LIBERAL ARTS BOOT CAMP
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

There is no camp for Thackeray or Trollope, but you can go to Dickens summer camp at UC Santa Cruz. It’s been running for over 30 years, gathering scholars and avid readers to revel in part academic conference, part book club, part vacation. In the earliest years, the amateurs revoluted at the academic jargon and demanded ordinary talk. But the scholars hung tough, and eventually everyone got into using words like “optative.”

This is one of those classic New Yorker style articles that’s so lengthy you can’t do it justice in a summary. It’s a great run-through of Dickens’ life and lit crit. Dickens wrote on a rampage, penning two books at once and editing a weekly magazine throughout his career. To the critics, the novels “before Copperfield were mereingue and treacle; those which followed were burned pot roast.” But readers loved him, and rival authors were awed by his power.


BIG SCALE TRYSTS & NOVELS
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

George Simenon was a Belgian poor boy who quit school at fifteen, learned to write at a newspaper, then turned to pulp fiction. He churned out 150 novels before he created police superintendent Jules Maigret in 1931. Each morning he wrote 80 pages and then vomited from the tension. Afternoons and evenings were devoted to womanizing on a grand scale (1,200 partners). But he limited the contact to two minutes, merely unzipping.

He wrote in longhand without a plot outline and would complete a novel in ten to twelve days. When he’d feel a new book coming on, he’d get a doctor’s going-over to make sure he could stand the stress.

The Maigret novels eventually totaled 76, but he also produced 134 romans durs, which seems to be their term for hard-boiled fiction. The non-Maigrets Dirty Snow, The Man Who Watched Trains Go By, and Pedigree, are not merely his best novels, but among the best novels of the 20th century.

The Maigret series brought in the money, particularly the 53 films made from them. Simenon was picked up by Gallimard, France’s most prestigious publisher for money reasons as well. Gide, Proust, and Valéry were pretty much lucre losers. Simenon was always resentful he never won the Nobel prize. Gallimard says his typical book only sold 5,000 copies. But his sales were big because he wrote so many.

See — Joan Acocella, “Crime Pays,” The New Yorker, Oct. 10, 2011, p.120.

WHY THINK SMALL?
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Peter Thiel developed PayPal with Elon Musk, sold it to eBay for half a billion with Peter getting a mere fifty-five mil. Then he tossed Mark Zuckerberg a half-mil to birth Facebook with Peter’s stock being worth easily one-and-a-half billion. With thirty mil of his own money he created Palantir Technologies to track terrorists and fraudsters. It’s worth two-and-a-half billion.

But he’s bugged by having come up with mere gadgetry that brings dizzying change to society, but no real progress. So he’s into biotech startups with big goals. Like conquering all viral diseases. And ending the aging process.

See — George Packer, “No Death, No Taxes,” The New Yorker, Nov. 28, 2011, p.44.

NO HARD EDGES, PLEASE. WE’RE BRITISH
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

P.D. James’s big American following is an exception to the rule that top British mystery writers don’t usually sell here. Meanwhile James Patterson and Michael Connelly sell great in the UK. Peter James (not P.D.) says the Brits write plodding procedurals, while Americans want hard-edged page-turners.

Peter James does great in Russia and China but is unknown here. His Looking Good Dead with Carroll & Graf sold less than 500 copies before they dumped him. Minotaur Books has an international stable of authors and is trying to make Peter big with Dead Man’s Grip. A dead biker in England turns out to be the grandson of a NY mafioso, and a revenge plot is spun out on two continents.


NOT HAVING IT ALL
by Bruce Strauch (The Citadel)

Dorothy Thompson (1893-1961), once America’s most famous woman journalist, was best of pals with Rebecca West (1892-1983), celebrated British author. Thompson’s 1932 best-seller I Saw Hitler! got her six honorary degrees and some talk of running her for president. West’s 1947 The Meaning of Treason delved the spiritual malaise that led people to abandon democratic values for murderous utopian creeds.

Both were ardent progressives who made wretched matches with great writers: Thompson with Sinclair Lewis and West with H.G. Wells. Each had a child that was a mess: Thompson’s a manic-depressive, and West’s an alcoholic.