The Best Reads of 2011 by Vicky Calmes

Each year, I create a top ten list out of the hundreds of books I have read. They are not necessarily books published in the past year, but books I stumbled across in 2011. This year, I have modified my list slightly to include the recommended book plus additional works by the same author.

10. John Hart's **Iron House**: Michael and Julian were brothers in a home for boys. Julian was continually bullied. When he finally fights back, Michael takes the blame for his brother's actions and leaves the home. Julian is adopted; Michael is left to fight on the streets. He becomes involved with the mob. When he falls in love and wants to leave the organization, he finds it impossible. This page-turner led me to Hart's **The Last Child** and **Down River**, which I also thoroughly enjoyed.

9. David Wroblewski's **The Story of Edgar Sawtelle: A Novel**: I debated before adding this book to my list. I enjoyed everything about it...except for the ending. It was one of our book club reads this past year, and it evoked much discussion and a wide spectrum of comments, so I kept it on my best reads list. After an eerie prologue, the setting for this fictional work is the 1970s. Edgar Sawtelle, a mute boy able to communicate only through signing, lives on his family's farm in northern Wisconsin where they raise and train an extraordinary breed of dog. Tragedy strikes, and Edgar is forced to flee into the wilderness, accompanied by three yearling pups. Edgar comes of age in the wild and must make a decision to stay on the run or return and unveil the truth he has discovered. Wroblewski's use of descriptive language is second to none, and the characters are well developed.

8. Brian Freeman's **Bone House**: I picked up this book because I noticed several of Freeman's works were based in Duluth, Minnesota. My family and I vacationed there this past summer, so I was interested in books about the area. This book is a psychological suspense thriller about Mark Bradley, a handsome teacher from Door County who was labeled a predator after a female student developed a crush on him. On a vacation to Florida, the girl's sister is found dead on a beach where Mark and his wife Hilary are staying. The investigation takes the reader on many twists and turns, making this a must-read. I went on to read two of Freeman's other books, **The Burying Place** and **Stalked**, both which I would recommend.

7. Robert Dugoni's **Murder One**: David Sloane's wife is murdered. At a speaking engagement, he meets former acquaintance Barclay Reid, who is recovering from the loss of her daughter to a drug overdose. Reid's crusade against Russian drug traffickers leads to a murder charge, with Sloane as her lawyer. A developing romance between client and lawyer complicates things. A review of the book calls it "fast-paced, page-turning action with exhilarating plot twists" and compares Dugoni to John Grisham. That is high praise indeed! I agree and plan to seek out more Dugoni works in 2012.

6. Lisa Genova's **Left Neglected**: A car crash gives a busy, harried young woman, Sarah, a syndrome called "left neglect." Used to working 60-hours weeks and caring for a husband and three young children, she now wakes up eight days later with a brain that ignores the left side of everything, including her body. The play on words title, as Sarah contemplates her life and everything "left neglected" by her workaholic personality, causes readers to pause and think about their own priorities. Genova is a neuroscientist/author with another book, **Still Alice**, which addresses early onset brain disease.

5. Jacquelyn Mitchard's **Second Nature: A Love Story**: A fire in a church during a parochial school program rehearsal leaves children dead and disfigured. Sicily, age 13, watches her father, a firefighter, attempt to rescue a child and die. She is horrifically burned as she tries to keep the smoke away from her face, as her father taught her, with the closest item available; unfortunately, she uses a plastic purse, which melts into her skin and leaves her grossly disfigured. Her life is changed from that moment forward. This is an interesting tale and leaves readers wondering how they would

handle a similar situation. Mitchard also penned two other good reads about the Cappadora family: **The Deep End of the Ocean** and **No Time to Wave Goodbye**.

4. Lisa Scottoline's **Save Me**: Rose McKenna is a lunchroom volunteer in her daughter Melly's school. She takes the job in order to keep an eye on Amanda, a mean girl who's been bullying Melly. She witnesses the bullying, which sends Melly to the bathroom in tears. Rose is about to follow after her daughter when an explosion goes off in the kitchen. Rose finds herself faced with the decision of whether or not to run to the bathroom to rescue her daughter or lead the bully to safety. She believes she has accomplished both, only to discover that Amanda, for an unknown reason, ran back into the school once out of Rose's sight. The community blames Amanda's injuries on Rose. Rose's life starts to fall to pieces as Amanda's mother decides to sue, Rose's marriage is tested, and when her daughter returns to school, the bullying is worse than before. Rose is determined to discover the truth of what really happened. This is another "what would you do in this situation?" book that is extremely powerful because of its realistic plot.

3. Melanie Benjamin's **The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb**: I used to devour historical fiction but lately have not found the time. This work has whetted my appetite for the genre again. The book is the story of Mercy Lavinia "Vinnie" Warren Bump, better known as Mrs. Tom Thumb, who stood only 32 inches tall but made a big impact on circus history. She begins her career in a showboat "freak" show, but when she meets P.T. Barnum and marries Thumb, she becomes a celebrity in the mid-1800s. News of "The Thumbs" was more important than reports of the battles of the Civil War, and they were guests of presidents, kings, and queens. The book is also the story of Vinnie's small-in-stature sister, Minnie, who does not successfully adapt to the celebrity spotlight. The author does a wonderful job of interspersing historical events throughout the book, such as news of the Lincolns, General Grant, and the Civil War.

2. Chris Bohjalian's **Midwives** and **Law of Similars**: In **Midwives**, Sibyl Danforth is a midwife in rural Vermont in the 1980s. She has practiced her trade for fifteen years. During a winter storm, which isolates a birthing mother due to icy roads and telephone failure, Danforth uses a kitchen knife to perform an emergency C-section on the mother, who appears to have died in labor. Later, the midwife's assistant claims the mother was not dead and Sibyl actually killed her. The trial turns into a midwife witch-hunt, setting traditional medicine against midwifery. The recounting of the tale by Connie, the fourteen-year-old daughter of Danforth, adds an interesting dimension. In the **Law of Similars**, Leland Fowler, a Vermont attorney, is a 35-year old widower caring for his four-year-old daughter. He develops a sore throat and cold that he cannot shake and visits Carissa Lake, the local homeopath. There, he finds the cure for his cold and romance. A client of Carissa's falls into a coma, and Fowler must make some ethical choices. Will he support his newly found love by encouraging the destruction of legal evidence? The title **Law of Similars** ("let like be cured by like") was selected due to a highly debated yet basic tenet of homeopathy: a patient is treated with an extremely diluted dose of whatever has caused the problem, forcing the body to cure itself. Both books were hauntingly enjoyable.

1. Wally Lamb's **Wishin' and Hopin': A Christmas Story**: This book is a hilarious trip down memory lane. Whether or not you attended a parochial school, the situations are applicable to anyone attending classes in the 1960s. Felix Funicello, a cousin to the famous Mouseketeer Annette, is ten years old and enrolled in a Catholic school. His antics with the nuns, lay teachers, class tattletales, and schoolroom bullies will leave you laughing out loud. The humor escalates as preparations are made for the annual Christmas pageant. When I finished this book, I wanted to read another, as I did not want the laughter to end. Our book club wholeheartedly enjoyed and endorsed this book as well. Lamb's other works are much more serious, but since Christmas, I have read **She's Come Undone** and am working my way through **The Hour I First Believed**. Though vastly different from **Wishin' and Hopin': A Christmas Story**, they are still well worth the read.