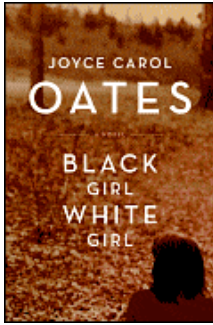


## New Fiction December 2006



### *Black Girl/White Girl*

By Joyce Carol Oates

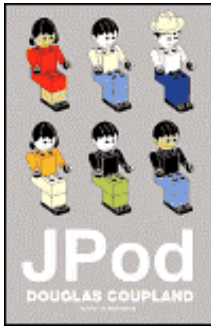
Volumes will be written about Oates' young women narrators, their vulnerability and covert power, their passive-aggressive quests for love and their penchant for revenge. Complicated young women like Generva Meade, heir to a fortune and a legacy of activism. Her Quaker ancestors were abolitionists, her namesake was a famous pioneering feminist, and her father is a notoriously radical hippie attorney. A signature theme for Oates is the psychology of race relations, and a favorite rite of passage is a young woman's first year away at college, preoccupations that shape this acutely provocative novel. It's 1974, and Generva, called Genna, is a freshman at a college founded by her great-grandfather. Her roommate, Minette Swift, is a black scholarship student and the pious, anxious, and aloof daughter of a minister. She also appears to be the target of hate crimes. Genna tries so desperately to befriend Minette that there is something suspect about her avid fascination. As events unfold, Genna's growing frustration over the unbridgeable gap between her and Minette fuels her anger with her elusive father, who may be in danger due to his involvement with a protest bombing. Oates is a master at injecting potent personal and social psychology into the lean musculature of a thriller, a feat that, in this case, starkly exposes key paradoxes at work in the American soul (*Booklist*).



*Blind Submission*

By Debra Ginsberg

Ginsberg has delighted readers with her candor and humor in three popular memoirs, including *Raising Blaze* (2002). She now brings her wit and pinpoint psychology to fiction in a gleefully caustic tale that is not so much a whodunit as a who-wrote-it. Ginsberg's heat-seeking novel tracks the high-anxiety misadventures of Angel Montgomery, a book lover who becomes a badgered assistant to an extravagantly cruel, histrionic, and elaborately attired literary agent, Lucy Fiamamma. Yes, this is the book-world version of *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003), albeit more artful. Blind submissions are manuscripts sent in cold to the agency, while Lucy's staff practices a stunned compliance one might describe as blind submission. Angel is learning to hold steady under Lucy's onslaughts, but she is growing alarmed over the creepy parallels between her life and *Blind Submission*, an anonymously authored mystery set in a literary agency and sent to her in e-mailed installments. Is the author her wannabe writer boyfriend? Her angry, possibly deranged coworker? An affectionate skewering of the ludicrous side of the book business and a claws-out send-up of the perversities of power, Ginsberg's blithe blend of mystery, romance, and satire is smart, classy, and fun (*Booklist*).



### *JPod*

By Douglas Coupland

No, "JPod" is not the next version of iPod; it refers to a group of geeks with last names starting with J cubicled together in a distant quadrant of a giant Vancouver video-game corporation. Coupland revisits the digital kingdom he so shrewdly depicted in *Microserfs* (1995) in a zeitgeist-trawling satire about twenty-first-century cyber obsession. JPoder Ethan Jarlewski narrates in deadpan geekspeak, reporting on life in gamer land, where he and his fellow designers--each precocious, cynical, oddball charming, and possibly a touch autistic--invent hilariously clever trivial pursuits to avoid work. But Ethan is often distracted from fun with porn sites, math problems, and an evil cyber version of Ronald McDonald by the crazy demands of his off-the-charts family. There's a *South Park* edginess and surrealism to the frequently violent escapades of Ethan's actor-wannabe father, gun-toting and pot-growing mother, and real-estate salesman brother, who gets them all entangled with the gangster Kam Fong. As both actual and cyber mayhem crest, Coupland, himself a character in this rampaging comedy, reminds us that no matter how seductive the virtual realm is, it is real life that requires our keenest attention (*Booklist*).



## *The Love Curse of the Rumbauchs*

By Jack Gantos

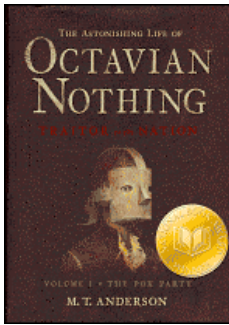
Up In this bizarre tale entrenched in genetics and human history, familial love is unabashedly and horrifically skewed, twisted, and swathed, reminiscent of the works of Poe, Shelley, and Hawthorne. Readers are introduced to the young woman narrator when she is seven, trapped in a small town and a victim of a family's dark legacy: a maternal obsession so extreme that it preys upon the minds of its maligned descendants, forcing them to pursue any means necessary to keep their mothers with them always. Ivy and her devout mother live across the street from a pair of reclusive, elderly twin brothers who run the pharmacy. Her mother used to work for the Rumbauchs, and, over the years, Ivy comes to understand her connection to the eccentric men, their deep bond with their now-deceased mother, and their fascination with the art of taxidermy, which they share with her. Soon Ivy finds herself engrossed in embalming squirrels, kittens, chickens, and whatever else she can get her hands on. They become her tools and totems to assuage her maternal-loss anxieties. Readers can only fumble and squirm through her distorted yet straightforwardly told horror story with a combination of shock, disbelief, and dread of what no doubt will come. Gantos has written an eerie, nearly perverse gothic tale of love and devotion gone completely and frighteningly haywire. This thought-provoking story about free will and the arguments of nature and nurture will definitely stick with readers, no matter how hard they try to forget it (*School Library Journal*).



