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REVIEWS

Philip Roth
Redux

How biographer Blake Bailey captured the life and times of America’s provocative literary legend

Also in the issue:
Katherine Heiny, Margarita Engle, and Cookie Hiponia Exerman
“Philip Roth, Towering Novelist Who Explored Lust, Jewish Life and America, Dies at 86” read the New York Times headline on May 22, 2018. “Towering” pretty much summed up the prevailing sentiment about the New Jersey-born novelist who had been writing, prolifically and provocatively, for nearly 60 years.

Roth certainly had racked up the awards to buttress his reputation: two National Book Awards, a Pulitzer Prize, two National Book Critics Circle Awards, a PEN/Faulkner. (But oh, that elusive Nobel Prize!) Portnoy's Complaint was a big bestseller, the kind of novel people talked about at smart cocktail parties (back when people held parties and talked about novels at them), a book whose sexual frankness and unhinged humor perfectly captured the ’60s zeitgeist. (Kirkus, in its contemporary review, wasn’t 100% sold: “masterful in parts, phony in others.”) American Pastoral swung for the fences as a Great American Novel (and the Pulitzer board ruled in favor). Roth’s late-life burst of creativity—four compact, decently reviewed novels written between 2006 and 2010, when the author was in his 70s—seemed to seal the deal.

But the public perception of Roth was never uncomplicated, and that “towering” came with an asterisk. As Marion Winik writes in our cover story on Page 58, many readers “believed Roth was Portnoy—an oversexed ‘self-hating Jew’ Holocaust.” And charges of misogyny always shadowed him. Were his female characters sufficiently developed? What about the accusations of cruelty leveled against them:


*Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969): “One of the funniest, filthiest novels ever written. It made the author a millionaire and an international scandal.”

*The Ghost Writer* (1979): “The first novel of Roth’s Zuckerman sequence, in which the Rothian alter ego is forced to choose between family and art.”


*Everyman* (2006): “‘You’ll love this book!’ said Roth. ‘It’s all about death!’”

The Roth reassessments—and the reading—go on.
| CONTENTS |

**FICTION**
- INDEX TO STARRED REVIEWS ................................................. 4
- REVIEWS ............................................................................... 4
- EDITOR'S NOTE ................................................................. 6
- INTERVIEW: KATHERINE HEINY ........................................ 14
- MYSTERY ........................................................................... 42
- SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY ........................................... 46
- ROMANCE ........................................................................... 48

**NONFICTION**
- INDEX TO STARRED REVIEWS ........................................... 50
- REVIEWS ............................................................................... 50
- EDITOR'S NOTE ................................................................. 52
- COVER FEATURE: BLAKE BAILEY ..................................... 58

**CHILDREN’S**
- INDEX TO STARRED REVIEWS ........................................... 87
- EDITOR'S NOTE ................................................................. 88
- REVIEWS ............................................................................... 89
- INTERVIEW: COOKIE HIPONIA EVERMAN ....................... 94
- MOTHER’S DAY & FATHER’S DAY PICTURE BOOKS .......... 139

**YOUNG ADULT**
- INDEX TO STARRED REVIEWS ........................................... 144
- REVIEWS ............................................................................... 144
- EDITOR'S NOTE ................................................................. 146
- INTERVIEW: MARGARITA ENGLE ....................................... 150

**INDIE**
- INDEX TO STARRED REVIEWS ........................................... 160
- REVIEWS ............................................................................... 160
- EDITOR'S NOTE ................................................................. 162
- BOOK TO SCREEN ............................................................. 178
- APPRECIATIONS: NORA EPHRON ..................................... 179

The Kirkus Star is awarded to books of remarkable merit, as determined by the impartial editors of Kirkus.

NoNieqa Ramos and Jacqueline Alcántara offer up an ebullient celebration of Latinx motherhood, one of the stars of our Mother’s Day & Father’s Day picture-book roundup. Read the review on p. 141.

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A young Muslim woman watches her neighbors as she comes to terms with her own tragic history.

In AlAmmar’s second novel, a young woman has arrived in a quiet English town after months of difficult travel. Having fled her native Syria, the woman, who goes unnamed, journeyed through much of Europe before arriving, nearly catatonic. Now somewhat recovered, she sits and watches her neighbors through their windows: An old man eats alone; an abusive husband terrorizes his wife and children; a young man exercises obsessively. The contradiction at the heart of this lovely and intense novel is that the young woman, who doesn’t speak aloud—she allows her neighbors to think she’s deaf—nar-

rates the novel. No one hears her voice but the reader, and it is a strong, formidable voice. In fact, she has so much to say that she begins writing a magazine column under the moniker “The V oiceless.” AlAmmar’s narrator may be a voyeur, but she is frankly critical of the voyeuristic tendencies of her editor, Josie, who asks that she write less often about politics and more about her own memories. “In [Josie’s] emails,” the narrator tells us, “she assures me that such articles are always topical, and it’s all people are wanting to read about given the state of the world, and could I tweak this and that before she publishes it.” It’s a smart, sharply constructed critique. So is the narrator of this fine book. But it isn’t a perfect novel: Not all the characters cohere into three-dimensional figures, and there are dream and memory sequences that can be difficult to follow—particularly an erotic one involving Edgar Allan Poe. Still, the narrator’s accounts of her own trauma, and the way that she is increasingly drawn into the life of her community, feel moving and fresh.

Beautifully wrought even if marred by minor discrepancies.
WITH TEETH
Arnett, Kristen
Riverhead (304 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-593-19150-7

A lesbian couple raises a son with a disconcerting dark side.

Sammie and Monika are a gay Central Florida couple: Monika is a successful lawyer, and Sammie works part time from home as a copy editor so she can be there for their son, Samson. Even from toddlerhood, Samson is an inscrutable child. At 4, he calmly allows himself to be nearly abducted by a man on a playground; as a fourth grader he carries around a doll double of himself that Sammie helped him make for a school project. And Sammie is ill at ease in her mom role: She sees herself as "a former manager now reduced to running a household. And...not even running it all that well." When Monika calls Sammie one night from the ER claiming that Samson has bitten another child, Sammie must confront the fundamental terror she feels in the face of parenting her son: "Maybe love is always a thing," she thinks, "that's resting on the edge of violence." As Samson grows, his behavior pushes past that edge, and Sammie must confront her own destructive impulses and the role she plays in her son's, and her family's, unravelling. Arnett writes movingly of the loneliness Sammie feels in the queer community once she becomes a parent, at times even flashing outside of Sammie's point of view for brief interludes to show how outsiders see her in ways that she cannot clearly see herself. As in her first novel, Mostly Dead Things (2019), Arnett deftly examines the psychological dynamics of a family, raising complicated questions about whether mothers can ever truly understand how to raise sons and whether our children, too often, are mirrors of our own worst tendencies.

A novel that is not afraid to look at the underbelly of parenting, queer relationships, and middle age.
For the past seven years, I’ve been serving as a fiction judge for the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature. Every other year—alternating with a nonfiction award—we choose a winner for this $100,000 prize designed to support a writer early in their career. It’s been exciting to delve into the wide range of contemporary Jewish experience: Ayelet Tsabari’s story collection, *The Best Place on Earth*, explored the lives of Mizrahi Jews in Israel; Idra Novey’s *Ways To Disappear* is about an American translator who goes to Brazil when the author she’s working with vanishes—and it barely mentions Judaism; *The Last Watchman of Old Cairo* by Michael David Lukas focuses on an American grad student with a Jewish mother and a Muslim father who goes to Cairo in search of the intertwining history of his two faiths.

The prize was established 15 years ago by the family of Sami Rohr, a Florida businessman and philanthropist, in honor of his 80th birthday. This year, the Rohr family decided to honor an established writer rather than one just starting out, so the judges were asked to select a winner for the Sami Rohr Inspiration Award—and we were happy to have the opportunity to recognize the work of Nicole Krauss.

Krauss began her career with *Man Walks Into a Room* (2002), the story of Samson Greene, a young English professor who, as the result of a brain tumor, loses all memory of his life beyond age 12. Kirkus called it “a knotty combination of psychological novel and cautionary science-fiction tale [told] with considerable finesse.”

Her second novel, *The History of Love* (2005), tells the story of several characters who are linked in a way that isn’t immediately apparent. Leo Gursky is a Holocaust survivor who immigrated to America in search of a woman named Alma—a woman he loved and wrote a novel about back in his Polish village. Then there’s Alma Singer, 14, who somehow was named after a character in that book. Zvi Litvinoff is another Holocaust survivor who moved to Chile and connects them both. Our starred review called it “a most unusual and original piece of fiction—and not to be missed.”

The characters in *Great House* (2010) are connected by a desk, not a book. In the opening section, a New York novelist describes how she came into possession of a wooden desk that belonged to a friend of a friend, a Chilean poet named Daniel Varisky. Daniel was going back to Chile and gave all his furniture away with the condition that he might come back for it someday. Then he became one of the disappeared, and the novelist wrote at his desk for decades—until someone claiming to be Daniel’s daughter shows up to claim it. We also meet an Englishman caring for his wife, who has Alzheimer’s disease; the London-dwelling children of a Jerusalem antiques dealer who survived the Holocaust; and an Israeli lawyer trying to connect to his elusive adult son. Each character is grappling with memory and identity, and it all fits together beautifully at the end.

In *Forest Dark* (2017), two characters are connected by the Tel Aviv Hilton. Wealthy New York retiree Jules Epstein gave away all his belongings and moved to Tel Aviv; when his adult children come after him, he won’t tell them where he’s staying and puts them up in the Hilton. Then he disappears. In separate chapters, an unnamed novelist has left her failing marriage in Brooklyn to stay at the Hilton, trying to begin a new book. King David and Kafka get involved.

Our starred review called Krauss’ most recent book, *To Be a Man* (2020), “a tremendous collection from an immensely talented writer.” As in all her books, the characters are vibrantly alive, making this a perfect place to begin to explore Krauss’ thoughtful, intelligent work.

*Laurie Muchnick is the fiction editor.
CATCH THE RABBIT
Bastašić, Lana
Restless Books (256 pp.)
$18.00 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-63206-289-5
A Yugoslav-born writer’s debut novel is a tale of fraught female friendship.
Translated from Serbo-Croatian to English by Bastašić herself, this tale explores the relationship of Sara and Lejla, childhood friends who grew up amid the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. Twelve years after their last interaction, Sara—who now lives in Dublin—receives an urgent phone call from her friend and returns to Bosnia to help Lejla find her exiled brother, Armin. Sara narrates the story as a marginally fictionalized tale of her reunion with the reckless Lejla: “I am the one telling the story. I can do whatever I want with [Lejla]. She can’t do anything. She is three hits on the keyboard.” The two friends journey together to Vienna to search for Lejla’s brother, reconstructing their shared past and reconciling their differing memories of childhood events as they go. Lejla always pushed Sara beyond her comfort zone, and she resists easy characterization on the page. “Even now,” Sara says, “within this text, I can almost feel her fidget.” The bookish Sara has always defined herself in contrast to the wild Lejla, even when the contrast exists entirely in her own mind. Their friendship was important but also damaging to Sara because of the way she internalized this comparison. She refers to Lejla’s “subtle violence” and the ways Lejla influenced her behavior. It becomes clear that her youthful perception of this influence may not be entirely accurate. As the two travel north, Sara has to reconcile her memories (and her desire to fit them into a narrative) with the reality of adult Lejla. As children, Sara relied on Lejla as an ally: “She transformed two separate individuals into the two of us, something ours, indivisible, strong, and spiteful before the whole universe,” yet after 12 years she is confronted with how they’ve grown up, apart.
A moving exploration of how perspective characterizes friendship, sometimes to a fault.

THE OTHERS
Blau, Sarah
Mulholland Books/Little, Brown (240 pp.)
$28.00 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-0-316-46087-3
Women without children fear for their lives. In college, Sheila and her three best friends make a pact to never have children. They call themselves the “Others,” after the childless women in the Bible, and for the most part keep to the pact. But now a few decades have passed, and Sheila’s friends start showing up dead: first Dina, the intimidating leader of the group, and then the others. Blau’s novel makes an earnest attempt at suspense and occasionally achieves it. Sheila is a difficult character to empathize with, though, or even to fully believe in: She’s focused more on flirting with the handsome young detective than on the idea that she might be his primary suspect—or the next murder victim. Her inner monologues often strain credulity. Then, too, Blau’s dialogue frequently feels canned (“I’d watch it if I were you,” Sheila says), and Sheila’s realizations are unoriginal, to say the least: “I guess it’s true what they say,” she thinks at one point, “love really does screw with your head.” Blau certainly has the makings of an interesting idea here: The story is deeply rooted in, and frequently references, childless Biblical women like Lilith or Miriam the prophetess. And Blau’s depictions of the envy that festers between the friends are darkly engaging. But because the threat at the center of the novel—the ritualized murders that first brought the detective calling—never feels real, the story itself never gets off the ground. Likewise, the moral conundrum that each of the women faces—whether or not to have children—is never fully explored, though Blau frequently mentions it. She seems to prefer to skate across the surface.
An occasionally suspenseful story gets bogged down.
SCORPION
Cantrell, Christian
Random House (336 pp.)
$27.00 | May 25, 2021
978-1-984801-97-5

A CIA analyst hunts an erudite assassin across a high-tech world.
Quinn Mitchell is wounded: by the accidental death of her child, by her estrangement from her husband, by her deflated self-confidence and loneliness. But even wounded as she is, she is CIA Deputy Director Townes’ best analyst, and when an analyst is needed to assist Interpol in catching the Elite Assassin, she is the choice. This establishes one plotline, but there’s much more going on. The assassin Ranveer, a gentleman of impeccable taste and manners, globe-hops from job to job on Emirates Airlines, kills in a variety of high- and low-tech ways, and leaves each victim marked with a four-digit identifying number. He is revered and respected by all. Quinn’s job is to try to find a pattern, or patterns, in his methods, travel, numbering, anything that might shape an AI analysis — and she has some success. Sent into the field, she gets close to him but is always a tantalizing step or two behind. Meanwhile, researchers, in particular physicist Henrietta Yi, a CIA contract employee, are attempting to decipher a coded message discovered in the Large Hadron Collider that appears to have come from the future. When Quinn traps Ranveer, the assassin reveals that he has deciphered the message and that in fact it’s a set of instructions to assassinate specific individuals, sent from the future, apparently to avert or suppress misery and chaos then. The CIA is aware of this, and Ranveer, though not an employee, is acting in their interests. But it turns out there are crosscurrents in the future, too, and Dr. Yi may have something to say about the CIA’s tendency to aid and abet established interests. All this takes place in an only slightly futuristic world that snaps and bristles with technological capabilities that may seem distant or improbable but which are in fact just around the corner. (Cantrell is a software engineer as well as a writer, and he knows the territory).
snappy dialogue, sharp observation, and compelling characters in Quinn, Ranveer, and Henrietta; the technology sings, the physics is plausibly presented, and the suggestion of time travel fascinates.

A fast, fun, and intelligent SF thriller.

**IT HAD TO BE YOU**
*Clark, Georgia*
Emily Bestler/Atria (384 pp.)
$16.99 paper | May 4, 2021
978-1-9821-3319-1

When her husband dies unexpectedly, a woman is forced to reconsider the life she had and what she wants.

Liv Goldenhorn and her husband, Eliot, own a successful wedding-planning company in Brooklyn. But during a tumultuous job that leaves the business on the edge of collapse, Liv receives a phone call that Eliot has died while on a business trip—and soon after discovers that he’s left his share of their company to his much younger and until-then-secret mistress, Savannah. Faced with financial ruin and unsure how to get back on track, Liv decides to accept Savannah’s persistent attempts to revive the company, a decision that results in Liv, Savannah, and a group of vendors they work with rethinking what they want and how to get it, particularly when it comes to love. Clark works hard to build a diverse cast of characters, but with upward of eight points of view and a swirl of subplots, there isn’t much room for in-depth character development. In addition to Liv and Savannah and their own relationships, the novel gives equal focus to a waitress and an actor who strike up a relationship at a wedding, two members of a wedding band who pretend to be a couple so one of them can secure their trust fund, and the long-term couple who run a flower business Liv works with. At times, each of these pairs reads as if they could be the focus of their own books. In spite of everything, though, Clark’s prose is engaging, her characters are likable, and the plot moves quickly enough that the shortcomings can be overlooked.

This overstuffed love story is a fun bit of escapism, but it doesn’t dig deep.

**FOR THE LOVE OF FRIENDS**
*Confino, Sara Goodman*
Lake Union Publishing (363 pp.)
$10.99 paper | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-5420-2759-5

Demanding brides, body-shaming bridesmaids, momzillas, and one woman caught in the middle of it all.

Lily Weiss is a 32-year-old aspiring writer who has a gift for turning the complicated scientific discoveries at the foundation she works for into digestible press releases.
be difficult to read. However, the author does a decent job of bringing Lily to a moral reckoning that is ultimately satisfying. A “What Not To Do” for any prospective bridesmaid.

THE ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF LENNI AND MARGOT
Cronin, Marianne
Harper Perennial/HarperCollins
(336 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-06-301750-4

Seventeen-year-old Lenni Pettersson is terminally ill, a long-term, motherless patient rarely visited by her father. But in her final months, she gathers a new family of quirky characters who inhabit Glasgow Princess Royal Hospital. As the days drift by on May Ward (the sad name for the hospital wing housing the medically hopeless cases), Lenni seeks something to fill her time. One day, she decides to visit the chapel even though she is not particularly spiritual and her religious training is haphazard at best—biblical parables have gotten tangled up with fairy tales and worries about homelessness. Yet there she meets Father Arthur, her first soul mate. Just months away from retirement, the priest finds in Lenni a witty, playful friend. She’s just as likely to good-naturedly mock his vestments as to ask him why she is dying. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the hospital, a young office temp is trying to use her art degree to snag a full-time job. Although her work backfires a bit when she loses her job to a proper teacher, the art therapy program she creates introduces Lenni to Margot. An 83-year-old woman awaiting her own death, Margot instantly clicks with Lenni. Recognizing that their ages add up to 100, Lenni and Margot embark on a massive project: 100 works of art to represent their entire century of life. Well, it’s mostly Margot’s art, because she’s a wonderful artist, and Lenni’s stories, because she’s a terrible artist. Threading together these two lives, Cronin not only embellishes Lenni’s brief sojourn with Margot’s dramatic adventures, but also nimbly avoids
drifting into sentimental clichés. So as Lenni’s health declines, Margot’s stories chase her true love through a broken marriage, criminal escapades, unexpected liaisons, and even a lost chicken story.

A whimsical, joyous portrait of the ends of things.

**THE FINAL TWIST**
Deaver, Jeffery
Putnam (416 pp.)
$28.00 | May 11, 2021
978-0-525-53913-1

A third case—make that flock of cases—for Colter Shaw, who finds lost people for the reward money.

Soon after Shaw finds evidence that, shortly before his death years ago, his father, Ashton, had been on the trail of some kind of damning information the late BlackBridge Corporate Solutions researcher Amos Gahl had gotten on his employer, his long-estranged brother, Russell Shaw, interrupts his own clandestine undercover work and turns up to help Shaw find that information and bring down BlackBridge. Their enemies—BlackBridge founder and CEO Ian Helms, his fixer Ebbitt Droon, grandmotherly killer Irena Braxton, and all the company’s vast resources—are potent, but not nearly as potent as the array of switchbacks Shaw and his brother will have to negotiate as they search for the mysterious Endgame Sanction of 1906. The company’s deep-laid malfeasance is closely entangled with the schemes of BlackBridge client Jonathan Stuart Devereux, head of Banyan Tree Holdings. Along the way, Shaw finds evidence that the family of someone identified only as “SP” is slated for extermination and adds saving them to his to-do list. And undeterred by the firepower arrayed against him, he decides to take on the more traditional job of finding recovering addict Tessy Vasquez for the piddling reward her mother, undocumented, overworked Maria Vasquez, is offering, and his search naturally gets tangled up with everything else. The caseload is every bit as miscellaneous as it sounds, but Deaver spices his kitchen sink with so many red herrings, misleading clues, bait-and-switches, and double-fakes that you’ll be hard-pressed to identify that final twist.

**SEVASTOPOL**
Fraia, Emilío
Trans. by Perry, Zoë
New Directions (128 pp.)
$14.95 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-8112-3091-9

Three snapshots of lives spent striving but ultimately falling short.

On the surface, these stories have little in common: Each is titled by a month—December, May, August; each takes place in Brazil—the first and last in São Paulo, the second in “the middle of nowhere.” In the first, Lena writes to the creator of a short film playing on a loop in an art gallery near her home. The piece seems to portray her life, but in ways that make her question her lived experience, especially her relationship with Gino, a photographer who accompanied her on a fateful ascent of Everest. In the second, Adán and his wife, Veronica, stop at a hotel that’s defunct, but the owner, Nilo, lets them stay...
anyway. Veronica leaves after one week; Adán seems content on his own, then vanishes, leading Nilo to search for him. In the third, Nadia, a young writer, quits her job to work on a play with Klaus, a much older director who cruises for men to cast in his work. The lone reference to the book’s titular city comes in a gloss at the start of Nadia’s tale—“Sevastopol, a soulless port...a generic scene, the kind with no story to tell.” It is immaterial to what follows, almost an overt wink to the reader that there is no hidden message in this slim volume. Similar metatextual sentiments run throughout: “The stories ran in parallel, never meeting”; “People always tell the same stories, even when they try to tell new stories.” These are merely moments in time, lives lived and—with the possible exception of Nadia’s—lives mismanaged, leaving disappointment, regret, or, at minimum, probing introspection. With deft precision, Fraia bares his characters just enough to reveal only these stories—nothing is extraneous. Somber, spare stories that let the reader crawl inside, searching for insight, only to be left greedily craving more.

In a town about to be ravaged for a second time by an evil chemical company, teenage triplets fight the power.

One is typical, and her name has one syllable: Mab. Two is on the spectrum, and her name has two syllables: Monday. Three cannot eat, speak, or walk, has the full use of only one arm and hand, and is a genius: Mirabel. The Mitchell girls’ father was one of many from the town of Bourne who died before the poisoning of the water supply became so severe that the factory producing it, the town's single employer, was shut down. Since then Bourne has been nearly evacuated; everyone left is disabled and/or unemployed; you still can’t drink the water or even risk more than a few seconds in the shower. One of the only businesses left is the Do Not Shop (donuts with a typo); the high school has separate tracks for those who need “extra help with their bodies” and those who need extra help with their brains; the library is closed. What books were not sold off were rescued by Monday Mitchell and stored under beds and in the microwave, but she can find any one of them in a minute. The triplets’ mother, Nora, has been trying unsuccessfully for years to mount a class action suit—and now the Templeton family, who owns the factory, is returning to town with plans to reopen! Despite the hotness of their teenage son, River—two out of three triplets fall in love with him—they must be stopped. After This Is How it Always Is (2017), about raising a transgender child, Frankel has given us another socially conscious 21st-century fable in a voice that is part pastor, part political speechwriter, and part Fannie Flagg. As she puts it (this is Mirabel talking), “There are two kinds of people in this world: the ones who split the world into two kinds of people, and the ones who know that’s reductionist and conversationally lazy.” And the ones who will love this book and the ones who...oh forget, it.

Clever, charming, and always on message.

Spurred by her father’s illness, a Chinese Canadian woman explores her family’s past.

When the unnamed narrator is 3, her family immigrates to Vancouver—she, her mother, and her grandparents. Everyone, that is, except her father, who helps them settle in but then returns to Hong Kong, worried that he won’t be able to find a job to support them in a new country. They become
“...Cacoyannis has written a thoroughly gripping novel, using the rhetoric of a real-life pandemic to fashion a chilling vision of an abnormal ‘new normal’ to come.”

“An intriguing, timely, and terrifying portent of life after Covid-19.”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“A well-written, richly complicated, and deeply engaging coming-of-age tale.”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“A sophisticated, comic novel that brilliantly captures the triumph and folly of art, media, and publishing.”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)
There’s no such thing as a villain in Katherine Heiny’s books; she writes about all her characters with so much affection—even the annoying ones—that you can’t help loving them. Her new novel, *Early Morning Riser* (Knopf, April 13), introduces Jane, a schoolteacher who’s just moved to small-town Boyne City, Michigan, in 2002. On Page 1, she meets Duncan, a thoughtful and sexy woodworker moonlighting as a locksmith. She’s just come from Pajama Day at school, and she’s locked herself out. Soon they’re a couple, and Jane is somehow also intimately connected to Duncan’s ex-wife, Aggie, a real estate agent who can make cooking dinner for someone seem like an act of aggression, and Aggie’s colorless new husband, Gary. Also Jimmy, Duncan’s assistant, who’s described as “slow learning,” and his mother, Mrs. Jellico; and Frieda, the music teacher, who can be counted on to produce a mandolin at virtually any moment. Sometimes Jane would like to be alone with Duncan, but that doesn’t seem possible—especially after an accident at the end of Chapter 2 changes all their lives. Heiny recently spoke to me from her home in Bethesda, Maryland, where she lives with her husband and two teenage sons; our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

I think that when this pandemic is over, people aren’t going to want to revisit it through fiction, but I’d actually like to read a quarantine novel written by you. In your books, you throw people together in different combinations and see what happens. And I thought, if they could never leave the house, it would be even more intense. I am fascinated by living arrangements. When I was younger, I wrote about roommates. And then I wrote about houseguests. And then I wrote about sort of inheriting people from other people. Yeah, it really does fascinate me.

So what’s it like being stuck in the house with your family for such a long time?

It’s chaotic, because there’s always someone in the kitchen, either eating or making something or loading the dishwasher. Our dogs think it’s the most fantastic existence, with the perpetual chance for people to drop food. I remember, about 30 years ago, I had a friend who was a writer in London, and her family was constantly coming to visit her and then not understanding that when she got up from her computer to make a cup of tea, she was still writing. So as soon as she stood up, they were like, *Can we go to Covent Garden?* And now I feel like it’s hard for me to find blocks of time where nobody’s going to come barreling in and ask me why we’re out of potato chips. But we still miss each other when somebody’s gone for like six hours.
Your books are all about love. Not falling in love—that just kind of happens at the beginning.
I don’t really like to write about people meeting each other and falling in love. It’s much more interesting to me to pick it up in the middle. I think that love is so strong, and you feel it for so many people in so many different ways. That’s perpetually amazing to me.

Your characters are so vivid and specific. Do they appear to you fully formed? Do your books start with a character or with a situation?
I start with a character usually, even though this book, compared to my other books, is tremendously plot driven. I grew up in Michigan, and my husband and I had a house in Boyne City for 20 years, and I wanted to set a novel there. The first novel I tried to set there was about a brother and sister who hire somebody to get in a car accident with their mother because they want their mother to stop driving, and the person they hired was Duncan. I couldn’t make that novel work, but I really liked Duncan, so I started over. And my son’s third grade teacher told me that the Drug Enforcement Administration got a tip that someone at her house was growing marijuana, but they had the wrong address. So the DEA came and kicked down her door, and she and her husband were at school—they’re both teachers, and it was Pajama Day. So they had to come home and deal with the DEA in pajamas. That’s why Jane is a teacher—I was like, boom, she’s a teacher, I can use that joke.

You recently wrote an introduction to a reissue of Laurie Colwin’s Happy All the Time, a title that would have worked for any of your books.
I think she’s a confident writer to name a book Happy All the Time. I would be so insecure that reviewers wouldn’t like it and would say This book made me unhappy all the time. And basically on the third page, she tells you exactly what’s going to happen. She’s like, And this is how these two guys got married to their wives. And I’m like, Wow, she’s really throwing down the gauntlet, saying Keep reading, it’ll be worth it.

