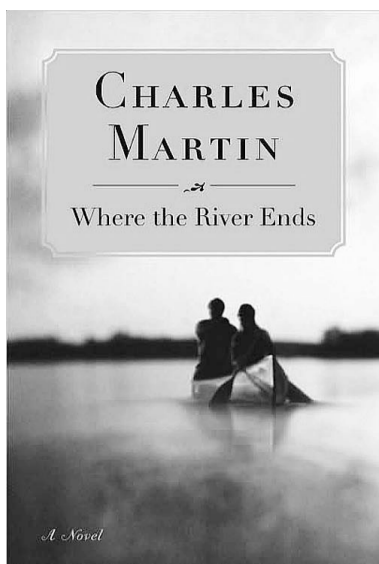


## REVIEWS



## RIVER RUNS THROUGH NOVEL

CANOE TRIP, DEADLY ILLNESS, FRANTIC SEARCH ADD UP TO PERFECT STORM

BY MARTY MORRISON  
FOR THE FREE LANCE-STAR

CHARLES MARTIN is a master of description, and his sixth novel, “Where the River Ends,” may be the best portrayal yet.

Martin weaves the love story of a husband’s enduring love for his dying wife with the constancy yet unpredictability of the river. Doss Michaels grew up with a single mom in a trailer park in southern Georgia and eked out an existence as a fishing guide and part-time artist. One night, he thwarted an attack on a young woman, Abbie Coleman, a Charleston-bred supermodel and the only daughter of a senior South Carolina senator. The two fell in love, eloped and enjoyed a blissful decade together until she discovered a lump in her breast. They spent the next four years in turmoil, she, in and out of hospitals undergoing chemo, radiation and experimental treatments until doctors exhausted all hope for a cure.

Instead of suffering her final days in hospice care, Abbie begs Doss to take her on a canoe trip down the St. Mary’s River as they had done at the start of their life together. Despite a hurricane looming and Abbie’s father’s insistence that she stay in the hospital, the couple slips away in the middle of the night to embark on the 130-mile journey to the Cumberland Sound. Along the way, they encounter a series of harrowing moments, sinister rednecks and colorful characters. Their journey is complicated by the senator who uses his heavy-handed political power to launch a nationwide search for the couple, while accusing Doss, whom he never liked, of kidnapping Abbie.

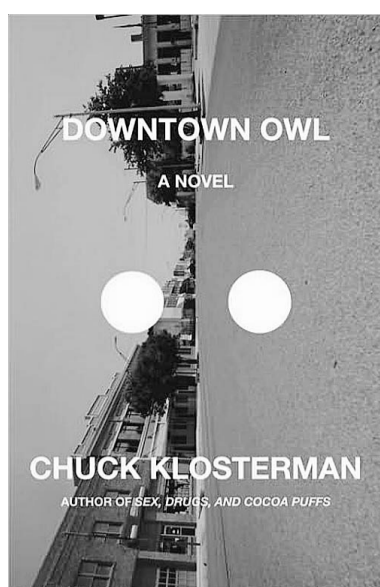
Despite waves of pain that course through her disease-wracked body, Abbie finds comfort in her final days on the river with Doss. Along the way, she manages to check off her “Top 10” list of things she wants to do before she dies. Her wishes are simple, such as riding an antique carousel, sipping wine on the beach and dancing with her husband. Together, Doss and Abbie take back some of the precious time they have lost to four years of nonstop medical treatment.

Martin paints a visual portrait that makes for a heart-breaking and unforgettable story. He skillfully balances the colorful scenes of small towns and striking landscape along the river he knows so well with the touching love story of an uncharacteristic courtship and the desperation they face as they wage a losing battle against the cancer that spreads to Abbie’s brain. Add to that the suspense of the approaching hurricane, the father’s frantic search for the couple and the inevitability of death and Martin creates a hypnotic narrative that readers won’t want to end.

Marty Morrison is a freelance writer living in Spotsylvania.

