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## Bookbits

**Reader recommendations, review of 'The Last Chicken in America' by Ellen Litman.**

By Martha White

from the September 18, 2007 edition

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### Readers' picks

I've rediscovered Agatha Christie! As a writer and poet, I find her work refreshing and invigorating. Without the CSI approach, the charm is in the solving of a mystery. Shows how GOOD writing lasts! – Norm Rourke, Beggs, Okla.

I've been reading Michael Perry's **Truck: A Love Story**. He chronicles a year during which he rebuilds an old pickup, becomes engaged (after many years of bachelorhood), and grows a garden. His prose style is very readable: not overly complex, but not simplistic either. He is both extremely funny and terribly insightful about the human condition. –Bryan Embrey, Fremont, Calif.

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**We Were One** by Patrick K. O'Donnell is a gripping account of the 2004 battle for Fallujah. O'Donnell is a combat historian embedded with a company of US Marines. He presents a first-person account – complete with photos – of the action they faced. Rated R for language and violence, but A+ for capturing the thoughts and emotions of these brave young men. – John Concar, Dana Point, Calif.

I'm reading the new Barbara Kingsolver book **Animal, Vegetable, Miracle**. My husband read it first, now it's mine. It is eye-opening, affirming, exciting, and a little cautionary. This is a terrific book!!! – Francine Apollo, Cobleskill, N.Y.

I am an avid mystery reader, presently enjoying Christopher Fowler's **Ten Second Staircase** featuring two quirky old guys who are the brains/backbone of an elite detective group in England. What has "hooked" me is the way Fowler has given them such wittily funny "lines." If you can picture a philosophic, witty mystery, this is it! – Marge Nieznay, Hemet, Calif.

I am reading all of Cristina Garcia's work. Just finished **Handbook to Luck** (her latest) and **Dreaming in Cuban** (her first). I am particularly interested in Latina women writers, and Garcia's work is interesting and creatively structured.– Bessy Reyna, Bolton, Conn.

I'm not a huge science fiction-fan (Stanislaw Lem and Douglas Adams are the only other sci-fi writers that come to mind), but Philip K. Dick's novels always seem to grab me. So I pulled **Valis** off the shelf about a week ago and so far I'm enjoying it. – Terrence E. Dunn, Santa Monica, Calif.

What are you reading? Write and tell us at [kehem@csps.com](mailto:kehem@csps.com).

## The Last Chicken in America

Author: Ellen Litman

Ellen Litman's debut novel, **The Last Chicken in America**, is a dozen interconnected stories peopled with displaced, often dispirited Russian-Jewish immigrants living in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh and trying to reassemble their lives. In the title story, a former literature teacher puzzles her way through a Giant Eagle supermarket. The bounty there is "still a bit of a miracle," says her daughter Masha, but Masha's father is impatient. "It's not the last chicken in America," he complains.

Each of the families depicted is struggling with what has been lost, be it health, love, money, or identity. A highly educated teacher

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### Today's print issue



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becomes a cleaning lady because her English isn't good. Engineers become mechanics, students learn computer programming regardless of interest and perform "benign maintenance tasks." Daughters remain their parents' translators, kept at home by the need to decode healthcare and insurance forms. Families become unnaturally close, but also have a tendency to unravel, each in their own way.

Litman's Squirrel Hill is a community of Russians in various stages of struggle. In "Peculiarities of the National Driving," a father teaches his daughter to drive, but she realizes he is considering leaving his family. The men, notes Masha, are, "Dispirited. Damaged by the immigration." The younger members of the family become go-betweens, both needed and resented for their abilities. "At twelve, you wear brown corduroy overalls, and the neighbors love you," Masha observes. But then, "At seventeen ... [they] eye you with suspicion."

Marriage brings its own pitfalls. One young man quotes a Russian poet's suicide note: "The love boat crushed against everyday drudgery," then adds his own humorous observations about what might follow a wedding: "a month later, or maybe two, you start to notice things – unswept bread crumbs, wet swirls of hair in the drain ... so after six months, you measure the trajectory of frying pans as she hurls them at you from the kitchen."

Author Litman emigrated from Moscow herself in 1992, and it's easy to see why she won the Rona Jaffe Award for these terrific stories. She has a clear eye, an ease with English, and a tolerant and hopeful view, as described by Masha who is watching a young Russian couple dance at their wedding: "They were trying. And maybe not everything was a mistake. Maybe we had learned something, and next time we'd do a little better, if only we gave it a chance."

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