

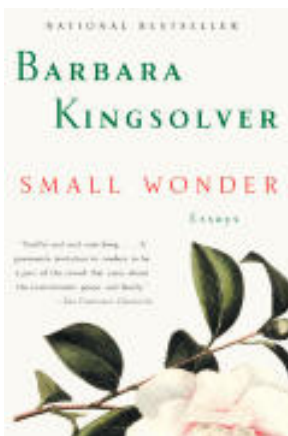
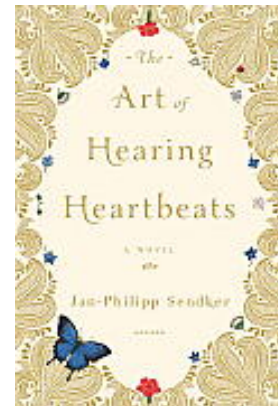
Now Reading: January, 2012  
By [Rhena Tantisunthorn](#)



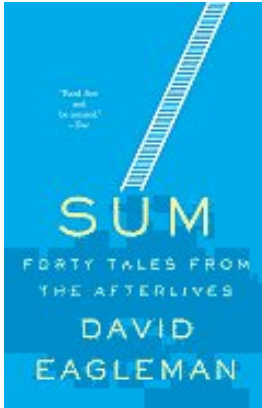
I finished Anita Diamant's [The Red Tent](#), which is a fictionalized account of Dinah, Jacob's daughter who is only barely mentioned in the Old Testament, over the holiday season. Diamant imaginatively and fully creates this little known world of Dinah and her four mothers, Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah. I had a serendipitous reading moment when I put down the book and the very next thing I picked up was an article in the New Yorker about the excavation of Gobekli Tepe, a Stonehenge-esque site in Turkey that reveals, according to some, that Early Neolithic hunter-gatherers may, indeed, have practiced a form of religion or spirituality. Pulling from the work of Jared Diamond, author of *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, amongst others, Elif Batuman goes on to suggest in his New Yorker piece that the biblical "fall" was actually the movement from hunter-gatherers to agrarian society. Batuman also indicates that pain of motherhood alluded to in the bible might be a metaphor for the increasingly confined role of women as people went from a relatively free nomadic existence to a patriarchal land-ownership system. The article revealed another interesting facet of the lives of Dinah and her mother as imagined by Diamant.

Other editors and columnists share their recent forays into essays, Burma, the afterlife, migration, and Chinese poetry below.

Fiction Co-Editor Suzanne Kamata shares, "I'm reading [The Art of Hearing Heartbeats](#) by German writer Jan-Philipp Sendker. It's about a Burmese-born father, a successful celebrity lawyer, who suddenly abandons his American wife and their daughter and disappears. The daughter, Julia, goes to Burma to find out the truth about her father's past - and maybe to find him. I know very little about the country, so I'm finding the folk beliefs and the cultural details fascinating. I think this book would appeal to readers who enjoyed Tea Obrecht's [The Tiger's Wife](#)."

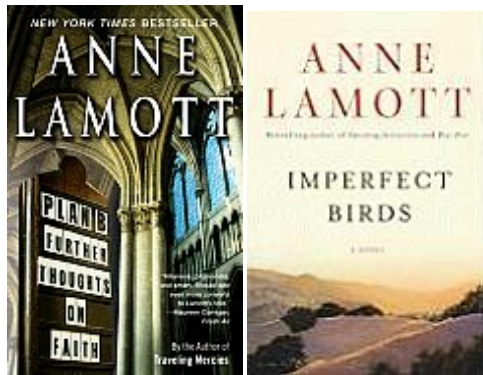


Christina Speed, Literary Reflections Co-Editor, writes "This month I am reading Barbara Kingsolver's collection of essays [Small Wonder](#). I find I really enjoy reading the personal essays of my favorite authors, as they offer insight into their personal views. Kingsolver's essays in this collection address such topics from her concern for life on our planet to the way we choose to oppose our enemies to the simple things we can do as humans to shift our perspective in a healthier direction. I have had this book on my shelf for a few weeks now, and I am especially glad it happens to be January as I read it. It is offering me just the nudges of introspection I crave as I step out into 2012."



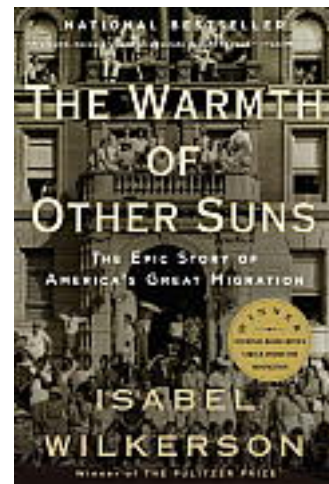
Editor-In-Chief, Caroline M. Grant just finished David Eagleman's fascinating collection of short stories, [Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives](#). "Each story is a very short, fully-realized snapshot of God, heaven, the afterlife, or our role here on Earth. Normally, I steer clear of fantasy or sci-fi, but these stories are so thought-provoking and exquisite, I find myself recommending the collection to a wide variety of friends. Here's a taste from the title story: 'In the afterlife you relive all your experiences, but this time with the events reshuffled into a new order: all the moments that share a quality are grouped together. You spend two months driving the street in front of your house, seven months having sex. You sleep for thirty years without opening your eyes. For five months straight you flip through magazines while sitting on a toilet.' Of course, I can't help thinking of the mom's version of this story: 15 straight months changing diapers, 3 weeks scraping flung sweet potatoes off the floor, 5 full days convincing a recalcitrant toddler to put his socks on. It'd better be a long afterlife for us, so that we get to

spend some time on other things!"



Four Worlds Columnist Avery Fischer Udagawa adds, "I am simultaneously finishing Anne Lamott's essay collection [Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith](#) and beginning her novel [Imperfect Birds](#), an eye-opening and sleep-disrupting portrait of teenage drug abuse and parental denial. Imperfect Birds keeps me grateful for messages threaded throughout both books about how the end of hope is also its beginning."

Creative Nonfiction Editor, Kate Haas, is reading [The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration](#), "Isabel Wilkerson's stunning chronicle of the Great Migration - the six million African Americans who left the South between 1915 and 1970. By focusing on the stories of three individuals who left at different times, Wilkerson is able to create a nuanced, detailed and riveting portrait of the migration as a whole. The book draws on scholarly studies and histories, but she incorporates them seamlessly into the narrative, so that it's almost like reading a novel. Wilkerson's writing is eloquent, and the way the stories of her principal characters come alive is a testament to the huge undertaking this project was - and to its success. This is one of the best books I've read in a long time."



Lastly, Nicole Stellon O'Donnell, Columns Editor, contributes, "I've been re-reading Tom Sexton's most recent collection of poems, [I Think Again of Those Ancient Chinese Poets](#). It's been cold here--minus forty



kind of cold. I don't want to go outside, yet I feel trapped being inside. Sexton honors that particular restlessness in his poem 'Aurora Borealis,' by acknowledging that, 'When it's cold foot away from the stove / and the door is rimmed with ice, it's best / to stay inside and read the Chinese poets,' and then adding:

Unless you sense, and you will, the aurora's  
green beginning, then go out and look up  
until your head tilts back and your mouth  
forms an O like that of a container being filled.

Sexton's poems remind me, no matter the temperature, to look up and let whatever light there is fill me."