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The Washington Post

Book Club

Reviews and recommendations from critic Ron Charles.



By **Ron Charles**

 Email



Oprah Winfrey makes a guest appearance Wednesday night at the National Book Awards ceremony in New York. (Screenshot from NBA streaming feed)

This week's National Book Awards ceremony in New York was supposed to be a train wreck. The trouble started in September when the appointed host, Drew Barrymore, got drummed out by public

complaints that she was violating the terms of the Hollywood writers strike.

Then came rumors that finalists at the awards ceremony were planning to protest the war in Gaza. In response, two sponsors — Zibby Media and Book of the Month — decided they would not be there. The National Book Foundation issued a statement hoping “that everyone attending the National Book Awards, in person or tuning in online, comes in a spirit of understanding, compassion, and humanity.”

The foundation had reason to be concerned. Thousands of writers — including Ocean Vuong, George R.R. Martin, China Miéville and Jonathan Lethem — recently signed an open letter accusing Israel of being “an apartheid state” conducting “genocide against the Palestinian people.” And on Monday, anti-Israel protesters interrupted Canada’s broadcast of the Scotiabank Giller Prize for the country’s best novel.

As the National Book Awards ceremony began Wednesday night, nobody knew exactly what might happen. Emcee LeVar Burton, opened by asking if any members of the anti-book extremist group **Moms for Liberty** were in the audience. “No?” Burton said. “Good. Then hands will not need to be thrown tonight.”

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A joke about assaulting opponents at a literary gathering was, perhaps, not the best way to encourage civil discourse.

But aside from that ill-conceived quip, the evening was notable for its relative tranquility. There were no complaints about Putin’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine. There was no alarm about the multiply-indicted “very proud election denier” marching toward the White House while spewing Nazi catchphrases ([story](#)).

Halfway through the black-tie event, National Book Foundation chairman David Steinberger sounded equally pleased and relieved. He said he felt good about “the way things are going, so far, this evening.

([Full list of the 2023 National Book Award winners.](#))

The most pointed reference to the war in the Middle East came just before the announcement of the winner of the poetry prize. Heid E. Erdrich, chair of the poetry committee, said:

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“While we have the joy of honoring powerful poems of beauty, language, love, family, history, trauma, genocide, colonial dispossession and survival, while we reward accomplishment in our art form tonight, human suffering in Gaza is at the forefront of our thoughts. Celebration and grief seem opposed, but in my life and in my recent interactions with those in the U.S.

most personally suffering this war, poetry is what we reach for in our grief. As Mahmoud Darwish wrote, ‘A poem in a difficult time / is beautiful flowers in a cemetery.’”

At the end of the ceremony, most of the finalists and winners took to the stage, and short story writer Aaliyah Bilal read a brief statement: “We oppose the ongoing bombardment of Gaza and call for a humanitarian cease-fire to address the urgent humanitarian needs of Palestinian civilians, particularly children. We oppose antisemitism and anti-Palestinian sentiment and Islamophobia equally, accepting the human dignity of all parties, knowing that further bloodshed does nothing to secure lasting peace in the region.”

It was earnest, sure, but perfunctory and bureaucratic, the kind of statement mashed together by exhausted diplomats at the U.N. for placement in a cavernous file of pronouncements. We need something better from our nation’s finest writers.

They might start by resisting public group statements, which are typically liquefied self-righteousness in a juice box. After the initial sugar rush, there’s nothing to digest. If writers really want to move us, they already know what to do and how to do it: Speak in language that’s striking but nuanced, that brings light to the murky contours of this tragedy. And most of all, *tell stories*.

When Oprah appeared Wednesday night at the National Book Awards ceremony, she didn’t issue a statement condemning book banning. She described how a banned book saved her life: “I was 15 years old when I read my first diverse book — Maya Angelou’s ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’ — and the whole world fell away for me. It was the first book, at 15, I ever read with a Black protagonist. That book gave a voice to my silences, my secrets. It gave words to my pain and my confusion of being raped at 9 years old. Until ‘Caged Bird,’ I didn’t know that there was a language, there were words, for what had happened to me or that any other human being

on earth had experienced it. That’s the power of books.” That’s the way you expand minds.