### WHERE THE RIVER ENDS

By Charles Martin  
(Broadway Books, \$19.95)



## ‘DOWNTOWN’ SENDS UP SMALL-TOWN AMERICA

‘SEX, DRUGS AND COCOA PUFFS’ AUTHOR TRIES HIS HAND AT THE NOVEL

BY NATASHA ALTAMIRANO  
FOR THE FREE LANCE-STAR

CHUCK Klosterman’s debut novel, “Downtown Owl,” takes place in the fictional small town of Owl, North Dakota, where the most exciting place—the town movie theater—is closing, and where the private lives of its residents are only slightly more interesting than they seem on the surface.

“Downtown Owl” centers around the lives of three protagonists whose lives are connected by—besides being residents of Owl—a deadly blizzard (based on a real 1984 storm) that ravages the state.

There’s Julia, a recent college grad who moves to Owl for her first teaching job and discovers, between nights spent at local bars, that “[t]eaching history to eighth-graders is like being a tour guide for people who hate their vacation.”

There’s Mitch, a junior who plays football and is terrorized by his coach, John Laidlaw, who has a penchant for teenage girls.

And there’s the elderly Horace, a widower who, despite missing his late wife, has come to enjoy being alone through the realization “that you don’t need someone else to invent your happiness.”

Through their eyes, Klosterman introduces a host of other characters: town drunks, gossipy old men, malcontent teens, over-the-hill high school football stars whose 15 minutes of fame were up long ago, yet who still are worshipped as town heroes. In Owl, “the same kids who spent thirteen years in class with each other start going to the same bars and they bowl together and they go to the same church and pretty much live an adult version of their high school life.”

Despite being a satire on small-town America, “Downtown Owl” also is a commentary on adolescence, adulthood, and aging—along with the various problems and issues one faces during those stages of life.

Julia ponders whether living in a small town, with its limited romantic possibilities, is so bad: “Maybe I don’t need a relationship at all, she thought. Maybe thinking about these conversations was just as good as having them. She could sit in her Honda in the dark and experience whatever kind of life she wanted.”

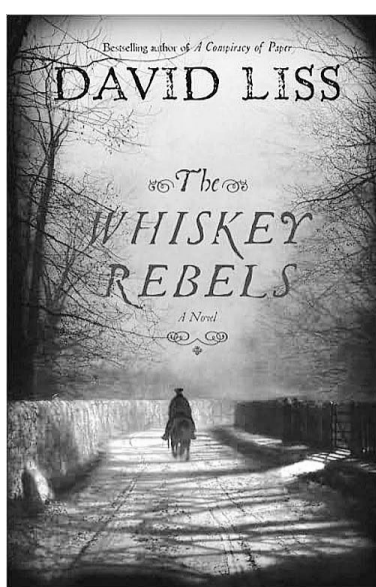
As his wife struggled through her last days, Horace was more open with her than he’d been during the last few decades of their marriage. “As is so often the case in the midst of any tragedy—they were things he would not have told her under nontragic circumstances,” Klosterman writes.

With his trademark biting wit and insightful observations of human nature, Klosterman’s “Downtown Owl” is a successful foray into fiction.

Natasha Altamirano is a freelance writer in Washington, D.C.

### DOWNTOWN OWL

By Chuck Klosterman  
(Simon & Schuster, \$24)



## ‘WHISKEY REBELS’ DON’T RUN DRY

FARMERS TURN GRAIN INTO GOLD DURING FINANCIAL PANIC OF 1792

BY LUCIA ANDERSON  
FOR THE FREE LANCE-STAR

TRADERS SELLING short. Bank shares falling. The national economy in jeopardy.

When David Liss was writing “The Whiskey Rebels” he could not possibly have anticipated how eerily relevant the story line of his historical novel would be at the moment it went on sale.

“The Whiskey Rebels” starts out as a kind of adventure story set in the early years of the republic, narrated by its two main characters.

When we meet Ethan Saunders in Philadelphia early in 1792, he’s close to getting killed by a cuckolded husband. Saunders fought in the Revolution under General Washington, but was forced to resign his commission under suspicion of treason. He’s spent the last 10 years pickling his sorrows in alcohol. But an appeal from the woman he loved and lost draws him into a spider web of mysterious events, and sets him on the track to redemption.

