

These winter reads include everything from Little Free Libraries to Tea Shop mysteries

[Mary Ann Grossmann](#) March 3, 2019 at 10:15 am

They keep telling us spring will come, but that isn't happening so we need books more than ever as we deal with frozen cars, ice dams with icicles long enough to kill someone and an exhausted snow shovel. Here's fiction and nonfiction by Minnesotans that might ease the pain.

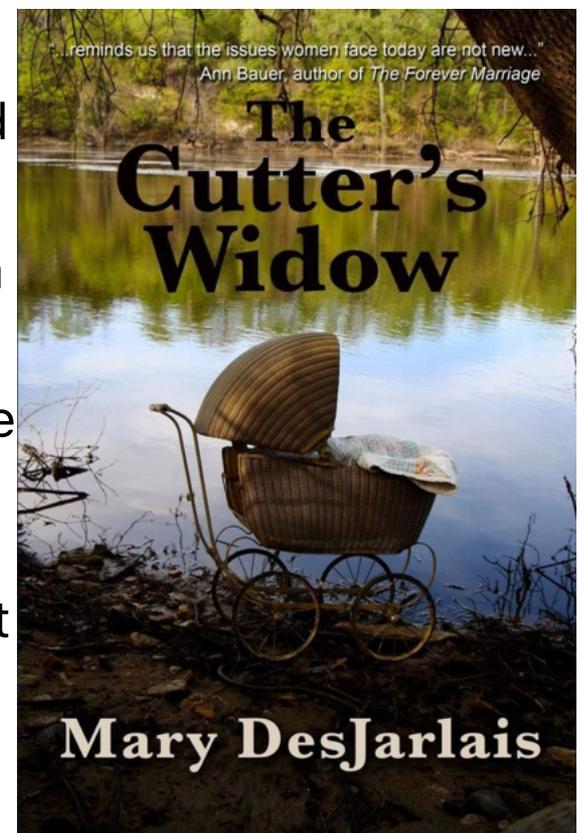
FICTION

"The Cutters Widow" by Mary DesJarlais

(Calumet Editions, \$16.99). It's 1915 in St. Paul, and soft-hearted Ella has just become a young widow after her beloved husband dies of an infection from the knife he used as a "cutter" of stacks of leather. Now, their house on the West Side Flats is the place Ella grieves.

As an apprentice to a milliner, Ella is delivering a hat to a wealthy family the day the wife's baby is born deformed. Ella also has an unmarried friend who has just had a baby she can't care for. The friend's baby is substituted for the dead child and Ella is paid for the transaction.

So begins DesJarlais' poignant historical novel that reminds us how cruel society was to poor women at the beginning of the 20th century. With no social safety net, women whose husbands were killed or incapable of working had to take the most punishing, low-level jobs, such as sewing in a shirt factory, or they could starve. With no access to reliable birth control,



the women were often unable to care for more children and tried to find homes for them.

When three babies are left on Ella's doorstep, she vows to find them good homes. Then she meets Lottie, a pickpocket and party girl at the Bucket of Blood saloon, who thinks she and Ella can make lots of money selling babies. She is heartless and wants money; Ella wants happy futures for the babies.

Ella quits the milliner, a thin woman with a French accent who's an absinthe addict. When one of Ella's babies dies, the tiny corpse is put in a hatbox with the French woman's label and later found in the river.

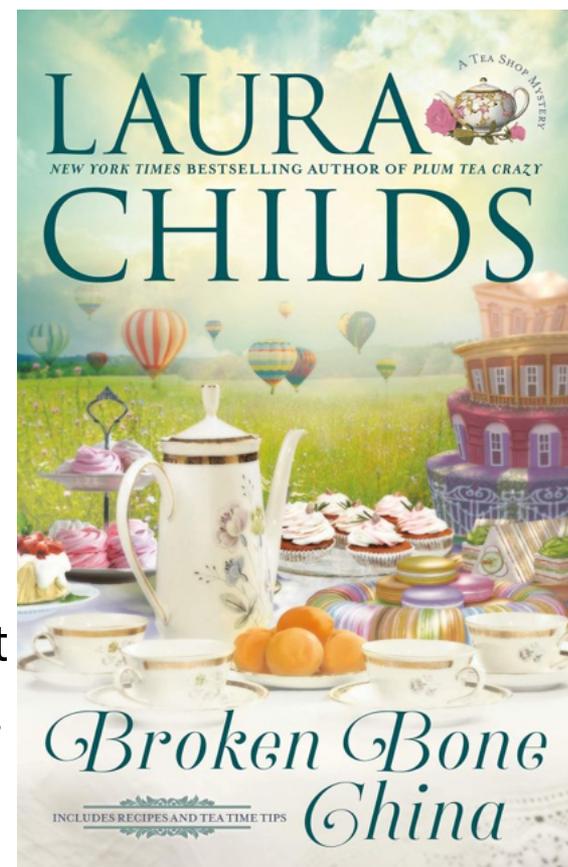
Then the story turns into a police procedural with introduction of the interesting character Inez. Big as a man, with white hair and eyelashes, Inez is a police matron charged with looking out for women and children. She can't make arrests and she amuses the male officers, but she knows police work because her late father was on the force. Investigating a poverty-stricken family on the Flats, she's soon on the trail of other babies found in the river and investigates the relationship between Ella and Lottie. Are they involved with smuggling absinthe, the liqueur that can kill someone?