REVIEW

A reminder that Michael Cunningham is the most elegant writer in America

By Ron Charles • [Read more »](#)



Books to screens

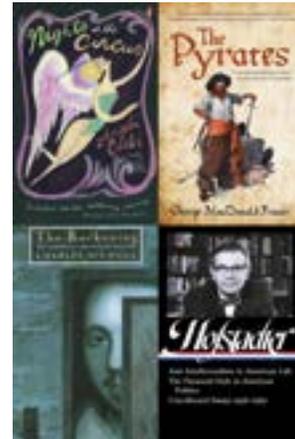
- “Leave the World Behind,” starring Julia Roberts, Mahershala Ali, Ethan Hawke and Myha’la, debuts Wednesday in select theaters before streaming on Netflix on Dec. 8. The movie, produced by Barack and Michelle Obama’s production company, is based on Rumaan Alam’s wry novel about race, class and the end of civilization. In his review for The Washington Post, Porter Shreve called it, “a genuine thriller, a brilliant distillation of our anxious age, and a work of high literary merit that deserves a place among the classics of dystopian literature” ([review](#)).

- The latest adaptation of “The Velveteen Rabbit” will debut Wednesday on Apple TV Plus. This live-action animated movie is based on the classic children’s book by Margery Williams published more than 100 years ago ([trailer](#)). Last December in The Post, Michael Patrick Hearn recalled interviewing Williams’s daughter, Pamela Bianco, and discovering the story behind “The Velveteen Rabbit” ([essay](#)).
- “Scott Pilgrim Takes Off,” starring the voices of Michael Cera and Mary Elizabeth Winstead, debuts today on Netflix. This anime series for adults is based on Bryan Lee O’Malley’s graphic novels about a lovelorn young musician who must conquer seven evil exes to win the girl of his dreams ([trailer](#)). If this sounds vaguely familiar, you’re remembering the 2010 live-action movie “Scott Pilgrim vs. the World,” which also starred Cera and Winstead. (There’s [a video game version](#), too.)

PERSPECTIVE

22 books meant to be reread.

By Michael Dirda • [Read more »](#)



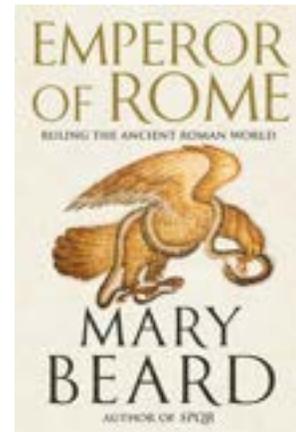
Lots of good people are rushing to help readers trapped in Gov. Ron DeSantis's statewide reenactment of "Fahrenheit 451."

- Get the party started! Pink gave away 2,000 copies of four banned books at her concerts in Florida this week. "Books have held a special joy for me from the time I was a child," the popular singer-songwriter said in a statement, "and that's why I am unwilling to stand by and watch while books are banned by schools." Pink worked with PEN America and Miami-area bookseller Books & Books to give away copies of Todd Parr's "The Family Book," Amanda Gorman's "The Hill We Climb," Toni Morrison's "Beloved" and Reshma Saujani's "Girls Who Code."
- Paul English's audacious program to airlift banned books to Florida readers is now a month old. Andy Hunter, founder of Bookshop.org, tells me that so far, **Banned Books USA** has shipped about 600 books to Floridians and raised \$7,000 in donations. "It is self-supporting and will continue to operate for the foreseeable future," Hunter says. "We'll be looking to form partnerships with more local organizations in Florida to keep growing and get these books in the hands of readers who don't have access to them, either due to book bans or financial constraints."
- The book-banning craze is burning so hot in Florida that PEN America has appointed a special director to concentrate on the state's rising censorship crisis. Katie Blankenship, former deputy legal director for the ACLU of Florida, will lead PEN America's fight for intellectual freedom at schools and colleges in the Sunshine State. Blankenship, who started her new position on Monday, said in a statement, "Floridians are ready to expand this fight against the silencing of teachers and the erasure of key subjects and history from classrooms." Her work is funded, in part, by more than \$3.6 million donated by Michael Connelly and other authors.

