



ROBERT HOLMES

## GOOD LIFE

Rombauer is among the wineries resourced in 'The California Directory of Fine Wineries.'

## Local Lit

*Our twice-yearly look at what the neighbors are up to*

Compiled by SUZANNE DALY,  
GRETCHEN GILES and GABE MELINE

New Orleans in summer. A well-dressed, well-spoken urbane woman attends the posh opening party of the newly refurbished Hotel Remy. All the beautiful people of the city are there. The hotel's fresh interior is blessed Crescent City-style with three Cajun priestesses undulating across the ballroom's marble floor. Suddenly, our woman feels a sharp pain in her side and falls, the victim of a stabbing. Awakening at the hospital, she begins to remember how this story unwound. So begins Novato novelist Tess Nottebohm's *'Sultry Days of Blood and Angels'* (Xlibris; \$27), a thick humid gumbo of 'Nawlins lore and mystery with plenty of sex stirred in to keep the afterlife, the current life and even our heroine's forgotten life spicy.—G.G.

Dedicated to the breath that inspired her to write *'River of Breath'* (iUniverse; \$22.95), 76-year-old Breathexperience™ practitioner Margot Biestman offers a diary of how breathing alternately helped and obstructed while writing the book. When in her 50s, Biestman had back pain. She came across a flyer for a Breathexperience™ workshop called "The Experience of Breath" and was struck by the authenticity and simplicity of breathing. In that first Breathexperience™ workshop, she writes, "I could begin to realize there was something deep that was happening within me, without my seeming to do anything."

In a personal, inside-the-author's-mind style, Biestman chronicles her feeling about her daughter's depression, her estrangement from her brother, her personal awakenings as a director of the Middendorf Institute for Breathexperience™—all with a comprehensive report on the author's own

breathing and her real-time reaction to that breathing. "My breath was held the whole time I wrote those lines," reads a typical passage, "specifically held in the usual place, at the end of exhale, so I could hardly receive my inhale. I'll never be satisfied this way, 'never good enough.'"

In poems with titles such as "Exploration of My Breath Supporting Me to Recognize My Illusion of Control," in cultural musings about the masculine principle of exhalation overriding the feminine principle of inhalation, and in scattered exciting and interpretive pages of art inspired by different breath forms, Biestman—who divides her time between Sonoma and Sausalito—reminds the reader to take a closer look at the thing that's with us from our first moment to our last.—G.M.

Offset printed in an edition of 300, *'Homeless in Petaluma'* (New Way Media; www.ennway.com) collects Michelle Baynes' poems from 13 years of working with Petaluma's homeless population. Baynes, whose career as a real estate agent selling houses evolved into street outreach to those with no houses, writes with alarming empathy about the people she's met along the way.

There's Nelson, the gracious, shy man who stayed on a boat in the Petaluma River's turning basin and who was struck by a truck while crossing the street. There's Jose, an Army reservist living underneath the D Street bridge waiting to ship off to Iraq, never to be seen again. There's John, who cries when he's brought a birthday cake from the soup kitchen and says that for his birthday he wants to stop drinking. There's the nameless character of "You Came to Me Crying," a devastating poem about a man who once gave \$800 business seminars before losing his house to foreclosure; death threatens him while trying to sleep by the Petaluma River, and suicide tempts him on the Golden Gate Bridge.

Baynes delivers with impressive succinctness the complex stories of those who have fallen through the cracks and eulogizes without syrupy sentiment those who didn't make it. Hope comes at the end, when the reader discovers that Baynes has returned to real estate, and has already sold houses to a number of lucky people she once assisted on the streets of Petaluma.—G.M.

Sleuthing in dusty attics, faded barns and long-forgotten storage containers often yields the most interesting treasures for diligent hunters. And that's where Lesa Tanner, a second-generation Graton native, discovered the bounty of photos comprised in her book, *'Images of America Series: Graton'* (Arcadia Publishing; \$21.99). With the help of the Graton Community Club, Tanner has assembled the first pictorial history of this tiny town, which includes 208 rare photographs with extensive captioning. The author used all original photos from private collections and the archives of the West County Museum and the Graton Community Club.

Tanner writes from a personal, hometown perspective, and not just a historical viewpoint. She tells a memoir of Graton, engaging readers with her vast, insider knowledge about the people and events in the photos. When she contacted older community members to ask for contributions for the project, she would

introduce herself by listing who her relatives were. "I was only allowed to use a lot of the personal material collected because of my connection to the community," Tanner recalls. "A stranger would not have been allowed this access. Being a hometown girl gave me a great advantage. The research was very fun and gave me a chance to visit a lot of the elders in our town."

While collecting the stories and accompanying photographs—sometimes a two-hour conversation might yield one picture—she quickly discovered that people were resistant to sharing for different reasons, such as family feuds, or family members who had taken and hidden the albums from other relatives. But persistence paid off, and the resulting book is an engrossing snapshot of this small, rural, agriculturally based town. The book is arranged chronologically, starting in the 1850s with the Gold Rush pioneers who find that wealth lies in farming rather than mining, and continues through a century of the town's rise and decline. It ends with Graton's 100th birthday in 2005, a fitting celebration of the heritage of this West County community.—S.D.

