

## Three Best Sellers for Your Must-Read List

As we wend our weary way through this endless economic situation, very few books about the subject actually make me laugh, but I have found one that does: *Boomerang, Travels in the New Third World*, by Michael Lewis. (You know, the guy who wrote *The Big Short*, *The Blind Side*, and *Moneyball* – among others.) He discusses the financial ruination of Iceland, Ireland, and Greece, giving us a glimpse at the characteristics of their societies as they handled the glorious temptation of cheap credit available across the world from 2002 to 2007. Mr. Lewis makes topics like the European sovereign debt, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank not only understandable but also fascinating even to readers like me, who rarely read the business pages or watch CNBC. This little book (212 pages) hilariously explains the fiscal recklessness behind the headlines we read about Europe's growing debt problems and the risk that debt poses to the United States and the rest of the world.

It is quite clear that Icelandic fishermen becoming inexperienced foreign currency traders should have listened to their wives. In just a short space of time, they tanked a solid 1,100-year-old economy based on fishing. Greeks (even the Greek Parliament) should just pay their taxes. They also need to consider retiring later than 50 years of age, an option available to those in "arduous" jobs, such as hair dressers, waiters, musicians, and radio announcers. Bribery is rampant in Greece; kind of reminds me of our own country's lobbying practices, but in Greece it's real bribery. And it would be nice if Ireland had had tenants lined up before almost everyone became a real estate developer, leaving the Irish landscape littered with unfinished housing and commercial projects, along with rusting cranes and construction debris. The connecting thread through this entire debacle (aside from stupidity) is the attacking of the messenger: nobody wanted to hear that what they had was a false prosperity and therefore doomed to fail.

So here we are, skating along on thin ice as we also ignore the warnings of today. Long ago, in the 1930's, the world was in the throes of a deep depression. Amor Towles' stunning new novel, *Rules of Civility*, gives us a glimpse of life for a young woman, Katy Kontent, in Manhattan during those times. Think *Mad Men* or *Sex in the City* or *The Great Gatsby*. She and her fresh-faced boarding house friend from the Midwest set out on New Year's Eve, 1937, with high hopes and three dollars between them. You immediately become lost in a world of silk stockings, furs, and hip flasks; a snowball fight with college students and the kindness of a wealthy stranger who is trying to live his life according to a teenaged George Washington's *101 Rules of Civility*.

Both girls fall in love with him and all he represents. The spur of the moment decisions they start making will define their lives for decades to come, as Katy journeys from a law firm secretarial pool through the upper echelons of New York society in search of a brighter future. Any time there is a best selling book with the word "rules" in the title, you know those rules will be broken. Amor Towles presents us with a period piece, a love letter to a great American city at the end of the depression, but there is a lot of tarnish on all that monogrammed silver.

In another city, and going back even further, we can enjoy Paula McLain's *The Paris Wife*. Based on fact, this novel of the 1920's is a book of literary tourism, including the expatriate American artists and writers of Paris often referred to as the "Lost Generation." Hadley Richardson fell in love with an impoverished Ernest Hemingway, marrying him in 1921 and divorcing him in 1927. She was a fine and decent person, but she was the starter wife of a man who wound up treating her badly. When they got to Paris, Hadley was planted in the midst of famous, ambitious people, and the reader can rub shoulders (and bend elbows) with celebrated literary figures. Among those who helped Ernest as a young writer were Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald and James Joyce.

The reader spots trouble and gets smart long before the trusting and good-hearted Hadley does.

Once the Hemingway's son is born, her situation becomes untenable. Hard-partying bohemian expats don't much like babies. Then Hadley loses the valise with all of Ernest's early work, finally giving him an excuse to really be angry. His mind and body begin to wander. Ernest Hemingway was actually a louse. Due to an earlier lover's rejection during World War I, in future relationships he followed a pattern of abandoning a wife before she abandoned him.

Any or all of these three titles make for absorbing reading. Build a fire in the fireplace, have a cup of something delicious nearby, curl up with your kitty cat, and enjoy. Life is good.

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