REVIEW

Mary Beard traces the profile of the Roman emperor

By Stephanie McCarter • [Read more »](#)



Nine-year-old Yeye stares directly into the camera and says, “No. No.” She’s responding to news that Nikki Giovanni’s picture book about Rosa Parks has been banned. “If you were the person who helped ban this book, why?” Yeye asks. “Just *why?*”

That’s the astonished question that rings across a new documentary called “The ABCs of Book Banning.” The short film — just 27 minutes long — is produced and directed by Sheila Nevins, the former president of HBO Documentary Films. It highlights the real effects of book banning by listening to “the voices of those who have not been heard . . . children.”

There is little explanatory text and no narrator. Instead, the film is punctuated by images of famous books that have been challenged,

restricted and banned from Florida schools, e.g. “The Hobbit,” “The House on Mango Street,” “The Hate U Give” and scores more.

Children provide most of the commentary. They’re bright, curious and incredulous that anyone would want to keep them from reading, from knowing, from understanding. “They’ve pulled all the award-winning books,” says Ruth Anne, a student in Mrs. Burn’s 4th grade class in Jacksonville, Fla. “Why take away all these excellent books? It’s like you’re trying to slow down children’s reading. Why do that?”

Seven-year-old Korben struggles to understand why anyone would ban the picture book “And Tango Makes Three,” based on a true story at the Central Park Zoo. “It’s about these two boy penguins, and they decide they loved each other,” he says. “It’s, like, why would you get rid of this book if people can’t be who they want to be?”

Pointing to a copy of “Ambitious Girl,” 10-year-old Taylor says, “If you read this book, and still after you read this book — read it twice, read it three times — realized that, ‘Oh, this book needs to be banned,’ then something’s not clicking in your brain.”

Out of the mouths of babes.

The film is bookended by footage of Grace Linn, a 100-year-old woman who spoke out against book banning at the Martin County (Fla.) School Board meeting earlier this year. Her husband was a soldier killed during World War II. “One of the freedoms that the Nazis crushed was the freedom to read the books they banned,” Linn tells the assembled crowd. “Banning books and burning books are the same. Both are done for the same reason: Fear of knowledge. Fear is not freedom. Fear is not liberty. Fear is control.”

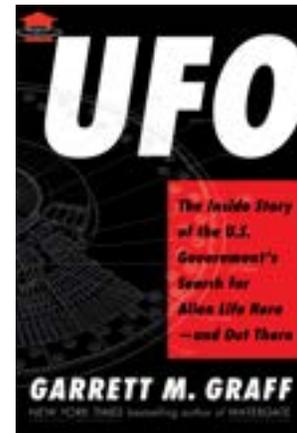
“The ABCs of Book Banning” will begin streaming on Paramount Plus on Nov. 21. You might also see the documentary at book festivals and

libraries around the country. May it inspire all of us to oppose book banning with more passion and purpose — for the children.

REVIEW

Wonder if UFOs are real? The government has been trying to find out, too.

By Sarah Scoles • [Read more »](#)



Everything old is new again:

- Erica Jong’s erotic novel “**Fear of Flying**” was published in 1973. At the time, I was at a Christian prep school in the Midwest, so I was equally afraid of flying *and* sex. But this week, I’ve been struck by the novel’s incredible verve and comedy. On Dec. 5, Berkley will release a new edition with an introduction by Taffy Brodesser-Akner, who, with her usual pizazz, captures the novel’s history and its effect on her. This edition also contains a somber foreword by Jong’s daughter Molly Jong-Fast. She describes the glitzy but challenging world “Fear of Flying” created for both author and daughter. “I thought writing this foreword would be fun, easy work,” Jong-Fast says, “but it’s like performing root canal surgery on myself.”
- Next week, Signet Classics is releasing a new edition of Agatha Christie’s 1926 mystery “**The Murder of Roger Ackroyd**” with a fun introduction by Ruth Ware, who knows a thing or two about

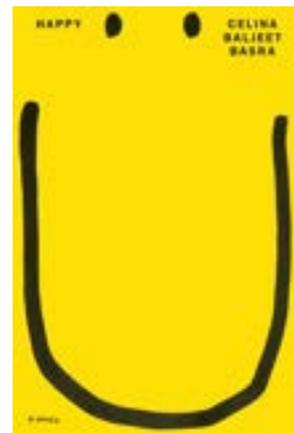
murder most foul. Ware runs through the standard rules of crime fiction and celebrates how cleverly Christie broke them.