Your husband is a former MI6 agent. That sounds like something out of a novel. Are you allowed to tell people?
When I first met him, he was under a death threat from the KGB, so it was supersecret. He told me after we’d been dating for a few months: I’m not a diplomat, I work for MI6. And I was like, What is that? That’s probably why he married me, because I was so unimpressed. And even after I understood what it was, I was like, Is that true? Because what are the odds that you’re dating a secret agent, it’s just so bonkers. So he was undercover the whole time we were in New York, and then we moved to London, and he was undercover there. Then a former MI6 agent went to the newspapers and published a list of hundreds of agents who were undercover, compromising them all, so when we moved to Washington, he was doing an official job. But before that I was always really afraid I was going to get drunk and tell someone at a party. And even today, when we rent a car or whatever, and the person says, Where are you from? What brings you to town? he won’t answer that.

Who are some other writers you admire?
I love Stephen King, and we could not be more different. In fact, a couple of years ago, he gave an interview saying he doesn’t really like books about relationships. That’s a hope crushed! But he’s just so talented, so creative, and so prolific in his sentences. They’re just so perfect. Anne Tyler is a writer who’s really influenced me. She writes books with a lot of passing of time with each chapter. When I moved to London when I was 30, within about a week of us getting there I read Bridget Jones’s Diary and High Fidelity, and I thought I’d died and gone to heaven. I can’t really overstate the impact those books had on me and how they made me understand you can write a comic novel, and you can also write a novel where not a whole lot happens. I’ve read those books 10, maybe 15 times each.

Early Morning Riser received a starred review in the Dec. 15, 2020, issue.
an “astronaut family”: “It’s a term invented by the Hong Kong mass media. A family with an astronaut father—flying here, flying there.” In very short, matter-of-fact fragments, the narrator accumulates memories of growing up, adjusting to life in Canada, and handling an often difficult relationship with a father she sees only twice a year. These memories mingle with those of her mother and grandmother, which the narrator begins collecting after her father falls ill from liver disease and the family assembles in Hong Kong. Her mother recalls high school basketball triumphs and, later, the process of caring for the narrator’s younger sister, born with a blood tumor; her grandmother relates, with impish humor, a childhood spent reading classical Chinese novels by night amid war (“Sometimes we couldn’t turn the lights on after sunset or we would get bombed”) and the one time she happened to write an opera. At one point in this nonlinear book, the narrator studies abroad in China during college and learns a spare technique of Chinese ink painting called xieyi. “They left large areas of the paper blank because they felt empty space was as important as form, that absence was as important as presence,” she tells us. “So what did they seek to capture instead? The artist’s spirit.” Debut author Fung seems to be describing her own narrative technique as much as this historical style, and its spareness does occasionally lend the narrative a fittingly agile sense of itinerancy. Largely, though, the details come across as somewhat mundane: They never really cohere into something bigger than their sum, and the characters remain unconvincing collections of attributes. As a result, the ending in particular feels merely sentimental rather than moving.

Occasionally touching but ultimately insubstantial.
EVERYONE KNOWS YOUR MOTHER IS A WITCH
Galchen, Rivka
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (288 pp.)
$26.00 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-374-28046-8

A 17th-century German witch hunt—really.
Katharina Kepler is an old woman when she is accused, by the wife of the town’s third-rate glazier, of being a witch. She laughs at the accusation. She has three grown children and a cow named Chamomile. She has a life to live. The accusation, unfortunately, seems to stick, with townspeople emerging, as it were, from the woodwork: A young girl once felt a pain in her arm as Katharina walked by; the schoolmaster once felt a pain in his leg. What one character calls “the destructive power of rumor” gathers momentum—gradually, and then all at once. Galchen’s latest book, which is by turns witty, sly, moving, and sharp, is a marvel to behold. Set in the early 1600s and based on real events—Katharina Kepler was Johannes Kepler’s mother, who really was tried as a witch—the novel also speaks to our own time in its hints at the apparent malleability of truth. “If only I had understood earlier what was really true,” someone says. “It can be so difficult to tell, the way people talk.” Galchen’s story will, by necessity, remind many readers of Arthur Miller’s The Crucible, but by focusing her narrative on an old woman rather than a cast of attractive young girls, she’s made her mission a far sneakerier one. Then, too, Galchen’s prose can sparkle and sting with wit. Katharina’s neighbor thinks, “In order to avoid turning people into monsters by suspecting them of being monsters, I do my best to keep myself mostly to myself.” There is so much in this novel to consider—the degree to which we make monsters of one another, the way that old age can make of femininity an apparently terrifying, otherworldly thing—but it is also, at every step along the way, an entirely delicious book.

“Dazzling in its humor, intelligence, and the richness of its created world.”

“Did you notice how ugly the dog has become?” Neither Elsa’s mother nor anyone else in their small Italian village knows that Elsa has fallen in love with Tommassino, the youngest child of Balotta, the old factory owner. The book takes a looser structure than Ginzburg’s others. Elsa and Tommasino bookend the story with their affair, but the middle is taken up by an account of Tommasino’s siblings and their spouses: Purillo, the adopted cousin who takes over their father’s factory; long-faced Gemmina; dreamy Vincenzino; and Mario, who marries Xenia, a Russian who speaks French but no Italian and so cannot converse with anyone in the village. What all these lives have to do with one another doesn’t become clear until the end. What is clear is that there is a darker current running beneath all the trivialities. During the war, Purillo sympathized with the fascists, an affectation for which the others mocked him. Nebbia, a friend, was killed behind the house. “I have the feeling,” Tommasino tells Elsa near the end, “that they have already lived enough, those others before me; that they have already consumed all the reserves, all the vitality that there was for us....Nothing was left over for me.” Rarely does Ginzburg directly address...
politics—fascism, in particular—but its shadow hangs over the
book just like it hangs over the characters. The result is pro-
found and profoundly moving.

As deceptively diffuse as it is meticulously observed, Ginz-
burg’s novel is a gem.

GIRL IN THE WALLS
Gnuse, A. J.
Ecco/HarperCollins (336 pp.)
$27.99 | May 11, 2021
978-0-06-303180-7

After a tragedy, a young Louisiana
girl returns to her former home, though
there’s another family already living in it.

After a car accident leaves 11-year-old
Elise on her own, she finds herself wan-
dering off from the foster home where
she’s been placed and back to the beloved house she grew up
in, a mazelike structure that her parents were always working
on. She finds an unlocked door and makes herself at home again.

The only problem? Elise’s family had moved out a few months
earlier, and the house is now owned by the Mason family: Laura,
Nick, and teenagers Marshall and Eddie. While the parents
seem oblivious to anything going on, Eddie notices a presence
in his room while Marshall tries to track down who ate the food
he put aside for himself. How long can a girl secreted in the
walls keep her presence hidden, and who might seek her out?

Split into five parts, Gnuse’s debut tale is tense but not a thriller.

There is always the threat of discovery hanging in the air, but
the story focuses more on meandering meditations on Elise’s
coping (or lack thereof) with the loss of her parents, Eddie’s
vague differences from others his age, or Nick and Laura’s mari-
tal problems. Gnuse explores interesting ideas about masculin-
ity as Marshall and Eddie attempt to “man up” and take care
of their hidden-person problem in the face of their parents’
disbelief. As the situation spirals out of control for them, there
are some genuinely frightening moments. However, despite the
anxiety induced by the title, the plot is quite stagnant, mostly
revolving around the fact that there is, indeed, a girl in the
walls. A reader looking for more of a cat-and-mouse game will
be disappointed.

More meditation than page-turner, a coming-of-age tale
with a twist.

AGAINST THE LAW
Gordon, David
Mysterious Press (336 pp.)
$25.95 | May 25, 2021
978-1-61316-226-2

His latest mission takes Joe the
Bouncer back to the last place in the world
he wants to visit. But he won’t roost there,
or anywhere else, for very long at all.

Before he was anointed sheriff of
New York’s crime families, “911 for people
who don’t call the cops,” strip-club bouncer Joe Brody put in his
time with special forces in Afghanistan, where he left a good bit
of his physical and mental well-being behind. So he’s not eager
to pursue the Helmand bandit king Zahir al Zilli, aka Zahir the
Shadow, who’s been hijacking heroin shipments those New York
families have every right to. But money talks, and half a million
dollars demands that attention must be paid, especially when it’s
bumped up to $2 million. So Joe heads off to Afghanistan, where
he’s happy to find his thieving friend Yelena Noylaskya, who’s
been missing since his last adventure in
The Hard Stuff (2019). The
reunited pair soon discover that Zahir’s only a front for a far more
powerful enemy: the Wildwater Corporation, whose founding
CEO, Bob Richards, has dreams of world domination that only
begin with intercepted shipments of White Angel. Cobbling
together a motley crew that draws from the ranks of the FBI and
the New York families, Joe and Yelena return home to challenge
a cadre of villains that include rogue military contractor Rick
Toomey, sociopathic assassin Victoria St. Smythe, and of course
A MISTAKE INCOMPLETE

A neo-noir caper set in modern-day Milan

“...a series of misadventures.”

“A dark novel brings together a collection of emotionally compromised characters whose lives unfortunately intersect in Italy.”

“With a talent for piercing the vainglorious veneer of his hapless protagonists, the author lightens the murder-and-mayhem action with biting humor.”

“A sharp, edgy caper with a final surprise.”

—Kirkus Reviews

ISBN: 978-1-73506-542-7

FOR ALL INQUIRIES, PLEASE EMAIL
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“A biting social satire—cum-thriller; dark, playful, and brimming with life.”

THE OTHER BLACK GIRL

Harris, Zakiya Dalila
Atria (368 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-9821-6013-5

In Harris’ slyly brilliant debut, a young editorial assistant is thrilled when her glaringly White employer hires another Black woman—but it soon becomes clear there’s something sinister about the new girl, who isn’t what she seems.

Young, literary, and ambitious, Nella Rogers has spent the last two years as an editorial assistant at Wagner Books, a premiere New York City publishing house, where, for the entirety of her (somewhat stalled) tenure, she’s been the only Black person in the room. How she feels about this depends on the day—for all her frustrations, she can’t help but be a little proud of her outsider status—but still, she’s excited when she detects another Black girl on her floor: finally, someone else who gets it. And she does, at first. Wagner’s newest editorial assistant, Hazel-May

THE STONE LOVES THE WORLD

Hall, Brian
Viking (464 pp.)
$28.00 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-59-329722-3

A young misfit—and her parents and grandparents—navigates through life in this scientifically minded novel.

A 20-year-old woman named Mette, overwhelmed by an abortive romantic entanglement, abruptly leaves the office of her tech job in New York and embarks on a bus trip to Seattle (a destination chosen at random), wondering whether to kill herself. Over the next few days, her parents become increasingly worried by her absence—or, at least, her mother does. Saskia, an unknown actress in New York City, raised Mette on her own after a brief fling with Mark, her astronomy professor in Ithaca, New York, and has always felt hurt by how much Mette is like her father—their predilection for math puzzles, their inability to read other people’s emotions. But when Saskia and Mark learn that Mette has somehow ended up in Denmark, they must reunite and find their daughter. Hall’s sprawling novel, which spans the years 1926 to 2017, isn’t plot-driven, however; instead, it’s largely composed of the characters’ dreamy reminiscences of their childhoods, their parents, their life’s trajectory, and limpid thoughts about the meaning of life: “It occurred to him that beauty, maybe, is always a thing you can only see from the outside. And he has wondered ever since if the key to a happy life is to learn ever more deeply to be satisfied with standing off to the side, perceiving the beauty that is separate from you, but nearly everywhere.” It’s also a book filled with left-brained precocity; besides Mark and Mette, we spend time in the minds of Mark’s father, a physicist who worked on the atomic bomb, and Mark’s mother, who wanted to be an astronomer but was foiled by the sexist norms of her day. Hall does an impressive job channeling his characters’ intensely idiosyncratic personal monologues and their interests in everything from Beethoven string quartets to the story of Joan of Arc to the Drake equation. And while the novel touches on an almost unwieldy array of themes, one constant throughout is the impossibility of exerting logic and control on a fundamentally unpredictable world.

A valiant attempt to encapsulate life, the universe, and everything.
McCall, cool and self-possessed, is quick to befriend Nella, echoing her frustrations with the never-spoken racial politics of their office, encouraging her to speak up. But it doesn’t take long for Nella to realize there’s something off about Hazel, even if she can’t quite put her finger on it. There’s something weird about how easily she fits in among the higher-ups at Wagner, about the way she’s instantly and universally beloved by top editors, the way her story—born in Harlem, daughter of civil rights activists, a grandfather who died protesting—exactly matches their ideas about Blackness in a way that Nella’s middle-class suburban childhood never will. And then, shortly after Hazel’s arrival, the first anonymous note arrives on Nella’s desk: “Leave Wagner Now.” Hazel? And if not Hazel, then who? Nella begins searching for answers—and in the process, finds herself at the center of a dangerous conspiracy that runs far deeper than she ever could have known. If it sounds like a moralistic sledgehammer of a novel—well, it would be if Harris were any less good. In her hands, though, it’s a nuanced page-turner, as sharp as it is fun.

A biting social satire–cum-thriller; dark, playful, and brimming with life.

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DUST OFF THE BONES
Howarth, Paul
Harper/HarperCollins (368 pp.)
$26.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-06-307-600-6

A tale of violence and redemption in the Australian Outback.
In this sequel to Only Killers and Thieves (2018), Howarth carries the story of brothers Billy and Tommy McBride forward following their involvement as teenagers in the unprovoked massacre of members of an Aboriginal tribe after the murders of their parents and sister. Billy has married and become a prosperous Queensland cattle rancher while the younger and more sensitive Tommy assumes a new identity and roams Australia’s vast open spaces on perilous cattle drives. Haunting both men are memories of their role in the mass slaughter, conducted at the direction of Edmund Noone, the brutal commander of the Native Police, an organization notorious in Australian history for carrying out genocidal
attacks, euphemistically referred to as “dispersals,” against Indigenous peoples. Noone has successfully suppressed the evidence of his blood-soaked past while rising to respectability as Brisbane’s police commissioner. When ambitious young lawyer Henry Wells, threatened by the risk of disclosure of his own secret, embarks on a single-handed effort to prompt a full government inquest into the long-ago incident, the McBrides and Noone must weigh the risks of exposure against the demands of conscience. In settings that range from the harsh beauty of the Australian countryside, “a place that [couldn’t] be tamed,” to the tension of a packed small-town courtroom, their starkly differing responses provide the energy of the novel’s often violent but far from predictable second half. Fast-paced and brimming with colorful, realistic detail, it also paints a vivid portrait of colonial Australia in the midst of its transition to independence as the 20th century begins while posing disturbing questions about the country’s historic cruelty to its Native inhabitants.

A classic cowboy saga is transformed into a complex, sophisticated morality play.

LESSON IN RED
Hummel, Maria
Counterpoint (320 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-64009-431-4

The untimely demise of a provocative young filmmaker consumes a museum copy editor in this sequel to Still Lives (2018).

After spending the summer in Vermont recovering from a run-in with a murderer, Rocque Museum copy editor Maggie Richter is ready to tell her friends and colleagues in Los Angeles that she isn’t coming back. Then her boss, Janis Rocque, emails with a tantalizing proposition. Several months ago, Brenae Brasil—a grad student at the prestigious Los Angeles Art College—shot herself. Janis claims she has inside knowledge that Brenae’s death was “more complicated than it seemed” and is willing to handsomely compensate Maggie—a former journalist—if she’ll investigate the school’s culture and use discretion in publishing her findings. Maggie returns to California, where she learns that Brenae sent Janis a copy of an unreleased movie titled Lesson in Red, which shows Brenae having coerced sex with an unidentified man. According to authorities, the work is one of two deleted from Brenae’s computer after she died but before her body was discovered. Determined to uncover the truth, Maggie infiltrates Brenae’s social circle and, with the help of special agent Ray Hendricks, starts digging. This novel might occasionally lose readers unfamiliar with the plot and key players from Still Lives. The story feels overstuffed and the denouement relies too heavily on coincidence, but Hummel delivers a searing indictment of the artistic community’s bias toward White men and the exploitations that follow.

A thoughtful thriller that shines a light into the art world’s dark corners.

THE SKELETON TREE
Janes, Diane
Severn House (224 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-7278-5019-5

A dream house turns into a nightmare. Wendy and Bruce Thornton realize that their house in Jasmine Close is too small for them. Tara, Wendy’s teenage daughter from her unhappy first marriage, and Katie and Jamie, their two active grade schoolers, find little room to spread out stamp collections or ride their bikes, much less entertain friends. Still, when The Ashes, a gracious old home facing onto Green Lane, comes onto the market, Wendy doesn’t take seriously the possibility that they might actually buy the house she’s always yearned for. A brief inspection at an open house confirms both her guesses: The house is indeed spacious, airy, and welcoming.
“A hired killer desperately tries to stay one step ahead of a kingpin’s goons in this novel.”

“...downhill this thriller isn’t. Fast, yes; the pace rarely flags...”

“Readers will find this crackerjack thriller hard to put down.”

—Kirkus Reviews

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It’s also badly neglected. Mrs. Duncan, the elderly widow who lived there, had neither the means nor the skills to repair the ancient plumbing or fix the collapsing roofs of the outbuildings. The sad state of the property is a mixed blessing: The price will certainly reflect the need for repairs, but those repairs will be costly. All Wendy’s calculations are rendered moot when a distant cousin dies and leaves her a legacy that will amply cover the purchase and remodeling. Bruce and the children gradually warm to the idea. Tara dreams of an extra room to entertain friends, and Jamie relishes the thought of riding his bike up and down the long driveway. Once they move into The Ashes, though, things go downhill. One of the cheerful workers who helps with the remodel is accused of murder. The children start to hear things that go bump in the night. Wendy and Bruce start to bicker. It’s hard to see what the moral is here: Since Wendy does nothing to deserve either her good fortune or bad, the only takeaway is don’t ever want anything.

A grim read.

**SLIPPING**

Kheir, Mohamed

Trans. by Moeser, Robin

Two Lines Press (260 pp.)

$16.95 paper | Jun. 8, 2021

978-1-949641-16-5

Contemporary Egyptian life glimpsed through a magical realist lens.

At the heart of Kheir’s first novel translated into English are the meanderings of young journalist Seif and his subject, Bahr, an enigmatic collector of stories who has returned from several years in Europe to the Egypt he dismisses as a “shithouse of a country” in the wake of the revolution. As the pair visit Alexandria, where they engage in a daredevil game with passing streetcars and cross the Nile River on foot, Bahr spins out tales that blend concrete detail with fanciful elements, offering bits of his melancholy perspective on life along the way. Among them are the account of his arrest and brutal treatment after a street demonstration and an oddly charming parable involving a bureaucrat named Yehyia who becomes part of a government effort to waste citizens’ time on purpose. Spirits and voices are recurring elements. There is the story of Ahmed, who is called upon to communicate with his late father to help his impoverished fellow villagers make a collective decision about whether to abandon their homes. Seif’s girlfriend, Alya, possesses an unusual talent for recreating any imaginable sound while Salaam, a young man with a persistent stutter, can only overcome it when he sings. Some of these fragmentary, dreamlike anecdotes are loosely connected, but those links are elusive at best. Then there are promising premises—like the one involving Ashraf, the young doctor recruited as a member of a medical staff at a private clinic whose work involves caring for a single patient, a wealthy businessman who has “resolved not to die”—that are introduced, never to be revived. For a Western audience lacking Kheir’s cultural context, it’s likely that many of these episodes will prove more puzzling than resonant.

Despite a handful of evocative moments, a novel that fails to cohere into a meaningful whole.

**FUTURE FEELING**

Lake, Joss

Soft Skull Press (304 pp.)

$16.95 paper | Jun. 1, 2021

978-1-59376-688-7

A trans man armed with the power of self-reflection embarks on a hero’s journey.

This debut novel begins in a vaguely futuristic New York City with our hero, Penfield R. Henderson, scrolling through the Gram, a sort of evolved Instagram with holographic capabilities. The object of Pen’s attention is Aiden Chase, a fellow trans
man whom Pen both worships and despises. Aiden represents a “trans-father whose shadow [he] wanted to step out of even tho dude was younger.” Unable to handle another perfect post from Aiden on the Gram, Pen decides to place a hex on him, asking his Bushwick roommates, the Witch and the Stoner-Hacker, to help him “curse someone, in both the old ways and the new.” This plan goes awry when a trans man named Blithe Freeman encounters Pen’s curse before Aiden does, and he’s sent deep into the Shadowlands. Enter the Rhiz, an underground trans network, which enlists both Pen and Aiden to find the cursed man and bring him back. The two frenemies set out to rescue Blithe from the Shadowlands, which, despite functioning as a metaphor for deep depression, is physically located in Joshua Tree. The journey is akin to a queer millennial version of *The Alchemist*, complete with proverbs and personal growth. Pen’s raw reflections on his insecurities as a trans man—“my feet were still sweating from my encounter with the airport scanners. I knew they saw I was missing a big dick”—provide a reality to this dreamlike, allegorical narrative. The attempts to orient the story in the future, from subway cars that glow with

Bio-meter readings to vague mentions of climate-related natural disasters, only serve to distract from a more powerful reality: For underrepresented communities, the everyday experience can be alien enough.

This is a modern allegory with a unique voice—searching, questioning, vulnerable, witty.

**THE GREAT MISTAKE**

*Lee, Jonathan*

Knopf (304 pp.)

$25.95 | Jun. 15, 2021

978-0-525-65849-8

An exceptional work of historical fiction about one of the key figures in the development of 19th-century New York City.

In November 1903, on Friday the 13th, Andrew Haswell Green was shot
dead in front of his Park Avenue home. Largely forgotten now, he had been essential to the establishment of many of the city’s parks, museums, and bridges and to the linking of its five boroughs into Greater New York. As he did in High Dive (2016), Lee sets up two narratives: one following highlights of Green’s life up to the murder and one on the police investigation afterward. Born in 1820 into a Massachusetts farming family, young Green realizes that he doesn’t grip an ax the right way, that he has “no interest in girls.” At 14, he is seen almost kissing another boy. (Present-day readers may find the allusions to his sexuality euphemistic or otherwise indirect, but that is period appropriate and could mean the historical record lacks more-explicit references.) Shortly after that incident, Green is sent to New York to work in a general store, where future New York Gov. Samuel Tilden appears one day seeking pills for indigestion. They develop a lifelong friendship that will lead to Green’s many civic achievements. Meanwhile, a police inspector stumbles on a clue to the shooting after visiting a bordello whose madam is linked to the case. She provides one of the book’s most colorful sections (and its only significant female character), and she and the inspector dominate the novel’s lighter moments. There also are two very different strands of suspense: in the whodunit, which hinges on an accepted haven for straight male urges, and in the biography, with its question of how a man deals with feelings that don’t fit into the conventional narrative of the time.

A highly satisfying mix of mystery and character portrait, revealing the constrained heart beneath the public carapace.
“Though its circumstances are harsh, Central City is a thriller with surprising heart.”
—Foreword Clarion Reviews

“With its intricate plot and delicious, film noir-ish prose, CENTRAL CITY is an engrossing murder mystery helmed by two familiar yet originally drawn characters: the hard-boiled detective and the world-weary antihero, straight out of the best of pulp fiction.”
—IndieReader

“A somber, moody, and absorbing mystery/thriller.”
—Kirkus Reviews

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https://indyperro.com • https://centralcitybooks.com
NANCY
Lloret, Bruno
Trans. by Jones, Ellen
Two Lines Press (156 pp.)
$19.95 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-949641-12-7

A woman, dying of cancer, reflects on her unhappy childhood.

The first novel to be published in English by Chilean author Lloret opens on a sunny morning, but there’s not much light in this lovely yet tragic book. It follows the title character, who is dying of cancer, as she reflects on her singularly unhappy childhood. Nancy was raised by a feckless father and a mother who subjected her and her brother, Pato, to horrific abuse, savagely beating them and telling Nancy things like “I wish you’d been born dead dead dead….Not even Pato came out as big and ugly as you, you little bitch.” Her brother later disappeared outside of a nightclub, leaving Nancy to bear the brunt of her mother’s viciousness. Nancy’s mother eventually abandoned her family, and her father converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; they lived together, almost always on the brink of poverty, at one point resorting to grave robbing to find jewelry to sell. Nancy later married Tim, a man several years her senior, but he had problems of his own; Nancy notes that “rum and Teletrak betting took my husband from me.” Still, she loved him, and was distraught after he was killed in a work accident while drunk. Recalling the long-term trauma that was her childhood, Nancy reflects on the disease that’s quickly killing her: “Knowing you’re going to die is horrible not just because you don’t want to die, but also because there’s always some residual, surviving doubt.” Lloret’s novel is obviously bleak beyond measure, but it’s also quite beautiful thanks to his self-assured and ethereal prose—after Nancy tells Tim that she’s dying, the two “[stare] at each other like divers underwater, sunk in uncertainty.” Lloret employs unusual typography, punctuating the book with a series of bold X’s; the effect is jarring but powerful, reminding the reader of Nancy’s impending fate. This is a gorgeous novel from a writer unafraid to consider the darkness; it’s hard to read but beyond rewarding.

Bleak, beautiful, and incredibly powerful.

CAGES
Mark, David
Severn House (256 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-7278-9091-7

A creepy psychological thriller from a specialist in bone-chilling suspense such as The Burying Ground (2020).

Annabeth Harris, a rising star at her job in the British prison system, has a secret: As a teenager, she killed her sexual abuser with a snow globe after he impregnated her. Now, looking for ways to make an impression at work, she asks author Rufus Orton to give a series of creative writing classes at HMP Holderness. Orton, struggling to produce a successful novel, agrees because he’s desperate for money. Meanwhile, the National Crime Agency is striving to pin a series of probable murders on convicted child kidnapper Griffin Cox, a Holderness inmate. Wealthy and brilliant, he’s suspected of a number of abduction/murders, but no bodies have been found. The manipulative Cox talks his way into Orton’s creative writing class, from which he’d been barred as an inmate in danger from the rest of the prison population. Annabeth is unhappy with this turn of events, but the class goes remarkably well even though Cox baits Orton and the other class members. But then Cox doodles a snow globe on his class paper, and Annabeth is terrified. When Orton stays overnight with Annabeth and her son, Ethan, she learns that among the prison stories Orton’s reading is one Cox has written about her. The next class becomes a pitched battle, as Cox is stabbed and Annabeth waits in fear of what he will require from her to keep her secret.

A grisly thriller with a shocking climax few readers will see coming.
An acclaimed African American essayist puts forth a first novel whose quirky romanticism, vivid landscapes, and digressive storytelling owe more to classic European cinema than conventional literature.

