Goodman, Allegra

**Intuition**

Hailed as "a writer of uncommon clarity" by the New Yorker, National Book Award finalist Allegra Goodman has dazzled readers with her acclaimed works of fiction, including such beloved bestsellers as The Family Markowitz and Kaaterskill Falls. Now she returns with a bracing new novel, at once an intricate mystery and a rich human drama set in the high-stakes atmosphere of a prestigious research institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Sandy Glass, a charismatic publicity-seeking oncologist, and Marion Mendelssohn, a pure, exacting scientist, are codirectors of a lab at the Philpott Institute dedicated to cancer research and desperately in need of a grant. Both mentors and supervisors of their young postdoctoral protégés, Glass and Mendelssohn demand dedication and obedience in a competitive environment where funding is scarce and results elusive. So when the experiments of Cliff Bannaker, a young postdoc in a rut, begin to work, the entire lab becomes giddy with newfound expectations. But Cliff's rigorous colleague and girlfriend, Robin Decker suspects the unthinkable: that his findings are fraudulent. As Robin makes her private doubts public and Cliff maintains his innocence, a life-changing controversy engulfs the lab and everyone in it.

Hedges, Chris

**War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning**

For Chris Hedges, a reporter for The New York Times who was a foreign correspondent for 15 years, war was like a drug. Under the spell of its elixir he was imprisoned in Sudan, expelled from Libya, ambushed in Central America and shot at in Kosovo; he has uncovered mass graves and witnessed atrocities that haunt him. He has seen fellow war correspondents who, like him, traveled from one war zone to another, had their luck run out and got killed. "There is a part of me -- maybe it is a part of many of us -- that decided at certain moments that I would rather die like this than go back to the routine of life," he says. "The chance to exist for an intense and overpowering moment, even if it meant certain oblivion, seemed worth it in the midst of war -- and very stupid once the war ended."

Then, after a decade and a half of war reporting, Hedges hung it up. He has stepped back to reflect on the carnage he witnessed. The result is a brilliant, thoughtful, timely and unsettling book whose greatest merit is that it will rattle jingoists, pacifists, moralists, nihilists, politicians and professional soldiers equally. War, Hedges finds, "exposes the capacity for evil that lurks not far below the surface within all of us." We are all culpable.

Hosseini, Khaled

**The Kite Runner**

This powerful first novel, by an Afghan physician now living in California, tells a story of fierce cruelty and fierce yet redeeming love. Both transform the life of Amir, Khaled Hosseini's privileged young narrator, who comes of age during the last peaceful days of the monarchy, just before his country's revolution and its invasion by Russian forces.
But political events, even as dramatic as the ones that are presented in "The Kite Runner," are only a part of this story. A more personal plot, arising from Amir's close friendship with Hassan, the son of his father's servant, turns out to be the thread that ties the book together. The fragility of this relationship, symbolized by the kites the boys fly together, is tested as they watch their old way of life disappear.

Amir is served breakfast every morning by Hassan; then he is driven to school in the gleaming family Mustang while his friend stays home to clean the house. Yet Hassan bears Amir no resentment and is, in fact, a loyal companion to the lonely boy, whose mother is dead and whose father, a rich businessman, is often preoccupied. Hassan protects the sensitive Amir from sadistic neighborhood bullies; in turn, Amir fascinates Hassan by reading him heroic Afghan folk tales. Then, during a kite-flying tournament that should be the triumph of Amir's young life, Hassan is brutalized by some upper-class teenagers. Amir's failure to defend his friend will haunt him for the rest of his life.

Kidder, Tracey
Mountains Beyond Mountains: Healing the World: The Quest of Paul Farmer

"The world is full of miserable places," Tracy Kidder writes. "One way of living comfortably is not to think about them or, when you do, to send money." "Mountains Beyond Mountains" is about one physician's quest to relieve suffering in just the kind of places we do not like to think about. In a stylistic departure from most of Kidder's previous books, he writes in the first person, offering himself as a character and even as a foil, so that his own reactions of admiration, skepticism, exasperation and awe provide a second lens by which to see Dr. Paul Farmer.

