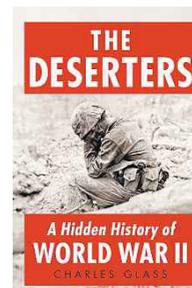
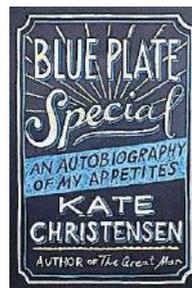
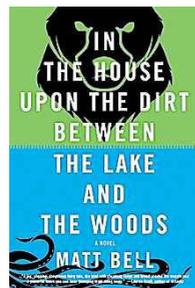
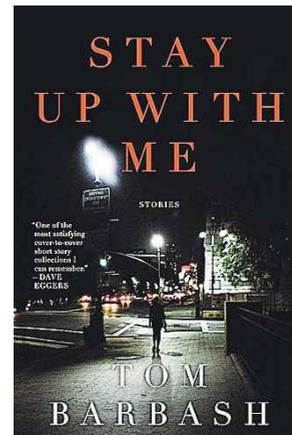
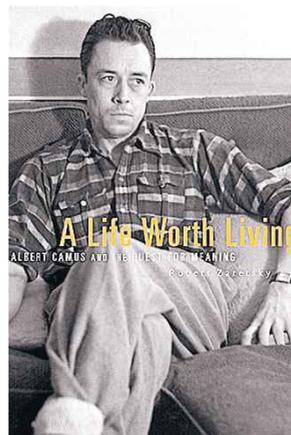
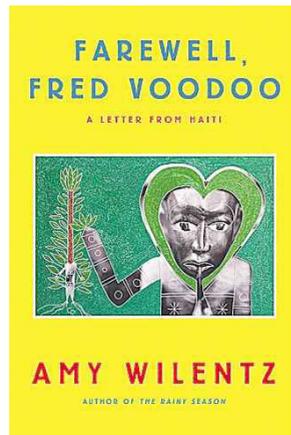


Last but not least . . .

7 gems that deserve a shout-out before year's end

Anyone who has spent time browsing the “new releases” tables of their local bookstore — or lost an hour web-surfing Amazon.com — knows just how many books are published in the course of a year: a lot. (Some might say too darn many.) Inevitably, certain titles are singled out for a chorus of praise while others quietly disappear. Before looking ahead to 2014, Newsday asked some of its regular reviewers to single out a book that deserved more acclaim than it got in the crowded literary marketplace.



STAY UP WITH ME, by Tom Barbash (Ecco, \$22.99)

In these 13 stories, Barbash proves himself a crafter of gorgeous sentences and a wise, witty observer. He specializes in suffering — especially the romantic kind — and is brilliant at capturing awkwardness among family members. In “The Break,” a woman can’t cope with her college-aged son’s love life: “The mother watched the hostess watching her son as though he were a chef’s special she was hoping to try.” These tales, populated by lonely, well-meaning people, are compassionate but wickedly funny — no easy feat to pull off. — CARMELA CIURARU

A LIFE WORTH LIVING: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning, by Robert Zaretsky (Harvard/Belknap, \$22.95)

Albert Camus, the philosopher, moralist, journalist and author, would have been 100 in November. The centenary has spurred books, papers and reconsideration of his contributions to literature and his times. Robert Zaretsky’s is one of the best. The Algerian-French Nobel Prize winner, known for novels such as “The Stranger” and “The Plague” and essays including “The Myth of Sisyphus” and “Reflections on the Guillotine,” wrote piercingly and urgently about facing injustice, the need for revolt, confronting absurdity and the search for meaning. Zaretsky underscores why the ideas of Camus, who died in a car accident in 1960, remain important today. — PETER M. GIANOTTI

FAREWELL, FRED VOODOO: A Letter From Haiti, by Amy Wilentz (Simon & Schuster, \$16 paper)

Nearly four years after the devastating earthquake in that country, Haiti has once again slipped off the front pages. This account of life in the literal ruins of this natural disaster — which was followed by a serious cholera outbreak — is a vital, fascinating corrective. Wilentz, who writes for *The New Yorker* and *The Nation*, has been reporting from the island since the 1980s, and her subtle insights and complicated love for the Haitian people, culture, religion and history bring the place to life. Her pointed criticisms of international aid unsettle our notions of what it means to help the less fortunate, but they are sharp and essential. — TOM BEER

IN THE HOUSE UPON THE DIRT BETWEEN THE LAKE AND THE WOODS, by Matt Bell (Soho Press, \$25)

