

STRAWBERRY MOON

PreView

Strawberry Moon The Novel

Written By
Donald Knight Beman

Cover Art By
Emilie Léger
[<https://emilieleger.ca/>]

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PreView 2021

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What Reviewers Have Said of My Earlier Novels

"Beman not only writes well, he has a gift for paranoia, too, 'a la Richard Matheson and Stephen King."

Mystery Scene.

"Unforgettable eerie and sensual. Not to be missed!"

J. N. Williamson

Author of *Spree, Dark Masques, Bloodlines, The Haunt* and dozens of other best selling horror novels.

"A page-turning thrill ride."

Douglas Clegg

Author of *The Children's Hour, Neverland, The Hour Before Dark* and many other popular 'scary' novels.

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Disclaimer

While drawn from my youthful experiences growing up, recollections from my work experience in business, my years as an art dealer and faculty in academe, *Strawberry Moon* is an 'autobiographical novel', a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and events described, referenced or portrayed in *Strawberry Moon* are the product of my imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places and events is coincidental.

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I

31 October

Dear Sara.....

Dear Sara.....

Congratulations!

Do we address you as President Potter or Dean Potter now that the Trustees appointed you President of Hart College?

Will they pay you two salaries for wearing two hats and make the pay retroactive, since you've been doing both jobs for over a year?

You asked me to share with you the 'real' reason I decided to resign effective the end of the Spring term. The reason I originally gave you - I wanted to write. And it's not a spur-of-the-moment thing; I've been toying with it for years.

I will be renting out my house (mortgage paid off). The rental income will cover the rent and utilities for my apartment and all of my personal needs. And having finally completed the restoration of that classic Austin Healy 3000, I found in a barn in Red Hook, I will have 'wheels' as the students like to say.

What else do I need?

And contrary to the rumor mill ... fueled by students and those colleagues of ours, who do not know that I was married and I am what they call a widower ... I am not gay, and I hope to start dating.

Yes, my dear friend, of course, I will stay in touch with you.

Affectionately,

Sean.....

#

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II

31 December

"Here Faith Died, Poisoned by This Charnel Air"

Sean MacDonald sat alone in the kitchen of his second-floor apartment in the aging Victorian farm house, nursing a mug of just-brewed black coffee and watching the thin pink line of the horizon slowly etch itself into the left-over night sky.

Wondering how cold it was outside, Sean raised the sash halfway up: bitterly cold and bone dry air flooded the kitchen as a pair of crows began arguing in the field across the road. Two more flew in, landed, and quickly weighed in on the debate, followed by a half-dozen more, their rowdy argument shattering the pre-dawn calm.

A sharp click from the ships clock on the wall beside the window announced it was about to add its two-cents worth to the argument, as the hammer slowly struck the bell six times. Sean whispered "Seven o'clock" and set his mug on the window sill.

Picking up *The Old Farmer's Almanac* in his lap, Sean started flipping through the pages of what he referred to as his 'Bible'. He stopped at page fifty, December, The Twelfth Month, and read the entry aloud: "Two full Moons this month, giving us a rare, and some say, unlucky thirteenth Moon. The first, on December second, causes very high tides because it occurs just three hours before the Moon's closest approach to earth in many years. The Moon's center is then just two hundred twenty one thousand five hundred and forty five miles from the Earth's center."

Skipping the remaining entries for December, Sean turned the page to January, 1991, and began checking-off the remaining days of the month with woodpecker-like taps of his finger on the page.....

- 7 Emperor Hirohito of Japan died, 1989
DDT banned, 1971.
- 8 'They say' is half a lie?
- 9 Snow and cold across the North.
- 10 Ethan Allen born, 1738.
- 11 No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible.
- 12 Moon at apogee**
- 13 1st Sunday after Epiphany.
- 14 Propitious day for birth of women.....

Sean abruptly stopped reading, when he was snagged by the memories from January, sixteen years ago. Slowly, steadily, the rising wind tickled then began to shake the leafless branches of the frozen trees, startling the raucous flock of crows.

