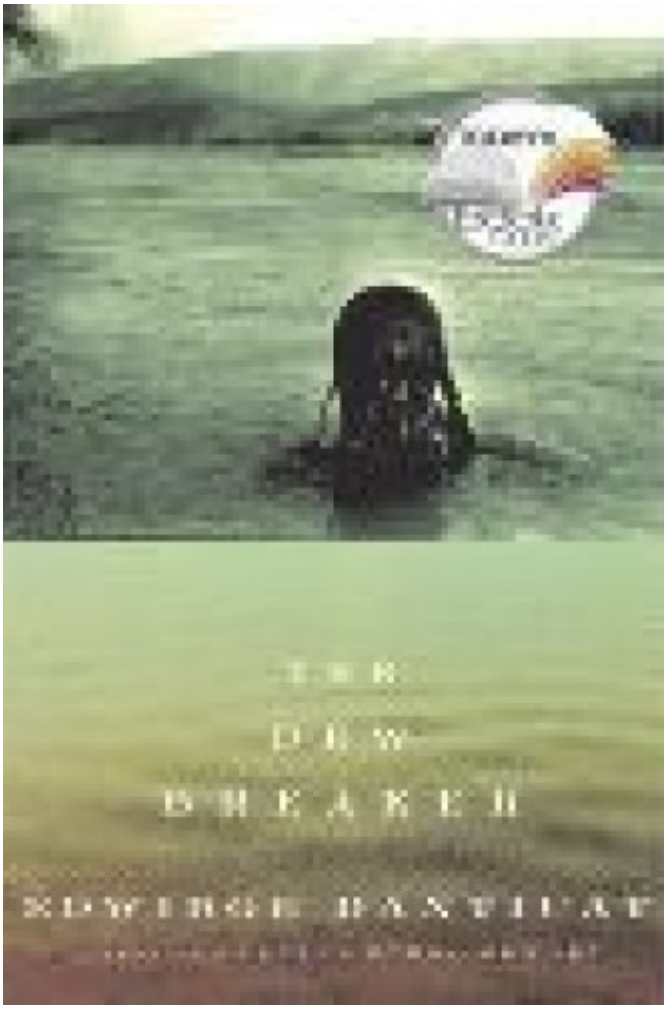
# CC recommends

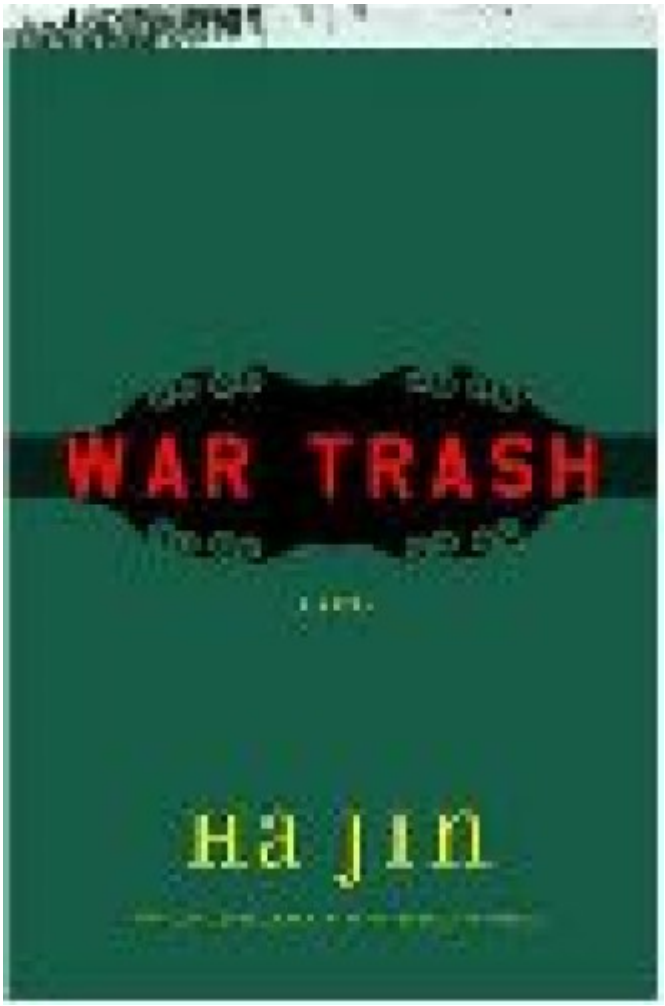
Books in the December 14, 2004 issue

## In Review



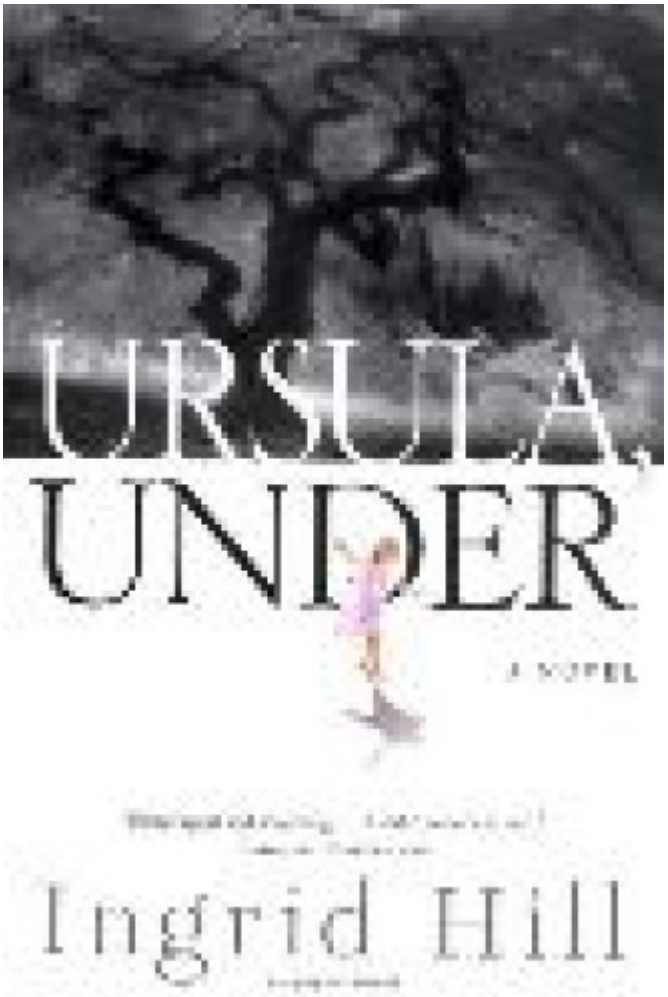
### The Dew Breaker

Edwidge Danticat
Knopf



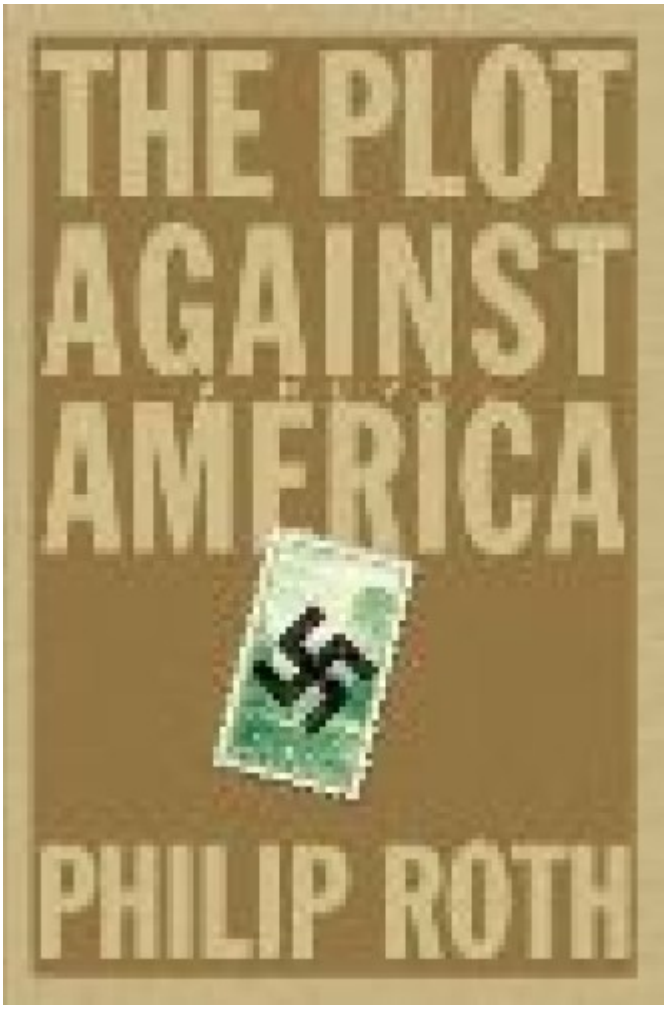

**War Trash**

Ha Jin
Pantheon



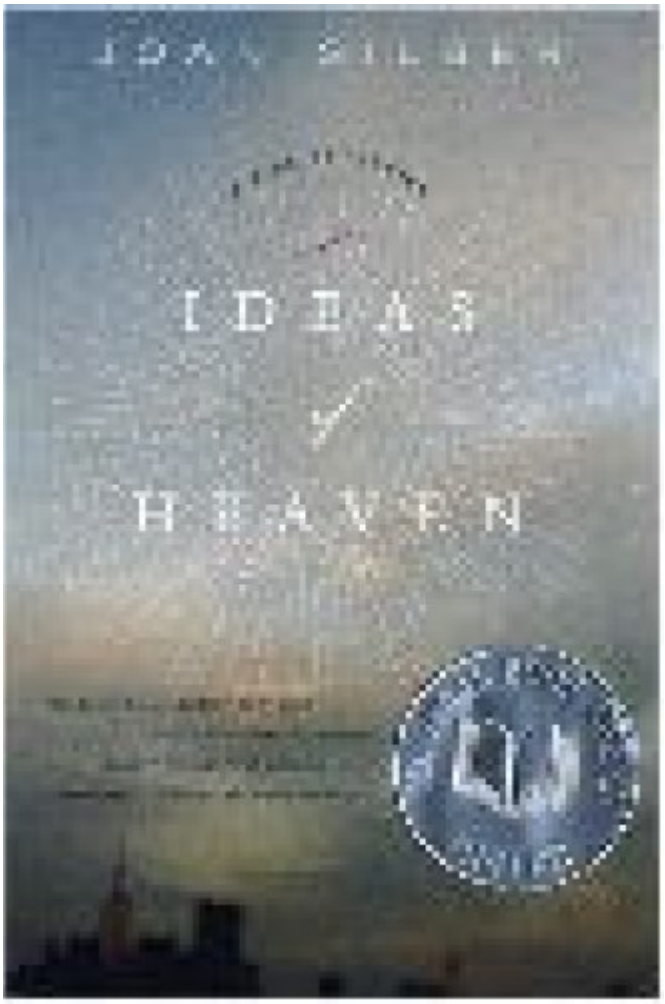

**Ursula, Under**

Ingrid Hill
Algonquin




**The Plot Against America**

Philip Roth
Houghton Mifflin




## Ideas of Heaven: A Ring of Stories

Joan Silber
Norton

In this cautionary “what if” political fable, Roth hypothesizes that in 1940 aviation hero Charles Lindbergh, an ardent isolationist who was sympathetic to Hitler, won the presidency. Reimagining his childhood—with considerable fact mixed in with the fiction—Roth narrates an alternative history that has an unsettling plausibility. Jewish communities are stunned and terrified as America flirts with fascism. Step by step, the Lindbergh administration initiates measures like the harmless-sounding Homestead 42 program—a scheme to induce companies to relocate their Jewish employees to remote, predominantly gentile parts of the country. Not all Jewish families put up a united opposition to the new order. Tensions mount in Philip’s family when Aunt Sylvia marries the collaborationist rabbi who is appointed to head the Interior Department’s Office of American Absorption.

Each of the nine stories can stand alone, but they are unified by the “dew breaker,” a torturer in Haiti who comes into homes before dawn—while the dew is still fresh—to arrest suspected dissenters. Only the first and last chapters deal directly with this torturer; in the others he is an unseen presence as the