The world tends to weigh heavily on a sensitive young man with an overly restive mind. And Jonah Winters, a Black, newly minted college graduate, begins the 21st century burdened with an eclectic imagination that’s hemmed in by limited possibility. Raised in Paris, Jonah is pressing his cultivated mind into service as a public school teacher in Brooklyn. He doesn’t get too deep into the new job before anomie creeps in: “infernal contradictions between his hopeful expectations and the downward spirals of aimless and angry students.” Seeking mental relief at a Manhattan repertory movie house, Jonah runs into Octavio, a “wild Cubano” and college friend who proposes they take a trip together to Brazil, where Octavio hopes to reunite with another college friend, nicknamed “Barthes,” who’s trying to help poor children in Rio’s favelas. Jonah promises to think it over but doesn’t, really, for weeks, until one night when a retired pro basketball player rescues him from arrest for drunk and disorderly. The stranger, Nathaniel Archimbald, unloads a harsh dose of “wake-up” on Jonah that forces the young man to assess his life up to that point, which in turn compels Nathan to recall a lost love from his own life in Paris. When Jonah tells him about the prospect of heading to South America, Nathaniel hands him a sealed letter addressed to that lost love, asking him to find her. If he doesn’t, “bring the letter back to me...[so] you’ll remember that you always have a reason to come back.” So begins for Jonah an odyssey through Brazil and elsewhere in the Southern Hemisphere loaded with discoveries, epiphanies, and, occasionally, physical peril looming from both within and outside his small circle of fellow travelers. At times, even with...
McCarthy’s allusive style and illuminating observations carrying them along, readers may become unsettled by the drift and dysfunction of its protagonist. But if ever there was an example of a quest story where the quest matters more than the objective, it’s this coming-of-age novel. An intellectually stimulating fiction debut.

**THE ATMOSPHERIANS**

McElroy, Alex  
Atria (304 pp.)  
$27.00 | May 18, 2021  
978-1-9821-5830-9

A cult sets out to reform men. Sasha Marcus built a career as a wellness influencer, but she loses everything—her followers, her connections, her job—when a troll livestreams his suicide and publicly blames her. The day she receives an eviction notice, just after her 29th birthday, her oldest friend, Dyson Layne, a struggling actor, shows up unannounced at her front door with a wild idea: “Mindfulness is the swamp of aspiring quacks...me and you: we’re starting a cult.” They plan to use land Dyson inherited from his grandparents to host and reform 12 middle-aged White men. The world of the novel is hyperreal, presenting a familiar reality studded with uncanny details. For example, there’s the problem of “man hordes”: a growing phenomenon in which groups of men lose consciousness temporarily, sometimes causing destruction but other times doing things like gardening or saving pets. Dyson insists they are “a sign of something deeply wrong in the souls of men today.” The Atmosphere, Sasha and Dyson’s cult, is supposed to be the solution: “The Atmosphere: where men become human.” McElroy’s debut is as uncomfortable as it is thought-provoking. It takes on toxic masculinity, eating disorders, influencer culture, and the violence inherent in power dynamics without dragging or overreaching. Edgy, addictive, gruesome, and smart.

**IN A Graphic Novel**

McPhail, Will  
Illus. by the author  
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (272 pp.)  
$28.00 | May 18, 2021  
978-0-358-34554-1

Cartoonist McPhail’s debut graphic novel follows a youngish artist’s desperate search for authenticity in a culture where true selves hide behind performative, perfunctory interactions. Professional illustrator Nick Moss isn’t sad but wants to be—at least for a night. He’s heard of sad men being sad in sad bars, so he tries on the role for himself, but an attractive young woman named Wren playfully calls him out on his artifice. This meet-cute leads to a fun, steamy, no-strings-attached affair, which weaves through Nick’s everyday struggles to form meaningful connections to his fellow humans—strangers, neighbors, and family alike. Eventually he learns to lean into awkward encounters and finally say something that matters to the other person—transcendent moments that McPhail brings to life by fantastically transporting Nick to vibrant, inspiring vistas for the duration of these fleeting epiphanies. McPhail’s art is exceptional—realistic if impressionistic settings and anatomic figures with cartoonish accents like bug eyes and over-emotive gestures. The visuals are scrumptious and the yearning for personal connection is deeply relatable, but the story loses focus with observational bits about pretentious coffee shops and corporate jargon, and the central romantic relationship has a bit too much of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl dynamic to fully resonate. But even when beats feel overly familiar, McPhail presents them with style and grace, deftly moving the story along with subtle, impactful visual cues. Nick isn’t an especially likable character, save for the relatability of his desires, but the eyes McPhail gives him—perfect white circles with pinprick
"False Light is The Big Chill of the #metoo era—I want the soundtrack of this terrific, timely book!"
—Mary Kay Zuravleff, Author of Man Alive!

"Eric Dezenhall is a genius writer, and False Light is a masterwork—smart, funny, unpredictable, freewheeling, and start-to-finish entertaining. The plotting is brilliant, the dialogue always sharp. Better yet, perhaps, this novel is a good-news reminder that we can always find measures of virtue and fairness and hard truth in justice’s difficult alchemy."
—Martin Clark, Author of The Substitution Order
pupils—imbue the awkward and borderline-unpleasant character with the charm of an earnest boob. What more could anyone be when faced with their place in the universe?

Gorgeous navel-gazing.

RAINBOW MILK
Mendez, Paul
Doubleday (336 pp.)
$26.95 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-385-54706-2

Troubled by religious traumas, a young gay Black man struggles to reconcile his racial and sexual identities.

In the wake of 9/11, Jesse McCarthy is 19 and living in the British Midlands; his parents, who are Jehovah’s Witnesses, have dissuaded him from pursuing academic study, encouraging him instead to devote himself to the church. His mother, who’s first-generation Jamaican British, is depressed and blames Jesse for her travails; his stepfather is White and has mostly given up on attempting to nurture him. As tensions rise at home, Jesse—an active and beloved member of his church community—is summoned to speak with the preacher: Not only has he been caught drunk and high on marijuana, but he’s been accused of making a homoerotic remark to his close friend. Disfellowshipped from the church and thrown out of his house, Jesse moves to London with all the money he’s saved up from working at McDonald’s. Independent of his family and faith, he’s finally able to enjoy his sexual freedom. Eventually, after a brief and disastrous waiting gig, Jesse finds that he can support himself through sex work, though at an emotional cost. He yearns for the safety and comfort of a more permanent relationship. While compelling at times—especially when Jesse interrogates the nexus between his sexuality and Blackness—the novel’s overwritten passages: long digressions into music, repetitive sex scenes, mundanities described in excessive detail. The pace drags, with key scenes lost in the midst of less significant ones. Structurally, the novel is confused and inconsistent. The events of the moving first section, about a Windrush generation Jamaican family immigrating to a brutally racist Britain in the early 1950s, don’t figure into the novel until the final quarter, when narrative threads about Jesse’s past are hastily (and messily) tied up.

Moving at times but not well executed.

GIRL ONE
Murphy, Sara Flannery
MCD/Farrar, Straus and Giroux (368 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-374-60174-4

In her latest work of speculative fiction, the author of The Possessions (2017) creates a world in which women can conceive without men.

Josephine Morrow’s mother has disappeared and the house where she spent most of her childhood has been set on fire. The source of the fire is unknown, and the only clues to Josephine’s mother Margaret Morrow’s whereabouts will send Josephine on a trip across the country and into her past—a past that Margaret has done her best to keep her daughter from investigating. Here is what Josie knows: She was born on the Homestead, a woman-only commune; she was the product of a virgin birth; and Dr. Joseph Bellanger helped her mother achieve parthenogenesis. As she searches for Margaret, Josie seeks out the other mothers who gave birth on the Homestead. She also reconnects with their daughters, a couple of whom join Josie on her journey. As these young women get to know each other, they discover that they all have superhuman abilities—telekinesis, controlling the minds of others, the power to heal. They also encounter a number of people who hate and fear them enough to want them dead. This is a difficult novel to categorize. It has science-fiction elements and its basic plot is that of a thriller, but it’s written in a style that is well suited to neither. Using first-person narration, Murphy spends a lot of time exploring Josie’s inner life, which is not nearly as interesting as her outer life. This novel also suffers from some serious plot holes. Josie and her companions assume that their powers are the result of parthenogenesis, but no one wonders why—like the X-Men or the Justice League—they each have a unique power. More importantly, Josie has devoted her life to replicating the work of Dr. Bellanger, but when she has the opportunity to ask those in a position to give her information about his techniques, she never asks any questions that might lead her to the truth. Some of the mysteries that drive the narrative are resolved, but its central secret remains a secret.

Full of intriguing ideas that are poorly developed.

WALKING ON COWRIE SHELLS
Nkweti, Nana
Graywolf (176 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-64445-054-3

Stories about Cameroonian Americans that complicate the usual immigrant narratives.

Explosive prose and imaginative plots characterize this debut collection of 10 stories populated by zombies and mermaids, adopted
“There’s a lot to like here, especially Centeno’s focus on character development—particularly secondary characters.... this focus begins to pay real dividends in the latter chapters as readers are rewarded with a breakneck-paced, fully immersive, and plot-twist-laden read.”
—BlueInk Review

“A space captain must contend with inner turmoil and enemy forces in Paul L. Centeno’s high-octane science fiction novel Maz’hura.”
—Foreword Clarion Reviews

“Sci-fi and fantasy merge to form an entertaining romp in space.”
—Kirkus Reviews
In the African" by her boy-African When she finally tells her side of the story, she explains, “I give
African, and by this culture’s definitions, unsightly,” reflects
Those stories are written in the first person, and when the nar-
feed
aren't fairy tales, and Nkweti's characters also face the double
New Jersey, as exotic as Comic-Con, and as far away as Cam-
Boisterous and high-spirited debut stories by a talented
LAS BIUTY QUEENS
Stories
Ojeda, Iván Monalisa
Astra House (176 pp.)
$21.00 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-662-60030-2
A Latinx writer and performer shares scenes from 1990s New York.
Ojeda was born in Chile. After graduating from university, he/she (Ojeda identifies as both male and female and uses the pronoun he/she) immigrated to the United States. The stories in this collection are set in his/her new home in New York, and they are peopled by sex workers and drag performers. These stories are written in the first person, and when the narrator has a name, it’s almost always Monalisa. There’s nothing unusual, of course, about an author mining their own life for fiction. That said, these short works feel more like excerpts from a diary than stories with a narrative trajectory. What Ojeda presents, for the most part, is a series of things that happened. “In the Bote” relates the narrator’s experience the first time they are put in prison for prostitution. This account will be instructive for anyone who has never spent time at Rikers Island, and there are certainly some details that most readers are unlikely to find elsewhere. The Chilén protagonist has been advised to give the police a fake Puerto Rican name because this is less likely to lead to involvement with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Another Chilén inmate takes this first-timer under his wing and...that’s about it. The narrator’s friends get bail money together, and that’s that. In “Ortiz Funeral Home,” Monalisa goes to a friend’s wake. There’s a bit of drama when an unknown someone snatches a bag of cocaine out of the dead woman’s hands, but Ojeda doesn’t develop this detail—or any other element of the story—and the piece just keeps going until it stops. This formlessness is typical of the works gathered here. There are, however, instances when the writing transcends the recitation of facts. “Biuty Queen” is a monologue by a contestant about to participate in “the most important beauty pageant for transsexuals in all the United States.” Deborah Hilton has won five crowns already, she has paid for her dresses and backup dancers with sex work, and she has zero regrets. “Obviously, it was worth it. The crown looks gorgeous on me.” It’s a pleasure to spend time inside the head of someone so emphati-
THE ROCK EATERS
Peynado, Brenda
Penguin (288 pp.)
$15.99 paper | May 11, 2021
978-0-14-313562-3
Sixteen genre-bending stories as sub-
stantial as they are superbly crafted.
Melding science fiction, fantasy, fable, and legend with atmospheric prose, these stories touch on a wide range of topics: immigration, race, climate change, the inexorable millennial hustle, influencers, gun culture, and the fraught, electric urgency of friendship between adolescent girls. In “Thoughts and Prayers,” silent, guano-drip-
ning angels preside over a suburban neighborhood, their “pale humanoid faces and downy bird bodies perched beside our chimneys,” each believed to bring blessings or misfortune to the family that resides beneath it. “Yaida” deftly examines class tensions and the myth of meritocracy against a backdrop of tennis court rivalry between two preteen girls: Yaida, a “scholarship girl,” and the narrator, whose family has hired Yaida’s grandmother as their latest housekeeper. In “The Great Escape,” the narrator’s great-aunt, spurred by paranoia brought on by Alzheimer’s and a long-ago forced marriage to the nephew of Rafael Trujillo, locks herself in her apartment with increasingly intricate and impenetrable devices. Once an aspiring artist who was left with no medium to ply but the life and belongings she carefully curated, she now “lost things so diligently it was like a religion,” as she herself is being erased by loss, time, greed, and, finally, disease. “The Kite Maker”—set 12 years after the arrival and widespread massacre of a buglike alien species that
crash-landed on Earth after their home planet was destroyed by an asteroid—looks at xenophobia and personal and collective cruelty and responsibility in the aftermath of tectonic shifts to the old social order. And in “The Rock Eaters,” a generation of Latin American island dwellers who, as adolescents, developed the ability to float, “discovering [they] could fly as far as [they]’d ever wanted,” returns to their home island, bringing their foreign-born children and gifts for their parents of “fancy foreign clothes we...couldn’t really afford...to show them we’d been right all this time to have flown away.” During their visit, some of the children begin to develop their own flying abilities, but unlike their parents, they tether themselves to their abandoned ancestral lives and land, eating rocks and soil to keep themselves from drifting away.

A sparkling, strange, and enthralling debut from a vivid new voice in contemporary fiction.
Simon hopes to follow Madison’s tracks out of Coney Island, so he’s thrilled when charismatic Warren Landry asks him to edit a manuscript, until he realizes that *The Vixen, the Patriot, and the Fanatic* depicts Ethel Rosenberg as a communist Mata Hari seducing every man in sight and, by the way, as guilty as hell. The firm is in dire financial shape, Warren confides; if Simon can make this mess “less bad” they could have a sorely needed bestseller. Tantalized by the prospect of a promotion, plus the alluring photo of author Anya Partridge, Simon suppresses his qualms and gets to work. Hilarious excerpts from the appallingly unconvincing and (2019).

In the early 1980s, four Malibu surfer siblings throw a raging party that forces them to confront their pasts in this new novel from the author of *Daisy Jones & the Six* (2019).

The Riva siblings didn’t have an easy childhood. Their father was a famous singer who came and went whenever he wanted, finally leaving for good. Their mother was an alcoholic, leaving her oldest daughter, Nina, to take on the bulk of the parenting. Nina ends up becoming a surf model to earn enough money to take care of her siblings: Jay, who becomes a pro surfer, Hud, who becomes a surf photographer, and the youngest, Kit, who hopes to follow in their surfing footsteps. Their rocky childhood led them to become extremely close as adults, and no tradition means more to them than the annual Riva party, held at Nina’s beach house. It’s typically raucous and full of celebrities behaving badly, but the real drama this time ends up coming from the secrets the Rivas are keeping from each other. Reid alternates between the siblings’ current-day party preparations and the story of their past: how their parents, Mick and June, met in the 1950s, fell in love, and had a tumultuous relationship. By the time the end of the party rolls around, the siblings each realize the many ways their pasts continue to affect their futures. Reid’s descriptions of Malibu are so evocative that readers will swear they feel the sea breeze on their faces or the grit of the sand between their toes. The Rivas have a believable sibling dynamic, and the family members are complex and delightfully flawed (especially Mick, whose bad decisions reverberate throughout the novel).

**A compulsively readable story about the bonds between family members and the power of breaking free.**

**MALIBU RISING**

*Reid, Taylor Jenkins*  
Ballantine (384 pp.)  
$28.00 | Jun. 1, 2021  
978-1-5247-9865-9

SMART, ASSURED FICTION FROM A MASTER STORYTELLER AND THOUGHTFUL SOCIAL COMMENTATOR.

**A THEATER FOR DREAMERS**

*Samson, Polly*  
Algonquin (336 pp.)  
$26.95 | May 11, 2021  
978-1-64375-149-8

**Smart, assured fiction from a master storyteller and thoughtful social commentator.**

**An alluring historical novel revolves around the genesis of a relationship that inspired poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen.**

On one level, this historical novel is a delectable work of escapism. Set on the impossibly picturesque Greek island of Hydra, it focuses on a group of expatriate writers and artists living the bohemian life in 1960. Its wide-eyed narrator is 18-year-old Erica. Mourning the recent death of her mother and fleeing a domineering father, she leaves London with her brother, a painter, and her sweet boyfriend, an aspiring poet. They head for Hydra to visit an old friend of her mother’s. Erica is fictional, but the friend, Charmian Clift, was a real Australian novelist who lived for years on Hydra with George Johnston, her husband and fellow writer. Charmian is an irresistible earth mother who, as Erica marvels, can wear a patched shirt and tie her hair up with a shoestring and look chic. George is a towering grouch who complains about the constant stream of new visitors “lured by our fantastic blue water and cheap rent to live out their carefree immortality away from prying city eyes.” But his and Charmian’s chaotic, welcoming household, tumbling with children and delicious food, is a magnet for the artistic crowd. That crowd also includes such real figures as Norwegian novelist Axel Jensen and his ethereally beautiful wife, Marianne Ihlen—and a very young and not yet famous Leonard Cohen. Yes, that Marianne, and the novel unfolds around the start of their relationship, amid dreamy days and nights of parties and feasts and sexual adventures, painted in lush prose. (Cohen fans will enjoy the author’s deft weaving of his song lyrics into his dialogue.) But Samson is up to something else as well—Marianne, Charmian, Erica, and most of the other women in the book are the muses of male artists, and that role gets a cool-eyed dissection. They might be inspiring poems and novels and paintings, but they’re also doing all the cooking and cleaning and, in Hydra, hauling water up the hill, not to mention bearing babies, coddling their partners’ fragile egos, and quashing any creative talents they might have themselves. It’s a role that, in this theater, can end tragically.

**Brilliant people in a beautiful setting add up to seductive time travel, with an edge.**
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ETERNAL
Scottoline, Lisa
Putnam (480 pp.)
$24.99 | Mar. 23, 2021
978-0-525-53976-6

Quite a change from Scottoline’s bestselling contemporary thrillers: an ambitious, deeply researched historical account of three Roman families caught in the meltdown of Fascist Italy.

May 1937 finds Alessandro Simone and Marco Terrizzi competing for the favors of Elisabetta D’Orfeo, an aspiring journalist and cat lover who waits tables at Casa Servano, the well-regarded Trastevere restaurant owned by Giuseppina Servano, widely known as Nonna. Since Sandro’s father, Massimo Simone, is a Jewish tax lawyer who strongly supports Mussolini and Marco’s father, Giuseppe Terrizzi, is a former cyclist who proudly styles himself a Fascist of the First Hour, there’s plenty of potential for ethnic, religious, and political conflicts both between and within the leading characters, and despite the widespread conviction that Mussolini’s pre-Hitler brand of fascism will never turn against the Jews, the coming of the war flushes all these conflicts out. After Marco’s brother Aldo is killed when he joins a group of anti-fascist saboteurs, Marco, groomed by Commendatore Romano Buonacorso for a rapid rise to power, begins to have second thoughts. Sandro, his dreams of academic stardom trashed by his religion, is more open in his opposition to Il Duce. The real calamities, however, follow the German invasion of Italy, which kicks off several painful rounds of increasingly severe anti-Jewish legislation, expropriation, extortion, and finally rastrellamento, the wholesale roundup of Italian Jews to be shipped off to destinations readers will know all too well. Through it all, Scottoline struggles mightily to bring her sorely tried characters alive through their love for each other, but they mostly remain pawns of history who believe till the end that “the Vatican will intervene, of course.”

A heartfelt but schematic wartime tear-jerker.

AN UNLIKELY SPY
Starford, Rebecca
Ecco/HarperCollins (352 pp.)
$27.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-06-303788-5

The intriguing story of a young woman’s espionage career during World War II weaves in a critique of the British class system.

What sort of people got recruited to be spies by Britain’s famed MI5 intelligence agency during World War II? This absorbing historical novel makes clear they weren’t much like James Bond. Evelyn Varley is a restless young woman living in London in 1939, working for a cosmetics company and making no use at all of her Oxford degree in German, when she’s invited for a rather mysterious job interview: She rapidly goes from typing up reports to infiltrating a group of Nazi sympathizers—and discovering a disturbing personal connection. Starford takes an interesting tack with Evelyn’s background. The daughter of a clerk and a homemaker, she attended a posh boarding school as a scholarship girl, which meant she would either suffer bullies or remake herself in the images of the upper-class girls who harassed her. She chose the latter and did it so well she got into Oxford and became a sort of second daughter to the family of her best friend, Sally—a family that’s one of the wealthiest in England. When Evelyn goes to work for MI5, she discovers others who, like her, are outsiders in the rigid British class system but have found ways to assimilate by assuming an identity, an essential part of spycraft. As the war looms, the challenge for Evelyn is assimilating with people she finds abhorrent. Most of the novel is set in the years just before and after Britain’s entry into the war. Occasional chapters flash-forward to 1948, when Evelyn is trying to put her life back together after some unnamed catastrophe and tentatively falling in love. The book is rich with historical details, right down to clothing styles and furnishings. The plot sometimes slows amid those details, but most of the book is well paced. The novel’s depiction of Evelyn’s career is exciting, but it also suggests the human cost: No matter how skilled her performances, to those above her in the social hierarchy, she’s expendable.

A well-crafted spy novel examines the perils of espionage’s foundation in personal relationships.

CITY ON THE EDGE
Swinson, David
Mulholland Books/Little, Brown (336 pp.)
$28.00 | May 25, 2021
978-0-316-52854-2

As tensions between Israel and Palestinian ratchet up following the massacre at the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, a 12-year-old American boy living in Beirut slowly discovers what his mysterious father is really up to.

The boy is Graham. His father works for the State Department, in what capacity he won’t say. Their family arrives in Beirut in the spring of 1972, having previously lived in Mexico City for four years. Exploring the new terrain with his two American friends, Graham discovers endless ways to get into trouble, including wandering out into a sandstorm and confronting a sul len, rock-throwing local boy. Life changes dramatically when, near the boys’ play fort, Graham witnesses the killing of a Middle Eastern man by an American. His father, in whose satchel the boy was shocked to find a gun (“Was he a spy?”), responds gravely to news of the death. People start showing up at their apartment door at all hours, among them a man from the embassy with a healed bullet hole in his face. Curfews are called, “little pops” and explosions are heard in the near distance, and the
boys are told to sleep on the floor. Meanwhile, the stern Presbyterian father and alcoholic Jewish mother wage their own war. Told by the adult Graham, who becomes a cop like Swinson did, the novel occasionally gets caught between a coming-of-age story and a mystery. But this stand-alone follow-up to Swinson’s Frank Marr mysteries—most recently Trigger (2019)—unfolds with cool understatement and entertaining period details (prepare for an onslaught of Jethro Tull) and builds to a satisfying climax.

An absorbing take on Middle East conflict as seen through the eyes of an American boy.

ANIMAL
Taddeo, Lisa
Avid Reader Press (336 pp.)
$27.99 | Jun. 8, 2021

An alluring, sophisticated, sexually voracious, and emotionally ruined woman moves to California to track down a connection to her tragic past. After finding critical and popular nonfiction success with Three Women (2019), Taddeo makes her fiction debut with a propulsive, erotic, emotional thriller focusing on a 37-year-old woman. Joan is fleeing New York after having watched her married lover shoot himself while she was out to dinner with his replacement, but this horrific experience is the tip of a very large iceberg with layers of trauma that began when she lost both parents at age 10. As Joan puts it, “If someone asked me to describe myself in a single word, depraved is the one I would use.” She rents a little house in Topanga Canyon on a large piece of property that is also home to a well-known rapper, a hot guy in a yurt, and a wealthy older man who has recently lost his wife. Once unpacked, she almost immediately runs into the person she went there looking for—a young woman named Alice, who she believes can help her understand what happened to her parents. Taddeo balances the sex, violence, and melodrama of her plot with insightful character development. Joan is almost impossible to look away from on every page. “When I saw boys in the streets with their low-slung backpacks, I thought of the girls they liked, the girls who got to be eleven and twelve and thirteen, with unicorn stickers and slap bracelets. I did not get to be any of those ages. I was ten and then I was thirty, and then I was thirty-seven.” Or this: “I knew the precise color I wanted my coffee and how to have an orgasm in under thirty seconds. I needed everybody in the world—including waiters—less than they needed me.” If the story goes off the rails in the final chapters, the burning questions driving it are satisfyingly answered.

As full of sensuality, amorality, and drama as its riveting narrator.

BARCELONA DREAMING
Thomson, Rupert
Other Press (272 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-63542-042-5

Three people navigate love and heartbreak in early-21st-century Catalonia.

The latest novel from English author Thomson is made up of three interconnected stories. The first follows Amy, an Englishwoman who meets Abdel, a much younger Moroccan immigrant sex worker, after he’s been raped by a client. The two begin an affair that’s brought to an end after one of the woman’s neighbors assaults the young man; the incident has tragic consequences that upend the lives of both Amy and Abdel. The second section tells the heartbreaking story of Nacho, a businessman who lives with his girlfriend, Cristiani, and her young son, Aristides, in the Barcelona suburb of Castelldefels. Nacho favors the area for its “low-level buzz, a foxiness, a slightly sleazy cool.” He spends most of his time drinking at a club until he meets the soccer star Ronaldinho, who asks Nacho to teach him Spanish. As he spends time with the legendary midfielder, Cristiani and Aristides start drifting away from him; the section ends in an almost unbearably heartbreaking way, causing the reader to question everything that came before. The final installment follows Jordi, a translator who forms an unlikely friendship with his neighbor, a mysterious and sleazy businessman who’s convinced a piece of furniture he bought is possessed. The relationship causes strain with a childhood friend on whom the translator’s always had a crush. The stories are loosely connected—a character named Montse is Amy’s best friend, Nacho’s ex-wife, and a publisher who works with Jordi, and a few characters from certain sections pop up in others. Thomson’s prose is unadorned but effective—at one point, Amy muses of Abdel, “He made me feel younger just by being himself. Sometimes I felt younger than he was.” He writes with a clear-eyed compassion and never forces moments; everything in the novel feels organic. Thomson inhabits the voices of his characters perfectly; each section is narrated in the first person, and each perspective feels unique. It’s a quiet and unassuming novel even in its most dramatic moments—fans of Thomson and of literary fiction are likely to find this trip to Barcelona well worth taking.

A reserved but powerful effort from the accomplished British novelist.
At a moment of great inconvenience for international coke dealer and all-around scourge Jack Price—he and his gang of irregulars, the Seven Demons, have united to rob a high-security bank on a Swiss mountaintop—people are out to kill him.

The novel, narrated by Price, opens with a psychopathic 9-year-old boy named Evil Hansel stabbing him in the thigh with an oyster knife. Even after the kid—“a little Sound of Music-looking motherfucker in actual lederhosen”—is literally thrown under a car, he remains one of an array of cutthroats the Demons must deal with. One of Price’s tactics is to fake his death and assume the identity of Banjo Telemark, an artist and “ambiguitionist” who specializes in “tearing down the world’s certainty.” Under his own assumed name, Truhen is consumed by his own assumed name, Truhen is consumed by the motor-mouthed Price, the book is mostly an epic, Chava, the Jewish golem, and Ahmad, the Arabian jinni. Bound to each other by love, they have nonetheless parted long enough for Ahmad to have had a brief affair with a human. “I wasn’t careful enough. I made her ill, permanently. I’m not certain how it happened, I only know that I was the cause,” he confesses to Chava. And now, Sophia Winston, known as Saffiyah, tells him she is pregnant for Ahmad to have had a brief affair with a human. “I wasn’t careful enough. I made her ill, permanently. I’m not certain how it happened, I only know that I was the cause,” he confesses to Chava. And now, Sophia Winston, known as Saffiyah, to tell him.

A postmodern heist novel with charged wordplay but flickering narrative.