It was about a week after my sixth birthday when this social worker showed up where Mom and me lived in Redding. She found me asleep on the sofa, TV still on. Woke me up and told me she'd died. Mom." So begins "Learning to See Fish," one of 10 stories in Sonoma County writer Michael David Fels' new collection *'Gone to Ground'* (PublishAmerica; \$24.95). The title piece finds a divorced father of two rather happily living in nice, big hole that he's dug, a pleasure marred only because the boys aren't allowed to spend their weekend with him in it, 10 feet below the earth's crust. Using many different narrative voices, employing dialect and setting his characters in rough circumstances as well as more "ordinary" arcs familiar to North Bay residents, Fels has created a lovely swathe of humanity to populate his pages.—G.G.

Pick up the book. It's called *'Wickhead's Guide to Verbal Gusto'* (Groundbreaking Press; \$14.95). It's not written by anyone named Wickhead. Nope, it's written by a guy who works the night watch at a Sonoma winery near a ghost town. Name's Jim Kelly. Seems to be a bunch of flowery phrases. "There are well over 100 books on insults," says the press package. This book instead contains compliments. I crack the spine.

With what mellifluous verbiage are my formerly arid brain cells appeased! Bask anon, dear thirsty cerebella and medullae oblongata, for revealed unto thee shall be a cornucopia of wordly delight! Hark, for o'er the arduous journey of seven years' time comes a compendium of jovial ribaldry hewn from many thesauri, many Renaissance faires, many websites of surf terminology and many a flowery snippet of light dialogue culled ever so astutely from *Monty Python's Flying Circus!*

Yea, ever-curious and indefatigable specimen of humanity, cleave forth unto the bibliophilistic pleasure undertaken by perusing yon guide of assistive phraseology to pepper speech with the spice-mastery of Julia Child and punch oral genuflections with the uppercut of Rocky Marciano! Alight these containments upon the necks of humanity, that it may be

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bless'd henceforth with thy precocious pronouncements of positivity!

I close the book. I set it down. The workday resumes.—G.M.

If you don't want to have a baby, are you selfish? If you have tried the old-fashioned way to conceive and haven't yet succeeded, should you embrace the cost and uncertainty of medical intervention? If you've had one child, shouldn't you offer a sibling? If you conceive and aren't ready to have a baby, what path leads to the least grief? These questions and others are asked and answered by Healdsburg writer Marisol Schowengerdt in her self-published work, **'A Selfish Life?'** (\$13.99). Modra and Kevin have a loving marriage and financially secure life in Healdsburg, replete with hobby vineyard and sun-drenched windows. As agreed, Kevin prepares for a vasectomy on Modra's 38th birthday. They've been willing to let nature take its course but don't want to parent late-life teenagers. Onto this day come three other women, all of whom have the secret life of the uterus uppermost in their minds, and so *A Selfish Life?* unfurls questions, dilemmas, fears and even some of the joys that those with biological clocks ticking at all ends can feel.—G.G.

The best parties, whether for two or 200, serve luscious libations and fabulous food in a manner that promotes circulation among lively and interesting company. St. Helena's renowned chef Cindy Pawlcyn has been serving small plates to her ravenous fans for years, first at San Francisco's Fog City Diner and currently as the chef-owner of Mustards Grill, Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen, and Go Fish, all in the Napa Valley. The queen of kitchen mojo shares over 30 mouth-watering recipes in her latest cookbook, **'Cindy Pawlcyn's Appetizers'** (Ten speed Press; \$15.95).

Readers and eaters might start with simple chile-garlic peanuts, move on to chorizo and goat cheese half-moons or Mustard's famous onion rings, and slurp down some barbecued oysters. For the plate-happy, Pawlcyn offers a simple avocado-papaya salad, potato-leek pancakes and goat-cheese-stuffed Gypsy peppers. A few heartier plates featured could be a meal in themselves—think parsnip and mushroom lasagna or porcini mushroom pot pies. The cookbook is cleverly formatted as a small easel, allowing the cook to easily read the recipes, and then store it away in its hardcover case. Lavishly illustrated with colorful photographs, this little book is sure to make a big impression on the eyes as well as the taste buds. So throw a party, and test your own cooking mojo. Your friends will be glad you did.—S.D.

The image hovering against a stark white backdrop on the cover of **'Split: A Memoir of Divorce'** (New American Library; \$15) by recent divorcée Suzanne Finnamore says it all: a gilded but rusted padlock no longer locked, its shackle open, as if looking in the emptiness for something new upon which to hang and, if luck prevails, latch again. Finnamore, whose *Zygote Chronicles* won the *Washington Post's* Book of the Year in 2002, is that lock throughout this memoir, which begins with her husband drinking a pair of three-olive vodkatinis,

changing into a wool blazer, and driving out of her life in his very nice car.

