIRECTOR AND AN EVEN BETTER STAR



HOLLYWOOD ENDING

A GOOD YEAR (PG-13) ★★★ (OF 5)

Reviewed by Daniel E. Jennis

Russell Crowe has made a career out of playing dynamic yet flawed characters. He was a gladiator with an extra ounce of pride, a mathematical genius unable to escape the horrors of his illness, and a boxer whose love of family pushed him into the ring one last time. But in "A Good Year," a tame, though reasonably well-made romantic comedy that once again pairs Crowe and director Ridley Scott, the main character is neither dynamic nor flawed enough to build a poignant storyline.

Crowe plays Max Skinner, a British investment broker who isn't above manipulating the stock market in order to make a quick buck. His best friends either manage his finances or assist him in his insider trading endeavors, and he feels that he lacks the time to do anything other than work and celebrate his greed.

After an especially profitable day on the market, Skinner receives a notice that his Uncle Henry (Albert Finney) has died and willed the businessman his lavish vineyard in Provence, France. Skinner flies to France in order to hastily sell the place, but before he can sign the correct forms,

his decision becomes complicated by the appearance of a young American (Abbie Cornish) who claims to be Henry's illegitimate daughter and the rightful heir to the vineyard.

The heart of the film concerns the transformation that Skinner undergoes as he reacquaints himself with the vineyard and begins to relive the memories that concern a childhood spent with his mischievous and fun-loving uncle.

At the same time, Skinner meets up with a beautiful local waitress (Marion Cotillard) who attempts to change his hectic and uncaring lifestyle. The experiences of this vacation cause the neurotic investor to question his existence and consider the possibility of a future in France.

The film's message is certainly sweet and heartwarming, yet the director often treats the material with boorish indifference instead of excited endorsement.

"A Good Year" is technically very sound, and possesses a classy and sophisticated mood. The comedy is well executed, and contains a strong degree of charm and wit that is reminiscent of a classic Hepburn-Tracy comedy.

The cinematography beautifully highlights the sun-bathed French landscape and the neatly ordered grounds of the sprawling vineyard. In addition, the slow-paced direction effectively juxtaposes the frantic London atmosphere with the relaxed and leisurely spirit of France.

Crowe turns in a decent, though not remarkable performance, and provides a strong enough anchor for the rather bland storyline. Although he is expressive and charming as usual, I can't help but feel that Crowe's acting is forced at times, as if he is just going through the motions, while preparing to move on to his next film.

If this is the case, I can't really blame him. "A Good Year" is a very average film for a great director and an even better star.



off the clock



need something to do after you're off the clock? check Southwest Saturday for the latest entertainment events in your area!

POT ROAST, A CLASSIC AMERICAN COMFORT FOOD



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

By Phillip Severson

As we make the transition from fall into winter some of my favorite comfort foods are less expensive cuts of beef, pork, lamb, and poultry braised in broth, onions, carrots, celery, wine and fresh herbs. As a child I have fond memories of my mother's pot roast on a cold chilly day. My version

is leaner and bolder and can be made a day in advance. The following day the end result is a dish with more complex flavor and texture. I remove all the beef fat and cut the large chuck roast into individual roasts or portions. The roasts are seared on all sides in heart-healthy fat producing fondos or brown bits on the bottom of the pan. These caramelized juices become part of the finished sauce flavored with sherry, espresso and gently simmered, creating a delicious, colorful, and fork tender pot roast. Serve with garlic mashed potatoes, oven roasted vegetables, red wine, and a well lit fireplace.

Severson caters to private dinner parties and teaches private or group cooking lessons. He can be reached at phillsef@netnet.net or (612) 802-0616. To see past recipes, visit www.letsgosouthwest.com.

Pan Seared Braised Pot Roast

Ingredients

- 2½ pounds, beef chuck roast
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons canola oil
- 1 cup onion, small dice
- ½ cup celery, small dice
- ½ cup carrot, small dice
- 1 tablespoon flour
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tablespoon tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon espresso, ground fine
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme
- 2 bay leaves
- ½ cup dry sherry or red wine
- 1½ quart homemade or store-bought quality chicken stock
- Horseradish for garnish

Method

With a boning knife trim all excess fat off roast and cut in four quarters. Preheat heavy duty braising pan on med-high heat. Sprinkle individual roasts with salt and pepper. Add two tablespoons of the oils in pan. Place meat in hot pan seared side down for 4 minutes. Lightly season topside with salt and pepper. Turn, sear and brown meat for about 4 minutes. Brown the other two sides as well. Total

sear time is about 12 minutes. Remove pan seared roasts and set aside. Add remaining 2 tablespoons of oils, onions, carrots, and celery on low heat. Stir on and off with a wooden spoon picking up all the golden brown bits off the bottom of the pan. Turn heat to low-med and add flour. Cook about 3 minutes, stirring frequently. Add garlic, cook and stir 1 minute. Add tomato paste, wine, thyme, and bay leaves, cook and stir 1 minute. Add chicken broth and bring to a simmer. Add roasts, reserved juices, cover and simmer about 3½ to 4 hours on low. Check meat—it should be tender but with a little texture, not falling apart. Remove meat and cover in warm area. Serve with garlic mashed potatoes and oven-roasted vegetables. Ladle reduced sauce over roast and around potatoes. Top with a teaspoon of horseradish.

Serves 4