THE HIDDEN PALACE
Wecker, Helene
Harper/HarperCollins (480 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-06-246871-0

Wecker returns, eight years after The Golem and the Jinni, with a sequel that brings the saga into the 20th century.

In a blend of romance, Mary Shelley-esque horror, and folklore, Wecker recounts the continuing adventures of Chava, the Jewish golem, and Ahmad, the Arabian jinni. Bound to each other by love, they have nonetheless parted long enough for Ahmad to have had a brief affair with a human. “I wasn’t careful enough. I made her ill, permanently. I’m not certain how it happened, I only know that I was the cause,” he confesses to Chava. And now, Sophia Winston, known as Saffiyah, among the Bedouins she visits—“Saffiyah the stranger, Saffiyah the afflicted”—has a big problem: Having been touched by the jinni, the spirit of pure fire, she can’t get warm, even in the blast furnace of the desert, where, among other historical characters, she runs into a certain Thomas E. Lawrence—soon to be known as Lawrence of Arabia—and Gertrude Bell. Meanwhile, back in New York, Chava, now known as Chava Levy, and Ahmad find each other again, performing miraculous labors, she as a champion baker who, of course, doesn’t need to sleep and he as an “iron-bound” figure in human form who works diligently, in self-imposed exile, for a Syrian immigrant tinsmith. Not far away, a rabbi happens upon a secret book that contains the recipe for making a golem—a project fraught with peril but one that turns out to be helpful to his daughter, Kreindel, after bad fortune lands her in an orphanage. Kreindel is the most resourceful of the characters Wecker sets into motion in this tale, and she knows a golem when she sees one, including the one who teaches her home ec. Wecker skillfully combines the storylines of these and numerous other players, good and evil, in a story that, while self-contained, gives every promise of being continued.

An enchanting tale that, though demanding lots of suspended disbelief, pleases on every page.

JACKPOT
Woods, Stuart & Quertermous, Bryon
Putnam (320 pp.)
$28.00 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-593-18845-3

CIA operative-turned-killer Teddy Fay, aka Hollywood producer Billy Barnett, gets his fifth sort-of-starring role in a splashy, muddled thriller set in Macau. Centurion Studios president Ben Bacchetti and his partner, director Peter Barrington, see no reason why their visit to the Macau Film Festival should be all business. They’re dismayed when their visit to a baccarat table at the Golden Desert Casino and Resort is used as material for a deep-fake video that seems to show them cheating. The video, which has evidently been engineered by Bing-Wen “Bingo” Jo, bids fair drag them into the iron grip of fearsome media/casino mogul Arrow Donaldson, for whom Bingo works off the books on matters concerning digital technology and violence. But Centurion producer Teddy, who’s every bit the equal of Bingo and Donaldson fixer Zhou “Ziggy” Peng put together, is on the case. His improbable sometime partners are Li Feng, the heiress and CFO of QuiTel who’s fighting to keep her company exempt from the U.S. blacklist of competing Chinese telecom corporations suspected of spying, and Millie Martindale, a CIA administrator who’s a lot more resourceful than most administrators you’ll ever meet. The first partnership between Woods and Quertermous is full of casino underlings, biddable cops, fake shootings, and doubles living and dead. But the plot never thickens, and readers confident that Teddy will live to fight, pressure, cheat, and kill another day may be
indifferent to the fate of the nefarious forces arrayed against him.

The first of Woods’ many collaborations to be unquestionably inferior to his solo performances.

THE CHECKLIST
Woolridge, Addie
Montlake Romance (347 pp.)
978-1-5420-2927-8

A corporate consultant thinks she has it all: good life, perfect partner, fast track to the placement she wants in Paris. But when she’s sent on a long-term assignment to her hometown, Seattle, and must live with her parents, she realizes that she doesn’t.

Pencil-skirt– and Manolo-wearing Dylan Delacroix—a “Black Katharine Hepburn”—lives in Houston with her methodical, gorgeous, blond-haired boyfriend, Nicolas. He’s just as organized as she is, and she finds the routine soothing after a childhood spent with no boundaries. But when she’s sent by her employer, Kaplan and Associates, on assignment to Seattle for a few months and Nicolas finally meets her family, her worlds collide: Her well-to-do artistic parents, Bernice and Henry, and her sister, Neale, are appalled by Nicolas’ disrespect toward her and them. And as Dylan tries to help Technocore, the troubled company with which she’s been placed, founder Tim Gunderson seems ready to undercut her at every turn. Throw in her best friend, Stacy, who’s Filipina; Mike, the gorgeous Latino boy across the street who’s getting a Ph.D. in early childhood development; Linda and Patricia Robinson, his two moms; and Deep and Brandt, Dylan’s new best friends at the office, and this story has an extremely full slate of characters who together draw Dylan back into the messy, unscheduled, opinionated, overwhelming life she thought she’d left behind. Readers ready to settle in to a long, detailed read about Dylan’s burgeoning interest in Mike, low-stakes neighborhood squabbling between the Robinson and Delacroix parents, and Dylan’s efforts to improve productivity at a “profit-sinking black hole” of a tech company that seems to have an endless supply of money will enjoy this lengthy tome. Some, on the other hand, might find its insistence on heavy-handed explanations and descriptions off-putting.

A highly organized and detailed book with a predictable storyline.

THE MAN WHO LIVED UNDERGROUND
Wright, Richard
Library of America (240 pp.)
$22.95 | Apr. 20, 2021
978-1-59853-676-8

A falsely accused Black man goes into hiding in this masterful novella by Wright (1908–1960), finally published in full. Written in 1941 and ’42, between Wright’s classics Native Son and Black Boy, this short novel concerns Fred Daniels, a modest laborer who’s arrested by police officers and bullied into signing a false confession that he killed the residents of a house near where he was working. In a brief unsupervised moment, he escapes through a manhole and goes into hiding in a sewer. A series of allegorical, surrealistic set pieces ensues as Fred explores the nether reaches of a church, a real estate firm, and a jewelry store. Each stop is an opportunity for Wright to explore themes of hope, greed, and exploitation; the real estate firm, Wright notes, “collected hundreds of thousands of dollars in rent from poor colored folks.” But Fred’s deepening existential crisis and growing distance from society keep the scenes from feeling like potted commentaries. As he wallpapers his underground Warren with cash, mocking and invalidating the currency, he registers a surrealistic but engaging protest against divisive social norms. The novel, rejected by Wright’s publisher, has only appeared as a substantially truncated short story until now, without the opening setup and with a different ending. Wright’s take on racial injustice seems to have unsettled his publisher: A note reveals that an editor found reading about Fred’s treatment by the police “unbearable.” That may explain why Wright, in an essay included here, says its focus on race is “rather muted,” emphasizing broader existential themes. Regardless, as an afterword by Wright’s grandson Malcolm attests, the story now serves as an allegory both of Wright (he moved to France, an “exile beyond the reach of Jim Crow and American bigotry”) and American life. Today, it resonates deeply as a story about race and the struggle to envision a different, better world.

A welcome literary resurrection that deserves a place alongside Wright’s best-known work.

VERSION ZERO
Yoon, David
Putnam (368 pp.)
$27.00 | May 25, 2021
978-0-593-19035-7

A trio of disgruntled coders, a reclusive genius, and a teenager attempt to take down the internet—the whole damned thing.

For his first adult novel, YA superstar Yoon draws on his decades in the tech industry to envision a takedown of the digital world so
A fast-paced, contemporary take on The Monkey Wrench Gang, blowing up digital infrastructure instead of dams.

The mischief rises to another level. Hosokawa, and her boyfriend, Shane Satow, Max envisions a Gang, blowing up digital infrastructure instead of dams. His version of the world, but there are breadcrumbs to follow—references to a Handmaid’s Tale–like social hierarchy that includes “whitemen” and “brows” and targets that include the world’s most influential companies, proxies for Facebook, Uber, Reddit, Amazon, and Apple. The mischief rises to another level when the three friends are approached by Pilot Markham, a wildly successful and equally withdrawn entrepreneur who believes the internet has left us emotionally bankrupt and who wants to help take their scheme to the next level with the help of his teenage neighbor, Brayden Turnipseed. Markham’s thirst for revenge was largely caused by his daughter’s untimely death. He now wants to help take their scheme to the next level with the help of his teenage neighbor, Brayden Turnipseed. Markham’s thirst for revenge was largely caused by his daughter’s untimely death by trolls, but he’s certainly as unhinged as his enemies. Digitally agile readers will recognize plenty of the ills of our time, and some will empathize with the counterintuitive way our heroes interpret the modern adage “Move fast and break things.”

A visit to a carnival lands a donut in the line of duty. At the carnival she attends with her talented employee, Nina Lapeer, an artist who’s just about to get a one-person show, they run into grouchy event manager Marsha Fitchelder, who seems intent on making their lives miserable. Things go from bad to worse: First, someone steals a large bucket of confectioner’s sugar; then, a magician and a mime steal from the cash box. The best part of the day is the time Emily spends with Detective Brent Fyne, who was her husband’s partner. The two are attracted to each other but are overcome by their shared trauma despite their friends’ efforts to foster a romantic relationship. Back at Nina’s loft, Emily finds a mime who looks remarkably like Nina with her head buried in a bucket of powdered sugar and more sugar thrown all over Nina’s masterpiece. After the mime dies, the police arrest Nina, but Emily’s determined to prove her innocent. Nina’s locket, which the victim was evidently trying to steal, provides a clue that harkens back to Nina’s mysterious past, making her look even guiltier. In the end, Emily and her friends go to a lake resort for a friend’s wedding and find far too many people involved in the death already there.

Plenty of twists and intriguing characters add up to an enjoyable donut-centric mystery.

THE GHOST AND THE HAUNTED PORTRAIT
Coyle, Cleo
Berkley (336 pp.)
$7.99 paper | May 4, 2021
978-0-425-25186-7

The secret of an amateur sleuth’s success is the ghost of a dead shamus. Bookseller Penelope Thornton-McClure, an accomplished crime solver who never believed in ghosts until her visitation by 1940s gumshoe Jack Shepard, has planned a launch party for a coffee-table book written by a local couple showcasing the art of book covers. The event, which will also include an exhibit of original artwork, was featured on CBS Sunday Morning and is a big deal for Quindicott, Rhode Island. With her two geeky friends, mailman and Jeopardy! winner Seymour Tarnish and professor J. Brainerd Parker, Pen visits Walter Waverly, whose enormous collection includes many original book-cover paintings he’s willing to lend for the launch. A painting by Nathan Brock, a cover artist Jack once cleared of murder, is a standout, but Seymour is mesmerized by a self-portrait by Harriet McClure, a famed late-19th-century artist known as the “Madwoman of Quindicott,” who left her caregivers a Victorian mansion that’s currently run as an inn. Seymour buys the painting, but when the friends return the next day to pick up some artwork for the exhibit, they find Waverly dead. It looks like an accident, but Jack’s warning voice suggests a second look, and that’s just the opening act in a series of crimes involving the self-portrait, which is full of odd symbols that could lead to a treasure. At length Pen travels back to the 1940s with Jack while he investigates a mystery surrounding Brock that may be tied to the present-day murder.

The collision of two cases from different times elevates this haunting tale above the average ghostly mystery.
Murder comes to a bridal expo.

Nina Fleet is the proud owner of the Fleet House Bed and Breakfast in Cymbelief, Georgia. Although she’s been cool to weddings ever since her own nasty but lucrative divorce, she sets up at a bridal expo after her new pal Roxanna Quarry suggests that it will provide great publicity. Nina’s frenemy Harry Westcott, a handsome actor who’s been looking for a new gig ever since his dreams of inheriting the house where Nina started her B&B fell through, has set up a booth offering himself as a professional “Plus One” for dateless wedding guests. Although Harry already has plenty of interest, Nina feels sorry for him. She’s been letting him live rent-free in her tower room while he gets back on his feet and finds herself liking him more than she should. Even after overhearing several nasty fights between other expo exhibitors, she’s shocked when Roxanna tumbles out of a faux cake, dead as a doornail. Despite her determination to mind her business, Nina ends up rescuing Roxanna’s goldendoodle, Gustopher, who’s had play dates with her own dog. With help from Harry and a hidden key, she packs up everything Gustopher needs and takes him to Fleet House. Once home, she opens Gustopher’s treat jar to discover $10,000 in cash packed inside. At length, her repeated glimpses of a mysterious silver car encourage her to snoop, and her past success as a detective is extended when she tracks down the killer.

A nice combination of mystery, Southern charm, and budding romance.
McKenzie worked until a financial windfall enabled him to move to Upper Sprocket, Oregon, where Gabe’s other ex-wives live. When Trinidad travels to pick up an order of fresh nuts she's splitting with Kevin Heartly, who has a popcorn shop, she meets farmer Quinn Logan and his brother Doug, both of whom she finds congenial. Delivering the nuts, she finds Kevin dead in his popcorn machine. Soon enough, Gabe’s sister, Police Chief Cynthia Bigley, arrests Juliette, who had a nasty breakup with Kevin. Determined to help Juliette, Trinidad learns that there are rumors about a hidden treasure among the effects of a rabid collector and that more than one local is searching for it. With help from some of her new friends, she snoops around enough to become a target herself and is glad when her Cuban grandfather arrives from Florida to help out, boost her spirits, matchmake, and keep her alive.

Plenty of suspicious-looking new neighbors give spunky Trinidad a chance to add detective to her resume.

Maddie Pastore was living happily in 1924 Chicago with a handsome husband and baby on the way. Unfortunately, her husband Tommy’s well-paying job driving for the mob ended when he was shot dead. Maddie’s money and her house vanish in an instant when Tommy’s first, and still legal, wife turns up, leaving Maddie broke. Desperate, she goes to Hull House waiting for little Tommy’s birth but fails to find a job until she meets Mrs. Burkholtzer, the mother of a school friend, who’s reinvented herself as the spiritualist Carlotta Romany. Beginning by playing a grieving widow at seances, Maddie graduates to doing research on upcoming clients while Freddy, a youth Madame Romany’s take-in, provides the ghostly effects. Maddie quickly takes to throwing off nefarious complications, and some readers may well get lost in the weeds before the curtain comes crashing down.

It’s inspiring to see so many people who don’t much like each other rally to the cause of Housewright’s hero.
“A young woman with amnesia shows up in a town the same day as a dead body.”

SEE SOMETHING

Perry, Carol J.
Kensington (384 pp.)
$8.99 paper | May 25, 2021
978-1-4967-3141-8

A young woman with amnesia shows up in a town the same day as a dead body.

Is that coincidence or something more? Though her promotion from WICH-TV field reporter to producer and program director has removed her from the front lines, Lee Barrett gets all of Salem's news fresh. So she's among the first to hear the word around the station that the town has yet another murder when an unidentified drowning victim washes ashore with his hands bound. Lee's been in a relationship with police detective Pete Mondello for a few years, but his cautious ways can't have rubbed off on her. On the very same day that she hears about the drowning victim, she sees a stranger sitting on a park bench unsure of who she is or how she got there and promptly invites the poor woman into her home. Lee is sure about her instincts—the stranger is obviously more scared of anything than anyone needs to be of her—but when Pete finds out, he's immediately suspicious. Lee has the support of her Aunt Ibby, who's both a friend and a housemate, and she's determined to figure out what's going on with the so-called Jane Doe (or Janie, as they quickly nickname her). Aunt Ibby brings the case to her seasoned friends for help, but as she and Lee learn more, they can't help wondering whether Pete is right. Is Janie a victim or a mastermind?

The latest installment of this long-running series focuses more on the puzzle and less on the thrills.

MR CAMPION'S COVEN

Ripley, Mike
Severn House (256 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-7278-9083-2

An American graduate student tracing the Essex roots of a mysterious 17th-century colony on the Outer Banks arrives in England just in time for some very contemporary murder.

This much is known: Back in 1692, a hardly group of villagers from Wicken-juxta-Mare signed the Billerycay Covenant, took passage on the Abigail, and set sail for Salem, Massachusetts. Those who didn't care for their new home headed farther south to Harkers Island, where a few of their descendants still speak with a pure Essex accent. Harvard anthropologist Kathryn Luger's student Mason Lowell Clay, who wants to know more about the immigrants and their covenant, writes Rupert Campion, who met professor Luger when he was a Harvard student eight years ago in 1963, to ask for help with his inquiries. Rupert's father, aging detective Albert Campion, offers Mason gratis accommodations but is preoccupied with what seems to be quite another case: the matter of veteran actress Dame Jocasta Upcott's dog, Robespierre, and the captain of her yacht, the Jocasta, both of them missing ever since the yacht ran aground in the mud of Wicken. Capt. Francis Jarrold is relatively dispensable, but not Robespierre. So it's very lucky indeed that Rupert finds the dog alive, although the man who vanished with him has died. Mason's research uncovers a great deal of new information about the Billerycay Covenant, none of it uplifting, and suggests that the questionable activities of the locals nearly 300 years ago have taken a disturbing new turn. Ripley lays out all this material more conscientiously than he knits it together, and the appealing franchise hero is pretty well buried under all the skulduggery.

Despite a highly satisfying showdown, not Mr Campion's finest hour.

THE HIVE

Olsen, Gregg
Thomas & Mercer (475 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-5420-1646-9

A corpse at the foot of a waterfall leads a newly isolated cop into a thicket of atrocities rooted in a 20-year-old women's cult.

At first Detective Lindsay Jackman, who must investigate the case on her own because her mentor and partner, Detective Alan Sharpe, has just killed himself, finds few clues in the death of Western Washington University student Sarah Baker, who was strangled, stripped, and dumped below Maple Falls. But her persistent questions eventually link Sarah's murder to that of Calista Sullivan, whose body was found on the beach of Lummi Island 20 years ago. The link between the two dead women is Marnie Spellman, the self-help guru whose commanding reviews each hive member's history through extended flashbacks. The effect is both scarifying and repetitious, and Olsen has to reach deeper and deeper into his bag of tricks to keep up the momentum. Along the way, though, the characters, most of them familiar types, spring to vivid life, even the people whose only job is to find dead bodies are deftly sketched in three dimensions.

Readers who relish the aftershocks of cult exploitation will turn every page with keen anticipation.
THE CONSTANT MAN
Steiner, Peter
Severn House (192 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-7278-9074-0

A former police detective hunts a serial rapist in Nazi Germany.
Now that he's identified high-ranking Nazi official Otto Bruck as a serial murderer and rapist in The Good Cop (2019), Munich detective Willi Geismeier has been forced to leave his police job and his home. Still feeling responsible for finding the man who attacked Lola Zeff, he returns secretly to Munich, living under the alias Karl Juncker, to find him. As he does his best to lie low, rising Nazi aggression and internal turmoil repeatedly put Willi's quest on the back burner. Steiner's brief chapters create a tapestry of Germany under the rising influence of the Gestapo. Ambitious storm trooper Lt. Walter Kempf arrests fellow Nazi Ernst Röhm for being homosexual as part of a project called Operation Hummingbird. DS Hermann Gruber worries that his wife, Mitzi, is in danger because of her Jewish heritage. Storm trooper Heinz Schleiffer is surprised to find his adult son, Thomas, at a show of "degenerate art" put on by Joseph Goebbels and disturbed to learn that Thomas opposes the Nazis. The intellectual Reinhard Pabst is lukewarm about the Nazi cause but attracted by the power his allegiance to the Führer provides. Willi does have his allies: Lola is anxious for closure, and his landlady, Frau Schimmel, informs him of visitors who come looking for him. His investigation gains traction with the discovery of more victims. All too often, though, Steiner's cursory attempts to provide a more complex depiction of Germany in this era distract attention from Willi's pursuit of a serial killer.

A brisk if uneven thriller peppered with historical detail about Nazi Germany.

MASTER ARTIFICER
Call, Justin T.
Blackstone (300 pp.)
$29.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-982591-79-3

Choosing his own path could make him a hero. Or a monster.
Annev is on the run. His village destroyed, he and a few friends are looking for a new place in the world. But Annev is being pursued by a monstrous assassin, and he has to find a way to remove the Hand of Keos, the prosthetic hand that once belonged to an evil god and is now attached to his own body. In the recent battle, this artifact released a torrent of flame that killed Annev's old headmaster and burned the headmaster's daughter, Myjun, whom he once loved. But the farther the group gets from home, the more complications they encounter in the wider world—slave traders, necromancers, magicians who worship ancient gods. Meanwhile, Annev has managed to make two new enemies, both determined to kill him: Kennton, a fellow student he burned with magical liquid, and Myjun, who's now wearing a magical mask that feeds on pain. All the elements of a satisfying fantasy epic are here—a young hero pushed to the brink, ancient prophecies beginning to come true, rogues and thieves and mysterious women in cloaks—but the narrative gets bogged down in exposition at almost every turn. Characters are constantly explaining to each other how the complicated magic system works or what the political situation is. Annev's goal keeps getting lost in the shuffle as multiple new characters are introduced, each with their own side quests to explore.

Compelling themes and gripping fight scenes can't save this fantasy from excessive focus on worldbuilding details.

THE FALL OF KOLI
Carey, M.R.
Orbit (576 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Mar. 23, 2021
978-0-316-45872-6

Carey concludes his post-apocalyptic Rampart trilogy, set in a future England ravaged by climate change and war. Koli Faceless and his companions—healer Ursala-from-Elsewhere; Cup; and the snarky, self-aware AI Monono Aware—have finally found the Sword of Albion. They've been following
Absolutely Remarkable Thing (2018), it’s clever in inception and it’s a massive warship chock full of old tech, more than Koli has ever seen in one place. It’s inhabited by only three people: Lorraine and Paul Banner and their son, Stanley. Lorraine and Paul are keenly interested in Ursula’s vital medical diagnostic unit. But something is off about the trio, and Koli and his friends are under constant watch, making them feel more like prisoners than guests. Turns out there really is something to the stories of a boogeyman called Stannabanna, “the lord of all shunned men and monsters,” and nothing on the ship is quite what it seems. Folksy, lyrical storytelling and heartbreakingly complex characters have been a trademark of this rich trilogy. In off-kilter English (England is “Ingland,” diagnostic is “dagnostic,” etc.), Koli shares a narrative with Monono and with his childhood friend Spinner as she takes on a powerful new role and a fearsome enemy back in Koli’s home village of Mythen Rood. Themes of loyalty, friendship, compassion, and inclusion are tightly woven into an inventive and exciting whole, and there are strong echoes of the current state of the world, notably the dangers of building walls between people. Luckily, in Koli’s world at least, there is always light at the end of the tunnel, even if it’s just a pinprick.

An epic and hopeful finale to an altogether splendid tale.

THE APOCALYPSE SEVEN
Doucette, Gene
John Joseph Adams/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (432 pp.)
$9.99 paper  |  May 25, 2021
978-0-358-41894-8

Waking up in a blighted, empty America, seven strangers unite to figure out what the hell just happened.

One of prolific SF author Doucette’s strengths is coming up with memorable inciting events, and while this story about the end of the world doesn’t reach the heights of the best apocalypse fiction or even Hank Green’s recent first-contact duology beginning with An Absolutely Remarkable Thing (2018), it’s clever in inception and execution (though it doesn’t quite stick the landing). We enter in Boston, circa sometime in the 21st century, depending on who you are. Robbie, a smart Harvard freshman who wants to be a writer but is doomed to be a CPA, wakes up with a killer hangover from last night’s kegger and...there’s no one around. Like, anywhere. Eventually he meets up with fellow student Carol, blind and fierce but missing her dog, and then five others. The first two-thirds of this eclectic novel is a survival story, somewhere between The Walking Dead and a Cary Doctorow thought exercise, albeit with no antagonists—yet. While Robbie becomes the nominal leader, it’s a true ensemble cast with a great collective of characters: There’s Touré, a second-generation Mexican American coder; Bethany, a 13-year-old juvenile delinquent with more practical skills than almost anyone in the ragtag company; Win, an Olympic-level archer; Paul, a heavily

armed ex-con-turned-traveling preacher; and Ananda, an MIT astrophysicist who thinks she might have an idea what’s happened. The titular band works together to find food and shelter, survive the bizarre weather, and attempt to figure out what the episodic flashes of light they dub the Shimmer mean, not to mention the date. Speculative fiction ranges from straightforward to bewildering, and Doucette covers the whole arc here. It would be a trespass to violate the reveal, after encounters with mutated coyotes, an alien who smells like pee, and a timey-wimey bargain for the fate of the human race, but it’s really fun to read.

A cinematic, speculative exercise in which a ragtag band saves the world, kind of.

BACCHANAL
Henry, Veronica G.
47North (352 pp.)
$14.95  |  Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-5420-2781-6

In the 1930s, a young woman uses her ability to communicate with animals to find a home with a traveling carnival.

Eliza Meeks can’t talk to animals, exactly, but she can send images to them and get images back. Separated from her beloved baby sister, Twiggy, Liza does housework for a nasty woman who owns the Baton Rouge boardinghouse where she lives. When the G.B. Bacchanal Carnival comes to town, Liza manages to salvage a disastrous alligator-wrestling match, and the carnival’s proprietor, Clay Kennel, is so impressed that he offers her a job as an animal performer. At the same time, he orders her to steer clear of a strange red trailer. Inside the trailer is Clay’s boss, the true owner of the G.B. Bacchanal Carnival, Geneva Broussard. Only Geneva isn’t her real name, and she’s not remotely human—she’s an ancient demon who devours the souls of children, and Liza may be the only one who can stop her. Henry’s debut draws on a rich history of folklore from various African traditions as well as African history and Black American history, and almost the entire main cast is Black. The carnival setting works perfectly for bringing together various strange and magical people who aren’t at home anywhere else. The extended cast is all finely detailed, but too much time spent on supporting characters destabilizes the plot before it finds traction again with Liza heading into the finale.

Come one, come all, this magical carnival has all the delightful dangers a reader could wish for.
THE NINTH METAL
Percy, Benjamin
Mariner/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (304 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-328-54486-5

After an apocalyptic meteor shower, Northfall, Minnesota, becomes the nexus of an SF gold rush in this genre-bending tale.

First, there is the cosmic event. On the night a meteor produces “a splash of molten metal like a muddy wave of lava,” another tragedy occurs: Hawkin, a young boy, witnesses the murder of his father, then is swept up by the metal, which ultimately becomes absorbed into the deepest structure of his body. Five years later, there’s a rush to mine Omnimetal, a highly volatile substance that may be “the greatest energy source in the world.” Prodigal son John Frontier returns to his wealthy family, which is fighting the mercenary Black Dog Energy company for rights to Gunderson Woods, where the high concentration of Omnimetal has attracted a cult of people who snort space dust and wait to be raptured by an alien power. When John hears about Hawkin, who is being held at a Department of Defense facility and is subjected to terrible experiments, he feels moved to help him. As it turns out, John has secret powers of his own. There are constant echoes of history and pop culture as well as SF and mystery tropes, most notably from Watchmen—like John, Dr. Manhattan has the ability to cause great destruction with his power and must weigh the massive responsibility to safeguard life against his own disgust for human greed. The variety of tones and allusions is a deeper social commentary; there’s just so much, all the time.

It’s a Western! It’s a revenge play! It’s an environmental critique! Creative, for sure, but also a bit fragmented.

UNDERCOVER DUKE
Jeffries, Sabrina
Zebra (352 pp.)
$6.69 paper | May 25, 2021
978-1-4201-4858-9

A duke searching for a murderer finds a woman to love, but secrets and lies stand in their way.

