

## 10 Before the End Reading Update Kris Wiley for The News-Review

I made great progress on reading my 10 books before the end of the year, and I highly recommend a few of them.

Roseburg Public Library's Online Book Group participants are dialed into awesome reads, and their latest rave, "The Correspondent" by debut novelist Virginia Evans, is one of my favorite books of the year.

Meet Sybil Van Antwerp, a divorced, retired attorney whose life unfolds through the correspondence she maintains with friends and family. Writing letters – and the occasional email – is a ritual that has grounded Sybil as she experiences the death of a child, her fraught relationship with her daughter, the end of her marriage and a devastating diagnosis.

It also creates moments of joy, best illustrated when Sybil writes authors after reading their books. My favorite exchanges were with Joan Didion and Larry McMurtry.

If you like "The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society" by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows, "Olive Kitteridge" by Elizabeth Strout or Anne Tyler's work, "The Correspondent" might be the book for you.

Susan Straight's "Sacrament" is a tribute to the nurses who held us together during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also is a companion to "Mecca," one of my favorite novels of 2023.

"Sacrament" takes us back to Southern California, from a hospital in San Bernardino to a date farm near the Salton Sea. Straight again centers her story on the often-overlooked people who toil on land that has been in their Indigenous and Mexican families for generations.

Larette and Cherrise are cousins and ICU nurses who move into RVs to be closer to their work and keep their loved ones safer. Their physical and emotional labor is difficult to read, especially when Larette sings to her patients. I went right back to the summer of 2020 when so many lives were lost and so much was unknown.

The drama extends beyond the hospital when Cherrise's 15-year-old daughter, Raquel, goes missing from the date farm where she is staying with relatives. Larette's husband, Grief, and Johnny Frias, a California Highway Patrol officer introduced in "Mecca," launch a desperate search for Raquel that culminates in a beautiful display of love and forgiveness.

Finally, I read another COVID-era book, this one a memoir titled "Mailman: My Wild Ride Delivering the Mail in Appalachia and Finally Finding Home" by Stephen Starring Grant, which came highly recommended by several patrons.

Grant's reflection on his year as a mail carrier in his hometown of Blacksburg, Va., is humorous and heartfelt, perfect for readers who enjoy slice-of-life books.

His career change came when he was laid off from his lucrative corporate job in March 2020 and needed health insurance because he had cancer. He turned to his local United States Postal Service branch, and over the next year he learned that working for the post office is not for the faint of heart.

Grant's book, told as a series of vignettes with lots of fun facts about the government agency at which he works, is a charming, quick read. It's amazing that I can post a letter that will cross the country in a week for less than \$1, and I now have a deeper appreciation for what it takes to make that happen.

### **Next week's events**

Tuesday, Dec. 9, 6:30 p.m. – Online Book Group

Wednesday, Dec. 10, 10:15 a.m. – Storytime with Aurora

Wednesday, Dec. 10, 12 p.m. – An Introduction to Artificial Intelligence presented by Brandon Ellery

Wednesday, Dec. 10, 6:30 p.m. – Ornithologist Dan Gleason: Bird Intelligence and Behaviors co-sponsored by Umpqua Valley Audubon Society

Thursday, Dec. 11, 10:15 a.m. – Storytime with Aurora

Thursday, Dec. 11, 11:30 a.m. - Program for adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities: winter crafts

Thursday, Dec. 11, 4-5 p.m. – Elementary Book Club: Baby-Sitters Club graphic novels