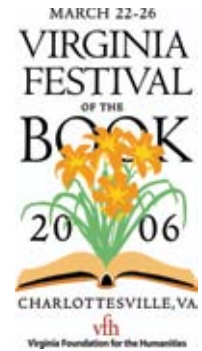


Suspects by David Thomson recommended by Benjamin Schutz

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the “VABooks!” column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Benjamin Schutz—Edgar- and Shamus-winning author of *The Mongol Reply* and *Mary, Mary, Shut the Door*—recommends *Suspects* by David Thomson. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



Suspects by David Thomson is *sui generis* and the most unusual novel I have ever read. It consists of the biographies of 85 characters from 56 movies made between 1930 and 1981. In between many of these biographies are the musings of the hidden narrator, whose identity is ever so slowly revealed. The characters come largely from the noir end of the spectrum, but films as diverse as *Citizen Kane*, *Psycho*, *Casablanca*, *The Godfather* and *It's a Wonderful Life* are represented.

In this book of enormous inventiveness and precision, Thomson presents a full biography for almost all of the characters, cradle to the grave, yet the book is less than 300 pages. He knows exactly what details to emphasize and what to omit to economically bring each character to life and make them unique.

The structure of the book is quite cunning. He weaves back and forth from fictional characters to real-life ones, connecting them to actual events and to the other movies. He provides the “back story” to the characters we met when their lives were upon the screen for all to see, and then tells us what happened to them after the lights went out.

All of this is in the service of weaving a tapestry of life in America in the 20th century.

It is a transgressive tapestry as the precious categories and classes of our public selves are criss-crossed in every direction.

In the back, behind the projector, sits the narrator, still unsure after all these years of what to make of this long parade of lives he has witnessed and touched. His observations are like the voice-over from a hard-boiled detective film, rich in irony and rue. Simultaneously with the portrait of America as a whole, the portrait of the narrator builds slowly, one life at a time. In that way, the novel is a mystery, a tale of suspense.

Who is the narrator? What does it mean, that of all these captivating characters, he is at the center?

Does it help to be familiar with these movies before you read the book? Absolutely. Each biography fits in seamlessly with the facts we know from the screen, elucidating motivations and describing destinies. The vividness of the screen images, and our feelings for the characters as we know them, enhances the impact of what you read. Is it necessary to know the movies before you read the book? I think not. It is surely a different experience, but the novel can stand on its own.