DesJarlais, whose first book was "Dorie LaValle," was inspired to write "The Cutter's Widow" after reading stories about women hanged for selling babies in Britain and about Marm Mandelbaum, New York City's "Mother of Crooks."

What DesJarlais does so well is show her tenderness for Ella and her admiration for Inez, who is not comfortable with men or women, but longs for a relationship with a man. Both women's erotic thoughts are handled gracefully but their longing is obvious. The author's sense of place is spot-on, from the disgusting scenes in the saloon to the quiet night on the Wabasha Bridge, which is almost a character in the plot. There's even reference to Nina Clifford's elegant brothel.

Reviews and reader comments have focused on Ella's part of the story, but this reader thinks Inez is the most intriguing character, taking on a job few women would enjoy in those days. Inez, ungainly and brilliant, would make a terrific character for a series.

"Broken Bone China" by Laura Childs (Berkley, \$26). Gerry Schmitt, who writes as Childs, reaches a milestone with this 20th installment in her Tea Shop mystery series, featuring amateur sleuth and Charleston tea shop owner Theodosia Browning. Theodosia and her elegant, kind tea master Drayton are drifting in a hot air balloon when the story begins. To their horror, they watch a drone fly into a nearby balloon, tearing it apart and sending it plunging to earth in a fiery tangle. Three occupants die, one of whom was a wealthy CEO of a local software company. It's soon established that the



drone was sent to murder, but by whom? One of the suspects is the boyfriend of the owner of the Featherbed B & B, who owned a drone. They beg Theo to find the killer and she does want to help her friend, although she also likes investigating. While the balloon was tearing itself apart, someone also stole the famous (and priceless) "Don't Tread on Me" Revolutionary War flag that the CEO owned. Could it have been the CEO's assistant, who hopes to keep his job? Or the estranged and not-too-sad widow? And what's the story behind the woman who claims to be a professor and wants to buy the missing flag?

"Broken Bone China" hits all the notes Childs is so good at — descriptions of elegant teas (including one focused on Nancy Drew) in her pretty tea shop, creepy happenings in Charleston's rich districts, beautiful old houses. Secondary characters are great, too, including Detective Tidwell, big and beady-eyed, who is not happy about Theo's sleuthing, although he does love the scones baked by Haley, the shop's talented young baker. (Included

are some of Haley's recipes and suggestions on themes for tea parties.)

Childs/Schmitt will sign books from noon to 2 p.m. Saturday, March 9, at Once Upon a Crime, 604 W. 26th St., Mpls.

NONFICTION

"Tales of The Great Mucky Muck: From The Year of Our Muck 2018" by Douglas Wood (Wind in the Pines Publishing, \$9.99). Doug Wood has written 38 books for children and adults, with 2.5 million copies in print. He's a musician, artist, environmental educator and wilderness guide. Now, this affable guy is also a satirical poet with publication of "Tales of the Great Mucky Muck," his commentary on an unnamed Mucky Muck written in a sing-song rhythm reminiscent of Dr. Seuss:

I speak for the little ones, whose lives have been bent,

By birthplace and sorrow, who now live in a tent,

Or a Walmart or barracks or warehouse so hot,

That a cool breeze or warm hug is never felt. Not.

An embrace from their father or mother is all

They may have in this life — a response to their call,

Or their cry or their fear or their terror or pain,

But that's not allowed in the Mucky Muck's game ...

There's a poem about Sir Robert the Mueller and one about how The Great

TALES OF
THE GREAT MUCKY MUCK



From The Year of Our Muck
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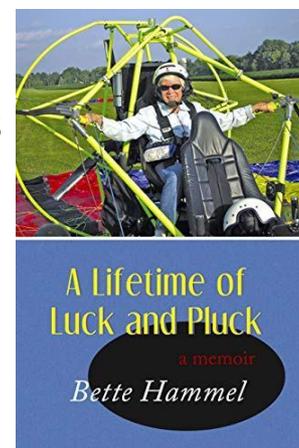
By Douglas Wood

Mucky Muck was Not Great After All!