A latter-day Schweitzer, Paul Farmer divides his time between the Harvard medical complex -- a "Wall Street of medicine," as Kidder describes it -- and Haiti. "Out there in the little village of Cange . . . in one of the most impoverished, diseased, eroded and famished regions of Haiti, there was this lovely walled citadel, Zanmi Lasante. I wouldn't have thought it much less improbable if I'd been told it had been brought by spaceship." The Zanmi Lasante hospital serves about a million people and represents years of single-minded effort by Paul Farmer.

O’Brien, Tim
The Things They Carried

Only a handful of novels and short stories have managed to clarify, in any lasting way, the meaning of the war in Vietnam for America and for the soldiers who served there. With "The Things They Carried," Tim O'Brien adds his second title to the short list of essential fiction about Vietnam. As he did in his novel "Going After Cacciato" (1978), which won a National Book Award, he captures the war's pulsating rhythms and nerve-racking dangers. But he goes much further. By moving beyond the horror of the fighting to examine with sensitivity and insight the nature of courage and fear, by questioning the role that imagination plays in helping to form our memories and our own versions of truth, he places "The Things They Carried" high up on the list of best fiction about any war.

"The Things They Carried" is a collection of interrelated stories. A few are unremittingly brutal; a couple are flawed two-page sketches. The publisher calls the book "a work of
fiction," but in no real sense can it be considered a novel. No matter. The stories cohere. All deal with a single platoon, one of whose members is a character named Tim O'Brien. Some stories are about the wartime experiences of this small group of grunts. Others are about a 43-year-old writer - again, the fictional character Tim O'Brien - remembering his platoon's experiences and writing war stories (and remembering writing stories) about them. This is the kind of writing about writing that makes Tom Wolfe grumble. It should not stop you from savoring a stunning performance. The overall effect of these original tales is devastating.

Roy, Arundhati

The God of Small Things

"The God of Small Things," Arundhati Roy's dazzling first novel, begins as a sort of mystery story. What caused the boy named Estha to stop talking? What sent his twin sister, Rahel, into exile in the United States? Why did their beautiful mother, Ammu, end up dying alone in a grimy hotel room? What killed their English cousin, Sophie Mol? And why has a "whiff of scandal" involving sex and death come to surround their bourgeois family? While such questions may sound crudely melodramatic, they provide the narrative architecture of a novel that turns out to be as subtle as it is powerful, a novel that is Faulknerian in its ambitious tackling of family and race and class, Dickensian in its sharp-eyed observation of society and character. A screenwriter who grew up in Kerala, India, Ms. Roy creates a richly layered story of familial betrayal and thwarted romantic passion by cutting back and forth between time present and time past. Set in southern India against a backdrop of traditional religious and caste taboos, her story depicts the tragic confluence of events -- both personal and political, private and public -- that bring about the murder of an innocent man and the dissolution of a family.

Stephenson, Neal

Zodiac

Stephenson's (The Big U) improbable hero is Sangamon Taylor, a high-tech jack-of-all-trades who inhales nitrous oxide for kicks and scouts environmental hazards for GEE, the Group of Environmental Extremists. Taylor particularly wants to nab the polluters of Boston Harbor, whose toxic sludge he monitors by zipping from illegal pipeline to illegal pipeline in his inflatable Zodiac raft. His work is slow-going and boring until the concentration of deadly PCBs rises inexplicably and then mysteriously drops to nothing. And then the "eco-thriller" begins: the bad guys are everywhere as Taylor ferrets out the connections between his bizarre landlord, a nerdy friend from college who's at work on a top-secret genetic-engineering project for a high-tech company, an industrialist-turned-Presidential-candidate and the crazed fans of Poyzen Boyzen, a heavy-metal band. In creating this all-too-conceivable story of industry and science running amok, Stephenson puts his technological knowledge elegantly to use, but never lets gadgets and gizmos take over the story. The characters are entertaining, if broadly drawn, and the rip-roaring conclusion will make a dandy denouement in the movie rendition. Film rights to Warner Brothers.