Although her story is interleaved in alternating chapters with Saunders’, we meet Joan Maycroft considerably earlier, in 1781. We witness her marriage to a Revolutionary War veteran, their brutal life on the Pennsylvania frontier near Pittsburgh, and the tragic events that turn Joan into a crusader against the infant U.S. government.

All of this leads up to the financial panic of 1792, when the national bank very nearly collapsed because of reckless manipulation of government securities. That part is true enough, as is the enmity between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton due to their differing political philosophies. Also true is the effect that Hamilton’s whiskey tax had on the western farmers, who had no other way to get their grain to market than to turn it into whiskey. This is Liss’ fourth historical thriller, and he obviously knows how to research a period.

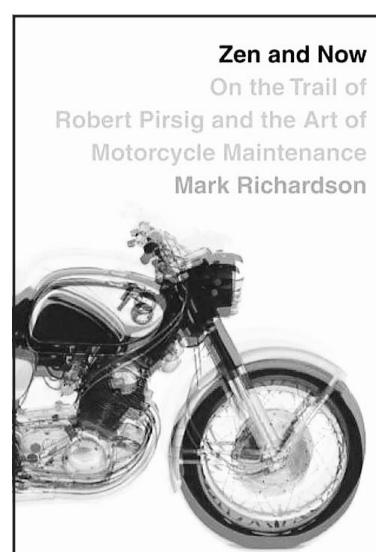
He’s also a skilled storyteller, creating compelling characters and an absorbing narrative. It doesn’t matter whether readers are familiar with the intricate contra dance between the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans in the first decades of our history. It isn’t even necessary to comprehend all the complicated financial dealings that are slowly uncovered as the story unwinds. It’s enough to know that there’s a monstrous crisis building and our hero is doing his best to ride to the rescue. And Saunders is a likable hero, with enough flaws to make him truly appealing. Joan Maycroft is less sympathetic, although one has to admire her intelligence and strength of character.

“The Whiskey Rebels” is that increasingly rare find—a book that’s a truly satisfying read.

Lucia Anderson is a freelance writer in Woodbridge.

### THE WHISKEY REBELS

By David Liss  
(Random House, \$26)



## BALLAD OF UNEASY RIDERS

JOURNALIST FOLLOWS BIKE ROUTE OF ‘60S ‘ZEN’ AUTHOR, PHILOSOPHER PIRSIG

BY KURT RABIN  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

ROBERT PIRSIG, in his ’70s travel memoir/philosophy text “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance,” said “Stuckness shouldn’t be avoided. It’s the psychic predecessor of all real understanding.”

In my 20s, I got “stuck” while reading Pirsig, mired in his dense consideration of Quality.

I suspect Pirsig’s book is, like Stephen Hawking’s “A Brief History of Time,” one of those best-sellers that few people actually read.

Even Pirsig’s biggest fans admit to having made several attempts before finally plowing through it. But many who do claim to be rewarded with enlightenment.

Journalist Mark Richardson, author of “Zen and Now: On the Trail of Robert Pirsig and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance,” not only finished the tome but became a “Pirsig pilgrim”—one who retraces Pirsig’s motorcycle route from Minneapolis to San Francisco.

“A big part of the message of ‘Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance,’ ” writes Richardson, “can be boiled down to a truism: If a job’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well.”

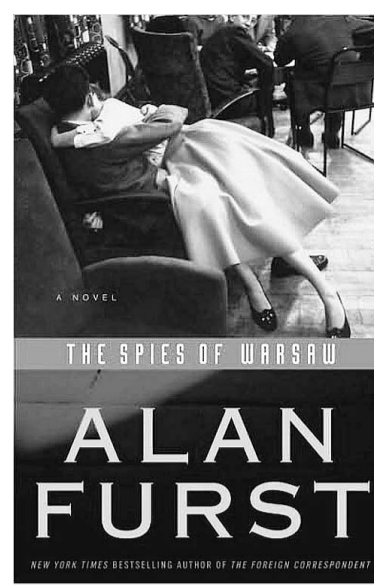
Richardson himself does a good job of keeping the dual narrative of his bike trip and that of Pirsig’s on track. And he doesn’t shy away from the divorce, madness and murder that surrounded his mentor’s seminal ’70s work.