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They exploded into the air as if shot out of a cannon, flapping, cawing and scattering everywhere. Before Sean could shut the window, he was there again.....

.....stumbling out of Merrywood Hall into the colorless dark of the New Moon, punching through the crumbling surface of the melting snow, his shoes filling up with prickly beads of ice as he ran through the deep wet snow to the body. He dropped to his knees, his head and shoulders slumping down. Shallow breaths began collecting around his head in the heavy night air, a mystical halo of white, as the cardboard-thick wool of his pants began sucking up cold muddy water out of the ground.

Her arms were folded over her chest, which had been ripped open like a freshly dug grave and just as empty. Her long brown hair was splayed out from her skull as if pulled by vermin, tugging and chewing on the frayed ends. The earth had begun to reclaim her.

Sean reached down, his hands shaking, and lifted the mask of ice off her face. It crumbled through his fingers. He brushed away the shards left behind. Snow had melted in the sunken eye sockets and frozen into frameless lenses. He pried them out to find her eyes, once as bright and warm as a summer sunrise, now dark, dead, blindly staring up into the black of heaven. He bent over, as if to kiss her cracked and swollen lips, but suddenly, violently, began jamming his hands into her icy grave, again and again and again, until his fingers were red and raw and bleeding.

Hands were reaching out behind him, gently tugging him, trying to lift him up. His sleeve caught on her splintered fingernails, as if she were pulling him down to her. He turned his head and shut his eyes, as if he were trying to hear what she was saying. But the beating of his own heart was the only sound that broke the silence of winter's clear night.

He noticed a crumpled-up wad of paper in her fist. As he tenderly pried open her clenched fingers, a blood-stained ball of paper tumbled out. He picked it up and held it to his chest as he stood up and walked away, deaf to the whispers.....

Sean angrily clapped the almanac shut and set it on the window sill. The wind re-opened the almanac and began turning the pages. Something blew out. Sean snatched it in mid-air. It was a sheet of old parchment paper with writing on one side, meticulously penned in faded blood-red ink, as if by a scribe centuries ago.....

**Here Faith died, poisoned by this charnel air.
I ceased to follow, for the knot of doubt
Was severed sharply with a cruel knife:
He circled thus, for ever tracing out**

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The series of the fraction left of Life;
Perpetual recurrence in the scope
Of but three terms:
Dead Faith, Dead Love, Dead Hope.
Life divided by that persistent three,
LXX divided by 333 =
.210210210210210210 ad infinitum.

"God damn you to hell! It's me you want. Why did you take her? And my son!"
Dropping the sheet of parchment, Sean slammed the window shut, knocking the coffee mug and almanac onto the floor and shattering the window pane. Jagged shards of glass exploded outside and into the kitchen, hitting him, cutting through his shirt. He just sat there, staring outside, blood staining his clothes, tears running down his cheeks.

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VI

12 June

She Dissolved Into the Fading Dark of Night

She silently glided up to the door of Sean's office and paused, listening.

The door opened. She peered inside, her gaze raking the room, as if to be certain it was safe for her to enter. Nodding, she walked in and waved her hand. The door closed. As she moved about the room, her black floor-length hooded cloak rubbed against the jagged corners of the cardboard cartons, brushing away the silence.

The walls of Sean's office had been stripped bare. His heavy Victorian oak desk was wrapped in a rope-tied quilted blanket. The floor-to-ceiling drapes were gone, leaving the stately leaded stained-glass windows looking common without their mantle of royal blue. The hanging silk tapestry and its wall-mounted bracket had been secreted away. The oak file cabinet, empty drawers left pulled out, was topped with stacks of threadbare linen-jacketed journals. Boxes cluttered the floor, bulging at the seams.

In front of the empty bookshelves were cartons stacked in columns six high. The words **BOOKS** and **HEAVY** stenciled in black on the sides and tops of all boxes.

She noticed a sheaf of papers on the boxes and snatched them up.

Drifting over to the window, she sat on the deep stone sill and started thumbing through the stack of papers in the moonlight, in a whisper, occasionally checking-off entries with a tap of her finger and approving nod or disapproving shake of her head.