somber stories of his surviving victims unfold. He now lives in quiet exile as a barber in Brooklyn, pretending to be a victim rather than a victimizer. In the first chapter, his shame and guilt finally compel a confession, shattering his beloved daughter’s affection for him: “Ka, your father was the hunter, he was not the prey.” Haitian-born Danticat probes—but does not decisively answer—the question of whether forgiveness and redemption are possible in the face of monstrous, unspeakable deeds. A poignant and haunting work.

One of five finalists for this year’s National Book Award in fiction, Joan Silber’s wonderful book is made up of six interrelated stories. Alice, the dancer who recounts her life in the opening story, appears in the final story as the generous middle-aged woman with whom the narrator falls in love. The dancing teacher also tells his story. A missionary wife in China during the Boxer Rebellion tells a tale of remarkable faith and courage, while a character in another story plans a trip to China to see some ancient tombstones unearthed during that rebellion. References to the sonnets of Gaspara Stampa, a 16th-century Italian poet, connect several of the stories, and one recounts her life. Most profoundly, these tales are united by the characters’ quest for spiritual transcendence through religion and love.

The “war trash” of Ha Jin’s powerful novel are the Chinese soldiers—sent to fight for the communists during the Korean War—who are taken prisoner by the Americans. Not only do these men endure the humiliations and brutalities of the POW camps, but they are divided into two warring factions: those who want to be sent to Taiwan after their release and those who want to