*A Meeting at Corvallis*

By S.M. Stirling

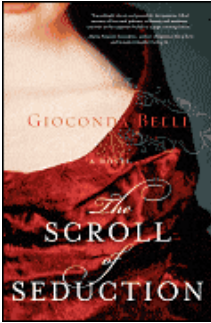
Ten years after modern technology and most of the human race go extinct, what was Oregon is divided among three societies. Ex-pilot and professional survivor Mike Havel rules around Salem. Juniper Mackenzie holds sway as bard and high priestess of her clan in the southern Willamette Valley. Self-styled protector Norman Arminger is building a medieval empire based on a social core of former street-gang members in Portland. The incompatibility of Mike's and Juniper's realms with the protector's ambitions as well as those of his consort, the ferocious Lady Sandra, contributes to rising--then overflowing--tension. Before long, Clan Mackenzie has captured the protector's daughter, and Lady Sandra will stop at nothing to get her back. The ensuing maze of intrigue, diplomacy, and battle (with a wonderful variety of weapons ingeniously exploiting archaic technology) comes up to Stirling's highest standards for pacing, world building, action, and strong characterizations, particularly of women. Postholocaust settings aren't to everybody's taste, but readers entranced by *Dies the Fire* (2004) and *The Protector's War* (2005), the first two books in Stirling's multivolume contribution to the subgenre, will be happy to be here, in the midst of a major work by an authentic master of alternate history (*Booklist*).



*The Pox Party: The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing: Traitor to the Nation: Volume 1*

By M. T. Anderson

In this fascinating and eye-opening Revolution-era novel, Octavian, a black youth raised in a Boston household of radical philosophers, is given an excellent classical education. He and his mother, an African princess, are kept isolated on the estate, and only as he grows older does he realize that while he is well dressed and well fed, he is indeed a captive being used by his guardians as part of an experiment to determine the intellectual acuity of Africans. As the fortunes of the Novanglian College of Lucidity change, so do the nature and conduct of their experiments. The boy's guardians host a "pox party" where everyone is inoculated with the disease in hopes that they will then be immune to its effects, but, instead, Octavian's mother dies. He runs away and ends up playing the fiddle and joining in the Patriots' cause. He's eventually captured and brought back to his household where he's bound and forced to wear an iron mask until one of his more sympathetic instructors engineers his escape. Readers will have to wait for the second volume to find out the protagonist's fate. The novel is written in 18th-century language from Octavian's point of view and in letters written by a soldier who befriends him. Despite the challenging style, this powerful novel will resonate with contemporary readers. The issues of slavery and human rights, racism, free will, the causes of war, and one person's struggle to define himself are just as relevant today. Anderson's use of factual information to convey the time and place is powerfully done (*School Library Journal*).



*The Scroll of Seduction*

By Gioconda Belli

Belli's rigorously imagined and sumptuously presented novel is a dual story of obsessive love, with a bi-level plot alternating between past and present. From the past, the author retrieves the almost legendary tale of Queen Juana of Castile, eldest daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, and her alleged madness caused by the premature death of her handsome husband, Philip of Hapsburg. The contemporary story line is also set in Spain; over a period of time and in piecemeal fashion, a teenage student in a convent school, Lucia by name, learns from a college professor, who will become her first lover, of his own obsession: Queen Juana and her life story, specifically the unanswerable question of whether she was insane or simply the victim of a smear campaign by the male forces at court who would seek to control her. The professor, as if Scheherazade, tells Lucia a series of episodes concerning the tragic queen so Lucia may internalize Juana's plight, all the while executing his seduction of her. Male manipulation of the female, as we see, is hardly a thing of the past. A balance between the two time levels is carefully maintained, the contemporary story intensifying the viability of the characters from the past--all this carried along, as if down a lovely stream, by the sheer beauty of the author's prose style (*Booklist*).



