

Tuesday, February 21 at 7:00 p.m.

Senator's Wife by Sue Miller

Meri is 37, newly married and newly pregnant, standing on the cusp of her life as a wife and mother, and recognizing with some terror the gap between reality and expectation. Delia, her neighbor in the adjoining New England town house, is twice Meri's age, the wife of Tom Naughton, a venerated former U.S. senator --- a man whose habitual infidelities are an open secret in Washington. As dissimilar as they may appear, these two women find themselves leading strangely parallel lives, reckoning with the contours and mysteries of marriage, one refined and abraded by years of complicated intimacy, the other barely begun.

Tuesday, March 20 at 7:00 p.m.

Bel Canto by Ann Patchett

In the vice president's mansion in an unnamed South American country, a lavish party is taking place to celebrate the birthday of a visiting Japanese executive. An American opera singer is entertaining the guests, dignitaries and high-ranking officials from around the world, when suddenly the room is plunged into darkness. Terrorists invade the mansion and set in motion a series of events that irrevocably alters the life of every person involved.

Much the same as an opera takes the listener through various stages of emotions; Bel Canto delivers the same impact for the reader. The beauty of the music is always present -- "soon enough the days were divided into three states: the anticipation of her singing, the pleasure of her singing, and the reflection of her singing" -- in stark contrast to the harsh reality of the situation. Mesmerizing with its lyrical prose, Bel Canto builds to an unexpected and poignant crescendo that resonates with emotion.

Tuesday, April 17 at 7:00 p.m.

Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague by Geraldine Brooks

With an intensely observant eye, a rigorous regard for period detail, and assured, elegant prose, Brooks re-creates a year in the life of a remote British village decimated by the bubonic plague. Inspired by the actual town commemorated as Plague Village because of the events that transpired there in 1665-1666, Brooks tells her harrowing story from the perspective of 18-year-old Anna Frith, a widow with two young sons. Anna works as a maid for vicar Michael Mompellion and his gentle, selfless wife, Elinor, who has taught her to read. When bubonic plague arrives in the community, the vicar announces it as a scourge sent by God; obeying his command, the villagers voluntarily seal themselves off from the rest of the world. The vicar behaves nobly as he succors his dwindling flock, and his wife, aided by Anna, uses herbs to alleviate their pain. As deaths mount, however, grief and superstition evoke mob violence against "witches," and cults of self-flagellation and devil worship. With the facility of a prose artist, Brooks unflinchingly describes barbaric 17th-century customs and depicts the fabric of life in a poor rural area.

Tuesday, May 15 at 7:00 p.m.

Atonement by Ian McEwan

On a hot summer day in 1935, thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis witnesses a moment's flirtation between her older sister, Cecilia, and Robbie Turner, the son of a servant and Cecilia's childhood friend. However, Briony's incomplete grasp of adult motives—together with her precocious literary gifts—brings about a crime that will change all their lives. As it follows that crime's repercussions through the chaos and carnage of World War II and into the close of the twentieth century, **Atonement** engages the reader on every conceivable level, with an ease and authority that mark it as a genuine masterpiece.

Tuesday, June 12 at 7:00 p.m.

Turnip Blues by Helen Campbell

75-year-old Mary Kuzo and Mary Lemack have been friends since the seventh grade and have seen each other through joy and grief (they have buried four husbands between them). So when the exuberant Mrs. Lemack decides to make a seven-hour pilgrimage from the western Pennsylvania town of Braddock to the Philadelphia grave of her idol, Bessie Smith, wry, arthritic narrator Mrs. Kuzo naturally (if reluctantly) goes along for the ride. Seated in the passenger's seat of Mrs. Lemack's Firebird, Mrs. Kuzo has plenty of time to remember her past, recalling the prejudice she and other Slavs faced as "Hunkies," her economic struggles, her clashes with her family, their suffering over the death of a sister and the ravages brought down on them by class prejudice and alcoholism. Ably characterized and deftly comic, this elderly-widows-on-the-road tale is marked by a breezy style that makes a pungent counterpoint to the actual tribulations of both women's' lives.

Tuesday, July 17 at 7:00 p.m.

Growing Up by Russell Baker

Russell Baker, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1979, deserves to be a national treasure based on this book alone. Starting from humble beginnings in the mountains of West Virginia, Baker weathered a childhood that spanned the entire Depression, and later found success as a big city newspaperman. It traces his youth in rural Virginia, from the death of his father when he was only five through his growing up years between the wars. The rest of the book is a paean to his mother, a strong-willed optimist who never accepted defeat as an alternative to success. This is an iconic and magical piece of literature, a story of courage and love, of the bonds of family in spite of tension and disagreement.

Tuesday, August 7 at 7:00 p.m.

All Over But the Shoutin' by Rick Bragg

A haunting memoir about growing up dirt-poor in the deep South, and about struggling to leave the past behind while still deeply tied to it through bonds of love and responsibility. This moving account is one man's determination to rewrite his family history and to carve out a life based on the strength of his mother's encouragement and belief. Written with refreshing honesty and marvelous humor, it paints an unforgettable picture of the love and suffering that lie at the heart of every family.

Tuesday, September 4 at 7:00 p.m.

Hell of a Place to Lose a Cow: An American Hitchhiking Odyssey by Tim Brookes

Tim Brookes was a 20-year-old Oxford student when he first succumbed to the lure of America's open road. Equipped with a change of clothes, a cheap guitar, and the youthful wanderlust of the "Easy Rider" era, he spent the summer of '73 hitchhiking from the East Coast to the West Coast and back again, an exhilarating experience that ultimately led him to leave old England to settle in New England. Twenty-five years later, he hit the road again, traveling light and following his thumb in a free-form re-creation of his first cross-country trip. His friends told him that times had changed, that fear stalked America's highways now, and that the only drivers who would pick him up were bound to be as crazy as he was to undertake such an odyssey. However, his friends were wrong, as this vivid and eventful book makes colorfully clear. Highlighted by wonderful photographs, "A Hell of a Place to Lose a Cow" revisits old stomping grounds and discovers new ones, tracks down old friends and makes new ones, remembers old impressions of America and deftly sketches new vignettes of a country at once very different and surprisingly the same.