return to mainland China. The narrator, Yu Yuan, tells their story in the form of a memoir written for his grandchildren. Because he speaks English, Yu is useful to all sides, and because he is a man “who had always been an outsider and couldn’t fit in any political group among [his] compatriots,” he is the perfect objective narrator. His love for his widowed mother and his fiancée makes him determined to go back to the mainland. But when he and some of the other prisoners arrive in China, they are despised because they allowed themselves to be captured rather than killed. Yu reads the Bible and reflects on war, which he sees as a furnace into which men are carelessly thrown. The novel both presents a vivid picture of life in the camps and traces Yu’s inner journey to a kind of

peace.

A little girl falls down an abandoned mine shaft in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. As rescuers, onlookers and television crews gather, a gin-besotted TV watcher asks, “Why are they wasting all that money on a goddam half-breed trailer-trash kid?” This engrossing novel is the answer to that question. Hill sets out her premise early and explicitly: “This little girl carries with her the inheritance of generations uncounted, precious, induplicable.” The novel tells the story not only of Ursula Wong’s rescue but also the stories of some of her colorful forebears. At the end of the novel, Ursula’s grandmother reads the Letter to the Hebrews. As she comes upon the passage “therefore, since we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses,“ she thinks of the witnesses as the ancestors whose DNA her granddaughter carries, and whom she sees as protective presences in the child’s life.