Wood, who lives in Sartell, Minn., never meant to publish his Mucky Muck poems, which he posted on social media. But readers reacted so strongly he decided to put them into a 62-page paperback, hilariously illustrated by Erik Roadfeldt.

To order a copy, go to douglaswood.com and click on "store." Roadfeldt, who owns Twin Cities Caricatures with his wife, Kelsey, is at TwinCitiesCaricatures.com.

"A Lifetime of Luck and Pluck" by Bette Hammel (Nodin Press, \$16.95). Hammel wrote this lively memoir when she was 92, looking back on how she was introduced to journalism when she was a curious eighth-grader and her dad, Whitey (Erwin) Jones took her to the Pioneer Press building where he worked as a mailer/printer. Then it was on to journalism school at the University of Minnesota, where Bette and her friends didn't have many dates because the men were fighting World War II. She worked for four years at the U's radio station KUOM and then at General Mills in the Betty Crocker kitchens.

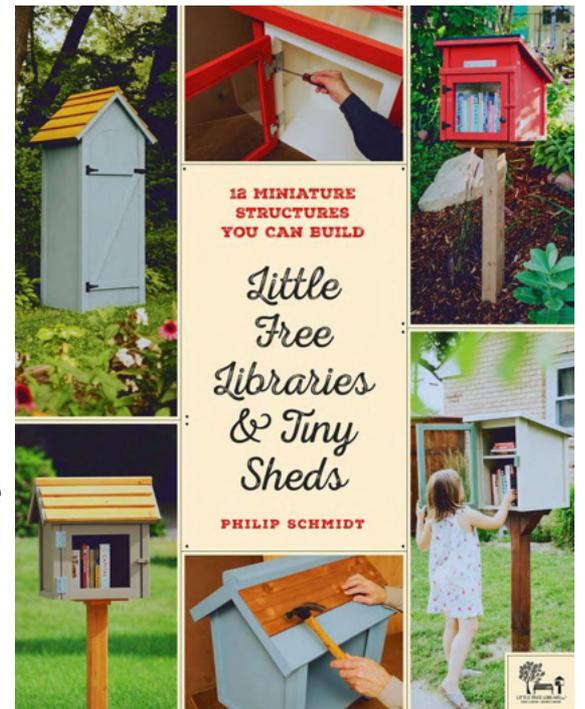


After marriage and the birth of her daughter, Bette found herself divorced and a single parent living in a Little House in the Woods in Minnetonka. Then she met and married Richard Hammel, who opened her eyes to the beauties of architecture, eventually leading her to write the books "Legendary Homes of Lake Minnetonka" and "Legendary Homes of the Minneapolis Lakes," as well as writing for Architecture Minnesota magazine. In her European travels, she covered the wedding of American actress Grace Kelly and the Prince of Monaco and dined with the owners of a large estate where bulls were raised for the ring.

The cover of "A Lifetime of Luck and Pluck" shows Bette in an interesting-looking contraption that seems poised to take off. She looks confident and

ready to roll, which will not surprise anyone who reads her memoir.

“Little Free Libraries & Tiny Sheds: 12 Miniature Structures You Can Build” by Philip Schmidt & Little Free Library (Cool Springs Press, \$24.99). Just before Little Free Library founder Todd Bol died in 2018, he finished the foreword for this useful book showing, with clear instructions, how to make structures that could be used as Little Libraries or sheds of various shapes and sizes.



The book is divided into sections on planning and design; building basics (including helpful tools and techniques and good materials for little structures); project plans for 12 of them — from one- and two-story sheds to flower boxes, a cedar roof basic pattern and first Little Free Library built by Bol — and instructions on how to install a structure. Of course, there’s a list of reasons why you should start a Little Free Library.

Bol, who lived in Hudson, Wis., couldn’t have dreamed he would create a worldwide movement, with some 75,000 libraries in 50 states and 88 countries, dedicated to fostering love of reading and community engagement. In December, just before Bol’s birthday, his family announced establishment of Little Free Library Sharing Network, a complementary organization in which stewards of the libraries use them for a variety of things, from specializing in children’s books to filling the structures with flower and vegetable seeds, nonperishable food and toiletry items, or anything else that would help neighbors in need.

This book will make you want to grab a hammer and get to work.