Sheridan Wolfe, Duke of Armitage, has a large blended family due to his mother’s having been married three times. All her husbands died, and while initially each death seemed accidental, the family has since come to realize they were all murdered. Sheridan is charged with learning more about one of their suspects, and doing so means spending time around her daughter, the attractive Miss Vanessa Pryde. Sheridan has no intention of falling in love or marrying after a previous love led to heartbreak. He’s under the impression that Vanessa is infatuated with a poet, anyway. In actuality, she pines for Sheridan and only continues with her ruse of wanting another in hopes of making Sheridan jealous. As they get further caught up in deceit, their chemistry grows stronger and harder to resist. Eventually, they’ll have to work together to untangle their own truths and also solve the family’s mystery. While this is a quick, easy read, the story’s overreliance on conflict caused by lack of communication is tiresome. Vanessa and Sheridan each have endearing aspects, but their relationship can be hard to buy into. Readers of previous books in the Duke Dynasty series will be satisfied that the mystery of the murdered husbands is finally solved even though the solution proves a bit obvious and therefore underwhelming.

Fine for fans of the series but forgettable for the most part.
Two writers reunite 15 years after an intense, weeklong affair changed both of their lives.

**SEVEN DAYS IN JUNE**

*Williams, Tia*

Grand Central Publishing
(336 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-5387-1910-7

Two writers reunite 15 years after an intense, weeklong affair changed both of their lives.

Eva Mercy is the successful author of a long-running erotica series with a devoted fan base, but as the deadline for the 15th book approaches, she has to admit she's run out of ideas. She can't afford to give up the series, which keeps her and her 12-year-old daughter, Audre, financially afloat, so her dream of researching and writing the stories of the Louisiana Creole women who are her ancestors is permanently on hold. At a Brooklyn literary panel, she has a surprising public reunion with Shane Hall, the reclusive, award-winning author of four books of literary fiction. As seniors in high school, Shane and Eva shared one week of passionate connection; they revealed to each other their raw pain and the extreme coping mechanisms (addiction, cutting) they used to survive. Now Shane has been clean for two years and Eva’s finally found a doctor who properly medicates her chronic, debilitating migraines. With chapters from the past interspersed throughout the novel, Williams juxtaposes Shane and Eva as reined-in adults with their terrifyingly out-of-control teen selves. Their reunion feels like coming home but also reveals that they might not have the skills to sustain a successful adult relationship. Williams’ novel is a tour de force, capturing Eva’s experience as part of the Black literati in Brooklyn, her urge to hide generational trauma from her daughter while still celebrating their ancestors, and the ways in which fate brings people together. The structure of the novel is complex but ultimately rewarding and provides a portrait of a richly layered world.

A hugely satisfying romance that is electrifying and alive.

**A LOWCOUNTRY BRIDE**

*Williams, Preslaysa*

Avon/HarperCollins (352 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-06-304029-8

A wedding dress designer learns to trust her professional instincts after returning home to Charleston to care for her ill father.

Maya Jackson has a dream job in New York working for Laura Whitcomb, one of the most prestigious wedding gown designers in the world. Although Maya has been told she’s in competition for a promotion, Laura denigrates every single one of Maya’s designs, which are inspired by her Filipino and African American background. Maya also hides her sickle cell disease from her boss, recognizing Laura’s pattern of discriminatory behavior and fearing retaliation. Nevertheless, Maya continues to hope that becoming Laura’s junior designer will open future opportunities in the wedding gown industry. When Maya’s father becomes ill, Laura agrees to let her take an unpaid leave of absence to care for him. Worried about her loss of income, Maya takes a job at the first Black-owned wedding boutique in Charleston to make ends meet. Having inherited the boutique from his mother, Derek Sullivan is struggling to keep the business afloat while also raising his teenage daughter. Three years earlier, his wife was killed in a mass shooting at their church, which is presented as a muted backstory rather than an active emotional factor for Derek. Maya’s original designs and her knowledge of the bridal business breathe new life into the boutique. Derek and Maya go out on a few sweet, bland dates, but the barely-there romance feels like an afterthought; their relationship lacks chemistry and is woefully underdeveloped. Maya is torn between hoping for Laura’s seal of approval and honoring the legacy of her heritage, and this dilemma drives the plot and timeline of the novel. Williams’ choppy, stilted prose is not strong enough to carry the emotional weight of the novel.

A simple story about learning to trust yourself to achieve happiness.

“Two writers reunite 15 years after an intense, weeklong affair changed both of their lives.”

**SEVEN DAYS IN JUNE**

*Williams, Tia*

Grand Central Publishing
(336 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-5387-1910-7

Two writers reunite 15 years after an intense, weeklong affair changed both of their lives.

Eva Mercy is the successful author of a long-running erotica series with a devoted fan base, but as the deadline for the 15th book approaches, she has to admit she’s run out of ideas. She can’t afford to give up the series, which keeps her and her 12-year-old daughter, Audre,
These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

**HOMO IRREALIS** by André Aciman ................................................... 50

**LUCKY** by Jonathan Allen & Amie Parnes .......................................... 51

**THE SECOND** by Carol Anderson ....................................................... 51

**BOYZ N THE VOID** by G’Ra Asim ...................................................... 53

**THE OUTLIER** by Kai Bird .................................................................. 54

**PUNCH ME UP TO THE GODS** by Brian Broome .............................. 55

**THE WAY SHE FEELS** by Courtney Cook ........................................... 57

**KING RICHARD** by Michael Dobbs ..................................................... 60

**SHAPE** by Jordan Ellenberg ............................................................... 62

**THE GROUND BREAKING** by Scott Ellsworth ..................................... 63

**THE BOMBER MAFIA** by Malcolm Gladwell ...................................... 67

**OPERATION PEDESTAL** by Max Hastings ......................................... 69

**THE DAY THE WORLD STOPS SHOPPING** by J.B. MacKinnon .......... 75

**STATE OF EMERGENCY** by Tamika D. Mallory with Ashley A. Coleman .... 75

**UNCARING** by Robert Pearl ............................................................... 78

**POP SONG** by Larissa Pham .............................................................. 78

**ON KILLING REMOTELY** by Wayne Phelps ....................................... 79

**SEEK YOU** by Kristen Radtke ............................................................ 79

**FULL SPECTRUM** by Adam Rogers .................................................... 80

**BETTER, NOT BITTER** by Yusef Salaam ............................................ 81

**ETHEL ROSENBERG** by Anne Sebba ................................................ 82

**THERE’S A REVOLUTION OUTSIDE, MY LOVE**
Ed. by Tracy K. Smith & John Freeman .............................................. 83

**HOMO IRREALIS**
Aciman, André
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (256 pp.)
$27.00 | Jan. 19, 2021
978-0-374-17187-2

Urbane essays in pursuit of a self. Reprising themes he explored in his most recent collection of nonfiction, *Alibis* (2011), novelist, memoirist, and cultural critic Aciman, at 70, offers elegant meditations on time and memory, longing and desire, being and becoming. Whether writing about his childhood in Alexandria, visiting Rome with Freud’s ghostly presence, searching for Dostoevsky’s 19th-century milieu in St. Petersburg, reading Proust, or watching Éric Rohmer’s movies, Aciman finds himself “caught between remembrance and anticipated memory.” The feeling is a swirl of moods he calls “irrealist,” where “boundaries between what is and what isn’t, between what happened and what won’t,” disappear, and where “what might never, couldn’t, shouldn’t, wouldn’t possibly occur” may well happen. Nostalgia imbues many essays with ruefulness, if not regret. In Rome, he discovered “the birthplace of a self I wished to be one day and should have been but never was and left behind and didn’t do a thing to nurse back to life again.” All of us, he writes, “seek a life that exists elsewhere in time, or elsewhere on-screen, and that, not being able to find it, we have all learned to make do with what life throws our way.” Past and present, for him, are “continuously coincident,” and memories that have apparently vanished continue to exert their presence. Those memories include encounters with works of art—John Sloan’s portraits of New York in the 1920s, Monet’s *Poppy Field*, the “muted lyricism” of Corot’s French landscapes—that hover enticingly in his imagination. Art, writes Aciman, “sees footprints, not feet, luster, not light, hears resonance, not sound. Art is about our love of things when we know it’s not the things themselves we love.” Reminiscent of the writings of W.G. Sebald and Fernando Pessoa (both subjects of his essays), Aciman’s latest conveys with grace and insight his longing to apprehend “myself looking out to the self I am today.”

A resplendent collection from a writer who never disappoints.
The 2016 campaign, Allen and Parnes attribute much of the success Trump was advised countless times to attempt to show empathy Trump, whose character flaws and scandal-plagued administration declared the election on Nov. 7. In the end, in 2020, Biden "caught for the victims of the pandemic, which he repeatedly called a far surpassed any of Biden's shortcomings. For instance, though Trump was a weaker candidate than Clinton, as his age, demeanor, and tendency to make faux pas statements weighed against him. Though the race was tighter than any Democratic campaigner would have liked, Biden's opponent was Donald Trump, whose character flaws and scandal-plagued administration failed sufficiently to suppress revolts, Anderson argues, that the "well-regulated militia" language of the Second was formulated. Militias and slave patrols were one and the same in several Southern colonies and then states, and only Whites could enlist, meaning that only Whites were legally allowed to carry firearms. Indeed, as Anderson carefully documents, many states specifically forbade Blacks from owning or carrying firearms, even after emancipation. Many leaders in the Southern states were fearful because of the success of the Haitian revolution, which, though inspired by both the French and American revolutions, also extended suffrage and political power to free Blacks. The Second Amendment, writes the author, helped reinforce the Constitution's "three-fifths" clause, a means of disempowering Blacks politically forevermore. Today, the racial component of the Second is starkly revealed in police shootings and the National Rifle Association's reticence to defend Black gun owners and police victims even while leaping to the defense of 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse, whose attorneys tellingly claimed that he was a member of a "well-regulated militia." Writing evenhandedly and with abundant examples, Anderson makes a thoroughly convincing case.

An urgent, novel interpretation of a foundational freedom that, the author makes clear, is a freedom only for some.
April Showers: Collections & Anthologies

While there’s no substitute for a tight, well-crafted book of narrative nonfiction, I also love the more drawn-out, leisurely satisfaction that comes from dipping in and out of a collection or anthology—setting it on the bedside table and revisiting a few pages per night over the course of weeks. This April brings a wealth of such work. Here are six books that I’ll be consulting throughout the spring and what our reviewers have to say about them:

**Why Didn’t You Just Do What You Were Told?** by Jenny Diski, edited by Mary-Kay Wilmers (Bloomsbury, April 20): “Between 1993 and her death in 2016, Diski wrote several hundred essays for the London Review of Books—some book reviews, some personal pieces, ‘reflections on the world and its stories for the most part,’ according to Wilmers, longtime editor of the LRB, who selected the essays for this masterful new collection of Diski’s work. In nearly all of the pieces, Diski’s voice is sharp, wry, and entirely her own....Within a single sentence she can exude both a seemingly effortless elegance and a fearless iconoclasm. For writers and readers alike, this new volume is a tremendous gift.”

**The Letters of Robert Frost, Volume 3: 1929-1936** by Robert Frost, edited by Mark Richardson, Donald Sheehy, Robert Bernard Hass, and Henry Atmore (Belknap/Harvard Univ., April 13): “The 602 letters and telegrams, 70% previously uncollected, afford a comprehensive view of Frost’s family, work, and friendships as well as opinions on human nature, academia, and art. A literary star, Frost fulfilled myriad obligations: teaching, lecturing, serving as poet-in-residence, and giving a prodigious number of readings....Besides an informative introduction contextualizing the letters and consistently rigorous footnotes, the editors provide a biographical glossary and a narrative chronology.”

**A Whole World: Letters From James Merrill** by James Merrill, edited by Langdon Hammer and Stephen Yenser (Knopf, April 6): “Hammer, a Merrill biographer and English professor at Yale, and Yenser, a poet, literary critic, and Merrill’s co-literary executor, have gathered a copious selection of letters by the acclaimed poet, beginning with young Jimmy’s request to ‘Santa Clause’ for a flashlight and continuing through countless letters to family, friends, lovers, and literary luminaries....Amplified by the editors’ authoritative annotations, a chronology, and capsule biographies of major figures in Merrill’s life, the book creates a palpable sense of the poet’s wide, eventful world, ‘properly stuffed with culture and people,’ travels, and accomplishments—as well as struggles and, inevitably, loss.”

**Allegorizings** by Jan Morris (Liveright/Norton, April 6): “Refreshingly, this thematically conceived collection of essays, unlike so many publications of miscellany issued shortly after an author dies, reflects the writer’s intent and cooperation....Throughout, she demonstrates the stylistic command that has always distinguished her work. While stressing empathy and resisting pomposity, she refuses to suffer fools gladly.”

**Second Nature: Scenes From a World Remade** by Nathaniel Rich (MCD/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, April 6): “In this outstanding collection of pieces...Rich provides vivid, often disturbing portraits of individuals and events contributing to ‘the death rattle of the romantic idea that nature is innocent of human influence’....Another disheartening but important book from Rich.”

**Nepantla Familias: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature on Families in Between Worlds** edited by Sergio Troncoso (Texas A&M Univ., April 2): “In an anthology that feels long overdue, Troncoso gathers 30 Mexican American writers to relate their accounts of what it means to be an American or, more often, what it means to not feel fully American. The anthology, which is divided into fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, contains mostly never-before-published works woven together by the common thread of ‘nepantla,’ a Nahua word that means ‘mutual place’ or the ‘in-between’...A deeply meaningful collection that navigates important nuances of identity.”

Eric Liebetrau is the nonfiction and managing editor.
“Part memoir, part rebel yell of a love letter to idiosyncratic young Black men trying to find their ways in the world.”

BOYZ N THE VOID

He was the only one remaining in 1945. As health and science writer Apple shows, the postwar years produced little change in Warburg’s routine, and theories about the pathogenesis of cancer dominated research until the 1960s, when scientists turned their attention to DNA and cancer-causing genes. Since cancer remains unconquered, the 21st century has seen a “metabolism revival.” Apple begins and ends with sections on the nature of cancer, the incidence of which increases as technology progresses. This realization two centuries ago began an intense search for the cause, which is still in progress. The fact that “70 percent or more of cancers were caused by environment factors, a category that includes diet,” is less helpful than it sounds, although avoiding smoking, radiation, and toxic chemicals is recommended. Health gurus confidently prescribe “anticancer diets,” but good research turns up few specifics. Diabetes and obesity increase the risk, so there’s clearly a connection to overnutrition, but Apple admits that the “connection” needs serious narrowing. As the search continues, this book is a welcome addition to the library on the disease and one of its most successful enemies.

A fine life, warts and all, of a brilliant scientist and his fight against cancer.

BOYZ N THE VOID

A Mixtape to My Brother
Asim, G’Ra
Beacon (272 pp.)
$25.95 | May 11, 2021
978-0-8070-5948-7

A Black millennial shares life lessons with his younger brother through the lens of punk rock.

Asim, a writer, musician, professor of nonfiction writing, and punk aficionado, feels a kinship with his younger brother Gyasi, in part because they are both “difficult,” and that “natural recalcitrance is the seed of punk sensibility.” The author, who has never viewed his embrace of punk as antithetical to his Blackness, addresses his 10-chapter narrative to Gyasi, an intelligent, artistic teen on the cusp of college who “predominantly lurks indoors like some Wi-Fi–empowered Boo Radley.” Asim writes to Gyasi in hopes that “a robust engagement with counterculture can serve as a vital antidote to soul-sucking normalcy.” The author’s mixtape is “part Nick Hornsby, part Ntozake Shange: my All-Time, Top-10 Angst-Neutralizing Punk Songs Because the Rainbow Clearly Isn’t Enuf, Bruh.” The product of “a poor, Black, bohemian family of quixotic values” in a “hyperliterate household,” Asim delivers erudite prose that will appeal to readers across generations who want a fresh lens through which to consider a range of topics, including mental wellness, childhood sexual abuse, masculinity and male feminism, sex and sexuality, racism, and respectability politics. Asim also considers the relationship between punk and Afrofuturism, another conduit for “critical examination of dreary, unquestioned norms.” Whether he’s discussing Black Lives Matter or the influential all-Black punk band Bad Brains, whose “lasting cultural resonance cannot be dismissed,” Asim’s astute social commentary, poignant storytelling, wit, and solid music criticism will appeal to punk and nonpunk readers alike. Here, the punk scene is no panacea, and Asim offers critique alongside celebration. Overall, his message to Gyasi is frank and hopeful: “I urgently want you to know that the living here can be good even if it’s never easy.”

Part memoir, part rebel yell of a love letter to idiosyncratic young Black men trying to find their ways in the world.
CHASING THE THRILL
Obsession, Death, and Glory in America’s Most Extraordinary Treasure Hunt
Barbarisi, Daniel
Knopf (368 pp.)
$27.95 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-525-65617-3

The tale of an infamous and perilous modern-day hunt for buried treasure in the Rocky Mountains.

In 2010, Forrest Fenn, a wealthy New Mexico art dealer, filled a small chest with gold nuggets, gems, and other pricey artifacts and planted it somewhere north of his home in Santa Fe. He then published a book and poem that, if properly interpreted, would lead to the treasure. Until it was finally discovered in 2020, the treasure sparked a devoted, contentious, and often paranoid subculture of Fenn hunters. Barbarisi, a former reporter for the Wall Street Journal, was good friends with one of them and soon got drawn into the search himself. In this lively book, the author provides a journalistic account of Fenn and the obsessives who attended an annual “Fennboree” and picked apart the poem on websites. What started as a fun hobby often sank into infighting over allegedly stolen “solves” and conspiracy-mongering; worse, the quest could be lethal: Multiple people died in the wilderness during futile searches. Because Barbarisi was an obsessive hunter for a time himself, the book is also an engaging adventure story. He chronicles how he and Beep, a friend, chased down leads and swallowed their frustration at coming up empty. The book is weakest when Barbarisi takes extended detours into stories of similar book-based treasure hunts and other lost treasures as well as during an account of his trip to Florida to meet other treasure hunters. Despite the meaningful context, the Fenn search is dramatic enough. However, the treasure’s discovery by Jack Stuef shortly before Fenn’s death in 2020 is a gift for a book like this, allowing the author to close the story with a tidy bow. In the process, he uncovers a lot of anxiety and greed, which even Fenn himself had to concede: “Knowing everything I know now, I wouldn’t do it again.”

A well-reported insider’s study on the engrossing and alarming fervor a search can inspire.

THE OUTLIER
The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter
Bird, Kai
Crown (784 pp.)
$38.00 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-451-49523-5

Searching biography of a president whose contributions, the author argues, are undervalued.

Though Jimmy Carter (b. 1924) has been “perceived as a ‘weak’ or hapless executive,” that view, writes Pulitzer winner Bird, is “a simplistic caricature.” Carter’s single term in office was “consequential.” Bracketed between the Nixon/Ford and Reagan/Bush eras, it marked such matters as the beginnings of corporate deregulation and the beginning of the end of the Cold War. Carter is also remembered as a scolding moralist. He earns the rubric “outlier” for being a Washington outsider, a former governor swept into higher office largely because he wasn’t a Republican—but also, by Bird’s sharp account, for taking his own path, often against the counsel of his advisers. For example, he was urged not to hire economist Paul Volcker to lead the fight against inflation, knowing that Volcker “intended to make the economy scream as he faced reelection.” Carter’s failures, Bird suggests, were often not of his doing: A deeply split Democratic legislature made up then of Southern conservatives (who would soon defect to the GOP) and Northern liberals hampered him, and he had the likes of Edward Kennedy dogging him constantly. The author’s sprawling study is sometimes repetitious—e.g., he repeats the observation that Carter made...
more minority appointments to the federal judiciary than any other president before him. Nonetheless, Bird is a keen biographer of political figures, and he offers a welcome reminder that Carter’s liberal impulses were correct while his missteps were often the result of events he could not fully control, as when the Reagan campaign, in a “treasonous caper,” putatively met with the Iranian regime to delay release of the Tehran hostages and “scuttle Carter’s second-term presidency.” Shelve this alongside Jonathan Alter’s equally incisive biography, His Very Best.

The best study to date of the Carter era and a substantial contribution to the history of the 1970s.
like I was a grown-ass man.” As a dark-skinned Black boy in Ohio, Broome’s childhood was fraught with peril; at school, it was made abundantly clear that God “made white people and Black people and meant for us to stick to our own kind.” His parents used shame and abuse to try and toughen him up, tactics the author describes in heart-wrenching detail. While watching the man on the bus, he realized that “what I am witnessing, is the playing out of one of the very conditions that have dogged my entire existence. This ‘being a man’ to the exclusion of all other things.” Moving back and forth through time, Broome revisits similar scenes—e.g., punishment and rejection for not acting according to someone’s expectations, halting attempts to express himself—and he interrogates his complicated relationship with his parents. In one particularly poignant passage, the author describes how he convinced his mother to buy him a girl’s shirt at the store: “And from that day to this one, no one has ever looked at me like my mother did that day. It was pity mixed with worry for what was to come. It was the piping pink manifestation of all she had ever suspected.” Beautifully written, this examination of what it means to be Black and gay in America is a must-read.

**A stellar debut memoir.**

**TWILIGHT MAN**

*Love and Ruin in the Shadows of Hollywood and the Clark Empire*

*Browne, Liz*

Penguin (400 pp.)

$16.99 paper | May 18, 2021

978-0-14-313290-5

Queer lives in Gilded Age America.

In 2003, while visiting San Francisco to celebrate her late grandmother’s life, Brown discovered, among her grandmother’s belongings, a photograph of a young, handsome man. She knew nothing about him at the time, but her discovery of Harrison Post sparked this absorbing debut book, a history of power, corruption, greed, and betrayal: her family’s saga. Her grandmother’s aunt had been the wife of millionaire tycoon and philanthropist William Andrews Clark Jr., who founded and supported the Los Angeles Philharmonic and established the monumental Clark Library at UCLA, where Clark housed his precious collection of Oscar Wilde letters. The son of a ruthless copper baron, half brother to the infamous recluse Huguette Clark, he was—like Brown—gay; Post was his lover. Aiming “to recuperate a lost gay history as a way to assert my own queer lineage,” the author uncovered a complicated tale: “a tangled, bewildering conspiracy about a man who’d been swept into one of the greatest fortunes in America only to be cast to the margins, a man taken captive in bizarre and gothic circumstances by his own family,” a man who survived imprisonment during World War II—and a man who proved to be a master of reinvention. Albert Weis Harrison met Clark Jr., a widower, when he was a salesman in Los Angeles. By then, Harrison had taken the surname Post, and soon he was traveling in Clark’s entourage as his secretary, living in his mansion as his ward, and benefiting from Clark’s considerable largesse. Drawing on archival material, Brown recounts the eventful trajectory of the men’s lives, the charges that they managed to avoid through bribery or subterfuge, and the shady business dealings that maintained Clark’s wealth. The author is forthright in portraying the Clark family’s ruthlessness—especially wielded by William Clark Sr.—as well as Gilded Age society’s relentless persecution of homosexuals.

**Thorough research informs an often sordid, entertaining history.**
“In addition to a moving personal story, Cook provides a funny, heartfelt guide to borderline personality disorder and a distillation of adolescent tortures many readers will recognize.”

THE WAY SHE FEELS

VALUE(S)

Building a Better World for All
Carney, Mark
PublicAffairs (608 pp.)
$30.00 | May 25, 2021
978-1-5417-6870-3

The U.N. Special Envoy on Climate Action and Finance calls for a rethinking of capitalism “to build an economy that works for all.”

As a G-7 governor in Canada and the U.K., Carney instituted reforms that helped address the global financial meltdown of 2007 and that looked ahead at such challenges as climate change. At root, he writes, is a problem of values, that sticky realm of morality and ethics, in a time when value is perceived as determined solely by the market. Today, we live in a market society, “and this is now undermining our basic social contract of relative equality of outcomes, equality of opportunity and fairness across generations.” With that undermining and its dog-eat-dog ethos, the world has been largely unequipped to deal with the current pandemic while climate change and other crises have been fueled by a market fundamentalism that takes it as a matter of faith that markets are self-correcting, moral, and unimpeachable. This fundamentalism has expanded its reach “into spheres of life previously governed by non-market norms,” including health care, education, and criminal justice, further weakening social bonds and privileging wealth. Against this, Carney proposes an emphasis on solidarity and the enhancement of the social capital on which economic capital relies for its long-term health. The author extols corporations and leaders committed to “socially driven purpose” and urges community building and infrastructure development, including stricter regulations for carbon taxes, all overseen by the state. “Nations—not companies—must set these ground rules for markets to be fair,” he writes. It helps to have some knowledge of economics to follow the technical aspects of Carney’s argument, though it’s not a prerequisite. He writes clearly and well of the need for “a life of moral, not market, sentiments,” an argument that will send Chicago School acolytes into despair.

Readers interested in environmental economics, inequality, and like matters will benefit from Carney’s discussion.

THE WAY SHE FEELS

My Life on the Borderline in Pictures + Pieces
Cook, Courtney
Illus. by the author
Tin House (224 pp.)
$18.95 paper | Jun. 29, 2021
978-1-951142-59-9

Borderline personality disorder explained in 20 candid and endearing illustrated essays.
Whether or not you’ve read a word of the 31 books produced by Philip Roth (1933-2018), you are doubtless aware of his reputation. While his 1959 debut, Goodbye, Columbus, got his career off to a flying start—it won a National Book Award—it was Roth’s fourth book that made the impression that would follow him the rest of his days. After Portnoy’s Complaint appeared in 1969, the public believed Roth was Portnoy—an oversexed “self-hating Jew” whose attitudes were so provocative that some claimed he might incite a second Holocaust. Neither the protestations of Roth and his many admirers nor his distinguished body of work ever managed to alleviate the problem; some books, such as his second National Book Award winner, Sabbath’s Theater (1995), only dug him in deeper.

“It was certainly a reference point for the Swedish Academy,” says biographer Blake Bailey, in reference to his subject’s perennially dashed Nobel Prize hopes. (Roth managed to be philosophical about it; when the prize went to Bob Dylan in 2016, he commented, “It’s okay, but I hope next year they give it to Peter, Paul and Mary.”)

In 2012, after a lengthy vetting process, Roth selected Bailey, known for his lives of John Cheever, Richard Yates, and Charles Jackson, as his official biographer. Bailey took over from Roth’s longtime friend Ross Miller, who had completed only 11 interviews in almost as many years; Bailey did nearly 150 more and transcribed dozens by others. He reviewed the materials in 200 boxes archived at the Library of Congress and spent hundreds of hours with Roth himself. The result is Philip Roth: The Biography (W.W. Norton, April 6), an exceptionally lively 800-page book that presents a man who, at his best, was “one of the most honorable, generous, sweet, vulnerable, funny people you would ever like to meet,” Bailey says.

Yet, argues the author, “I did not sugarcoat,” honestly portraying Roth as a Lothario “without a monogamous bone in his body.” The book carefully reviews the charges of stinginess, misogyny, and cruelty leveled by his second wife, actress Claire Bloom, in her 1996 memoir, Leaving a Doll’s House, and makes note of its various omissions and distortions.

We explored several aspects of the biography with the author over Zoom from his home in Portsmouth, Virginia. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

How did you—“a gentile from Oklahoma,” as Roth called you in your job interview—manage to become biographer of the favorite son of Newark, New Jersey’s almost-all-Jewish Weequahic High?

From the beginning, I made a conscious decision not to be intimidated by him, and indeed, when Philip was at his most imperious I tried to be at my most humorous and unflappable. It’s very easy, actually, to pierce Philip’s veneer of imperiousness, because his sense of humor is never far from the surface, whatever his mood.

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We learn that Roth was always mystified and irritated by charges of misogyny. As far as he could see, he loved women and had always had women in his life as mentors, friends, lovers, and colleagues.