In Matt Bell’s beguiling novel, a man battles bears and squids in the wilderness as he strives to reconcile with his family. The storytelling is strange and mythical, almost hallucinogenic. But the rhythm of Bell’s prose (hinted at in the title) is enchanting, and once you recognize its beat, the adventure story is both entertaining and affecting. — MARK ATHITAKIS

BLUE PLATE SPECIAL: An Autobiography of My Appetites, by Kate Christensen (Doubleday, \$26.95)

PEN/Faulkner-winning novelist Christensen explains that memoir intruded on her fiction “the way a cat might sit on a book you are trying to read.” Food adventures and quirky recipes (Dark Night of the Soul Soup, Bean Burrito) accompany a rare, juicy, sometimes searing, study of the formation of a writer’s soul and a woman’s heart. — MARION WINIK

THE HIVE, by Gill Hornby (Little, Brown and Company, \$26)

Writing comic novels about the foibles of wealthy parents — or, more accurately, wealthy mothers — never seems to get old. Taking its place on a shelf that includes “Where’d You Go, Bernadette” and “I Don’t Know How She Does It” is Gill Hornby’s “The Hive,” a sprightly send-up of the Queen Bees and Wannabes buzzing around school drop-off in a small English town. — LAURIE MUCHNICK

THE DESERTERS: A Hidden History of World War II, by Charles Glass (Penguin Press, \$27.95)

Amid the general flood of World II books, which continues unabated, Charles Glass’ “The Deserters” stands out for its frank and clear-eyed examination of an underexplored phenomena of the Greatest Generation: soldiers who went AWOL and fled the front lines. Glass tells the story of three men — one English, two American — who deserted in Europe, and goes beyond opposition of cowardice versus bravery. These were battle-hardened men who had had enough. Glass tells you why in this stripped down, unromantic portrait of war. — MATTHEW PRICE

2013 TOP 10
See our picks for the best books of the year
newsday.com/books

The star's poetic excess, now in book form

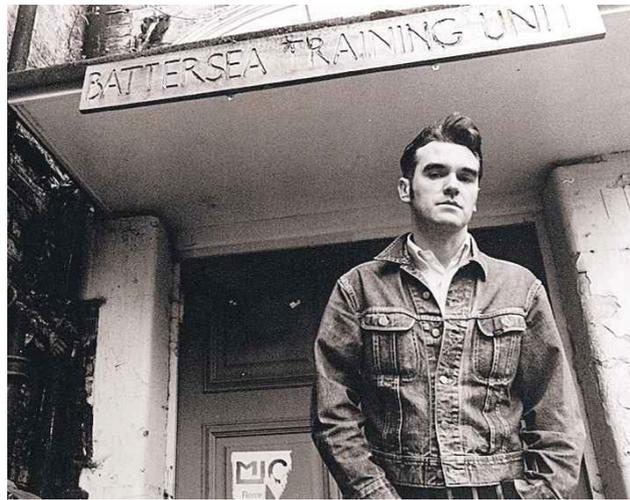
AUTOBIOGRAPHY, by Morrissey. G.P. Putnam's Sons. 459 pp. \$30.

BY JEN CHANEY

Washington Post Book World

This book begins the only way a Steven Patrick Morrissey autobiography should: with gorgeously excessive descriptions of decay and despair.

"More brittle and less courteous than anywhere else on earth, Manchester is the old fire wheezing its last, where we all worry ourselves soulless, forbidden to be romantic," the notoriously melancholy pop star writes of the English city of his youth. "The dark stone of the terraced houses is black with soot, and the house is a metaphor for the soul because beyond the house there is nothing, and there are scant communications to keep track of anyone should they leave it. You bang the door behind you and you may be gone forever, or never seen



Morrissey in 1995

again, oh untraceable you."

It's a passage of virtuoso bleakness that could have been ripped directly from the scrawled notes in Morrissey's songwriting journal. It's also typical of the spectacularly unbridled "Autobiography" by the solo artist and front man

for the influential '80s British brood-rock band the Smiths.

"Autobiography" is filled with prose of dazzling, poetic excess that unspools without regard for conventional organizational tools, such paragraphs of reasonable length. Like the man, "Autobiography" some-

times doesn't know when to shut up, marinating too long — specifically, for about 50 pages — in the bitters of a highly publicized trial on the division of royalty payments among the Smiths' ex-band members.