- The budding despot in your family needs the special 25th anniversary edition of “**48 Laws of Power**” from Penguin. Robert Greene’s self-help book draws on the sociopathic wisdom of Machiavelli, Henry Kissinger, P.T. Barnum and others. Appropriately, this new edition is bound in something the publisher calls “vegan leather.” For a hilarious, profanity-laced takedown of Greene’s advice, check out the podcast “If Books Could Kill” ([listen](#)).
- “**The Last Tycoon**” was left unfinished when F. Scott Fitzgerald died at the age of 44, but his story about a Hollywood producer has tantalized readers since 1941 when an edited version was published by Edmund Wilson. (Ernest Hemingway almost got the job, but Zelda said *no*.) This month, Scribner is releasing the great fragment again, along with Fitzgerald’s notes, Wilson’s foreword and a new introduction by Haruki Murakami, who recently translated “The Last Tycoon” into Japanese.
- Readers have never lost their taste for Julia Child. Next week, Knopf will release a fresh edition of “**The French Chef Cookbook**” (1968) based on her legendary TV show. Interest should be stirred by the second season of “Julia,” starring Sarah Lancashire, which started last night on Max ([trailer](#)). On this week’s episode of the podcast “Your Mama’s Kitchen,” host Michele Norris talks with Michael Pollan about Child’s influence on his mother’s cooking ([listen](#)).

REVIEW

The tragic exploitation that puts food on our plates

By Jenny Wu • [Read more »](#)





(Two Trees Press)

I may need physical therapy after hauling around a copy of “Among Friends.” Weighing in at more than eight pounds, this gigantic anthology offers “an illustrated oral history of American book publishing and bookselling in the 20th century.” It’s a labor of love edited by Buz Teacher, the co-founder of Running Press, and his wife, Janet Bukovinsky Teacher. They set out to chronicle “what was once a business and is now an industry.”

“Among Friends” is not so much a book as a treasure chest of memories and images of our modern literary culture exploding — in good ways and bad.

John Sargent, Jr. describes his hilariously clueless start at Macmillan. Nan Talese mourns the corporatization of publishing. Robert Gottlieb recalls the excitement of revitalizing a moribund imprint called Knopf. Dick Snyder claims that the first draft of “All the President’s Men,” by Washington Post reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, was “an unreadable disaster.” And Pennie Clark Ianniciello, a longtime book buyer for Costco, misses “the glamour of the book business.”

Jane Friedman remembers meeting “a young man from Seattle who believed that people would buy books without seeing them, holding them

and smelling them.” By the time Jeff Bezos left the Random House headquarters that day, “I had drunk the Kool-Aid,” Friedman says. “This was the future.” (Amazon’s founder, Jeff Bezos, owns The Washington Post.)

There are dozens of others — more than 100 in all — talking about the history of mass market paperbacks, independent publishers, booksellers and more. There’s a lot of bragging (and humble bragging) and a tendency to discount privilege and family money, but that, too, is a crucial element of postwar publishing.

Designer Alex Camlin laid out “Among Friends” to take full advantage of its huge pages. The book is packed with classic dust jackets — from “Chicka Chicka Boom Boom” to “The Satanic Verses” to “The Feminine Mystique” — along with decades of advertisements, author photos and newspaper clippings.

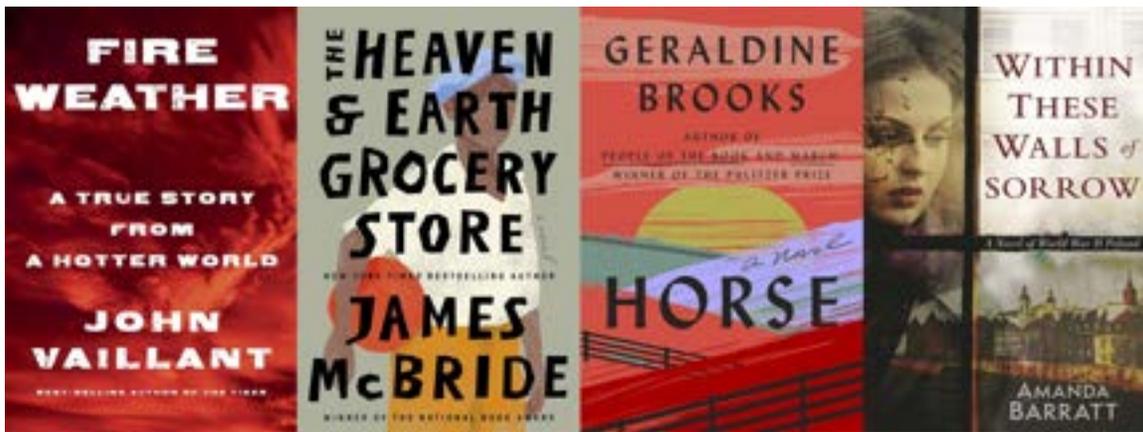
Yes, this is an expensive tome. But what’s \$200 among friends? Given the enormity of the project and the quality of the production — each book comes in its own die-cut clamshell box — I suspect the publisher is losing money on every one of the 1,600 hand-numbered copies ([more information](#)). If you give this book to any reader interested in the history of modern literature and publishing, you won’t see them for weeks.