Pausing, she stopped and read aloud one of the numbered hand-written notes.

"20.0 I did not find any evidence in my research of surviving male offspring. In the event the child conceived was a male, it for some reason died in the womb, turning to stone and producing what for centuries had been known as a 'calcified fetus', which would be deadly to the host. In the event a male fetus survived to full term ... six months ... it was born a mooncalf, a hideously deformed creature forever dependent upon its host. What is unclear is the birthing of the stronger fetuses, the females. From what little evidence there is, which was pieced together from shattered figurines found in various archeological ruins, which I find suspicious, it appears they may not be delivered vaginally, but abdominally. This belief is 'supported' by, the striated markings found on the stomachs of the pieced-together figurines, which represent scars. Considering a Caesarian birth is a modern practice, one could conclude they delivered themselves, leaving their host horribly scarred

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and most likely dead. The female's will to live must be ferocious!"

Nodding, she snarled, "If it were not so, your species would not exist!"
Skipping over a dozen entries, she stopped and continued reading aloud.

"21.0 Men are afraid of women, because they unconsciously sense that women are more powerful, sexually, than they are. Women are the true givers and takers of life here on earth. The role of men in the evolution of life is insignificant in the whole scheme of creation."

She nodded, as if in agreement, then looked up and gazed outside.
The glow of the false morning star reflected in her eyes.
She turned her head, as if she was listening to someone or something.
Nodding, she returned the papers to where she found them, drifted back to the window, and dissolved into the fading dark of night.

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X

23 June

Dr. Oliver Shore

Sean sat down on his porch steps to read Oliver's handwritten note, which had been neatly taped to one of the four large cartons sitting on the porch beside him.

Sean...

I put all of your papers into new folders and in date order in these storage boxes. While I'm sorry to have missed you, perhaps it's best, since I have 'hundreds' of questions. However, once I have everything and in chronological order, hopefully, my questions will have been answered (as I am sure you feel the same way).

Now, a few favors: (1) please prepare a summary of all milestone events in your life; (2) give serious thought to your interpretation for/of the Poe poems you received and referenced in your research.

Once I am settled in the UK, I will send you my address.

Oliver...

Sean slipped the folder with Oliver's notes back into the carton he left open and wondered, *You put everything in date order? I packed everything in chronological order.* Sean shrugged. *Or did I?* Sean laughed to himself and asked, "And prepare a summary of all important milestone events in my life, complete with dates? Why don't you just ask me to write a friggin autobiography, my friend!"

"Sean MacDonald!" Jean Murphy called out. "Watch your language, young man."

Sean jumped up and turned around, to find Jean standing on the porch in front of the entrance to her apartment, which was the entire lower half of her house.

Jean gestured to the boxes. "The man who left those said he could not wait. He sounded British to me. Dressed that way, too. Sloppy neat. He wanted to take them upstairs, but I said he couldn't."

Jean pointed to the boxes. "Let me help you," and picked up a box. Sean couldn't keep from smiling at the thought of a seventy five-year-old woman helping him carry thirty or forty pound boxes up a flight of eighteen steps to his apartment.

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XII

24 June

"Hell Hath No Fury Like a Woman Scorned"

The double doors for the main entrance to Merrywood Hall had been pulled wide open and braced with cut-down broom handles. The larger-than-life size bronze lions resting on either side of the steps appeared to be sleeping in the hazy heat of the day.

Sean walked in and headed down the darkened hall. The only sounds disturbing the cloistered quiet were the ceiling fans in some of the offices, whispering, shhhhhh.

The first office was Dean Potter's. He stepped up to the door, sniffed, again, and nodded when he found the subtle scent of licorice, which Sara kept in a Waterford crystal jar on her desk.

Kicking off his shoes, grabbing one in each hand, Sean ran up the stairs to the second floor. Skating over the just-polished floor in his socks, he slid to a stop in front of Bruce Fanning's office.

"Shit!"

He slapped the padlock Bruce put on his office door when he went out of town.