And so it goes: the drinking, the support of girlfriends and family, the drinking, the plans for winning him back, the drinking, the divorce sex, the drinking and the inevitable realization: *he is not for me*. Beautifully written, Finnamore's story is a page-turning, emotional ride between funny and sad without going to extremes of either. Local readers will find familiar environs in Marin County enshrined, or reviled ("Kentfield," Finnamore sneers, "the very word seemed to exude money and nefarious intent"), and anyone, particularly women, who has been through what Finnamore goes through in these pages will be comforted by knowing that they and their broken locks are not alone.—G.M.

One of the truisms for those who live in wine country is that we rarely go winetasting. Sure, when the inevitable out-of-town guest arrives seeking a purple tongue, we'll grudgingly get out a thin designated-driver smile and take off, but otherwise, not so much. Sonoma journalist Marty Olmstead and Mill Valley photographer Robert Holmes might just plump that grin as the fourth edition of **'The California Directory of Fine Wineries'** (Wine House Press; \$19.95) knowledgeably profiles an eclectic group of Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino county wineries both in long narrative text and in an easy-to-read sidebar roundup that notes everything from the winery's owners ("Rubicon: Francis Ford and Eleanor Coppola") to the facility's current winemaker to nearby attractions (ignore all COPIA suggestions). Sized more like a first edition than a throw-it-in-the-backseat-and-go guide, *Fine Wineries* is intended to be actually read rather than scanned, and makes for fine preparation for perhaps even enjoying winetasting with out-of-town guests.—G.G.

Those who can read and understand sci-fi fiction are surely those who can read and understand long Russian novels. Both genres feature names and nicknames unseen by Occidental eyes, and each features emotions and situations less universal than a mere cherry orchard. Doubtless, Anne Wilkes' **'Awesome Lavratt'** (Unlimited Publishing; \$12.99) is a fun sci-fi read; the small amount that I was able to understand included plenty of lusty sex and an assured local send-up when heroine Aranna Navna and her Han Solo-like pal Horace Whistlestop careen into a place called Calistania. Navna has in tow the Awesome Lavratt, a device allowing her to read all minds and aiding her in a swift seduction of Horace. Those who labored a full summer on such as *Anna Karenina*, however, can't understand exactly what happens from there but see no reason not to good-naturedly assume that it's plenty of fun.—G.G.

It's hard to say when I got interested in old buildings (although a childhood fascination with the wooden outhouse in Bodega comes to mind). Since then, it's been a dusty, musty ride. You can keep your *Hustler* magazine any day over **'Historical Buildings of Sonoma County: A Pictorial Story of Yesterday's Rural Structures'** (3rd Wing Press; \$18.95), cuz buddy, photos of decaying local buildings are my porn. Just looking at the wooden outhouse pictured on



RON PARENTI

WAY OUT

Gabe Meline comes out in print declaring that photos of decaying outhouses are his porn, baby.

the cover brings me back to that first taste of dilapidated charm in Bodega, and stimulates the glands. *Where is it?* I ask myself. *I must know!*

Author Jack Withington, a third-generation Sonoma County resident, grew up on a farm in Penngrove and expertly describes the rural structures which he spent two years documenting with photographer and longtime friend Ron Parenti. Rather than a basic primer on the very well-known and well-documented historic buildings in the county, the rural structures featured are often on back roads, back alleys or tucked behind houses in backyards; one will not find the McDonald Mansion or Vallejo's home in this book. Instead, *Historical Buildings of Sonoma County* features feed mills, hop kilns, hatcheries, smoke houses, silos, stables, barns, public scales and grange halls—in other words, the tiny pearls, individually overlooked, that collectively give Sonoma County its soul.—G.M.

When Kimberly Poole, the owner of a small garden and kitchen shop in Kansas, begins to research her family lineage, she discovers that her family's name had been changed. Meanwhile, in

Seattle, a reluctant freelance journalist is assigned a story by his editor regarding the true paternity of Abraham Lincoln. Lots of Google searching and emailing brings these two stories together in **'The Lincoln Secret'** (Martin Pearl Publishing; \$13.99), in which author John McKinsey conjures a *Da Vinci Code*-esque historic novel from an ongoing theory about the true origins of America's most revered president.

McKinsey says *The Lincoln Secret* came about when he stumbled across an out-of-print book called *Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction: The True Genesis of a Wonderful Man*, published in 1899. It documents an alternate oral history that Lincoln was an illegitimate child actually fathered by one Abraham Enloe. When Nancy Hanks worked on Enloe's farm in North Carolina, the story goes, she became pregnant; she returned to Kentucky in shame, then married Thomas Lincoln, who accepted the child as his own. Interweaving this story into his novel, McKinsey has written a compelling mystery of genealogy, history and personal journey that questions not only the story of Lincoln but the truth of all history.—G.M.