While he was never faithful to anyone, ever, the majority of Philip’s girlfriends had a very good opinion of him—that cannot be emphasized enough. He kept in touch with them, and while he very frequently gave money to anyone in distress, with his old girlfriends he was particularly generous.
But for many of his female fans the problem wasn’t his behavior in real life, it was the depiction of female characters in his books. You quote his friend the biographer Hermione Lee as saying Roth had four types: “overprotective mothers,” “monstrously unmanned wives,” “consoling, tender, sensible girlfriends,” and “recklessly libidinous sexual objects.”

I do think Hermione is basically correct, yet I also think Philip was capable of nuanced female characters when it served his purpose. Brenda Patimkin from Goodbye, Columbus—Brenda is very bright and spunky and admirable. Maria Freshfield, Zuckerman’s lover in The Counterlife; Martha Reganhart, from Letting Go; and Drenka, of course, from Sabbath’s Theater—she is just as shamelessly lascivious, and as funny about it, as any reprobate male.

Your book connects these characters to their real-life inspirations. It was fascinating to see how people and experiences turned up in Roth’s work in fully fictionalized contexts.

Usually they turn up in somewhat transmuted forms. Claire Bloom was suspicious about the “real-life” identity of Maria Freshfield, who’s so vividly evoked, and indeed she was mostly based on one of Roth’s secret lovers at the time. Nonetheless, he could plausibly tell her that Maria was actually based on a different, pre-Bloom lover, Janet Hobhouse, who also had a posh accent.

Roth had many close male friendships, though these were almost always marred by misunderstandings and quarrels eventually. Bellow, Updike, and Kundera, along with many less-well-known names, as well as his previous biographer, Ross Miller...it almost seems like he never had a friend he didn’t fall out with, at least temporarily.

Well, but often these falling-outs were largely the other person’s fault, and Philip didn’t see them coming because he had a lot of blind spots where other people—especially friends—were concerned. Philip cultivated his wisdom in his art, not so much in his life. He didn’t always see people very clearly, and that is more common than you may think among writers of the first rank. Cheever was very much the same way; Yates was very much the same way; they spend so much time burrowing inside themselves that they stopped looking at what’s in front of their noses.

The only time I ever saw Roth in person, on tour for his memoir, Patrimony, someone asked him, “During your long career there have been dramatic changes in mores and culture. How do you think this has affected your work?” And he said, “Well, I think it’s my work that has affected the change in mores and culture.”

[Laughs.] That was not an idle claim. Singlehandedly, Portnoy abolished the obscenity laws in Australia. Here in the U.S., the New York Times—whose reviewers otherwise applauded the novel—ran a very deploring editorial titled “Beyond the (Garbage) Pale.” Philip also said that in a free, democratic society, the culture is a maw, and he’d had about as much effect on it as he would had he become a lawyer, as he’d originally planned.

Roth’s directive to you, quoted in the book’s epigraph, was to make him interesting. You certainly accomplished that. Do you think he would like the book? Philip and I developed a rapport. I knew when he would like something, and I definitely knew when he wouldn’t—when he would find it psychobabble or otherwise reductive or kitschy. I got a pretty well-developed antenna for this over time. But insofar as Philip had an artistic manifesto, it was to let the repellent in, bad and good. Show who we really are. There are people who have very settled ideas about who Philip was, and they often tend to be negative. It’s quite possible that these people will read my book and still have a disparaging view. But if you read with an open mind, I think Philip comes across as a flawed human being, certainly, but mostly quite lovable.

Marion Winik is the author of The Big Book of the Dead. Philip Roth received a starred review in the Feb. 1, 2021, issue.
details her experiences with scab-picking in nauseating but necessary detail, and she explains how important friends and lovers can be in beginning to defang and move beyond these secretive behaviors. “The relief is instant, palpable,” she writes. “I sigh, partly because I’m frustrated I’ve restarted the healing process yet again, partly because this is my high. I’ve experimented with coke, Molly, shrooms, acid, drunk an entire fifth of vodka in a night; nothing touches this feeling.” In addition to a moving personal story, Cook provides a funny, heartfelt guide to borderline personality disorder and a distillation of adolescent tortures many readers will recognize.

A poignant debut from a promising writer and illustrator.

KING KONG THEORY

Despentes, Virginie

Trans. by Wynne, Frank

Farrar, Straus and Giroux (160 pp.)

$15.00 paper | May 11, 2021

978-0-374-53929-0

A collection of essays by the renowned, infamous French writer and filmmaker.

At her best, Despentes is vicious, iconoclastic, filthy-mouthed, and raw. She is all of those things in this out-of-print collection, first published in French in 2006. In a piece that describes the two years the author spent as a sex worker, she writes, “when we are told that prostitution is a ‘violent act against women,’ it is an attempt to make us forget that it is marriage that is a violent act against women, and all the general shit we have to put up with.” Elsewhere, she writes, “I speak as a woman who is always too much of everything she is: too aggressive, too loud, too fat, too brutish, too hairy; always too mannish, so they tell me.” Throughout, Despentes delivers deliciously nasty condemnations of misogyny, hypocrisy, all manner of sanctimonious nonsense. She draws from pop culture as well as sources as diverse as Simone de Beauvoir and Angela Davis to make her case, which is unapologetically enraged. Toward the end of the book, she does get occasionally sloppy, contradicting her own points and resting a little too easily on crowd pleasers: “What is difficult to deal with, even today, is being a woman,” she writes near the end. At times, the momentum of the rant overwhelms the logic of the argument. Still, there is unquestionable bliss to be found in the author’s looseness of style and no-bullshit approach. “In my case,” she writes, “prostitution was a crucial step in my reconstruction after I was raped. A compensation settlement in thousand-franc installments for what had been brutally taken from me. What I could sell of myself to each client was a part of me that had remained intact.” Despentes has always been one of a kind, and her willingness to break apart all kinds of received wisdom remains vital.

Brash, blunt, unashamed, and justifiably filled with rage.

KING RICHARD

An American Tragedy

Dobbs, Michael

Knopf (416 pp.)

$30.00 | May 25, 2021

978-0-385-35009-9

A seasoned journalist tackles one of the most notorious political scandals in American history.

In his latest, self-described “presidential crisis historian” Dobbs, former Washington Post reporter and author of a trilogy of nonfiction books about the Cold War, delivers a spellbinding account of the 100 days following Richard Nixon’s second inaugural. Fresh off one of the biggest landslides in U.S. history, the president went right back
to work waging “all-out war against his political enemies” and trying to secure his legacy of brokered peace with Vietnam and the opening of relations with China. As the weeks passed, however, details emerged about break-ins at Democratic National Committee headquarters, prompting the burglars and their handlers in the administration to turn on each other as paranoia set in. To this day, there is no conclusive proof that Nixon directly ordered the espionage, but “there is little doubt that he set in motion the chain of events” that led to it. Divided into four “acts,” this masterful book and its title summon the Shakespearean tragedy in which the most powerful man in the world built himself up and then self-destructed. Familiar actors in this drama, which never seems to lose its excitement across the decades, include G. Gordon Liddy, John Dean, Jeb Magruder, and H.R. Haldeman. Of course, the primary focus is Nixon, the son of poor Southern California Quakers who rose to the nation’s highest office only to leave forever disgraced. Dobbs admits that his book is not meant to be an exhaustive account like Stanley Kutler’s *The Wars of Watergate*. Rather, the author delivers an intimate, engrossing picture of Nixon as a visionary man “obsessed with privacy and solitude,” an affectionate husband and father, and a gut-fighting outsider mystified by power and all its trappings, styling himself as a kind of blend of Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Disraeli, and Charles de Gaulle.

A riveting portrait of ambition, hubris, betrayal, and the downfall of an American president.
Ebner soon followed in his father’s footsteps, learning the ins and outs of the game at an early age. “Rugby asks for a certain humility. It’s an egalitarian game. No player is above another. Each is a link in the chain of the team,” he writes in a narrative co-written by Daugherty. Ebner and his father trained together, lifting homemade weights in a dingy garage, where they pushed themselves to do better every day: “You finish strong. This was his mentality. Working hard is a skill. Practice it enough, it can be second nature.” Even after his father was murdered when the author was 19, he stuck to his father’s mantra and continued to play rugby and put in hours at the gym honing his physical skills. He went on to play football at Ohio State and in the NFL with the New England Patriots, where he earned three Super Bowl rings. In 2016, Ebner returned to rugby as part of the U.S. Olympic team. The book is filled with the highlights and disappointments that come standard with any high-level athletic career. Taking risks and pushing oneself to the limit are strong themes, as well, and the loving bond between a father and son is evident throughout. “Rugby was our connective tissue,” writes the author, “the living bridge between who Jeff Ebner was and who he wanted me to be.” This book is a fitting continuation of that bridge, a tale that will appeal to sports fans and those who appreciate the determination and physical and mental toughness required to thrive at the top level of sports. Former OSU head coach Urban Meyer provides the foreword.

SHAPE

The Hidden Geometry of Information, Biology, Strategy, Democracy, and Everything Else
Ellenberg, Jordan
Penguin Press (480 pp.)
$28.00 | May 25, 2021
978-1-984879-05-9

A wide-ranging sojourn into geometry and how it can be applied to real-life situations.

Even for the math-averse, there is something indelibly “primal” and useful about geometry, at least of the Euclidean variety. As University of Wisconsin math professor Ellenberg is quick to note, however, “geometry is the cilantro of math. Few are neutral.” As the author shows, it’s a subject on the move, providing new insights and deployments. “We are living in a wild geometric boomtown, global in scope,” writes Ellenberg in this often humorous, anecdotally rich dive into numerous mathematical theories. (His accessible approach carries over from How Not To Be Wrong, his 2014 bestseller.) The author feels that geometry has a lot to do with integrity and honesty, but he doesn’t want to sacrifice intuition at the altar of logical deduction: “We start from our intuitions about shapes in the physical world (where else could we start?), we analyze closely our sense of the way those shapes look and move, so precisely that we can talk about them without relying on our intuition if we need to.”

Ellenberg introduces readers to a bevy of relatable mathematical concepts: the “theory of the random walk” and its implications regarding the unpredictable nature of the stock market; “tree geometry” and how it might help you win certain games; the algorithms that work their ways into tennis matches and the World Series as well as some that recall a bunch of monkeys at typewriters, “reducing literary texts to a binary sequence of consonants and vowels.” Also eye-opening are the author’s discussions of pandemics—progression, decay, and the math of herd immunity—and how geometric processes can “model smallpox, Scarlet fever, train derailments, and steam boiler explosions.” In the penultimate chapter, “How Math Broke Democracy (and Might Still Save It),” Ellenberg offers an engrossing discussion of how geometry can help in the fight against gerrymandering.

Serious mathematics at its intriguing, transporting best.
THE GROUND BREAKING
An American City and Its Search for Justice
Ellsworth, Scott
Dutton (336 pp.)
$28.00 | May 18, 2021
978-0-593-18298-7

A vital history of a racially motivated mass murder a century ago.

It has been nearly 20 years since James Hirsch's Riot and Remembrance offered a modern record of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. “In an interview with a journalist some twenty years ago, I...likened it to an American Kristallnacht,” writes Ellsworth, a professor of Afro-American and African studies. “That wasn't a stretch.” The author delivers a brilliant update that recounts the events with the swiftness of an especially grim crime thriller. The massacre was touched off by an alleged assault committed by a Black teenager against a White girl. The young man was threatened with lynching as a mob of angry Whites assembled at the city jail. When Black veterans of World War I arrived to protect him, shooting began, with police officers “doling out rifles, pistols, shotguns, and boxes of ammunition to members of the lynch mob.” They went on to firebomb the thriving Black neighborhood of Greenwood (“Black Wall Street”), displacing thousands of residents. Ultimately, an unknown number of Black Tulsans were murdered—unknown because Tulsa took pains to cover up the massive crime, burying the victims in unrecorded mass graves—and their businesses were ruined. Evidence existed, including a trove of police photographs. “Whole sections of the city look like Berlin or Frankfurt at the end of World War II,” writes Ellsworth. “In one snapshot, the lifeless bodies of an entire African American family—father, mother, son, and daughter—have all been draped over a fence, their arms hanging down toward the ground.” Ellsworth not only recounts the horrific crimes; he also traces the chain of journalists and researchers who preceded him in revealing the details. The author doubts that the exact number of casualties will ever be known, but through his
diligent research, the locations of many graves have been discovered and forensic work conducted, assisted by locals who spoke out with information passed down over generations.

An essential historical record surrounding heinous events that have yet to be answered with racial justice.

FOOTNOTES
The Black Artists Who Rewrote the Rules of the Great White Way
Gaines, Caseen
Sourcebooks (352 pp.)
$26.99 | May 25, 2021
978-1-4926-8881-5

A celebration of a groundbreaking musical that stands as a landmark in Black American cultural history.

Journalist and historian of popular culture Gaines offers an animated, well-researched history of the creation, production, and long afterlife of Shuffle Along, a show that burst into the New York entertainment world in 1921 and was revived, in many iterations, as recently as 2016. Central to the story are four Black entertainers: composers and lyricists Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake and comedians Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles. Multitalented and determined, the men managed to transcend the racial prejudice that dominated the entertainment world at a time when Black characters—even when played by Blacks themselves—habitually darkened their skin with burnt cork. “They would cover their faces until they were the color of tar,” Gaines writes, “leaving just enough space for them to paint on a wide mouth with bright red or white exaggerated lips. The look would become complete with a natty wig, tattered clothing, white gloves, on occasion, and a heavy Southern drawl with a historical framework are resonant and consistently compelling.

Ursula’s life story as autobiography. This section, she notes, “is stitched together from letters and journals given to me by my birth mother. It involves both our voices which blend and embellish each other.” Visual elements include photos of molded-plastic dolls Galbraith placed in dollhouse dioramas to mimic her own childhood photos. The affectless dolls and lively baby Megan—in similar dress and pose—are unsettlingly juxtaposed against Galbraith’s words. Some intimate disclosures edge into narcissism, and the author’s judgments of friends and family can be harsh. However, the essays that situate her experience as an adoptee and mother within a historical framework are resonant and consistently compelling. She critiques Cornell University’s Domestic Economics program, inaugurated in 1919, which “borrowed” infants from orphanages to serve as practice babies for female students. (Paired with program baby photos, Galbraith’s doll scenes are eerily apt.) While Gabrielle Glaser’s American Baby (2021) offers broader insights into and historical context for the closed-adoption era, Galbraith’s passionate narrative effectively shows the struggle of an adopted child to comprehend an often long-hidden history. Ursula wouldn’t allow her photos to appear in the book, one part of a pattern of denial that the author highlights at various points in the book.

Flawed but haunting, a potent reminder that adoption is founded on loss.
“15 Books on Business Culture That You Need to Read Today”
—Entrepreneur Magazine

“Love the analogy/metaphor of music being compared to business. There are lots of similarities...”

“Leonard’s debut compares the culture of an organization to the bass in an orchestra.”

“The author is obviously passionate about both music and project portfolio management, and his enthusiasm shines through the text.”

“Nicely orchestrated and well-executed business advice.”
—Kirkus Reviews

For Information on Film Rights, Email gerald@geraldjleonard.com
https://geraldjleonard.com/culture-is-the-bass/
Rural, impoverished Washington County, Maine, is not an easy place to grow up.

Georges presents the stories of five young women on the cusp of adulthood in Maine’s furthest northeast county. She began chronicling her subjects, whose names she has changed due to privacy concerns, in their teens, conducting interviews and following them in their lives. Willow grew up with an “abusive, drug-addicted father, although moving in with her grandparents provided a bit of respite—until her grandmother was sent to prison for embezzling. Vivian, Willow’s best friend from early childhood, has a vastly different background. Her financially successful parents had deep roots in the county, but after they divorced, Vivian faced significant emotional challenges. A gifted softball pitcher, McKenna has been hauling lobsters with her father and brother since childhood. In her teens, she saved enough to buy her own boat. As she finished high school, she was torn between offers from two colleges and her passion: becoming one of the few females in the area running their own boats. Audrey is a basketball star and a dedicated member of her school’s civil rights team. Though she matriculated at prestigious Bates College, she found it to be a tough fit and transferred. Josie, the class valedictorian, was accepted at Yale, and she found herself questioning her parents’ conservative religious beliefs. Each of these stories reflects the extreme challenges of life in poor, rural America, areas that are often awash with substance abuse, offer few opportunities for education, and lack decent-paying career opportunities. Georges interweaves the engaging personal tales with recent statistical information, extending the girls’ experiences to illuminate a vast government failure to serve America’s less-populated spaces. In mostly lyrical, always informative, only occasionally trite prose (“Fisherman here don’t care for idle talk”), the author shines an important light on the sobering challenges rural youth are facing.

It’s almost impossible not to care about these fierce young women and cheer for their hard-won successes.

Further evidence that Thoreau offers wise counsel in dark times.

Melding memoir and nature writing, award-winning environmentalist Gessner celebrates Thoreau, whose Walden he discovered at the age of 16, inspiring him to question his values, attend to the natural world, keep a journal, and, as an adult, even build his own solitary writing shack. Now, facing environmental degradation and a global pandemic, Gessner sees Thoreau as his “presiding genius, and guiding spirit.” Examining Thoreau’s enduring relevance, he writes, “in an age of climate change he gets to the root of it: the need to do with less not acquire more. The need to live a moral life despite the risks and the ridicule. And of course the deep understanding of just how much nature can still offer us. Not nature in any vague or high-handed sense but in the physical daily experience of it.” Gessner vividly recounts his rich daily experiences of wildness, including walking, biking, kayaking, and bird-watching in North Carolina, his adopted home for the past 17 years; accompanying environmental activist Rick Bass for a project to save grizzlies; and traveling to Thoreau country—Cape...
“Another Gladwell everything-you-thought-you-knew-was-wrong page-turner, this one addressing a historical question that still provokes controversy.”

THE BOMBER MAFIA

A Dream, a Temptation, and the Longest Night of the Second World War
Gladwell, Malcolm
Little, Brown (536 pp.)
$27.00 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-0-316-29661-8

Another Gladwell everything-you-thought-you-knew-was-wrong page-turner, this one addressing a historical question that still provokes controversy.

During the unprecedented slaughter of World War I, bombers played a trivial role. However, by the 1930s, many military thinkers concluded that they were the weapon of the future. Were they right? Gladwell concentrates on the careers of Gen. Curtis LeMay and Haywood Hansell, but the author includes several of his characteristic educative, entertaining detours—e.g., histories of napalm and the Norden bombsight. Between the wars, all rising American Air Corps officers attended the Air Corps Tactical School in Alabama. A small part of the faculty, the Bomber Mafia, taught that high-altitude, daylight, precision-bombing would win wars. During World War II, Mafia stalwart Hansell sent fleets of bombers to destroy German and Japanese industrial targets. Unfortunately, due to weather, enemy resistance, and failure of the overhyped Norden bombsight, the bombs mostly missed. Gladwell delivers a fairly flattering portrait of LeMay, who “had a mind that moved only forward, never sideways...[and] was rational and imperturbable and incapable of self-doubt.” Heading the 21st Bomber Command in the Pacific in the fall of 1944, Hansell was conducting high-altitude precision daylight bombing of Japan, with the usual poor results. Replacing him in January 1945, LeMay did no better—until he changed tactics, sending missions at night, at low level, loaded with firebombs. His first round of bombing created a firestorm that killed an estimated 100,000 Tokyo civilians. LeMay’s bombers went on to devastate 67 Japanese cities, and the raids continued until the day of surrender. In his opinion, the atomic bombs were superfluous; the real work had already been done. Some historians call this a humanitarian crime that failed to shorten the war. Evenhanded as usual, Gladwell does not take sides, but he quotes a Japanese historian who disagreed: “if they don’t surrender, the Soviets invade, and then the Americans invade, and Japan gets carved up, just as Germany and the Korean peninsula eventually were.”

Excellent revisionist history.
THE GUNS OF JOHN MOSES BROWNING
The Remarkable Story of the Inventor Whose Firearms Changed the World
Gorenstein, Nathan
Scribner (320 pp.)
$28.00 | May 25, 2021
978-1-982129-21-7

The first biography since the 1950s of the famed—and in some circles, infamous—gun-maker.

Gorenstein delivers a technically detailed life of John Moses Browning (1855-1926), a second-generation member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and second-generation gun manufacturer who found pleasure in inventing weapons. As a young boy, he built a working shotgun in his father’s shop, and he began sketching out plans for more advanced weapons. Years later, he noted, “a good idea starts a celebration of the mind, and every nerve in the body seems to crowd up to see the fireworks.” There were fireworks aplenty, as Browning developed repeating rifles, pump shotguns, and other armaments, licensing his patents to all the major manufacturers—Remington, Colt, Winchester, and so forth—and creating new designs by trial and error. Gorenstein takes a cataloger’s tone as he describes each new prototype and design. Of one early gas machine gun, he writes, “At forty-one inches long and a relatively modest thirty-five pounds, it had to be mounted on a tripod but remained far more portable than a hand-cranked Gatling gun, and it gave Colt a chance to compete in a market dominated by the Maxim gun.” The result is a text gun collectors and historians of armaments will cherish, though nonspecialists may get bogged down in such technical matters as the composition of a “locked breech system” for high-pressure weapons like Browning’s .45 pistol and automatic rifle. Gorenstein clearly demonstrates how most of the world’s guns, from the AK-47 to the latest Sig Sauer pistols, draw on Browning’s designs of more than a century ago, and he tallies many of the known assets of Browning’s estate and those of his heirs. However, he avoids reckoning with the human costs. “If there were going to be wars, there had to be guns,” he writes, “and Browning was going to give his country the best.”

A dense journey through an ocean of iron and blood best suited for gun enthusiasts.

SECURING DEMOCRACY
My Fight for Press Freedom and Justice in Bolsonaro’s Brazil
Greenwald, Glenn
Haymarket (280 pp.)
$27.95 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-64259-450-8

In his latest explosive exposé, Greenwald turns to his adopted Brazil and the corrupt machinations of its highest leaders.

Having lived there since 2005 with his Brazilian partner and husband, David, a politician, and two adopted children, the American-born author has been deeply ensconced in the life of his adopted country for years. In 2018, they were alarmed by the election of Jair Bolsonaro as president, a process that was markedly similar to the aggressive nationalist trends that carried Donald Trump into office in the U.S. Like Trump, Bolsonaro, along with many of his elected officials, openly expressed authoritarian, anti-democratic, pro-military, anti–LGBTQ-rhetoric. Contacted on Mother’s Day 2019 by an anonymous Brazilian hacker then living in the U.S. who targeted Greenwald because of his involvement in the Edward Snowden intelligence leaks, the author agreed to receive reams of files that revealed years of corruption by state and national figures. Making sense of the files, Greenwald uncovered a vast web of corruption that was integral in getting Bolsonaro and his party elected by eliminating the opposition—namely, former two-term president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the center-left political leader of
the Workers’ Party. Greenwald published articles on the hacks in June 2019, helping to vindicate Lula, but he was met with a violent backlash by Bolsonaro and his thuggish establishment. Nonetheless, he was undeterred. “I believe we righted wrongs, reversed injustices, and exposed grave corruption,” he writes. “In many ways, I regard the dangers and threats we faced as vindication that we fulfilled our core function as journalists: to unflinchingly confront those who wield power with transparency, accountability, and truth.” Though some of the details may not be as revelatory to American readers as those involving Snowden and the National Security Agency, this is still a fascinating portrait of the importance of journalism in today’s tumultuous political world.

A courageous advocate for journalistic and democratic integrity strikes again.

DON’T APPLAUD, EITHER LAUGH OR DON’T
At the Comedy Cellar
Hankinson, Andrew
Scribe (400 pp.)
$18.00 paper | May 31, 2021
978-1-950354-54-2

A surprisingly serious history of the Comedy Cellar, home base for Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock, Louis C.K., and numerous other stars.

Hankinson, who has written for Wired, GQ, Esquire, and other publications, approaches this story like a mystery: Will stand-up comedy survive? Sure, it’s popular now—boosted by social media and countless specials on cable TV and streaming services—and the success of the historic Greenwich Village venue is a significant piece of its history. But stand-up is under considerable pressure due to the growing battle between envelope-pushing comics and those complaining about what they see as racist or misogynistic. Noam Dworman, the club’s owner, has always been a staunch advocate for free speech. As he told the author, “Nobody should ever get fired for anything they say, no matter what, and the only reason to fire somebody should be if, you know, people stopped watching or something. So, meaning like, if I found out that some comedian or someone who was under my thumb in some way said the most horrible things about Jews or whatever it is, I don’t think I’d fire them, I’d just say it’s not my business.” Hankinson shows both sides, even rewriting the book to deal with the fallout from accusations of sexual misconduct by Louis C.K. and its effect on the Comedy Cellar when he launched his comeback there. The author narrates the story in reverse chronological order, and because the stakes are raised, he offers transcripts of his interviews with a minimum of paraphrasing or editorializing. It’s a risky approach, but it mostly pays off because Dworman is eloquent, as are the comics Hankinson quotes. Even the fans complaining about jokes are well spoken, though they are generally outnumbered. Plenty of readers will be offended by certain jokes or comments—that’s the nature of the business—but Hankinson ably captures the importance of the Comedy Cellar.

A well-crafted tale of comedy stars and thorny social issues that shows just how hard it is to make people laugh.

OPERATION PEDESTAL
The Fleet That Battled to Malta, 1942
Hastings, Max
Harper (448 pp.)
$35.00 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-06-298015-1

Veteran military historian Hastings’ first full-length narrative of war at sea measures up to his usual high standards. The author reminds readers that summer 1942 marked the low point of the war for Britain. “The British people were weary,” writes Hastings, “especially of the
defeats that seemed to be all that their bellicose prime minister could contrive.” Particularly humiliating were the surrenders of Singapore and Tobruk to inferior forces. Britain’s 8th Army remained on the defensive in Egypt, menaced by Rommel’s Afrika Korps, whose major difficulty was obtaining enough supplies from Europe. As Britain’s sole military possession between Gibraltar and Alexandria, Malta was vital, and its planes and submarines wreaked havoc on Axis merchant ships. Efforts to neutralize the island accelerated in 1942 when the Luftwaffe arrived to join Italy’s air force, dropping more bombs than it had on London during the Blitz. By summer, the island was devastated. British leaders debated whether or not Malta was worth defending, but Churchill had no doubts. As a result, on Aug. 10, 1942, 20,000 men and “the largest fleet the Royal Navy had committed to action since Jutland in 1916 entered the Mediterranean to fight an epic four-day battle.” Named Operation Pedestal, the mission aimed to protect 14 merchant vessels carrying desperately needed food and fuel. Vividly chronicling the sinking of the aircraft carrier Eagle, Hastings initiates 250 pages of gripping fireworks and insights that continue well past Aug. 15, when five battered merchantmen limped into Malta’s harbor. Real-world war is sloppier than the Hollywood version, even more so under the author’s gimlet eye. Heroism was in abundant supply but not universal. Through Hastings’ keen analysis we see how commanders on both sides showed as much bad judgment as intelligence. Belying Italy’s reputation for incompetence, its naval fleet inflicted more damage than Germany’s. Two months later, El Alamein and America’s North Africa landings took the pressure off Malta, again calling Pedestal’s sacrifice into question.

Another enthralling Hastings must-read.