Slipping on his loafers, Sean bolted downstairs and made a bee-line for the sunlight falling out of Oliver's doorway. The walls were covered with bookshelves, floor-to-ceiling, corner-to-corner: old books; skinny books; fat books; books with cracked and peeling backs. A half-dozen small antique electrified brass lamps were set out like flowerpots on spindly end tables, matching credenza and massive roll-top desk.

The seat cushion of Oliver's threadbare upholstered wing chair was buried beneath outdated sections of *The London Times*. The crocheted antimacassars on the armrests and pinned to the headrest were stained dark with oil and sweat.

Sean scurried down the hall, intent upon leaving, but stopped when he spied a blade of light knifing out into the hall from his old office. Tip-toeing up to the door, he peeked inside and was surprised to see a dozen or so period paintings waiting to be hung up. One caught his attention. Slipping into the office, he gingerly picked up the painting and took it to the window.

"George Inness!" he whispered.

The overcast sky was soft and blond, with rouge brushed across the horizon. A hundred shades of brown and green had been scumbled over the canvas, creating the illusion of mountains in the background, fields covered with hay ready for harvesting and a figure gathering twigs.

On the wall over the desk was a large marine painting filled with the serenity of an early summer morning, soft diffused light radiating from inside and far away. It was a harbor scene, with sailing ships asleep at anchor and a solitary vessel under way, sailing into the morning mist as if manned by a ghostly crew.

Sean scurried over for a closer look.

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"That's mine!" he squeaked comically and snatched up the bronze sculpture on the table beneath the painting. Barely eight-inches tall, the bronze depicted a fox, a spindly legged stork and a raven gathered around an empty well, eyeing a tiny cluster of grapes hanging from a vine wrapped around a dying tree. The empty well was threaded for a glass reservoir that had been lost somewhere in time.

"Recognize it?" a woman asked.

Sean spun around and suddenly found himself falling backwards in time...

.....Patricia cupped his face in her hands. He didn't reject her touch as she began smoothing away time with her fingertips, gently pushing his eyes shut. He didn't want her to stop. A bouquet of fragrances evaporated into his senses from her warm, moist hands, pulling him deeper into her touch. Patricia whispered, 'You're blushing' and kissed him. He drew the protective curtain of faculty down over himself and walked away to join his colleagues without saying anything more. Patricia left, too, walking through Merrywood Garden and up the wall of sandstone steps. It didn't look like she was running away from what had just happened, rather that she had somewhere else to go. She returned after dark, having changed into a sheer ankle-length dress that revealed she wasn't wearing anything beneath the dress. She had showered, and without soap, leaving the natural scent of her body to find him.....

The night watchman, Andy Jensen, appeared in the doorway.

"Hello, Doctor Koch, still moving-in?"

He nodded to Sean. "You helping out, Doctor MacDonald?"

"Hi, Andy," Sean said with a lazy wave of his hand.

Andy stepped back and stood just outside the doorway.

"Miss your old office?"

Sean shrugged and half-smiled.

"We miss you. Especially Dean Potter. You're all she talks about lately."

Andy appeared to sense he shouldn't be there.

"The front door will be locked in ten minutes, so unless you two want to spend the night here, you best be on your way."

Andy turned and started down the hall, jangling keys as he locked the doors.

Patricia pulled the leaded stained glass windows shut and latched them with a soft pat of her hand. Sean watched as she walked around the office as if she were mentally taking inventory. Slipping her key into the door, Patricia looked back at Sean.

"Dinner?" she asked and stepped into the hall and turned to face him. "Coming?"

Get out of here! Sean told himself and stepped out into the darkened hallway.

Patricia waved for Sean to follow her. "Better hurray, "I wouldn't want you to spend the night in here with me against your will."

Sean thought, *Worry not ... once bitten, twice shy.*

Patricia subtly turned her head as if she had read Sean's thoughts.

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XIV

27 June

Strawberry Moon

Turning onto Molly Lane, Sean sped up, killed the lights, slipped into neutral and let the car coast in silence as he searched for the cut in the road Karen told him about.