REVIEW

‘The Helsinki Affair’ fills a gap in spy fiction

By Carol Memmott • [Read more »](#)





(Knopf; Riverhead; Viking; Kregel)

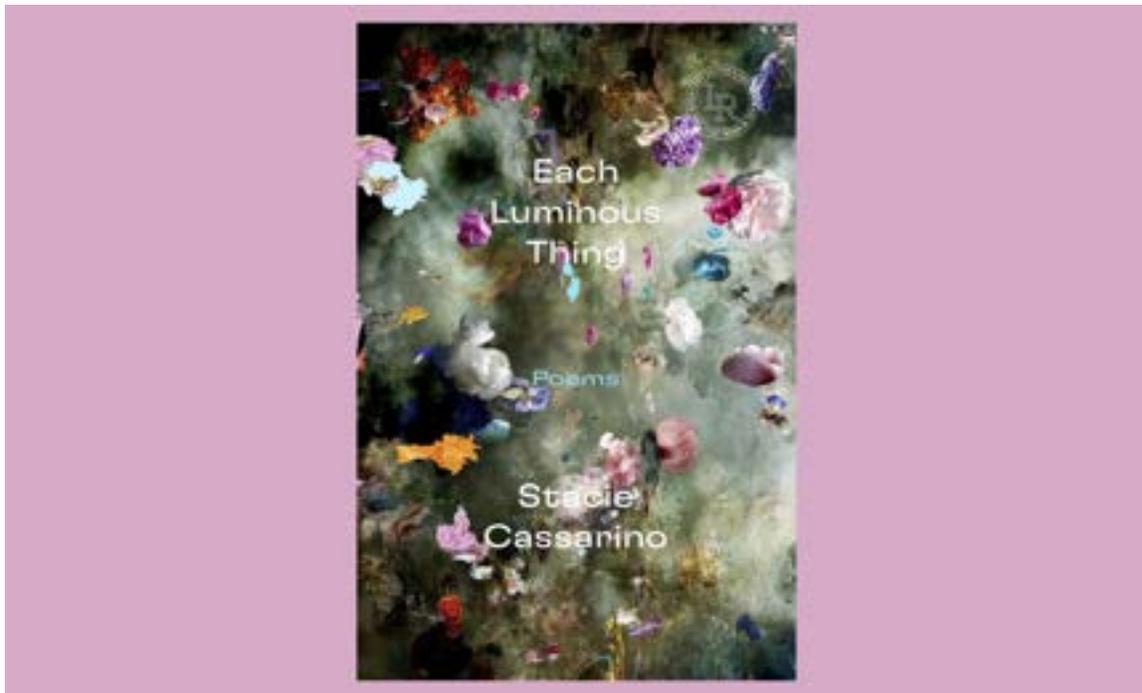
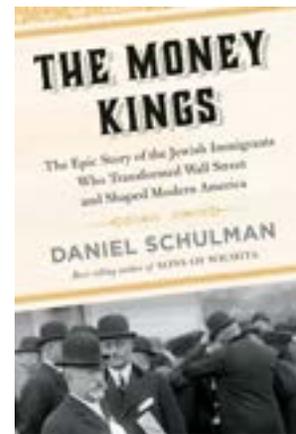
More literary awards and honors:

