

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress : A Novel by Dai Sijie

The Cultural Revolution of Chairman Mao Zedong altered Chinese history in the 1960s and '70s, forcibly sending hundreds of thousands of Chinese intellectuals to peasant villages for "re-education." This moving, often wrenching short novel by a writer who was himself re-educated in the '70s tells how two young men weather years of banishment, emphasizing the power of literature to free the mind. Sijie's unnamed 17-year-old protagonist and his best friend, Luo, are bourgeois doctors' sons, and so condemned to serve four years in a remote mountain village, carrying pails of excrement daily up a hill. Only their ingenuity helps them to survive. The two friends are good at storytelling, and the village headman commands them to put on "oral cinema shows" for the villagers, reciting the plots and dialogue of movies. When another city boy leaves the mountains, the friends steal a suitcase full of forbidden books he has been hiding, knowing he will be afraid to call the authorities. Enchanted by the prose of a host of European writers, they dare to tell the story of *The Count of*

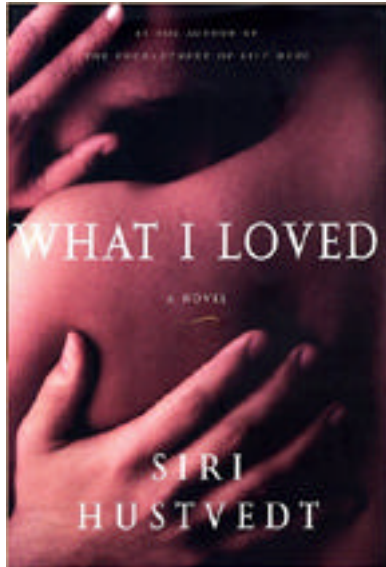
Monte Cristo to the village tailor and to read Balzac to his shy and beautiful young daughter. Luo, who adores the Little Seamstress, dreams of transforming her from a simple country girl into a sophisticated lover with his foreign tales. He succeeds beyond his expectations, but the result is not what he might have hoped for, and leads to an unexpected, droll and poignant conclusion. The warmth and humor of Sijie's prose and the clarity of Rilke's translation distinguish this slim first novel, a wonderfully human tale. (Sept. 17) Forecast: Sijie's debut was a best-seller and prize winner in France in 2000, and rights have been sold in 19 countries; it is also scheduled to be made into a film. Its charm translates admirably strong sales can be expected on this side of the Atlantic.



The Eyre Affair by Jasper Fforde

Surreal and hilariously funny, this alternate history, the debut novel of British author Fforde, will appeal to lovers of zany genre work (think Douglas Adams) and lovers of classic literature alike. The scene: Great Britain circa 1985, but a Great Britain where literature has a prominent place in everyday life. For pennies, corner Will-Speak machines will quote Shakespeare; Richard III is performed with audience participation ... la Rocky Horror and children swap Henry Fielding bubble-gum cards. In this world where high lit matters, Special Operative Thursday Next (literary detective) seeks to retrieve the stolen manuscript of Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The evil Acheron Hades has plans for it: after kidnapping Next's mad-scientist uncle, Mycroft, and commandeering Mycroft's invention, the Prose Portal, which enables people to cross into a literary text, he sends a minion into *Chuzzlewit* to seize and kill a minor character, thus forever changing the novel. Worse is to come. When the manuscript of *Jane Eyre*, Next's favorite novel, disappears, and Jane herself is

spirited out of the book, Next must pursue Hades inside Charlotte Brontë's masterpiece. The plethora of oddly named characters can be confusing, and the story's episodic nature means that the action moves forward in fits and starts. The cartoonish characters are either all good or all bad, but the villain's comeuppance is still satisfying. Witty and clever, this literate romp heralds a fun new series set in a wonderfully original world. (Jan. 28) Forecast: With a six-city author tour, a well-conceived Web site at www.thursdaynext.com and crossover appeal to Brontë fans, this is likely to attract more attention than the usual first genre novel.



What I Loved: A Novel by [Siri Hustvedt](#)

The ardent exchange of ideas underlies all manner of passionate action in Hustvedt's third novel (after *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*), a dark tale of two intertwined New York families. "What is memory's perspective? Does the man revise the boy's view or is the imprint relatively static, a vestige of what was once intimately known?" So muses Columbia University art historian Leo Hertzberg as he recalls the love affair between artist Bill ("Seeing is flux") Wechsler and his model/second wife, Violet, whom Leo secretly loves almost as much as his own wife, Erica. Leo and Bill become friends when Leo buys a huge portrait of Violet, the first painting Bill has ever sold, and the two are inseparable ever after. Erica and Bill's first wife, Lucille, give birth to sons in the same year and, soon afterward, the Wechslers buy a loft in the same SoHo building. When the boys are four, Bill and Lucille are divorced, and Bill marries Violet. Linked by their love of art and language (Erica is an English professor and Violet a Ph.D. student with a specialty in 19th-century forms of madness), the two couples talk insatiably about art and life, celebrating triumphs and weathering tragedy together. In its second half, the novel shifts into the terrain of the psychological thriller, as Bill and Lucille's son, Mark, a dangerously charming boy, grows up and slips into a sinister New York club scene. So solid and complex are Hustvedt's characters that the change in pace is effortlessly effected—the plot developments are the natural extension of the author's meticulous examination of relationships and motives. In considering Violet, Leo observes, "Unlike most intellectuals, [she] didn't distinguish between the cerebral and the physical." The same distinctions are blurred in this gripping, seductive novel, a breakout work for Hustvedt.-- didn't distinguish between the cerebral and the physical." The same distinctions are blurred in this gripping, seductive novel, a breakout work for Hustvedt.