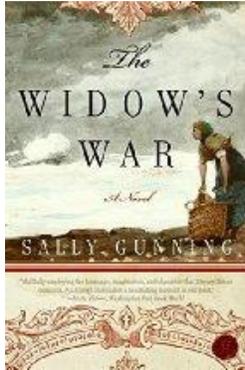


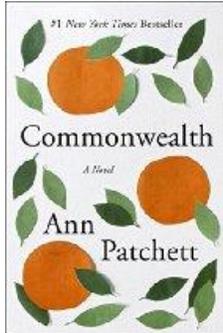
Book Talkin' January 2017

The Widow's War by Sally Cabot Gunning (2007)



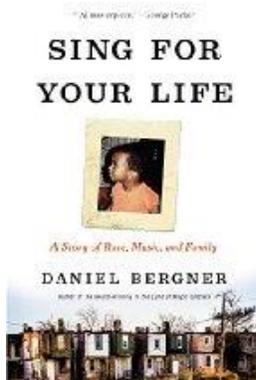
Here is the mother of all colonial historical novels! Lyddie, 39 year old widow of a whaler from Satucket (part of Brewster, Cape Cod), struggles to prevent church and custom from tearing her away from her home after her good husband's mysterious drowning. How joyous it is that Lyddie's an unabashedly sexual woman, not a cardboard cutout mashup of Abigail Adams and Betsy Ross. She's demanding, stubborn, and cantankerous as she seeks her independence. The obtrusive men in her life - her son-in-law, her attorney, and her native American next door neighbor, all feel it is their duty to plant themselves in her way. It's a rewarding, triumphant thrill ride for the reader. And there are two sequels!

Commonwealth by Ann Patchett (2016)



Ann Patchett is a remarkable novelist. She says, "I write the same book every time". Even if that's so, her devoted readers adore every word. This new novel challenges "Bel Canto" and "State of Wonder" as possibly her best. It's a series of set pieces in the midst of two families tied together by marriage and divorce and a complicated web of stepmothers and stepfathers. The real heroes are the six children, who come out scathed, as dads, barmaids, attorneys, bicycle builders, meditators, and dead. The star child is Franny, whose tales of waiting tables at Chicago's elegant Palmer House, and then as mistress to a faded author just glow with humor and pathos. Every chapter is a story onto itself and each could be held up as an example of how to mix plot and dialogue as the smoothest batter, with nary a lump. And it's even better upon second reading, which I did as soon as I finished the first time.

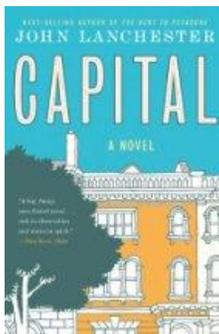
Sing for Your Life: A Story of Race, Music, and Family by Daniel Bergner (2016)



This is the remarkable story of Ryan Speedo Green's rise from imprisonment in a juvenile detention center to the stage of the Metropolitan Opera. Also contained within are meditations on how singing actually happens, what goes through the mind of someone who is completely off track at an early age, and on how intensely driven effort and determination can create unexpected outcomes. One of the strongest sections explores the history of " 'O! Man River" from the musical "Showboat" - and why Paul Robeson, Ryan Green, and other black men bitterly resent being compelled to sing it.

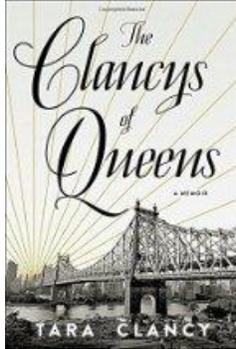
Green and the writer seem to have had a mind-meld in the prose - there's almost nothing hidden from the reader and one is compelled to further research Green's career in hopes of finding even more joy from his victories. Truly inspirational.

Capital by John Lanchester (2013)



A great big fat Brit novel, opening with strange postcards being sent to residents of upscale Pepys Road, London: WE WANT WHAT YOU HAVE. Well, who wouldn't? It's mostly mansions full of rich people in the runup to the financial crisis. But there's also a Pakistani family-owned corner shop, a Polish contractor, a Hungarian nanny, a traffic warden, and an elderly lady dying of cancer, with a secret in the attic. The rich family, especially the horribly spoiled Real Housewife of London, provides great contrast to the other neighbors who are just trying to get by. Multi PoVs, humor, and realism make this a perfect read for a few long winter's days. And it's not predictable at all. No stereotypes allowed.

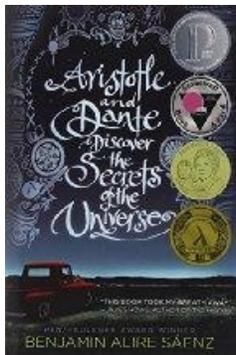
The Clancys of Queens by Tara Clancy (2016)



Like most memoirs, this one speeds up at the end: "So then after 200 pages on every day of my childhood, I got married and had kids and everything's great. See ya." Too bad, because there's a good deal of wit and spark in this one. Tara lives in three separate worlds: her cop father's boathouse in Broad Channel, a rough part of Queens; her mother's boyfriend's mansion in the Hamptons; and with her feisty, abrasive grandmother in a Queens geriatric haven. She is surrounded by real characters - all the denizens at her father's bar hangout, her girlfriends in school, and her mom's boyfriend, who encourages her to think above her reach and grasp. It's a very lively, well-told saga, and Tara may have had the best childhood ever, as unusual as it was.

