



## thisweek

Readings & signings on LI

### Monday

Former New York Times reporter **Leslie Maitland** discusses

"Crossing the Borders of Time: A True Story of War, Exile, and Love Reclaimed" (Other Press). At 2 p.m., Great Neck Library, 159 Bayview Ave., Great Neck; 516-466-8055, greatnecklibrary.org



### Tuesday

Former New York Times reporter and documentary producer **Hedrick Smith** discusses "Who Stole the American Dream?" (Random House). Admission \$5. At 7:30 p.m., Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock, 48 Shelter Rock Rd., Manhasset; 561-627-6560, ext. 160, uucsr.org

### Wednesday

Today show co-anchor **Hoda Kotb** signs copies of "Ten Years Later: Six people Who Faced Adversity and Transformed Their Lives" (Simon & Schuster). At 7:30 p.m., Book Revue, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com



### Thursday

Syosset resident **David Sprintzen**, professor emeritus of philosophy at Long Island University, speaks about his book "Critique of Western Philosophy and Social Theory" (Palgrave Macmillan). At 7 p.m., Book Revue, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com

### Friday

**Denise Schipani** speaks about her book "Mean Moms Rule" (Sourcebooks). At 7 p.m., Book Revue, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com



## reviews

# Adventures in self-help

**LOVE IS A CANOE**, by Ben Schrank. Sarah Crichton Books / Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 342 pp., \$26.

BY MARION WINIK  
Special to *Newsday*

*Good love is a quilt — light as feathers and strong as iron. A good marriage is a canoe — it needs care and isn't meant to hold too much — no more than two adults and a few kids.*

These pearls of wisdom come from a fictional self-help book titled "Marriage Is a Canoe," written some 40 years ago by Peter Herman, a one-hit wonder now stumbling through his golden years in upstate New York, widowed, drinking, dating a woman he doesn't love. Ben Schrank's new novel, "Love Is a Canoe," an enjoyable inside-publishing satire, hinges on a contest held to celebrate the anniversary of Herman's book by its publishers, Ladder and Rake. Up-and-

coming editor Stella Petrovic has been ordered to boost sales of older books, and her idea is an essay competition whose winners — the people with the best troubled marriage! — will spend an afternoon getting advice from Herman himself. It's "The Devil Wears Prada" meets "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten," with a bunch of messed-up relationships thrown in.

The chapters alternate among threads: excerpts from the original book (one step above Deep Thoughts by Jack Handey), episodes at the offices of Ladder and Rake, scenes from Herman's life and the story of the couple who wins the contest, Brooklyn hipsters Emily and Eli Babson. Emily suspects that her ultra-hot bicycle-maker husband is cheating on her; as a fan of "Canoe" since age 9, she is the

contest's most eager entrant.

Schrank's setup generates a lot of fun, but there are times when you're not sure how seriously he takes his characters. For example, when Eli and Emily talk to each other, they use the formulation "I love that you [feel that, noticed that, etc.]" with great frequency. Is he making fun of them? I wasn't sure. I wanted the book to be just a little edgier, like one by Tom Perrotta or Martin Amis, but the narrative voice is more Mary Higgins Clark.

After everything goes kablooey, as of course it must, Peter Herman is forced to confront his mistakes. "Now, looking back on the mess he'd made, he felt like such a damned sentimentalist under his cynical veneer. Or, he thought, as he wandered back to the hotel, was it the opposite? Either way, his sentimentalism was tightly threaded through his cynicism. Like a barber pole." That also describes "Love Is a Canoe," and I'm pretty sure Ben Schrank meant it that way.



Ben Schrank, author of "Love Is a Canoe"

PHOTO BY LAUREN MECHLING

# As at the abbey, so at the manor

**HABITS OF THE HOUSE**, by Fay Weldon. St. Martin's Press, 314 pp., \$25.99.

BY LAUREN GILBERT  
Special to *Newsday*

*Though the patriarch of an aristocratic British family married his wife for money, the union has evolved into a genuine love match. Their freethinking, pantaloons-wearing daughter scandalizes the family with her unorthodox ideas and progressive political beliefs. The heir, meant to marry to save the family estate, balks at the match, yet realizes too late that he is truly in love with his intended. . . . As the story opens, the family is thrown into turmoil by the arrival of a telegram with devastating news.*

You'd be forgiven for assuming the above is a plot summary of the first season of the British TV

series "Downton Abbey," whose third season began on PBS last Sunday. But it also describes "Habits of the House," the first book in Fay Weldon's new trilogy about the Earl and Countess of Dilberne and their two grown children. Of course Weldon can't fairly be accused of imitation; she wrote the pilot episode of "Upstairs Downstairs," the granddaddy of the English aristocracy miniseries and unofficial progenitor of "Downton Abbey."

"Habits of the House" is set in London over six weeks in 1899. Despite an earlier influx of cash from Countess Isobel's father (a lowborn coal miner who struck it rich) the family

fortune is in jeopardy from poor investments, overspending and gambling.

Several of the main characters are one-dimensional — particularly the hedonistic heir, Arthur, who cares for nothing but fine tailored clothing and fast automobiles; and his sister, the reform-minded, self-righteous Rosina. Tessa, the boorish American in search of a titled match for her daughter, is

another caricature. Better drawn are the orphaned serving girl Grace, who is more sensible and intelligent than her social superiors, and Minnie, the free-spirited Chicago heiress.

The long-suffering Jewish

solicitor Mr. Baum, who wants nothing more than to introduce his lonely wife into the Earl's high society, is repeatedly thwarted by the family's casual anti-Semitism and class snobbery. But despite the prevailing belief that "old wealth and new wealth would never speak the same language," it's clear to the reader that the times are a-changing.

"Habits of the House" seems to have been rather quickly tossed off to cash in on the renewed popularity of the genre. It reads almost like a teleplay — and would in fact make an entertaining miniseries in its own right. Like "Downton Abbey," with its delightful mingling of highbrow and lowbrow, it is likely to appeal to American readers. Though one suspects Weldon, author of more than 30 books, could have written it in her sleep, "Habits" will be a suitable alternative if Season 3 disappoints.



Fay Weldon

PHOTO BY ALEX BAKER