- “Fire Weather: A True Story from a Hotter World,” by John Vaillant, won the Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-Fiction. The award, worth about \$62,000, honors the best work of nonfiction written in English and published in the UK by an author of any nationality. “Fire Weather,” about a devastating wildfire in Alberta in 2016, was also a finalist for this week’s National Book Award in Nonfiction. Washington Post book critic Becca Rothfeld said Vaillant’s book “concretizes the unimaginable in terms that seize readers by the throat” ([review](#)).
- “The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store,” by National Book Award winner James McBride, has been named the best book of the year by Amazon and Barnes & Noble. ([I loved it, too.](#))
- “Horse,” by Geraldine Brooks, won the Tony Ryan Book Award for the best book related to horse racing ([review](#)). The \$10,000 prize is conferred by the Castleton Lyons farm near Lexington, Ky.
- “Within These Walls of Sorrow,” by Amanda Barratt, was named Book of the Year at the Christy Awards conferred by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. Barratt’s historical novel is about a woman who risks everything to help her Jewish neighbors in Krakow during the Holocaust. ([Full list of winners.](#))

REVIEW

How 19th-century financiers grappled with antisemitism and power

By Emily Tamkin • [Read more »](#)



(Persea)

Stacie Cassarino’s second collection, “Each Luminous Thing,” explores the joys and thrills and, yes, the terrors of motherhood. These are poems caught between the delights of life and the certainty of death. Cassarino never forgets that there’s nothing truly domestic about being a mother; it’s always an adventure in the natural world.

Body Electric

Before I was a mother,
I would crawl along these crags,
all spunk and grace, no qualm.
But today, on the top

of Buck Mountain, pregnant
with twins, I don't let myself yearn
for the woman carrying my daughter
with the tenderness of a woman
who will eventually need me
too. From the valley, anyone might look
up to see *family*. Look how they've arrived
to take in the view. And maybe

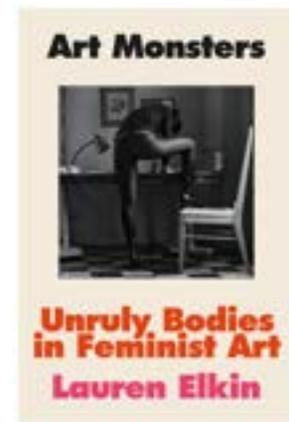
I pretended, every part of me swelling
and flushed and laboring to get there,
each step tactical, a triumph. But
this wasn't a story I could live with.
And when the thunderclouds came so quickly
all I could think was how reckless
I had been, putting the one life I'd made
into another woman's hands, while
we rushed down the slope
of shale and sludge, the path surging
with rainwater, my daughter somewhere
behind me, I ran and I ran
counting the seconds between the flash
and the sound to equal the distance
it might take to get struck, knowing
the same body that was a conductor
could not also be a shelter;
knowing how rare it is
to not want to be touched by light.

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REVIEW

What it means to be an Art Monster

By Maggie Lange • [Read more »](#)



Ron Charles getting crafty at Woodcraft in Rockville, Md., on Nov. 12. (Ron Charles/The Washington Post)

Every article I read about planning for retirement highlights the importance of developing interests outside of work, which has made me realize that I have none. Such obsessiveness has not been a healthy way to spend my working life; in retirement, I'm told it could be disastrous.

As part of their ongoing conspiracy to goad me into expanding my horizons, my parents and my wife gave me a two-weekend course at **Woodcraft**. Last Saturday, I harrumphed all the way to the workshop. *“Four full days? When am I supposed to get my reading done? What if there's an emergency, and The Post needs a mid-list literary novel summarized immediately?”*

Spoiler alert: I'm loving Furniture Making 101. On the first day, I took possession of a long cherry board so heavy I could barely lift it. Each class is seven blissful hours of sawing and chiseling and using very loud machines. I don't have to read anything. I don't have to strain to sound clever or pretend that I know what I'm doing. Last Sunday, I made eight mortise and tenon joints that fit together better than any sentences I've ever written.

Thomas Moser has nothing to worry about from me, but that's fine. So much of adulthood is about avoiding anything one isn't good at, which can become an excuse for avoiding almost everything. Getting hit with an 8-foot cherry board might be a lifesaver.

I'm making a simple end table. It could hold a small stack of books. Which I might read someday. Or maybe not.

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