Whispering, "There it is!" he slowed to a stop, slipped into first gear and slowly, cautiously pulled off the road into the woods. Light from the rising full moon was slicing through the leafy branches overhead, cutting-up the road into jagged patches of yellow, gray and black. At the end of the road, Sean stopped and killed the engine.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, startling him.

Karen whispered, "I was afraid you wouldn't come."

She tousled his hair. "Follow me."

Grabbing a rolled-up blanket off the ground, Karen started down the path.

Sean snatched a canvas tote bag off the passenger seat, hopped out, and scurried after Karen as she melted into the night, forcing him to hurray and catch up as she darted out into the field and disappeared between the rows of young corn stalks.

Karen called back, "Hurry up slow-poke."

Sean sprinted past her and turned around.

Karen raised her hand, shielding her eyes from the bright glow of the full moon.

Sean brushed the tips of his fingers over Karen's face.

"You look different."

"How so?" she asked.

"You look ... younger ... much younger!"

Karen laughed, slipped past him, darted to the end of the rows of corn and stepped out into a small clearing, flooded with moonlight and snapped the blanket she was carrying into a billowing wave that hung in the air then settled onto the ground.

Catching up, Sean kicked off his shoes, stepped onto the blanket and knelt down. Karen followed his lead and watched with curiosity as he withdrew a bottle of champagne from his tote bag, unwrapped the wire cage holding the cork prisoner, then slipped off the cork with both thumbs. The pop echoed across the field. Karen's unguarded laughter chased after it, which quickly infected Sean.

Sean offered Karen the bottle. Grasping the large bottle with both hands, Karen took a long slow sip. "This is heavenly! What is it," she asked and lifted the bottle into the air, turning it slowly in the one-sided light of the moon. "I can't read the label?"

Sean announced proudly, "Piper Heidsick, Flouren Louis, nineteen fifty-five."

He then reached into his tote bag and retrieved a plastic container filled with strawberries. Handing it to Karen, he blindly felt around inside the tote and produced a paring knife. Smiling, Karen twisted the champagne bottle into the soft earth beside her, snatched the knife away from Sean, and handed him the strawberries.

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"You pluck off the leaves and stems. I will halve the strawberries."

Karen started laughing, a soft relaxed laugh, sounding every bit a woman.

Sean was instantly infected by the soothing sound of her voice. Their tasks quickly became a competition, which Karen easily won. Retrieving the champagne bottle, Karen trickled champagne over her fingers, then wiped them off on the blanket. Sean did the same. As if they rehearsed it, Karen and Sean simultaneously plucked a halved strawberry out of the plastic container and offered it to each other. They did it again, without speaking. Karen added a sip of champagne to their mimed game. Sean raised his hand, as if to press pause. He then felt around in the tote bag, held up a plastic container, opened it, snatched up a strawberry and dabbed it in the container.

"Here, try this," he suggested, and offered Karen the strawberry.

Karen asked cautiously, "What's that white stuff on it?"

Sean replied proudly, "Superfine sugar laced with natural crystalline vanillin."

Hesitating, Karen replied, "You go first."

Sean popped the strawberry into his mouth, chewed and swallowed it, made a hideous face, grabbed his throat, and fell back onto the blanket as if he were dead.

Grabbing the champagne, Karen snapped, "That was not funny," and began drizzling the champagne all over Sean's chest. Laughing, Sean stood up, gently wrestled the bottle away from Karen, and returned the favor, which started them both laughing.

"Shhh, not so loud," Karen cautioned as she stood up, a mischievous smile on her face. She then reached down, gathered up fistfuls of her caftan, pulled it up over her head, nonchalantly dropped it onto the blanket, and stood naked in the moonlight.

Following her cue, Sean discarded his shirt and stepped out of his pants and briefs. They knelt down facing each other and almost in rehearsed unison began to tenderly explore each other's body with the soft tips of their fingers. Karen smiled when she saw Sean's response to her touch and leaned back, pulling him with her.

Sean halved her swollen flesh with his tongue.

Karen cried out ever-so-softly, then whispered, "Come in me...now."

There was a sense of urgency thinning her words.

Sean responded.