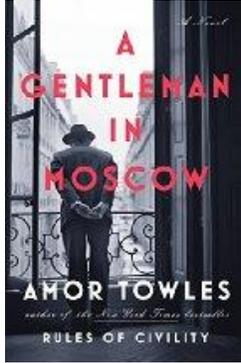
Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe by Benjamin Alire

Saenz(2014)



Another YA novel that needn't be labeled as such. Set during a summer, teenage El Paso Mexican-American boys Dante and Ari meet and help each other work through a boatload of troubling issues, including incarcerated family members, PTSD, sexuality, and how to deal with all the feels. Ari's voice is so strong yet doubtful and questioning that it touches the reader's heart deeply. Both of the boys have complicated families and the parents are also very realistic and great/awful, as seen by any 15 year old. This winner of many awards is not to be forgotten and perhaps even worthy of a reread.

A Gentleman in Moscow by Amor Towles (2016)

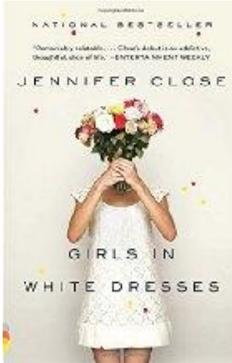


I flat out amor Amor Towles. I loved *Rules of Civility* and the followup e-story, but this might even be the better novel. The story itself - a White Russian count is sentenced to exile in the Metropol Hotel in Moscow (a real hotel, now in its 105th year!) when he returns from Paris during the Russian Revolution - is such a creative concept. But the execution is almost flawless, with the exception of perhaps a few too many characters. Count Alexander Rostov is everything one would want in a hero, and his family background, while privileged, does not seem to be excessively oppressive to the kulaks and peasants on the estate (although there is minimal information about this, so I judge only by his recollections). He is thoughtful, calm, and considerate of all whom he encounters in his limited hotel world. His flexibility extends to the Bolshevik regime, which is gently taunted by the count and the author.

From 1922, at age 30, until 1954, the count nurtures a talented young student, balances his old friends and the new authority, maintains a quirky romance with a passionate movie star, and eventually becomes the Head Waiter at the renowned Boyarsky Restaurant at the hotel.

The tale is told with such warmth and humor that we must forgive the author for going on a bit too long - it is to savor, like all the fine cuisine, drink, and loyal friendships that permeate this extraordinary novel.

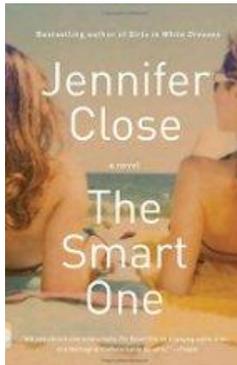
Three from Jennifer Close



***Girls in White Dresses* (2012)**

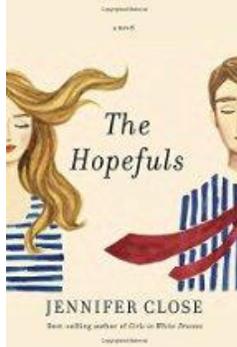
Here's a perfect winter snuggle-into-the-blankets chick lit saga, featuring a bunch of post-college girlfriends who flounder around in NYC, dating losers and working crappy jobs until the marriages, kids, and suburban exiles begin. The stories of the five or six, plus their sisters and various Bridezilla friends, are all amusing examples of white privilege (parents' support is always lurking in the background), and for me, a guilty pleasure. There are real dilemmas here, but none that money or marriage can't seem to cure. The writing is crisp and focused.

***The Smart One* (2013)**



Close's sophomore effort, as per tradition, is weaker than the debut *Girls In White Dresses*. The subject is much bleaker, too - the 30 year olds who retreat back to the suburbs and their parents' basements to recover from relationship/job/financial disasters. Almost no one has an easy time of it, including the mother, except the father, who remains oblivious to it all and pats his "little girls" patronizingly on their heads, just as he did when they were five years old. Still good reading, and still a fine writer.

***The Hopefuls* (2016)**



Now she's down to two married couples. This enthralling novel about national and local political campaigns is a cautionary tale. Even though the candidates are Barack Obama and a fictional Democrat running for Railroad Commissioner in Texas, the stresses and impact of the long, drawn out, miserable travel/food/speeches/polls etc are told in an extraordinarily intimate manner by the wife of an ambitious campaign manager. Beth is reluctant to leave NYC, but when she gets laid off from her writing job at Vanity Fair and her lawyer husband Mark quits his job to help to get Obama elected, they are both sucked into DC life, where Mark thrives and Beth feels useless. Mark, intending to run for elected office himself, then becomes campaign manager for his friend Jimmy, and the couple moves to Texas.

Jennifer Close, in Beth's voice, is a brilliant observer of families, marriages, ambition, and lack of direction. Her writing is witty and full of hard truths.