

A charmed, not charming, life

LOTS OF CANDLES, PLENTY OF CAKE, by Anna Quindlen. Random House, 182 pp., \$26.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

For most of her nearly 60 years, things have gone really well for writer Anna Quindlen. “When I came to The New York Times as a reporter in 1978, at age 25, I thought I’d been hired because I was aces at my job,” she writes in her new nonfiction book, “Lots of Candles, Plenty of Cake.” “It took me a few months to figure out that a small group of courageous women had sued the paper and that the hiring of a bumper crop of female reporters and editors . . . was the result.”

That was the beginning of Quindlen’s charmed life, one that led to her enormously popular Times column, “Life in the Thirties”; then more than a dozen bestselling works of nonfiction, fiction and children’s literature; a long, happy marriage with homes in the country and the city; a rewarding speak-

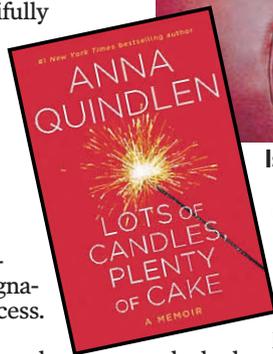
ing career, and, best of all, three healthy, happy, grown children who get along beautifully and enjoy shopping in their mom’s jam-packed attic to furnish their apartments.

Indeed, there are lots of candles and plenty of cake for Quindlen. There is pride and self-acceptance and a wry resignation to the aging process. There are dear girlfriends, beloved pets and welcome times of solitude, and there is the family reading of “A Christmas Carol” every December. Maybe there has never been a perfect figure, but there is great vigor and excellent health to make up for it — these days, she can even do one-armed push-ups and a headstand.

What there is not, oddly enough, is any conflict or tension or darkness. That entire side of life, somehow, has been relegated to Quindlen’s fiction, where domestic abuse, mass murder, abandonment and untimely death abound. True, the author’s mother died of



PHOTO BY JOYCE RAY/D



Is Anna Quindlen’s “Cake” for all tastes?

cancer when Quindlen was in college, and she might have ended up with a drinking problem, it seems, if she had not had her last beer several decades ago. But largely she has had the biography her nonfiction titles suggest: “Loud and Clear,” “A Short Guide to a Happy Life,” “Being Perfect.”

As she puts it in the first line of this collection, “It’s odd when I think of the arc of my life, from child to young woman to aging adult. First I was who I was. Then I didn’t know who I was. Then I invented someone and became her. Then I began to like what I’d invented. And finally I was what I was again.”

If that summary strikes you as a little fuzzy, a little smug, a

little less than stylishly composed, you may be one of the small group of readers who, like me, can’t quite understand how Quindlen’s work has won such a huge and loyal audience. To me, the pieces are often not much more than strings of platitudes, lots of “telling” and little “showing,” short on good stories, surprises, sharp writing and humor.

But for millions of readers, Quindlen’s earnest observations are as comfy as a favorite nightgown. Her life is as deliciously enviable as the Pottery Barn kitchen in a Nancy Meyers film. Her positions are liberal, feminist and hard to disagree with. So don’t let me stop you from getting your own slice of Quindlen’s signature recipe. But no more cake for me, please.

Knocking a fable out of the park

CALICO JOE, by John Grisham. Doubleday, 198 pp., \$24.95.

BY STEVEN V. ROBERTS
Washington Post Book World Service

John Grisham’s legal thrillers are dense and hefty, full of twists and turns and tension. His latest novel, “Calico Joe,” is not like that at all. It’s a sweet, simple story, a fable really. And like all fables, it has a moral: Good can come out of evil; it’s never too late to confess your sins and seek forgiveness.

Writers who deal with baseball seem drawn to its mythic dimensions. Maybe it’s the strict geometry of the playing field that turns players into archetypes, characters in a morality play: stars and bums, good guys and bad guys. And so it is with “Calico Joe,” a story about two men whose lives are fused by one terrible instant on Aug. 24, 1973.

Wearing the white hat is Joe

Castle, a 21-year-old rookie first baseman for the Chicago Cubs. Calico Joe (the nickname comes from his hometown of Calico Rock, Ark.) bashes home runs in his first three at-bats in the major leagues and is hitting above .500 six weeks later, when the Cubs play the Mets at Shea Stadium.

Wearing the black hat is Warren Tracey, a 34-year-old journeyman pitcher for the Mets with a reputation for hitting batters — and the bottle — with equal determination. His first time up, Calico Joe whacks a homer off Tracey. When he comes to bat again, an 11-year-old boy in the stands, Tracey’s son, Paul, has a sick feeling.

He’s obsessed with Joe, keeping a scrapbook that records all of his dazzling deeds. And he knows his father is about to throw at Joe’s head. Paul knows this because Tracey has called his son a “coward” for not challenging batters with inside pitches in Little League. Years

later, as he narrates this story, Paul recalls the game at Shea: “I wanted to stand and scream, ‘Look out, Joe!’ but I couldn’t move.”

The next moment changes many people’s lives, including that of the boy, who is tinctured by guilt over the warning he never uttered. Years later, Paul becomes determined to arrange a meeting between the old antagonists, his despised father and his boyhood idol, and much of the story revolves around his effort to make that happen. I won’t reveal the outcome, but if you believe in redemption — and who doesn’t? — you won’t be disappointed.

Grisham knows baseball as well as he knows crime. He coached Little League and roots for the St. Louis Cardinals. But “Calico Joe” is not just about baseball, of course. It’s also about relationships — between Joe and his brothers; between Warren, the father, and Paul, the son; between a small town and the wounded



TRUNKARCH VE/COM PHOTO

John Grisham

young athlete who comes home to heal. This story is also about faith, which is appropriate because there’s every reason to believe God created baseball. She’s not invoked directly in Grisham’s little book, but as in all good myths, She’s behind the scenes, pulling the strings.

this week

Readings and book signings on Long Island

FanFare

Monday

Ghita Schwarz discusses her debut novel, “Displaced Persons” (HarperCollins). Suggested donation \$5. At 7:30 p.m., Lido Beach Synagogue, Lido Boulevard and Fairway Road, Lido Beach; 516-432-4271.

Wednesday

Ann Packer (“The Dive From Clausen’s Pier”) is this week’s guest at a Writers Speak program. At 7 p.m., Stony Brook University Southampton, Chancellors Hall, 239 Montauk Hwy., Southampton; 631-632-5030, stonybrook.edu/mfa



Friday

Vinny Guadagnino, better known as Vinny G on “Jersey Shore,” signs his new book, “Control the Crazy” (Crown). At 7 p.m., Book Revue, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com



Saturday

Linda Lear, author of “Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), is guest speaker at an event to honor the 50th anniversary of Carson’s “Silent Spring.” Admission is \$60, includes wine and hors d’oeuvres. At 4 p.m., South Fork Natural History Museum, 377 Bridgehampton/Sag Harbor Tpke., Bridgehampton, 631-745-0689, longpondgreenbelt.org

Lawrence Douglas discusses his novel “The Vices” (Other Press). At 5 p.m., BookHampton, 41 Main St., East Hampton; 631-324-4939.

Compiled by
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