But what sings out most from "Autobiography" is Morrissey's flair for expression and the same wicked humor present in much of his music. In the evocative sections of the book that flash back to his spirit-breaking days in primary school, he recalls one teacher "who is aging, and will never marry, and will die smelling of attics." Later, he wryly remembers a TV newsman saying, "Morrissey conveys all the worst elements of homosexuality and bestiality."

"It is not enough, I note, to represent homosexuality fused with bestiality," Morrissey quips, "but indeed I apparently convey *all the very worst elements of both.*"

As memorable as his words are, though, Morrissey doesn't use them to reveal certain details his fans might crave. At one point, he discusses a two-

year, seemingly romantic relationship with a man named Jake Owen Walters: "Every minute has the high drama of first love, only far more exhilarating, and at last I have someone to answer the telephone." Curiously, as many media outlets have noted, some additional references to that relationship have been excised from the U.S. edition.

At his essence, Morrissey is someone who managed to carve tunnels out of his Manchester childhood gloom by opening his mouth to make music. In doing so, he carved similar tunnels for others, a fact that will forever permit his fans to forgive their beloved Morrissey when he waxes a little too vaguely poetic or goes off on egotistic rants.

As the man himself writes: "Whenever I'd overhear how people found me to be 'a bit much' (which is a gentle way of saying the word 'unbearable'), I understood why. To myself I would say: *Well, yes, of course I'm a bit much — if I weren't, I would not be lit up by so many lights.*"

A toast to the drunken masters

THE TRIP TO ECHO SPRING: On Writers and Drinking, by Olivia Laing. Picador, 340 pp., \$26.

BY MARION WINIK

Special to Newsday

In this reflection on six great alcoholic American writers — John Cheever, Raymond Carver, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, John Berryman and Tennessee Williams — Olivia Laing emerges as a kind of British Susan Orlean, combining nonfiction narrative, travel writing, literary criticism and a touch of memoir in a personable style. While it's rare to quote blurbs in a book review (with good reason), Hilary Mantel, of "Wolf Hall" fame, says something on the book's back cover that is worth repeating: "I've been trying to work out exactly how Olivia Laing drew me in, because I



Olivia Laing

hardly drink myself and I have no particular attachment to the group of writers she describes."

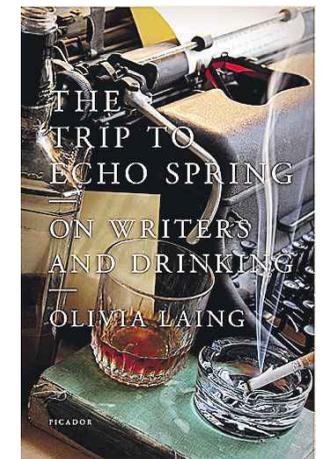
Well, I'm no Hilary Mantel. But balancing my a priori interest in the topic and the authors with a potentially numbing familiarity with them, I believe I was won over by the same dreamily engrossing quality of the book as she.

Laing takes her title from a passage in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof"; Brick, the alcoholic son, escapes a lecture from Big Daddy by taking a "little short trip to Echo Spring." This is code for the liquor cabinet, and the brand of bourbon inside it. Laing's own journey to the metaphorical Echo Spring is a long meander by train, plane and automobile covering all the cities associated with these authors. She begins at the Elysée Hotel in New York, where Williams died, heads south to Key West and New Orleans, back north to Berryman's St. Paul, then to Port Angeles, Wash., where Raymond Carver spent his joyfully sober last years. Along the way, she describes and analyzes texts by each writer, some very famous, some less known.

Her descriptions of the landscape she sees, the conversations she overhears and the people she runs into are spar-

ling. In North Dakota, she sees "cataracts of ice [that] shone blue, silver, grey, pewter and sandy brown, the colours entwined like marble," then moves on to macaroni and cheese for lunch in the dining car with a man named Bob, who'd been Bill Gates' electrician, and two women "one . . . very dippy, the other stern." Her pleasant encounter with these people sends her into a meditation on Berryman's difficulty in bonding with others, the sort of empathetic leap Laing is so good at. "That's what alcoholism does to a writer. You begin with alchemy, hard labour, and end by letting some grandiose degenerate, some awful aspect of yourself, take up residence at the hearth, the central fire, where they set to ripping out the heart of the work you've yet to finish."

Without building to a specific point or climax,



Laing keeps you on board through her journey, which ends at Carver's grave, and then tacks on two key lists for reference. One, the birth and death dates of her subjects. Two, the twelve steps of Alcoholic Anonymous. Your head filled with the questions and answers so interestingly raised here, you will want to take a long look at both.