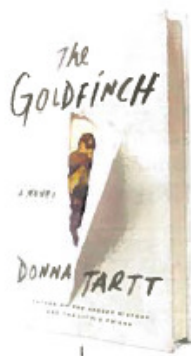


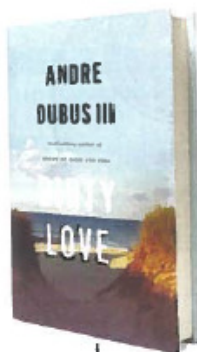
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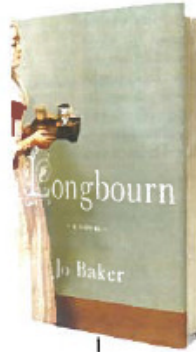
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Fiction 4 knockouts for fall

1 THE GOLDFINCH by Donna Tartt (LITTLE BROWN)

A summary of Donna Tartt's marvelous third novel must be brief and oblique in order to avoid spoilage: 13-year-old New Yorker Theo Decker blames himself for the death of his mother in a startling tragedy, one that connects him not only to the people who will foster and form him but also to the art world—particularly a lovely 17th-century Dutch painting of a captive goldfinch. Whisked away to Las Vegas by his weasel of a dad, Theo harbors a secret and makes a lifelong

best friend, a Ukrainian classmate with secrets of his own; their lives will intertwine in unexpected ways. Tartt (*The Secret History*) deftly surfs the zeitgeist (teenage druggies, the foreclosure crisis, international crime). But *The Goldfinch* is also deliciously Dickensian—in scope and themes (loss, class, redemption, the power of art) and in its lovable, hateable, memorable characters. Though judicious pruning might have given the most brilliant passages more room to shine, the book is never less than a pleasure. As the artist Mae West is said to have purred, too much of a good thing is wonderful. —JUDITH STONE



BLIPP TO WATCH

Elizabeth Gilbert introduces the smart, adventurous heroine of her new novel.

2 THE SIGNATURE OF ALL THINGS by Elizabeth Gilbert (VIKING)

Alma Whittaker, daughter of the greatest botanical mind and fortune of the 19th century, is a brilliant bryologist—that's a student of moss—who craves knowledge and to be known herself. She's a sensualist trapped in a spinster's body. And while she pores over plants in Philadelphia and, later, Tahiti, the Civil War arrives, railroad tracks stitch up the country, and Darwin blows creation apart. This epic, intellectual novel is full of the era's heavy historical reality, and yet it's delightfully suspenseful and surprising, cinematic even and loads of fun. Gilbert is having a ball with the wonder and language of the time—words like *quim* and *bedlamite* grin from the pages—and you come away with the sense that she is, like her heroine, simply in love with the world.

—CATHERINE NEWMAN

3 DIRTY LOVE by Andre Dubus III (NORTON)

These four exquisite novellas are linked loosely by the coastal New England town in which they take place and more strongly by the particular ways their central characters fail, and fail again, and still manage to find hope so authentic—so earned—that it takes the reader's breath away. Dubus is a master of description, always choosing

metaphors that cut straight to the heart of his character's predicament without compromising any of its emotional complexity. A bartender "worked the service bar but kept feeling the dark woman's presence behind him like good news in a letter he wasn't opening." A teenage girl whose "new radiance shines not from the boy who has found her but from the chance to direct all the love that's been pooling inside her." This is the best kind of fiction: rendering humanness in all its vulnerability, each sentence crafted as though all our lives depend on it.

—PAM HOUSTON

4 LONGBOURN by Jo Baker (KNOPF)

"Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery," wrote Jane Austen. "I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can." On the 200th anniversary of *Pride and Prejudice*—and about time, some might say—Jo Baker has taken up that other pen with a vengeance. In this servant's-eye view of life in the woefully understaffed Bennet household, she turns Austen upside down and gives her a good shake. Here, in vivid detail, are the endless hours, the filthy chamber pots, the family's nonstop production of dirty linen. Here, too, are glimpses of war, torture, slavery (what trade did you say your family was in, Mr. Bingley?). Against all this odiousness, Baker pulls off a fabulous, galloping, gorgeously written Regency romance, starring a seriously overworked housemaid and a dashing footman who vanishes as mysteriously as he appeared. In the end, secrets are exposed (Mr. Bennet's is particularly guilty), identities revealed, lovers reunited—and one can only imagine the fireworks to come.

—AMANDA LOVELL