

Ten top titles for winter reading

Worldwide Pearls

By Barbara Hoffert

Bodrožić, Ivana. *The Hotel Tito*. Seven Stories. Nov. 2017. 176p. tr. from Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać. ISBN 9781609807955. \$21.95; ebk. ISBN 9781609807962. f

For the young protagonist of Bodrožić's debut novel, winner of France's Prix Ulysse and several Croatian and Balkan-area awards, ordinary worries about boys, clothes, and grades are set against a horrific backdrop. The book opens in summer 1991 as the Croatian war for independence flares up in her hometown of Vukovar, and she's sent to the coast with her older brother. But while her mother eventually joins them, her father stays behind to fight with the Croatian forces and ends up at Vukovar hospital, which astute readers will remember as the site of a terrible massacre. Squatting in an abandoned apartment, then a former political school (contemptuously called the Hotel Tito by its disillusioned residents), the siblings are now refugees, living with hundreds sharing their plight and regarded with contempt by those who don't. **VERDICT** Drawing on personal experience, Bodrožić is remarkably adept at blending a coming-of-age story about a girl who both knows and doesn't know what's happening with a starkly, almost matter-of-factly delivered picture of suffering we should not forget.

Fo, Dario. *Holy Jester! The Saint Francis Fables*. Opus. Dec. 2017. 160p. tr. from Italian by Mario Pirovano. illus. by the author. ISBN 9781623160821. \$38.95. f

As Nobel Prize winner Fo explains in his introduction, in the Middle Ages, jesters were both loved (by the multitudes) and reviled (by those in power who suffered their barbs), and St. Francis of Assisi took the appellation Holy Jester as a matter of pride. After Francis's death, the Vatican remade the rogue friar—famed for his gutsy, performative sermons—into a docile soul. Here, Fo uses a witty vernacular to resurrect the real Francis in fables that take him from his stone masonry days through his work for the church. In "Francis Meets the Wolf in Gubbio," he's determined to chat with a marauding wolf despite protests: "You've gone crazy again. First you embrace

the lepers, then you strip off naked in the church and now you want to talk to wolves! Why don't you just write the Wolf a letter instead?" What follows is a reflection on our responsibilities for our actions, with the wolf later helping Francis out of a scrape. **VERDICT** A bold, bright Francis for our time, with illustrations to match, and charmingly translated.

Franzosini, Edgardo. *The Animal Gazer*. New Vessel. Jan. 2018. 128p. tr. from Italian by Michael F. Moore. ISBN 9781939931528. pap. \$16.95; ebk. ISBN 9781939931542. f

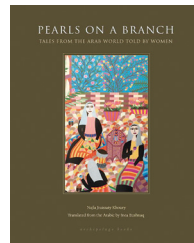
Brother of the famed automaker, the eccentric, ever dandily dressed Rembrandt Bugatti moves from Milan to Paris to pursue his artistic inclinations and ends up casting his bronzes at the foundry used by new friend Rodin. (In a flashback, we get a sparkling anecdote about the two brothers burying three automobile engines in Ettore's backyard.) Rembrandt becomes increasingly intrigued by the animals at the zoos in Paris and Antwerp, observing them carefully and seeming to understand and empathize with them, as evidenced by his massive sculptures. The tone is mellifluous throughout, and it all sounds charming. But the reader has already been jolted awake on page two, as Rembrandt's concierge observes offhandedly, "The Germans continue to advance," and the narrative is soon thrust into World War I. Bombs are pouring down on Antwerp, and zoo officials are forced to make a terrible decision about their animals that shocks Rembrandt—and readers—to the core. **VERDICT** Multi-award-winning Italian author Franzosini's English-language debut is an irresistible, elegantly conceived example of biographical fiction.

Kawabata, Yasunari. *Dandelions*. New Directions. Dec. 2017. 128p. tr. from Japanese by Michael Emmerich. ISBN 9780811224093.

pap. \$14.95; 9780811224109. f

Left incomplete when he committed suicide in 1972, Nobel Prize winner Kawabata's meditation on madness is nevertheless wholly satisfying. Ineko has been taken to the Ikuta Mental Hospital by her mother and her lover, Mr. Kuno, who wants desperately to marry Ineko. But she suffers from a bizarre and exceedingly rare affliction: she is sometimes unable to see the body of Mr. Kuno. The pearlescent prose relates a sparring, increasingly agitated exchange as the mother and lover walk away from the hospital with Ineko ringing its bells in the background. Why is Ineko so disturbed? Does it have anything to do with the accidental death of her father, a soldier during the

war, as the two rode horseback together? Is Mr. Kuno right that "sanity and madness are two sides of the same coin"? Why does Mr. Kuno think he sees, improbably, a white rat and a white dandelion? **VERDICT** Philosophical yet touched by an eerie magic; for sophisticated readers and lovers of smart, spooky tales.



Khoury, Najla Jraissaty. *Pearls on a Branch: Tales from the Arab World Told by Women*. Archipelago. Mar. 2018. 270p. tr. from Arabic by Inea Bushnaq. ISBN 9780914671961. pap. \$18; ebk. ISBN 9780914671893. f/FOLKLORE

Collected by Khoury as the basis for plays performed by the traveling theater group she founded during Lebanon's civil war, these tales are radiant with sunlight and flowers, jinns and spirits, palaces and sultans. The setting you might expect, which makes them refreshingly different and a pleasure to read. Yet the themes will resonate with anyone who loves fairy tales and folklore, pointing out commonalities within the Middle East framework. From comeuppance and transformation, sly tricksters tricked, good people rescued from bad ogres, wishes satisfied, beautiful young women finding the right (rich or royal) man, and

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