

## AUTHORS AT THE SHOW

will fare well. "After all, who doesn't like marshmallows?" quips Ron Barrett. "And who doesn't like s'mores even more?"  
—Sally Lodge

## Melinda Atwood

### A Kenyan Saga

When Melinda Atwood's mother died, Atwood ran away to Kenya for what was supposed to be a year or two; she stayed six years. "It was the only place I knew that was far enough away," she explains.

A professional dancer and choreographer in New York, Atwood had gone on a safari in Kenya with her young son and knew a couple of people there when she uprooted herself about 20 years ago. *Jambo, Mama: Memories of Africa* (Cypress House, Feb. 2009) tells the story not only of Atwood's adventures as a business owner and white, liberal American transplant in Kenya but also of her unusual and even taboo relationship with one of her black housekeepers.

"She took care of me and I took care of her," says Atwood, who owned a carpet business. But friends warned Atwood about becoming too friendly with Mildred Nzike. Atwood didn't listen. The two women did not even share a language, but they both had teenage sons, and they bonded in motherhood. So when Nzike was diagnosed with a form of lupus, Atwood paid for her medical treatment. "Jambo, Mama" is how all women of childbearing age are addressed in Kenya.

"Mildred told me it was time for her to go home to die, and that's what she did," says Atwood. But before Nzike returned to her village, Atwood promised her that she would make sure her son Frederick was educated—quite



an accomplishment at the time in Kenya.

Much of the material in *Jambo, Mama* was culled from letters Atwood wrote to friends during her six years in Kenya. Her son posted them online 10 years ago, and finally people started asking Atwood for a book. She is not sure how she found her way to Cypress House, but Atwood says she has been treated with kindness and tenderness. Atwood had never really written much before, but with her dancer's discipline, she thought she could tackle writing her memoir.

Atwood now lives in New York City, where she is steeped in the theater world and busy with her new granddaughter, so she does not get back to Kenya much. But on a recent visit, she gave Frederick a copy of *Jambo, Mama*, which thrilled him. "He felt it immortalized his mother," says Atwood. "That was sweet."

Atwood will be signing at 10 a.m., Table 3.

—Bridget Kinsella

## Piers Paul Read

### Novelist Knocks Liberation Theology

British novelist Piers Paul Read is about to find out whether Americans' penchant for religiously themed fiction is reserved only for racy tales that paint church authorities in a dim light.

Read takes a different approach in *The Death of a Pope* (Ignatius Press, May). In this "theological thriller," the Catholic author isn't shy to portray a pontiff who has good reasons for refusing to support condom distribution in AIDS-torn regions of Africa. Nor is he hesitant to hint at what he sees as the "dangerous" shortcomings of liberation theology, which interprets the Gospel as a call to political action on behalf of the poor.

"The sort of liberal Catholic who supports the Sandinistas and guerrillas in El Salvador and that kind of thing will, I think, be annoyed by the novel,"

