

Bookshelf riches: Recommended reading

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 10, 2009](#) issue

I'm always interested in what my friends are reading, and I find that people tend to ask me about what I've been reading. So, to continue that conversation, here are three books that have meant something to me recently.

Kathleen Norris's *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life* is a compelling reflection on the sin of acedia. Her descriptions of her marriage and the death of her husband are deeply moving.

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society, by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows, is fiction, but as a critic says on the book jacket, it reads like a fascinating historical report. It records how German forces occupied Guernsey, one of the British Channel Islands, during World War II. The story is told via a series of letters between an aspiring writer in London and residents of Guernsey who are apprehended by the Germans, having broken the curfew. The residents talk their way out of trouble by convincing the commandant that they are the Guernsey Literary Society—and that is what they become.

I've read every novel John Updike has written—and that includes his latest, *The Widows of Eastwick*. Updike has been the literary chronicler of the culture in which I have lived. He continues to stun me with how much he knows about everything from classical music to the smell of freshly ironed laundry. He is also a regular churchgoer. At one moment in the novel, two of the widows—witches in the earlier novel *Witches of Eastwick*—are attending a funeral:

Alexandra allowed Sukie to follow the drift of the crowd, not down the aisle to the narthex but through a double swinging door to one side of the chancel, down a linoleum-floored hall past the choir-robing room and some ministerial offices, on into the parish hall, already a social hubbub. . . . Beyond, a long table covered with a white cloth held plates of cookies and watercress and pimento-spread sandwiches from which the bread crust

had been trimmed, and a crystal bowl filled with a punch the chemical color of lemon Jello.

Only an insider could write that.