### *Snow Apples*

By Mary Razzell

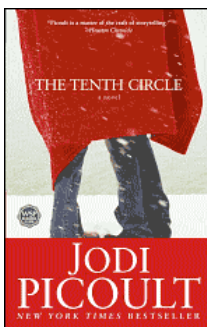
In isolated, rural British Columbia, as World War II is ending, Sheila Brary turns 16 and yearns for a life different from the sad existence of her mother. Struggling to raise four sons and a daughter mostly on her own, the woman has turned hard and cold, always angry at her bright and emotional daughter who reminds her too much of her unfaithful, undependable husband. Sheila finds connection with other adults and develops a bond with Helga, who long ago lost her husband and sons to the ocean. The teen wins one struggle with her mother and manages to finish high school, while she loses another with her own awakening sexuality and finds herself desperate and pregnant. When she runs off to Vancouver, her distant father helps her to abort the pregnancy and then abandons her one last time. Sheila survives a terrifying miscarriage on her own, returns to her family long enough to see what her mother has sacrificed, and starts a new life with promise and support. This is a quiet, introspective novel that takes a while to build its power, and it has some stunningly dramatic scenes. Somewhat autobiographical, *Snow Apples* is imbued with difficult themes, from poverty and ambition to sexuality and abuse to emotional abandonment and growth. For mature, thoughtful readers, it will inspire discussions of the struggles of women in recent history (*School Library Journal*).



### *Special Topics in Calamity Physics*

By Marisha Pessl

After 10 years of traveling with her father, a perennial (and pedantic) visiting lecturer at various, obscure institutions of higher learning, Blue Van Meer finally settles in as a senior at the St. Gallway School in Stockton, North Carolina. There she is bemused to find herself part of a charmed circle of popular kids called the Bluebloods and the protégé of the mysterious film-studies teacher, Hannah Schneider. When a friend of Hannah's dies at a party the kids have crashed, this extravagantly arch and self-conscious coming-of-age novel turns into a murder mystery that--although never as Hitchcockian as its publisher claims--is, nevertheless, almost compelling enough to warrant its excessive length. Intriguingly structured as a syllabus for a Great Works of Literature class, Pessl's first novel is filled with references to invented books--and to some real ones, too, including several by Nabokov. Overkill? You bet. But, as a result, the novel is generating a great deal of buzz that will excite the curiosity of readers who enjoy postmodern excesses and indulgences of this sort (*Booklist*).

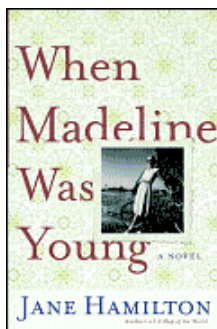


### *The Tenth Circle*

By Jodi Picoult

There are no black and whites in Picoult's latest novel, except for the drawings that graphic artist Daniel Stone inks. Stone, a former bad boy who grew up among the Yup'ik Eskimos in Alaska, now

lives a sedate life in Bethel, Maine, with his college–professor wife, Laura, and his 14–year–old daughter, Trixie. But the night Trixie's ex–boyfriend, Jason, rapes her at a party is the night Daniel's carefully ordered life falls apart. Daniel is forced to acknowledge that he's ignored the distance growing between him and his daughter and that his wife, a Dante scholar at a local college, is having an affair. After the rape, Trixie's classmates turn on her, and even her best friend, Zephyr, sides with Jason, a school hockey star whose future seems bright. When Trixie claims she was drugged and the evidence backs her up, the tide turns against Jason, and another tragedy sends Trixie fleeing Maine for her father's childhood home of Alaska, forcing Daniel to confront the demons he'd hoped he'd left in the past. Picoult's sad, complex novel should appeal to the many readers who have enjoyed her previous works (*Booklist*).



*When Madeline Was Young*

By Jane Hamilton

Hamilton, twice an Oprah author, is a master of the baffling and the bizarre. In her fifth and most psychologically prismatic novel to date, Hamilton's signature motifs take on new resonance and mystery as she creates perplexing familial relationships complicated by war. Raised in a Chicago suburb, Timothy Maciver--a future small-town doctor called Brains by his macho cousin, Buddy, and Mac by everyone else--considers the willowy, slow-witted beauty in the family a sister. But Madeline is actually Mac's father's first wife. Soon after the wedding, she suffered a brain injury that left her with the mind of a child. The second Mrs. Maciver cares for her damaged predecessor with infinite patience and strange tenderness while raising her two high-achieving and watchful children. This gothic configuration with its troubling erotic undercurrents allows Hamilton, who was inspired, in part, by Elizabeth Spencer's *The Light in the Piazza* (1960), to explore wildly divergent casts of mind and nearly mythic conundrums. Add to that a family divided over

the Vietnam War as Buddy enlists and Mac becomes a conscientious objector, influenced almost against his will by his vehemently antiwar mother. The cousins don't reunite until after Buddy's soldier son serves in Iraq. Hamilton has never written more finely nuanced or beguiling prose, imagined more fascinating characters, or posed more provocative moral dilemmas. In each surprising permutation, Hamilton offers fresh perspectives on the puzzles of time, memory, and consciousness, and keenly gauges the many shades of guilt and audacity, grief and sacrifice, tenacity and goodness (*Booklist*).