THE DOUBLE LIFE OF BOB DYLAN
A Restless, Hungry Feeling, (1941-1966)
Heylin, Clinton
Little, Brown (704 pp.)
$35.00 | May 18, 2021
978-0-316-53521-2

Bob Dylan (b. 1941) has spent decades augmenting his singular talent by mythologizing, misdirecting, and outright lying about his life. This ambitious biography seeks the truth.

Noted music historian and critic Heylin has already written 10 books about Dylan, including the well-regarded biography Bob Dylan Behind the Shades (1991), as well as portraits of the Velvet Underground, Sex Pistols, Springsteen, and other rock luminaries. Here, the author is armed with material from Dylan’s papers and outtake footage from tour documentaries now housed at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa. Even with those documents, not to mention Dylan’s own autobiography, Chronicles, and hundreds of interviews and press conferences over the years, the story of how Bobby Zimmerman from Minnesota became one of music’s most influential and enduring artists remains murky. To his credit, Heylin leans into the confusion, documenting who said what and how they would know even though it makes some parts, especially the chapters on Dylan’s early years, hard to follow. We still don’t even get a straight story on the origin of the name change. “Even in 1960,” writes the author, “he delighted in spinning yarns, telling close friend Dave Whitaker that it ’was his mother’s name, and that he had taken it because…he didn’t want to be known by his father’s name.” The last part of that statement, at least, was true. But since his Jewish mother’s family had come from Russia, it must have seemed to the worldly Whitaker rather unlikely that her family name was Welsh for ‘son of the sea.’ ” Heylin is on stronger footing in his discussions with eyewitnesses and analysis of documentary footage and studio recordings from sessions for such classics as “Like a Rolling Stone” or “Visions of Johanna.” In these passages, the narrative becomes an enlightening, informative delight.

Impressively researched, this deep look at Dylan’s early career and initial stardom is a decidedly uneven but enjoyable ride.

LIKE STREAMS TO THE OCEAN
Notes on Ego, Love, and the Things That Make Us Who We Are
Jenkins, Jedidiah
Convergent/Crown (272 pp.)
$26.00 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-0-593-13723-9

Ruminations on our need for purpose and a celebration of adventure.

Much as he did in his debut bestseller, To Shake the Sleeping Self, Jenkins sprinkles his joyful, meandering text with musings on the natural world: a lone violet in a meadow; rafting through the Grand Canyon; intense feelings of gratitude for Earth’s grandeur and the interconnectedness found throughout nature. His most authoritative chapter is on the ego, where we live “the majority of our lives” and which he keenly defines as “the container in which you build an identity and then defend it.” The author goes on to describe his quirky personality and explains how his ego protected him from pain: “As a kid, I highlighted my weirdness and uniqueness to remove myself from competition.” He writes affectionately about his good friends, encouraging readers to appreciate and cultivate those relationships, and his open worldview shines in the countless aphoristic passages and introspective reflections scattered throughout the text: “If you could see the strings pulling at people, you’d be as patient as a pillow with everyone you meet”;

“Tears are the swelling of something inside me, until that something gets too big for my body to hold. It makes room by pushing the tears out.” It’s clear that Jenkins wants readers to join him on his journey of self-discovery, which requires consistent questioning: “Who do you feel the most yourself with?”; “Who do you hang with that makes you feel the fullness of one of yourselves?” The bromides may lay too thick on the ground for some
ON TRAINING

VOLUME 1
Selected Essays
Edited and Compiled by the Author

DUSTIN P. SALOMON
Author of Building Shooters

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ISBN-10: 1952594073

“...a well-researched introduction to a complex set of issues...”

“A concise and expert primer...”
—Kirkus Reviews

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readers, but the author seems genuine in his desire to inspire people to consider the true motives behind the desires—and to direct their actions based on those considerations. Ultimately, he advises that we “try things with gusto” and understand “we are ignorant actors in a cosmic drama.”

An awakening for fellow travelers on the spiritual path.

CLIMATE, CATASTROPHE, AND FAITH
How Changes in Climate Drive Religious Upheaval
Jenkins, Philip
Oxford Univ. (276 pp.)
$29.95 | May 11, 2021
978-0-19-750621-9

A survey of the historical effects of climate on world religions.

In his latest, acclaimed religious scholar Jenkins looks at how climate change, broadly defined, has shaped movements in religion—mainly in the European realm but also around the globe. The author argues that by studying the past, we can make assumptions about the future of religious reactions to climate change. However, his forecasting is shaky, as the text becomes a catalog of natural catastrophes, each tenuously tied to its own corresponding historical horror.

One of the author’s main narrative threads involves the unending string of catastrophes brought about by the long-running Little Ice Age, which lasted from the 1300s to the mid-1800s. Jenkins covers this period in a mesmerizing series of accounts of brutal winters and cold summers (along with the occasional drought), sometimes stretching on for years, bringing about hunger, poverty, and, inevitably, violence—particularly against Jews, Christian dissidents, and perceived witches, all of whom suffered due to a combination of economic tension and superstitious anger. Though it is common sense that severe changes in climate and weather patterns often lead to social change and unrest, the author’s attempts to tie nearly every important moment in European religion to climate issues—for instance, the rise of John Calvin’s theocracy in Geneva due to sunspot activity and Baltic Sea temperatures—will overwhelm most readers. Jenkins does incorporate other factors into his analysis, but he often forces the issue, overestimating the degree of causation between climate and “religious upheaval.” The author is also tripped up by the fact that climate change as he discusses it historically has entirely natural causes (volcanoes, El Niño, sunspots, etc.), whereas his predictions for the future are based on human-influenced climate change, the effects of which continue to expand and mutate.

A well-researched concept that falls flat in the presentation.

NOISE
A Flaw in Human Judgment
Kahneman, Daniel & Sibony, Olivier & Sunstein, Cass R.
Little, Brown Spark (464 pp.)
$32.00 | May 18, 2021
978-0-316-45140-6

A sprawling study of errors in decision-making, some literal matters of life and death.

You go to a doctor complaining of chest pains. The doctor orders an angiogram. The hospital requires a second opinion before authorizing surgery, and the second doctor disagrees on the extent to which a specific blood vessel is blocked. These unpredictable disagreements over the same data are what Kahneman, Sibony, and Sunstein call “noise,” a species of human error that happens whenever such higher-order judgments are involved. Noise, they write, is rampant in medicine, where “different doctors make different judgments about whether patients have skin cancer, breast cancer, tuberculosis, pneumonia, depression, and a host of other conditions.” Noise is especially prevalent in psychiatry, they add, where subjective opinion is more pronounced than in other disciplines. A cousin of bias, noise is difficult to isolate and correct. In forensic science, the authors write, noise is implicated in nearly half of all misidentifications of perpetrators and wrongful imprisonments. Unlike some categories of error, noise is often not helped by the introduction of more information. Writing in often dense but generally nontechnical prose, the authors offer strategies for reducing noise. One is to average out predictions in, say, stock market performance, since “noise is inherently statistical.” Another is to consult the smartest people you can find; while they may not be flawless, “picking those with highest mental ability makes a lot of sense.” Since error combines with snap decisions, the authors endorse rigorous review and other strategies for noise reduction and “decision hygiene” as well as developing habits of mind that acknowledge both bias and error and favor examining the opinions of those with whom one disagrees as dispassionately and fairly as possible. “To improve the quality of our judgments,” they urge, “we need to overcome noise as well as bias.”

Abundant food for thought for professionals of all types as well as students of decision science and behavioral economics.

“Abundant food for thought for professionals of all types as well as students of decision science and behavioral economics.”

NOISE
A film critic revisits personally meaningful films of the 1980s.

“The story of the movies is basically one long, heterosexual romantic epic,” writes Koresky, a gay man who contributes to the Criterion Collection, Film Comment, and Film at Lincoln Center. Yet growing up in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, in the 1980s, he couldn’t get enough of cinema, watching “all kinds and as many as I could get my hands on.” He credits his mother, Leslie, with instilling this love, a love they continued to share after Koresky’s father died in 2011. In this memoir, he describes their project of revisiting ’80s films she had introduced him to, one from each year. All of them are “about and starring women, movies that put their emotional inner lives front and center.” Interspersed among thoughtful readings of such movies as Mommie Dearest, Terms of Endearment, and The Color Purple are stories from Koresky’s family life, mainly about Leslie’s attempts to balance motherhood and work and about Koresky’s coming to terms with his sexuality. Sometimes the films are only tenuously connected to these stories—the chapter on Aliens takes a jarring turn from a discussion of Ripley, Sigourney Weaver’s warrior lead, to his mother’s giving birth—but most chapters are smooth and focused. In the chapter on the workplace comedy Nine to Five, the author writes that Leslie still feels the sting of a visiting associate who told one of her male bosses, “Can your girl get us some coffee?” A discussion of the trans character in Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean includes the moment when Koresky called his mother from New York to come out to her. Before he could get the words out, she asked, “Michael, are you gay?” and later revealed that she and his father knew about his orientation long before he did.

A moving portrait of a bond film lovers will understand: between a cineaste and the people who nurtured that love.
PREGNANT GIRL
A Story of Teen Motherhood, College, and Creating a Better Future for Young Families
Lewis, Nicole Lynn
Beacon (248 pp.)
$24.95 | May 4, 2021
978-0-8070-5603-5

A memoir and activist call to action from a Black entrepreneur who got pregnant during her senior year of high school.

PROOF OF LIFE
Twenty Days on the Hunt for a Missing Person in the Middle East
Levin, Daniel
Algonquin (288 pp.)
$26.95 | May 18, 2021
978-1-64375-098-9

Anecdotal account of an effort to find a missing young man in civil war-torn Syria.

Levin, a lawyer and armed-conflict negotiator who has vast experience with the Middle East, delivers “a story about love and sadness, about violence and death, about unspeakable cruelty and greed—the daily menu of Syria’s devastating war.” More than that, he reveals the complex grammar of quid pro quo that is required for any negotiation in the region. At stake was the son of an influential American, and tracking him down fell to Levin, who had been involved in a project to nurture young Syrians to take roles in a postwar government. Via that connection, he was often approached to help find missing persons with the assumption that he “might know someone who knew someone who knew someone who could help. The classic Levantine arrangement, in other words.” Finding that chain of someones involved visits to several countries and encounters with a range of characters, from a smooth, charming interlocutor who was quite helpful to a variety of gangsters and strongmen. Levin didn’t find the hoped-for answer to the question of the young man’s disappearance, but he did help effect an unforeseen rescue that, one hopes, will one day change the shape of regional politics. Despite some unnecessary digressions—e.g., the author’s story of his visit to a wealthy racist did help effect an unforeseen rescue that, one hopes, will one day change the shape of regional politics, he also serves as one of the viewpoint during her senior year of high school.

As Lewis notes early on, she never doubted that she was headed for college. She was an excellent student, and both she and her parents had high expectations for her future. However, her whirlwind romance with Rakheim led to an unplanned pregnancy, which she discovered a few months before graduation. As she recounts, her mother was gravely disappointed, and her father was unresponsive. To avoid her parents’ disapproval, Lewis moved in with Rakheim, who, despite his troubled past, made her feel loved as “a young woman who belonged to someone special.” The author graduated from high school, but a lack of economic opportunity, financial safety nets, and family support meant that the couple struggled with homelessness, food insecurity, and overwhelming poverty. Unfortunately, the combination of economic stress and immaturity turned their relationship toxic, and Lewis had to leave. Throughout her pregnancy and new motherhood, the author never gave up on her dream of attending college, and she went on to excel at the College of William & Mary. After graduation, her experiences made it clear to her what she wanted to do with her life: help other teen parents go to college, just like she did. To that end, she founded a policy and advocacy organization called Generation Hope. “What if we said yes instead of no? That was the guiding star in the design of our program,” writes the author, whose voice shines with both vulnerability and wisdom. She does not portray herself simply as a victim or a hero but rather as an ambitious, loving, resourceful, Black single mother constantly fighting systemic racism. Throughout the text, she weaves in context drawn from research and her own personal experiences mentoring teen parents, articulating the racist systems that often keep teen parents uneducated, poor, and desperate.

A frank, thoroughly contextualized portrayal of Black teen motherhood.

A WILDER LIFE
Journey of an Adventuring Doctor
Louwrens, Joan
Jonathan Ball Books (260 pp.)
$17.95 paper | May 11, 2021
978-1-77619-112-3

A doctor shares her medical adventures in wild places.

Louwrens begins her globe-trotting memoir in 1980 in Swaziland, delivering a graphic description of an ambulance ride with a sugarcane worker who’d been run over by a tractor. “The stagnant air trapped in the back of the ambulance reeks of past calamities,” she writes evocatively. From that introduction, the narrative gallops along, taking readers to the author’s many medical posts in remote areas across the planet. Among other experiences, she writes about her time aboard an icebreaker heading toward Antarctica, a stint in the Australian Outback, and her work as a doctor during a 10,500-kilometer biking expedition that ran from Istanbul to Beijing along the Silk Route. At each post, she offers compassionate, memorable stories of her patients and their injuries and ailments: crushed
fingers, uncontrolled bleeding, rabies, suicidal ideation, and even dental work, with which she had little experience. Throughout the text, Louwrens revels in the natural world around her, even during difficult journeys. For example, she remained exhilarated and awed by the power of the ocean even as she and her fellow shipmates endured seasickness while traversing some of the most dangerous waters in the world. She was also clearly fascinated by the birds and other wildlife she encountered. The author’s prose is concise and conversational, with solid dialogue and descriptions that place readers in the moment and effectively brief historical backgrounds on each locale. Despite her ability to handle each emergency, Louwrens, impressively talented yet humble, managed to second-guess herself prior to accepting new posts, constantly hounded by “the demon of incompetency,” which “whispered taunts in my ears.” The photos and maps are welcome bonuses to the page-turning narrative, which is sure to delight armchair adventurers and medical enthusiasts alike.

Boisterous, exciting true tales of a fearless doctor traversing the seas to help people all around the world.

An urgent call for racial justice that demands attention, discussion, and action.

STATE OF EMERGENCY

How We Win in the Country We Built
Mallory, Tamika D. with Coleman, Ashley A.
Black Privilege Publishing/Atria
(224 pp.)
$26.00 | May 11, 2021
978-1-982173-46-3

Activist and organizer Mallory sounds an alarm against complacency now that a new administration is in the White House. American history has been full of terrible moments for Black people, but one of particularly pressing importance happened recently. “To wake up on January 6, 2021,” writes the author, “to see a noose hanging in front of the United States Capitol while domestic terrorists breached the complex where our congressional leaders met to legislate, was paralyzing.” Paralyzing but not unexpected: Mallory’s next thought was, “Wow, they finally did it.” The Trump administration, whose leader fomented the revolt, is gone, but the enemies of Black progress remain. Against that, writes the author, “it is not enough to be nonracist.” Black activists and their White allies—who are welcome if they are “careful not to try to own the fight”—must commit to being anti-racist, to constantly combat racism and its exponents. Mallory delivers a series of rules that one wishes were ironic: “Don’t talk back,” reads one, since the consequence is that “You will be deemed dangerous,” while another counsels not to wear a hoodie. Because “my undiluted Blackness is worth fighting for,” the author urges a well-organized movement of resistance that involves, among other tenets, stopping to record every encounter of Black persons and the police, taking down names and badge numbers and filing complaints. Despite her well-thought-through program, which concludes with the rule “Be unapologetic about your Blackness until they respect it,” Mallory calls herself a contributor to and not a leader of the Black Lives Matter movement (she also co-founded the Women’s March on Washington), a movement whose necessity remains self-evident even with the new Biden-Harris presidency. “They must turn over the soil in order to grow a new political landscape for us all.” This is the first book from the Black Privilege imprint, led by radio and TV personality Charlamagne Tha God.

An urgent call for racial justice that demands attention, discussion, and action.
but curious, methodical, & this was foreign, hard to see at His father called to say, "I could tell you / a few stories about stories, / flip a little word-play, we could / warm up with some improv / games. it has been eight / fucking years & i have written / everything but this," he writes, immediately before telling of how he learned the news. His father called to say, "david has taken his own life first." While his first reaction, he notes, was to utter "banshee sounds," he sought explanation in family history and discussions with others whose siblings committed suicide—not a support group or a meeting of suicide / survivors, that is the / tortured, oxymoronic / nomenclature for the / people left behind," but rather shattered individuals such as a bookseller who worked through his grief via memoirs by schizophrenics who wrote in times before there was even a word for their condition. In the end, writing that "the only thing worse than not understanding one is that he made his father "say it to me twice." Small revelations abound: David suffered from depression, was incommunicative as a child, was perhaps on the autism spectrum: "his intelligence clustered in / an unfamiliar quadrant, / was not fierce & literary ambitions—and, more importantly, to liberal democracy in the United States." With Congress increasingly partisan and dysfunctional, the author asserts that the court has exerted decisive policy changes: dismantling campaign finance law and weakening the Voting Rights Act, the Affordable Care Act’s Medicaid expansion, laws shielding workers from sexual and racial harassment, public sector unions’ ability to raise funds, and Barack Obama’s Clean Power Plan. Along with examining the judicial backgrounds of the Republican-appointed judges, Millhiser looks closely at salient cases in four areas that reveal the court’s conservative bias: voting rights, limitations on federal power, expression of religion, and the right to sue. As for voting, the author clearly shows how the court’s decisions work against the election of Democrats by allowing redistricting laws that favor Republicans, thereby transforming legislative elections “into little more than a formality in many states.” Limiting federal regulatory power also favors a conservative agenda, for example, impeding the government in addressing climate change. “This fight over the federal government’s power to address a slow-moving catastrophe,” Millhiser writes, “is just one battle in a many-front war over federal agencies’ power to regulate.” In addition, court decisions regarding religion have opened the possibility that business owners may claim religious objections to following anti-discrimination laws or even paying taxes. Because judges have “no democratic legitimacy,” the responsibility to shape policy must lie with Congress. Deferring to the court “means placing unchecked power in the hands of men and women who serve for life, and who may be no less partisan than the people who can be voted out of office if they use their power irresponsibly.”

A cogent, timely warning about the fragility of American democracy.

A wounded though loving paean that will speak to anyone who has lost a sibling, no matter the cause of death.


I HAD A BROTHER ONCE
A Poem, a Memoir
Mansbach, Adam
One World(Random House (176 pp.)
$26.00 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-0-593-13479-5

A piercing meditation on death, grief, and family. Among acclaimed novels and other works, Mansbach may be best known for his zeitgeist-grabbing children’s book Go the Fuck To Sleep (2011). Here, he turns to weightier matters in this free-verse account of the suicide of his brother, David. “I could tell you / a few stories about stories, / flip a little word-play, we could / warm up with some improv / games. it has been eight / fucking years & i have written / everything but this,” he writes, immediately before telling of how he learned the news. His father called to say, "david has taken his own life first." While his first reaction, he notes, was to utter "banshee sounds," he sought explanation in family history and discussions with others whose siblings committed suicide—not a support group or "a meeting of suicide / survivors, that is the / tortured, oxymoronic / nomenclature for the / people left behind," but rather shattered individuals such as a bookseller who worked through his grief via memoirs by schizophrenics who wrote in times before there was even a word for their condition. In the end, writing that “the only thing worse than not understanding one is that he made his father "say it to me twice." Small revelations abound: David suffered from depression, was incommunicative as a child, was perhaps on the autism spectrum: "his intelligence clustered in / an unfamiliar quadrant, / was not fierce & literary

THE AGENDA
How a Republican Supreme Court Is Reshaping America
Millhiser, Ian
Columbia Global Reports (142 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Mar. 30, 2021
978-1-73442-076-0

A biting critique of the current Supreme Court. Lawyer Millhiser, a senior correspondent at Vox and senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, argues persuasively that the Supreme Court, with its 6-3 Republican majority, “is potentially an existential threat to the Democratic Party’s national

THE HUMMINGBIRDS’ GIFT
Wonder, Beauty, and Renewal on Wings
Montgomery, Sy
Atria (96 pp.)
$20.00 | May 4, 2021
978-1-982176-08-2

The author of The Soul of the Octopus returns with the story of the miraculous recovery of two abandoned baby hummingbirds.

When Brenda Sherburn, a volunteer hummingbird rehabilitator in California, received two orphaned birds, they were not much larger than bumblebees. Uncertain about how to proceed with their recovery, she contacted naturalist Montgomery to help. As the author explains, rehabilitating hummingbirds is difficult work. In addition to maintaining the temperature of their habitat and examining their bodies for injury and invasive insects, baby hummingbirds must be fed every 20 minutes using a tiny syringe. Furthermore, “because the food spoils easily, a fresh batch must be concocted several times a day.” The conditions under which the young are released into the wild are also
Hummingbirds typically lay two eggs, which hatch two days apart. The timing difference can lead to a developmental lag in the youngest hatchling and offer additional challenges, which was the case in the recovery of this pair. With her characteristic compassion, Montgomery shows the patience and skill with which Sherburn nursed her charges back to health. She also discusses the extreme measures other rehabbers have taken to ensure the recovery of injured and orphaned hummingbirds. Montgomery packs a wealth of general information regarding hummingbirds into this slim volume, examining species differences, body mechanics, habitat range, food sources, migration patterns, and relevant mythology. As their attachment to the birds grew, Sherburn and Montgomery chose to break the unwritten rule of naming birds in the process of rehabilitation. Drawing on Aztec and Mayan mythology, they chose Maya and Zuni. Regarding the reason for writing this book, Montgomery explains that witnessing the recovery of these tiny creatures was a cherished gift. If humans, she notes, “could help transform these pathetically vulnerable infants to rulers of the sky, then perhaps our kind can heal our sweet, green, broken world.”

A small gem full of hope, determination, and wonder.

**A SENSE OF SELF**

**Memory, the Brain, and Who We Are**

O'Keane, Veronica

Norton (256 pp.)

$27.95 | May 25, 2021

978-0-393-54192-2

A veteran psychiatrist examines how memories form to create accounts of who we are.

Memory is a function of both time and place. For very young children, writes O'Keane, a professor of psychiatry at Trinity College Dublin, “time ‘doesn’t exist experientially.’ The days constitute an eternal present. ‘Children are not so much adaptable as partly amnesic,’” she adds, which helps explain why most adults have so few crystal-clear memories of their earliest years. Nonetheless, as she writes in this pleasing blend of psychiatric case studies and the latest findings of neuroscience—findings that, she observes, haven’t yet been fully embraced or even understood by most physicians—the early years are critical to who we become. Children born into poverty, for instance, suffer disproportionately from stress (and associated high levels of cortisol), which has detrimental effects on general health. As for older people, many are stressed and forgetful—but not necessarily because their minds are slipping. O'Keane counsels that things are not so much forgotten as that we “never laid down a memory for it in the first place,” an act that involves building dendritic connections in the brain. Whereas we “never laid down a memory for it in the first place,” an act that involves building dendritic connections in the brain. Whereas time stands still for the young, it flies by for the old, a matter of subjective sense. The author delivers interesting observations on nearly every page. For example, the brains of people who suffer from depression have a smaller left hippocampus than people who don’t, and a mark of human phylogenetics is the pruning of the jumble of information from childhood in our 20s and 30s, “enabling the developing brain to take shortcuts through learned pathways of knowledge.” A virtue of O'Keane's complex but not daunting discussion is her insistence that our understanding of the science of the brain should, among other things, serve to remove the stigma associated with mental health conditions such as schizophrenia, for “individuals with psychiatric illnesses have a great deal to tell neuroscience, and the larger world, about the processes involved in the organization of memory.”

A welcome new voice in the literature of consciousness and neuroscience.
Connecting the dots between music and entrepreneurial inspiration.

How can music teach us—or at least teach musicians—about business innovation? That’s the question posed by Panay, the senior vice president for global strategy and innovation at Berklee College of Music, and Hendrix, global design director of design and innovation at the IDEO consultancy group. The authors chronicle their discussions with artists and entrepreneurs about qualities that both groups share. Among the subjects are some heavy hitters. Justin Timberlake lays down his guiding principle on experimentation: “I have only one rule in the studio, and it’s this: dare to suck. You may have a great idea in your head as somebody’s playing a riff on the guitar. Don’t hold it in.” Interscope head Jimmy Iovine weighs in on the act of listening, which isn’t as simple as you might think, by way of Beats headphones and a famous ad featuring the NBA’s Kevin Garnett walking into a rival arena and drowning out the hostility with his Beats. Wilco bassist John Stirratt discusses Tourists, a Massachusetts hotel “created to bring strangers together around shared experiences.” Stirratt makes the musical connection tangible as he shouts out the Austin hotel that gave him the idea: “I have the same feeling checking into the San Jose as I do listening to a Miles Davis record for the fiftieth time…. It’s a visceral experience, a feeling of possibility.” The book is strongest in the authors’ presentations of heady concepts in down-to-earth fashion. But what if you’re not a musician, and what if your brain doesn’t yield the same starbursts of creativity as the likes of Pharrell, Björk, and Imogen Heap? Some of these lessons may still apply to you, but others may be out of reach. Other luminaries in the text include Dr. Dre, Steve Vai, and T Bone Burnett, and a series of “Interludes” offer soundtracks to illuminate the lessons.

An intriguing—yet not universally applicable—look at what recording artists can teach us about innovation.

By the early 2000s, the U.S. health care system, once a global leader, had become the most expensive and least effective in the developed world. Of course, Covid-19 has only exacerbated the situation. Among the number of factors that have led to our current state of affairs—a situation that implicates everyone from hospital administrators to insurers, regulators, and pharmaceutical giants—Pearl singles out for examination the flawed culture that guides doctors in their practice. Physician culture, writes the author, “elevates intervention over prevention,” resulting in a lack of effective treatment for chronic killers such as diabetes, obesity, hypertension, and heart disease. In a brightly delineated—and highly disturbing—dissection, Pearl lays out the rituals, rules, and beliefs that often isolate physicians from their colleagues and their patients. The foundation of the culture may rest on concepts of healing, resilience, and artistry; but it also breeds a hierarchical sense of individual exceptionalism, heroism, and invincibility. This entitlement and autonomy often clash with the implementation of advanced diagnostic technology, undercutting the doctor’s sense of status and control. In this new environment, characterized by long hours, lowered pay, diminished decision-making, and erasure of prestige, more and more physicians are experiencing burnout. Pearl sensibly advocates a coevolution of these two streams, taking advantage of a doctor’s experience and independent judgement while tapping into the structural and scientific changes in medical practice. Incorporating peer-reviewed research, personal experience, and anecdotal evidence, the author excoriates overtesting and overprescribing as well as institutionalized racism within the medical community; and he advocates for “broadly available, prepaid, integrated, high-quality healthcare,” a system that is open to change, collaboration, and “safe, effective, patient-centered, timely, efficient, and equitable” care.

In a well-documented, panoramic narrative, an insider demystifies what makes many doctors tick.

In her first full-length work of nonfiction, Pham, an inaugural Yi Dae Up fellowship recipient from the Jack Jones Literary Arts Retreat, thoughtfully collects a series of essays exploring themes of love, beauty, pain, trauma, art, and identity. Over the course of 11 pieces, Pham writes and rewrites her own story using her most honest memories alongside the lives and works of other artists and writers she admires. In “Blue,” she uses the writing of Rebecca Solnit, the artwork of Georgia O’Keeffe and...
Agnes Martin, and the beauty and allure of the American Southwest to narrate her professional burnout. In "Body of Work," Pham interrogates the idea of pain—physical manifestations, potential for beauty, and increasing commodification—by analyzing Nan Goldin's photography, the popularity of Tumblr, her tumultuous relationship with a high school boyfriend, and her subsequent sexual (mis)adventures. "I worry that in writing this down, I'm showing you the ways I made myself abject," she confesses. "But it was useful before, and I've never liked the self-help books where the writer comes across as holier than thou, already healed and already recovered. I want to honor the girl I was, whose pain was real. It's her I write for, too." While each of the essays twists and turns from subject to subject, all of the material serves a purpose. Each curve in the collection leads readers to a fuller, more nuanced understanding of Pham's unique perspective. In a manner reminiscent of contemporaries Leslie Jamison and Jia Tolentino, Pham seamlessly blends the personal and the cultural, the confessional and the critical, the cerebral and the sentimental, to create an exciting and imaginative memoir.

