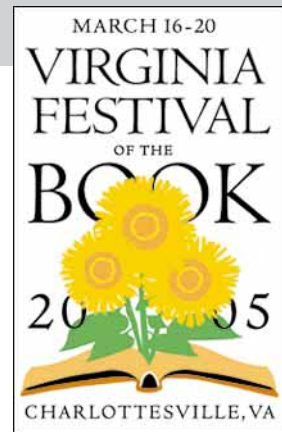


***Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree and Other Works of Buddhist Fiction* edited by Kate Wheeler recommended by Jeanne Larsen**

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, Jeanne Larsen—novelist, poet, and translator who lives and teaches in southwest Virginia—recommends *Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree and Other Works of Buddhist Fiction* edited by Kate Wheeler. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



Anyone who's been within a laptop's throw of a creative writing classroom knows "didactic" isn't what you want to hear when your story's on the table. Yet from Confucius to Horace to Lady Murasaki, the notion that we can learn from what we read keeps showing up when people defend art made from words. Why waste time on a pack of lies? Well, for one thing, you might find it instructive.

Most writers I know would say: if you set out to write a story that will convince the reader to become a (fill in the blank—Bolshevik? tree-hugger? Presbyterian?) and you also aim at creating quality fiction, you've got a mighty tough row to hoe. But if you're Flannery O'Connor or Lu Xun or Isaac Bashevis Singer, then what you believe about Christian faith or the social problems of early twentieth-century China or the Jewish tradition will inform your art. And inform your readers, too.

So there's one reason to read *Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree*, which has little to do with our thirty-seventh president (he haunts the title story), but a great deal to do with the various religions lumped together under "Buddhism." You'll get to know more about the teachings lots of people call the Dharma. Or anyway, about what lively writers can make of them.

But these stories—some dreamy, some disturbing, some plain funny—don't offer only one take on those teachings; you'll come across a passel of perspectives. A down-and-out Tibetan meets a

junkie on a Greyhound bus. Nuns goof up big time. Or bake a cake. A meditating mom hears her daughter calling for her as the TV blares. A soul looks for a womb to land in. Old tales from South Asia have been retold, made new. Modern memoirs have been tweaked into disguise. All of it is fiction.

Fiction: that's especially a problem (it's the lying thing, again) from any viewpoint affected by the Himalayan prince-turned-spiritual-seeker known as the Buddha. Like Plato, he warned us away, we're told, from whatever removes us from reality—for example, artful language. And yet, like Jesus, he made use, we're told, of parables.

Novelist and essayist Charles Johnson (a serious student of that teacher for more than thirty years) takes an astute look at the quandary in his forward to the book. Editor Kate Wheeler (fiction writer, travel writer, long-time Buddhist practitioner) says in her introduction that "Buddhist fiction" is "a rather strange and impossible category." I found these two brief pieces alone to be worth the price of the book, so check them out.

But don't stop there. You'll discover in the mixed bag of work that follows—authors known and unknown; stories brand new or taken from novels, from "year's best" collections, from an array of magazines—much that you'll be glad you read. Some will better suit your taste than others, surely. Every one, however, offers the chance of learning, offers an opportunity for insight's matchless *click*.