Pirsig kept his distance. “The best place to meet an author is on the pages of his book,” he told Richardson. “Anywhere else is a disappointment, believe me.”

Kurt Rabin is a copy editor at The Free Lance-Star.

### ZEN AND NOW: On the Trail of Robert Pirsig and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

By Mark Richardson  
(Knopf, \$25)



## ‘FURST’ NAME IN SPY GAME

IT’S SPY VS. SPY IN FOREBODING PEACE BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

BY DAN DERVIN  
FOR THE FREE LANCE-STAR

AS A RULE, I am no fan of spy novels, but every rule has its exception, and Alan Furst’s “The Spies of Warsaw” is truly exceptional. It is the bleak winter of 1937–38 in Warsaw and other European centers under the shadows of Hitler’s swastikas. The days are dark; vision is hardly better. Among the embassies and intelligence centers, the mood is singularly complacent and ominous. The peaceful aftermath of World War I invites a return to traditional customs, but the diplomats and the spooks sense Germany a cauldron of simmering resentment from the humiliating Treaty of Versailles. Terror lurks around the next corner. But how will it arrive?

Die-hard Soviet spies on the Poles are being rounded up in the Stalinist purges; the French are spying on the Germans, the Poles on the Germans, and the Germans are spying on all the other spies. Decorum and politeness reign even as no one trusts anyone, and invasion seems inevitable. This peculiar atmosphere is exquisitely captured.

Played off against this tense standoff is the private zone of erotic attraction. A military attaché at the French embassy, Colonel Mercier, has ferreted out an imminent German tank attack on French trenches, but will anyone listen? At least Ana, a lawyer for the League of Nations and the woman he has recently fallen for, will if he could confide in her. And what will come of it all anyway, given our hindsight? It is a tribute to the author’s genius to keep us in suspense every step of the way. Don’t wait for the movie.

Dan Dervin is a freelance writer in Fredericksburg.

### THE SPIES OF WARSAW

By Alan Furst  
(Random House, \$25)

## COATS CUT FROM SAME CLOTH

GEORGETOWN CIVIL WAR SLAVE FAMILY CLOSE-KNIT

BY LAURA L. HUTCHISON  
FOR THE FREE LANCE-STAR

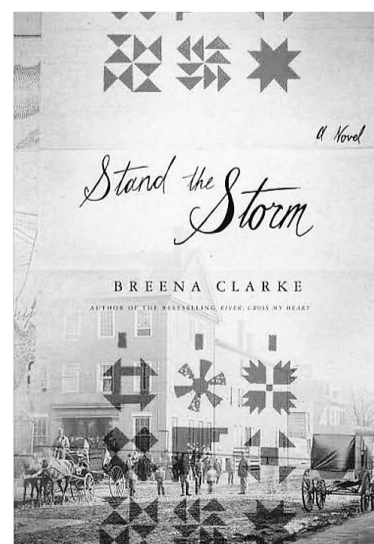
BREENA Clarke’s second work of historical fiction focuses on the Coats family of slaves, living in Georgetown around the time of the Civil War. Her first book, “River, Cross My Heart,” also takes place in Georgetown, where the author lives.

Sewing Annie has taught her son, Gabriel well, and he learns even more needlework at the feet of a kind Jewish tailor. When the tailor decides to leave, Gabriel’s master puts his nephew in charge of the shop.

“Stand the Storm” is a fascinating look at the life of slaves, free blacks and the country during the fast-changing period around the Civil War.

There are tales of escaping slaves and the brutal punishment they risked if caught; families torn apart as various members are sold; and even some happy stories about former slaves rescued and sent to freedom.

The story is one of a family’s dedication to one another and



to the dream of being free. It is about love, hard work, talent, heartbreak and triumph.

It is beautifully written, well-researched and has a history lesson as an added feature.

Laura L. Hutchison is an editor at The Free Lance-Star.

### STAND THE STORM

By Breena Clarke  
(Little, Brown and Company, \$24.99)