Karen wrapped her legs around his waist, startling him with her strength, taking his breath away.

"Be still," she pleaded. "I want to feel your heart beating inside me." She guided Sean to where she wanted him and in a single graceful move, rolled him over onto his back and sat up, straddling him and gazing into the face of the moon, as if in a trance.

Karen began moving her hips in small circles, squeezing him, as she gracefully rose up and down as if she were floating on a calm sea.

Karen suddenly screeched, "No!"

Startled, Sean opened his eyes to find the shadowy image of Karen, with broad white feathered wings spread wide, silhouetted against the face of the full moon.

Karen whispered through her teeth, "No. It is not his time. He has been falsely claimed. I will return in his place." She then bent down, gently wrapped her wings around them, no longer two but one, touching each other to sleep as the Strawberry Moon fell to earth.

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#

The first strokes of early morning light painted the sky awake with streaks of orange and pink. Standing, naked, their bodies bathed in the cool pre-dawn light, they embraced, feeling each other still warm from sleep. The distant choking of a tractor's engine startled them apart. They dressed quickly, laughing like truant school children.

Sean scurried about, collecting everything lying on the ground and tossed it into the blanket. Grabbing the corners, he hoisted the make-shift bag over his shoulder.

As they slipped back into the wooded path, Karen whispered, "Thank you."

Confused, Sean asked, "For what?"

"You made me feel beautiful and young again. You asked for nothing, yet you gave me everything I demanded of you and more than what you thought you could."

Karen turned to go.

Sean blocked her path.

"No!" she ordered, then pushed him aside and dissolved into the dark of dawn.

#

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XVI

28 June

BODY FOUND

George Kraft
Staff Reporter

While plowing one of her fields yesterday morning, Catherine Greene, CPT, USMC, retired, owner of Greene Farms in Red Hook, made a grisly discovery: the naked mutilated body of a man authorities say had been dead for only a 'few hours'.

Police Chief Peter Kratz reported that the cause of death is yet to be determined. However, reliable sources have told this reporter the man was found with his 'chest ripped open' and his 'heart ripped out and taken'.

The police report the face and hands of the victim had been burned beyond recognition by some sort of chemical, forcing identification to be made using dental records and DNA. Which Chief Kratz noted 'could take weeks'.

Chief Kratz also stated: "At this point, we believe the body was brought to this location and the murder" (Chief Kratz believes this is a homicide) "took place elsewhere and the body was dumped in the field sometime just before dawn."

At this point the police have no leads, not even footprints around the body since investigators at the scene reported everything appeared to have been 'blown clean by a strong gust of wind'. However, when contacted by this reporter, three regional weather services advised there were no high winds detected in the immediate area and that in fact 'the air was calm due to a stationary column of high pressure air, which moved in late yesterday afternoon, accounting for the hot and muggy air in the valley'.

While Ms. Greene was requested by the police not to comment on what she found, she wanted the public to know: "I sincerely hope everyone will feel perfectly safe visiting our farm for the fresh vegetables, corn and fruit, when in season, we have become famous for in the Hudson Valley."

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Author's Notes

For readers who wish to learn more about numerology, goddess worship, ancient religions, the works of Edgar Allan Poe, the cycles of the moon, and the folklore found in my story, I suggest the below-noted resources. Which are but a few of the many texts I drew upon for Strawberry Moon.

Numerology
E. T. Bell, Ph.D.

The Mystery of Numbers
Anne Marie Schimmel

City of Dreadful Night
James Thomson

The Holy Bible
King James Version

The Oxford Companion to the Bible

The Oxford Classical Dictionary

The Encyclopedia of Religion

Plots and Characters in the Fiction and Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe
Robert L. Gale

Moon Tables for Times Past, Present and Future
Rolf Brahde

New and Full Moons - 1001 B.C. to A.D. 1651
Herman H. Goldstine

The Old Farmer's Almanac
1943 through 2018

The Women
Glen Yarbrough

The Lonely Things: The Love Songs of Rod McKuen
[\[https://bit.ly/2QUVySI\]](https://bit.ly/2QUVySI)

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