A vital playlist that hits all the right notes; readers will reach the end ready to hit repeat.

**On Killing Remotely**
*The Psychology of Killing With Drones*

Phelps, Wayne
Little, Brown (320 pp.)
$29.00 | May 25, 2021
978-0-316-62829-7

A penetrating look inside the military units operating armed drones on remote battlefields around the world. Phelps, a former Marine who served five deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq, works from—and expands on—the principles laid out in Dave Grossman's *On Killing* (1995), which investigated the intense psychological forces affecting troops involved in lethal action. The author draws heavily on interviews with members of the armed forces who operate remotely piloted aircraft, as drones are officially known. The military has always sought to increase the distance from which it attacks enemy forces, if only as a way to protect its own soldiers. From spears and arrows to artillery, aircraft, and long-range missiles, the distance has grown steadily over time. From that perspective, RPAs are a natural progression. Phelps, who has commanded multiple Unmanned Aircraft System teams, takes pains to contest the flawed perception that using RPAs is equivalent to playing computer games. The warriors who fire their weapons have often spent weeks or months observing their targets, waiting for a time when there is no risk of killing bystanders. They may know more about their targets than their own next-door neighbors, and they see with unusual clarity what happens after they "pull the trigger." Inevitably, there is an often devastating emotional effect. Add to that the conditions under which they work, often serving long shifts that lead to dangerous sleep deprivation. Nor does their culture encourage them to seek help for the crushing mental stress. Furthermore, even as the number of RPA operators has dramatically increased, they are still treated as less important than "real" pilots or soldiers who are directly exposed to enemy fire. Phelps provides ample quotations from RPA operators as well as detailed reports of their necessary work. Drone warfare is seemingly ubiquitous, and the author delivers a clear report on how it works and how it affects the users.

A can't-miss for anyone interested in current military affairs.

**Seek You**
*A Journey Through American Loneliness*

Radtke, Kristen
Illus. by the author
Pantheon (352 pp.)
$30.00 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-5247-4806-7

An exploration of loneliness, the troubling ways we’ve studied it, and the subtle ways we strain to avoid it.

Radtke’s second graphic memoir feels almost custom-made for the social-distancing era. She explores our need for connection and touch (“skin hunger” is the psychological term) and the negative social and personal effects of isolation. But the book is a much broader and deeply affecting study of loneliness, uncovering the host of ways our craving for community manifests itself in ways that are sometimes quirky and sometimes terrifying. Laugh tracks on sitcoms, for instance, offer a sense of communal feeling within a cold medium; so, too, did the Web 1.0 sites and chatrooms Radtke obsessed over, where strangers laid out their private thoughts and fears. The anxiety runs deep: We crave reports of mass shooters that say the perpetrator was a loner because it satisfies our need to not associate with them. “The collective branding of mass killers is a clumsy act of self-preservation,” she writes. In clean, graceful renderings and a constricted color palette, Radtke expresses her own experiences with loneliness, as a child and in relationships, and gets people to open up about theirs. Along the way, she discovered unusual approaches to combating loneliness—e.g., a hotline that elderly people can call to have someone to talk to. The author also writes about the cruel experiments psychologist Harry Harlow conducted on monkeys in the 1950s to debunk the belief that children shouldn’t be emotionally coddled. Harlow himself lived a troubled, isolated life, and Radtke wonders if he projected his anxiety upon the animals he tormented in the name of science. If so, how much of our own fear of isolation do we project on the world? Throughout, Radtke is an engaging and thoughtful guide through our fear of being alone.

Superb. A rigorous, vulnerable book on a subject that is too often neglected.
An idea-centered life of the noted economist and political commentator.

“I’m sure that at least 95% of the people in this country have never heard of me, and that’s the way it should be.” So remarked Thomas Sowell (b. 1930) in 2003. Readers of conservative/libertarian publications such as *Reason* and more liberal ones such as the *New York Times* will number among the other 5%, aware of Sowell through his prolific journalism. *Wall Street Journal* columnist Riley charts Sowell’s perhaps unlikely path. From a modest background, he finished high school after serving in the Marine Corps, took advantage of the GI Bill to attend Howard University, then Harvard and Columbia, and finally earned a doctorate in economics from the University of Chicago. His politics began to change from a kind of Marxism to a qualified endorsement of Milton Friedman’s free-market ideas. (Sowell allows government a greater role than Friedman in enhancing the public good.) From the vantage point of the Hoover Institution, he has written numerous controversial books and a mountain of newspaper commentaries that have hit the third rail plenty of times. As a Black public intellectual, he has opposed affirmative action and similar programs. “Sowell’s scholarship would demonstrate empirically,” Riley asserts, “that racial preferences for the black underclass were not only ineffective but counterproductive, that they stigmatized black achievement, and that they were no substitute for the development of skills, attitudes, and habits that are conducive to upward mobility.” Perhaps unlikely friends such as Steven Pinker have suggested that Sowell’s race has kept him from being recognized as a great economist, but regardless, he has always been interested in matters that embrace child development, public policy, and other extraneous topics. It is on Sowell’s economics that Riley falls short: Sowell has said that his work on Say’s law is among his most important accomplishments, but Say’s law goes unglossed while the differences between the Chicago School and other economic schools of thought merit broader exploration.

Though with some shortcomings, this will be valuable to students of economics, Black conservatism, and public policy.

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The natural world is bursting with seemingly endless color, writes *Wired* deputy editor Rogers in this sharp, often jocular look at waves and particles, fluctuations in the Earth’s magnetic and electrical fields, and the electromagnetic spectrum, of which humans only experience a small visual slice. Since prehistory, we have gone about repurposing objects around us; one example is the engineering of chemicals to provide color. Those colors are picked up by the photoreceptors in our eyes and then processed. Rogers discusses how our neurophysiological and psychophysiologic impression helps create our sense of the world, examining color as knowledge (discovering a good place to find food), color as commerce (desire, rarity, trade), color as semiotics, “to know how someone will see those colors once applied.” Rogers is particularly illuminating in his discussions of the history of color and our ever growing appreciation of it, from Aristotle to Arab physicists to the Chinese to the caves at Lascaux and beyond, as craft expertise blossomed into a revolution that marched in parallel with that of optics. While the author is in his element exploring the evolution of dyes and pigments, from the highly toxic to the highly opaque and bright, he is on less firm ground when approaching the “salience” of color, its “cultural and personal significance”—of course, this is understandable given that science has only begun to plumb the subject. Rogers also makes valiant attempts to discern the universality of color—“Do people who speak different languages literally see different colors?”—and through all the scientific concepts, he brings a tinder-dry humor and evident enthusiasm for the subject.

From opsins to Technicolor movies, Rogers covers the colorscape with brio, dash, and crystal clearness.

Breaking down the messy nature of Donald Trump’s hard-line China policy and how China took advantage of the relationship.

The last four years of the American government’s stance...
regarding China was largely guided by the realization that the prior 40-year experiment of engagement and accommodation was not working. China simply did not want political liberalization, and growing evidence revealed that the Chinese Communist Party was infiltrating many facets of American society, from universities to Silicon Valley to Wall Street. As Washington Post foreign policy columnist Rogn shows in meticulous, depressing detail, even though candidate Trump’s aggressive approach effectively called out the authoritarian regime, the administration’s “dysfunction and the president’s behavior” led to erratic results. From the beginning, Trump loyalists like Jared Kushner—guided by Steve Mnuchin and other “pro-business players”—and Steve Bannon fashioned themselves as China experts. Regarding Bannon, the author writes, “it takes real nerve to lead a populist, anti-China movement when you started as a Goldman Sachs executive—and when you have already made your money in China before turning against the system that made that possible. After he left Goldman, Bannon worked for...a Hong Kong startup...[that] used cheap labor in China to mine virtual goods inside computer games to sell for real-world money.” On the other hand, Matthew Pottinger, National Security Council senior director for Asia, managed to craft an intelligible policy and was one of the few who stuck it out for all four years of Trump’s presidency. Rogn delineates how, by 2018, hawks like Mike Pompeo and Mike Pence overruled the pro-business faction, leading to the implementation of tariffs and an all-out trade war. The spread of Covid-19, which Trump repeatedly dubbed the “China virus,” as well as the violent suppression in Hong Kong ensured that U.S.–China relations reached a low point by the 2020 election. It doesn’t make for heartening reading, but Rogn covers it comprehensively.

An exhaustive study that leaves open the question of whether the Biden administration can maintain a steadier hand.

BETTER, NOT BITTER Living on Purpose in the Pursuit of Racial Justice Salaam, Yusef Grand Central Publishing (352 pp.) $28.00 | May 18, 2021 978-1-5387-0500-1

One of the wrongly accused and imprisoned Central Park Five recounts his experiences with an unjust system of justice.

Salaam was just 15 when he “was run over by the spiked wheels of justice.” That collision came when he was accused, along with four other teenagers, of raping a young woman in New York’s Central Park and leaving her for dead. Tried as a juvenile, he was sent into adult custody at Rikers Island, “a notoriously violent prison from which many men never returned,” before being shifted in and out of other institutions. In 2002, following a jailhouse confession by the actual attacker, the convictions were overturned. Inside the system, taking a cue from Malcolm X, Salaam accepted the fact that “it’s often incumbent upon the person to educate him- or herself while inside.” He completed high school and earned an associate’s degree, building on his enrollment in the LaGuardia High School of Music and Art when he was only 12. “They have created cages in order to create animals so they’ll have an excuse to create more cages,” writes the author. “But we all have the power to blossom behind those bars.”


An appropriately chilly and brainy history of the pioneering German electronic group.

Founded in Düsseldorf in 1970 by Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider, Kraftwerk (“power station”) was an unlikely pop phenomenon. Their early hit “Autobahn” was a distillation of a 23-minute track meant to evoke the drift and speed of the national highway and the members cultivated such an austere persona they were all but anonymous. While playing live, the members lined up like a row of passport-control officers, with practically no audience banter. Schütte, a literary scholar and hardcore Kraftwerk fan, doesn’t strive to crack the ice that encases the band’s public image. We learn little about the personal lives of Hütter, Schneider (who died in 2020), and company—except about their obsession with bicycling, an avocation that informed their final studio album, 2005’s Tour de France Soundtracks. What the book lacks in personal insight, though, it makes up for with the author’s well-researched understanding of the thinking behind their music. The Kraftwerk philosophy is best summarized by the title of their 1978 album, The Man-Machine. The band strove to capture the burl of their industrial city (and the roads around it) while contemplating (and lightly satirizing) notions of humanity’s perfectibility. Because they were so savvy about embracing new technologies—they hired an engineer to wrangle the notoriously complicated Synclavier II synthesizer—they were of-the-moment well
into the 1980s. Because their songs focused on the integration of man and technology (cars, trains, computers, bicycles), they never became irrelevant. Beyond the theorizing, Schütte suggests, Kraftwerk also paved the way for Germany to develop its own cultural transformation from “genocide [to] a brighter future inaugurated by a post-war generation that had learned its lessons from a terrible history.” A more intimate and thorough band biography would be welcome, but intimacy was never Kraftwerk’s long suit.

A well-turned introduction to a band whose sleek surfaces belied complicated ideas.

**ETHEL ROSENBERG**

**An American Tragedy**

Sebba, Anne

St. Martin's (320 pp.)

$27.99 | Jun. 8, 2021

978-1-250-19863-1

The short, heartbreaking life of a woman caught in the meat grinder of history.

Like British biographer and journalist Sebba, many readers first encountered Ethel Rosenberg (1915-1953) through E.L. Doctorow’s fictionalized account in *The Book of Daniel* (1971) or in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963) and came away with a general romantic impression that she was a martyr. This riveting biography, pulling together decades of previous work on the Rosenbergs as well as chilling new evidence released in 2014, fills in the blanks and proves the case. As Sebba demonstrates, Ethel was certainly a communist, as were many liberals in her pre-McCarthy era, but she was not a spy, as was her husband, Julius. The author’s sharp portrait of Julius is decidedly unflattering, but she was not a spy, as was her husband, Julius. The author’s sharp portrait of Julius is decidedly unflattering, whether he is slavering for the approval of his Russian handlers or keeping silent about his wife’s (non)role to increase his own meager chances of survival. On the other hand, it’s clear that the importance of the information he passed was exaggerated and executing him for it was barbaric. Though a juror saw Ethel as “a steely, stony, tight-lipped woman…the mastermind” of the operation, Sebba suggests that nothing could be further from the truth. What took her down was her unshakable loyalty to her husband and a shockingly weak legal defense against Roy Cohn and a team of prosecution hotshots, plus a hanging judge. The author compellingly narrates Ethel's early life, the course of her relationship with the brother whose perjury sent her to the electric chair, and both her difficulties as a mother and her commitment to overcoming them. Could there be a better time to review “what can happen when fear, a forceful and blunt weapon in the hands of authority, turns to hysteria and justice is willfully ignored”?

A concise yet thorough account of a 1953 miscarriage of justice with alarming relevance today.

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**STRANGER CARE**

A Memoir of Loving What Isn’t Ours

Sentilles, Sarah

Random House (432 pp.)

$28.00 | May 4, 2021

978-0-593-23003-9

A writer and her husband take in a newborn as a foster child in rural Idaho. Sentilles, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and author of *Breaking Up With God*, among other books, lovingly cared for baby Coco for nine months while her troubled birth mother, Evelyn, worked on her personal issues. It’s clear that the author, who had reluctantly agreed with her husband not to have biological children, hoped the arrangement with Coco would lead to adoption. After becoming qualified to foster, the couple turned down many children. “We said no a lot,” writes Sentilles. “To sibling set after sibling set. To older child after older child. To child in need after child in need after child in need.” The author also discusses Idaho’s status as a “reunification state,” where “reunifying foster children with their biological parents is considered a victory.” This leaves readers in the uncomfortable position of feeling that Sentilles, so emotionally and spiritually invested, has set herself up for an inevitable devastation. The social workers she encountered come across as chilly and defensive in the text, though it’s obvious they were also harried and overworked. The author portrays Coco in a consistently glowing light; she was a charming “delight” seemingly everywhere she went. Though interspersed passages about how whales and trees care for each other and parables from the Bible offer welcome relief from the pain of the central story, they don’t provide much added value. Throughout, Sentilles scrupulously examines her own thoughts and feelings—including her guilt that she would be happy to see Evelyn fail or “flip her truck” if it meant she could keep Coco—but it’s evident that she is not past that chapter of her life. In the epilogue, the author chronicles the continuing battle among her and Coco’s unfit biological parents, social workers, and lawyers.

A tragic, occasionally uplifting story that reveals more about the author’s psychological state than the foster care system.

**NUMBERS DON’T LIE**

71 Stories To Help Us Understand the Modern World

Smil, Václav

Penguin (368 pp.)

$18.00 paper | May 4, 2021

978-0-14-313622-4

An assembly of short, numbers-based investigations into important questions of the day.
“Angry, rueful, and defiant, the impressive roster of award-winning writers and academics portrays a nation wracked by pain.”

THERE’S A REVOLUTION OUTSIDE, MY LOVE

Ed. by Smith, Tracy K. & Freeman, John

Vintage (320 pp.)

$16.95 paper | May 11, 2021
978-0-593-31469-2

Reflections on racism from 40 writers.

Pulitzer Prize winner Smith, former poet laureate of the U.S., and Freeman, an executive editor at Knopf, gather poems, letters, and essays, most previously published in Literary Hub, bearing witness to systemic oppression and racial injustice. Angry, rueful, and defiant, the impressive roster of award-winning writers and academics portrays a nation wracked by pain. “There’s a revolution outside, my love,” journalist and cultural critic Kirsten West Savali writes in a moving letter to her son. “Where in the world is safe for you, my beautiful, beautiful boy?” Jasmin Drain, addressing his daughter, reflects that during the pandemic, she must wear two masks: one, her skin color; the other, protection against the virus. “Your born mask brought fear. This new one doubles it,” he writes. “There’s no vaccine for who you’ll be or how you’ll be viewed, for the unseen or visible parts that will oftentimes be assumed of you.” Protests against police brutality inspired many pieces: “Like an arrow” writes Native American writer Layli Long Soldier, “the images of George Floyd pierced my soul.” Living in Madison, Wisconsin, where he teaches creative writing, poet Amaud Jamaul Johnson describes “the Fault Lines of Midwestern Racism”: insidious expressions of prejudice among...
Whites who treat him like “a kind of mascot, a pet Negro, that one Black body in the coffee shop or at the private pool; I’ve become everyone’s one Black friend.” Francisco Goldman compares dictators to Trump: “The aftereffects of an evil dictatorship are hard to get rid of, to scrub clean. It usually involves a steadfast struggle, and justice is the only remedy.” In “A Letter to Black America,” Smith invokes Black solidarity, exhorting her readers to “revel in the depth and the flair and the belief and the secrecy of Blackness. We are lucky to be who we are, and we know it.” Other contributors include Edwidge Danticat, Gregory Pardlo, Ross Gay, and Camille T. Dungy.

An eloquent and urgent collection.

**THE BEAUTY OF LIVING TWICE**

*Stone, Sharon*

Knopf (256 pp.)

$26.95 | Mar. 30, 2021

978-0-525-65676-0

The celebrated actor reflects on a life of success, activism, and cleansing self-discovery.

Stone (b. 1958) begins in the hospital in 2001, when a severe brain injury nearly ended her life. She then backtracks to her youth growing up with three siblings in the “snowbelt” of northwestern Pennsylvania. She excelled at school but distanced herself from an aloof, damaged mother, a woman who never had a chance “to imagine a life where she could be whatever she chose.” As a teenager, Stone waited tables while entering local beauty pageants, which led to Manhattan modeling jobs and a move to Hollywood in the early 1980s. The author breaks down her iconic roles in *Basic Instinct* and *Casino*. Regarding the controversial interrogation scene in the former, she writes, “there have been many points of view...but since I’m the one with the vagina in question, let me say: the other points of view are bullshit.” While sharing a host of madcap episodes throughout an eventful life, she also proudly describes her impressive “life of success, activism, and cleansing self-discovery.”

Fans will blissfully revel in the intimate if restlessly delivered details in this perceptive memoir.

**LOST IN SUMMERLAND**

*Swanson, Barrett*

Counterpoint (304 pp.)

$27.00 | May 18, 2021

978-1-64009-418-5

A probing essay collection that tackles relevant issues emerging in America’s current shaky political and social climate.

In “Consciousness Razing,” Swanson recounts his experience at a “manhood-confirming” adventure retreat hosted by a men’s encounter group called Evryman. As the weekend’s activities triggered strong emotional reactions, the author questioned the intent of such movements. “The relevant question for me...is whether this torrent of emotion is a meaningful intervention into the debate about masculinity,” he writes, “whether Evryman is treating the symptom or the cause.” In his account of his time at a convention for fans of *The West Wing*, Swanson reflects on the renewed interest in the series as a signal of a nostalgic yearning for its idealistic portrayal of governance. “Whereas Obama followed the rules of Aristotelian drama and thus resembled a president from Aaron Sorkin’s imagination,” writes the author, “Trump obeyed the anti-narratives of reality television, where what matters most is not coherence or logical progression, but chaos and titillation.” The title essay follows Swanson’s visit to a psychic convention in upstate New York, a journey prompted by the experiences of his brother, who had suffered a brain injury that caused him to experience psychic visions. This is one of the more compelling and moving pieces, as the author delves informatively into the dynamics of the sibling relationship and reflects on his struggles with depression. With the exception of a couple pieces that miss the mark in their humorous aim—e.g., visiting the massive Noah’s Ark waterpark in Wisconsin—these are mostly tuned-in, absorbing essays. However, the author sometimes relies too heavily on affected wordplay that doesn’t always match the subject matter. In comparison to the crisp prose of a few contemporaries—Jia Tolentino and Zadie Smith come to mind—Swanson’s overly mannered style can be distracting. If he can rein in the tendency to overwrite, this could be the start of a fruitful career.

Intelligent, well-informed essays from a promising if occasionally pedantic writer.

**SUPER FOUNDERS**

*What Data Reveals About Billion-Dollar Startups*

*Tamasch Ali*

PublicAffairs (272 pp.)

$30.00 | May 18, 2021

978-1-5417-6842-0

A successful Silicon Valley venture capitalist offers a grand tour of the startups now worth billions.
Tamaseb is an articulate and influential advocate for the complex world of startup culture, and his education, experience, and access all come into play here. Many books in this realm tend toward cautionary tales, but Tamaseb offers an intriguing combination of history, data, theory, economics, and thoughtful interviews with significant founders and investors, creating a narrative that is less tech history and more playbook for the power players that come after. The author focuses only on companies valued at more than $1 billion, which, despite what sensational media attention may suggest, are not common. “Billion-dollar startups—or ‘unicorns,’ a term coined by venture capitalist Aileen Lee—are, as their name indicates, relatively rare. They make up less than 0.1 percent of startups.” Featuring contributions from such boldface names as Eric Yuan, founder of Zoom, and investor Peter Thiel, the book is as organized and clear-cut as a textbook, but Tamaseb has a personable and generous writing style and the grace to step aside to highlight other voices. In the first third, the author engages in some necessary myth-busting about startups and their founders, using data to move the narrative beyond the stereotype of a couple of genius friends working 24/7 in their parents’ garage. Next, Tamaseb examines the origin stories of well-known corporations like PayPal and Airbnb as well as companies that are less familiar publicly but no less successful. Later, the author pivots to business models, the timing of bringing a product to market, and how to deal with competition. Finally, he lands on the juicy issue of success and lessons to be learned from their journeys.

A well-meaning and often stirring insider’s look at startup success and lessons to be learned from their journeys.

REMAKE THE WORLD
Essays, Reflections, Rebellions
Taylor, Astra
Haymarket (200 pp.)
$17.95 paper | May 4, 2021
978-1-59463-445-1

A trenchant analysis of contemporary problems.

Activist, organizer, and documentary filmmaker Taylor gathers 15 penetrating essays (previously published in venues such as the New York Times, New Republic, and the Bulfinch) on issues including the deleterious consequences of unfettered capitalism; planetary stewardship; Covid-19; inequality; and the meaning of democracy. “We are all living amid the wreckage of a long, ongoing, and intentional sabotage of progressive collective action,” she writes, “a profit-driven health care system ill-prepared to cope with a pandemic, runaway climate change threatening the future, a bigoted and broken criminal justice system, a misinformation-addled (and conspiracy-promoting) corporate media sphere, and an economy in which the majority of people can barely keep their heads above water.” In the face of such deep-seated problems, the author laments the lack of “an organized and mobilized multiracial working class fighting for their shared interests.” Her own evolution from “supportive observer to obsessive organizer” came in response to the Occupy movement, which highlighted the suffocating debt afflicting so many Americans; in response, she helped found the Rolling Jubilee, a fundraising initiative aiming to purchase and erase people’s debts, and the Debt Collective, a union for debtors. Activism alone cannot foment change, Taylor asserts: Organizing transforms activism into movement building, crucial to sustaining and advancing causes “when the galvanizing intensity of occupations or street protests subsides.” In several essays, the author delivers sharp critiques of capitalism, which she calls “an insecurity machine.” Besides “profits, commodities, and inequality, insecurity is a fundamental output of the system.” More than reforming capitalism, she urges, we must “jettison and transcend it.” Whether she is writing about gender discrimination in the tech industry, the plight of refugees, or the rights of the natural world, Taylor reveals in her essays a forthright commitment to “the cause of common humanity.”

Stirring essays reveal an intelligent and pragmatic voice for change.

BEYOND
How Humankind Thinks About Heaven
Wolff, Catherine
Riverhead (352 pp.)
$28.00 | May 25, 2021
978-1-59463-445-1

A broad survey of global and historical views of the post-life spiritual realm. In this vast overview, writer and therapist Wolff wades deep into the murky waters of heaven, the afterlife, and unseen planes of being. The sweeping narrative—designed for lay readers, some of whom may be overwhelmed by its scope—introduces countless intriguing concepts, from near-death experiences to reincarnation. With eloquent reporting on various cultures and faiths, the author presents her work as “a history of hope” and an examination of “the ongoing collective exercise of the human imagination.” Wolff begins with the prehistoric evidence for belief in what may be termed the afterlife, or at least a world beyond the present, physical one. She then moves on to ancient religions, focusing not only on doctrines of life after death (most famously in ancient Egypt), but also on poetic views of the world of the dead, as captured in such works as the Odyssey and the Aeneid. Moving on to Judaism, Wolff admirably captures the ambiguity involved in Jewish teachings on the afterlife. This sets up her lengthy, detailed examination of Christianity, as she tracks views on the afterlife through religious figures (Paul, Augustine, Julian of Norwich, Swedenborg, etc.) and artists and writers (Dante, Blake, Bunyan), all against the backdrop of the proliferation of significant religious movements such as the Reformation. In the educative...
section on Islam, Wolff notes how Allah is “an all-powerful and transcendent but also an interested god, concerned with humans, capable of acting in history with mercy and justice.”

Hinduism and Buddhism share a section, in which the author demonstrates that whereas the liberal West views all religions as heading toward a common end (a tranquil afterlife), Eastern religions can have thoroughly different concepts of what that final end may look like. The concluding section, “We Shall Not Cease From Exploration,” looks to the future of our unceasing search for meaning.

A soulful, far-reaching primer on what lies beyond.

TO WRITE AS IF ALREADY DEAD
Zambreno, Kate
Columbia Univ. (192 pp.)
$18.00 paper | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-231-18845-6

The experimental novelist wrestles with mortality, identity, parenthood, and friendship—and that’s before the pandemic hits.

This contemplative, rhetorically austere memoir is a kind of companion piece to Zambreno’s excellent 2020 novel, Drifts. That work of autofiction followed the author as she labored to meet a book deadline while navigating teaching gigs, her creative direction, and parenthood. Same story here: Zambreno has been commissioned to write a study of the French writer Hervé Guibert, whose 1990 novel, To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life, was a roman à clef about his friendship with philosopher Michel Foucault. The novel was controversial (and became a French bestseller) for disclosing that Foucault died of AIDS. Though Zambreno tries to stay on point, Guibert’s book mainly serves as a launchpad for more personal excursions she can’t set aside. Much of the first half of this book is focused on a friendship with a writer who wished to keep her identity obscure. Was their connection more authentic for being anonymous, Zambreno wonders, or a more distant connection of two artistic personas? In the second half, Zambreno focuses on life as a new mother consumed with thoughts about intimacy, relationships, and (of course) finishing the Guibert book. As the pandemic grew in scope, Zambreno’s sense of disillusionment and despair intensified, feelings she finds echoed in Guibert’s work. Drifts was digressive but possessed a lyricism, sense of humor, and passion that justified its fragmentary nature. By contrast, this book is meandering and chilly. Zambreno clings to Guibert’s book as a signifier of troubled friendships, first-person writing, and physical illness, but there’s little sense of resolution or coherence. That’s partly the point, of course. The author is frustrated by the way memoir is “supposed to be incredibly earnest and moral.” She wants to push back against that tradition, but the result is more an exercise in sangfroid than transgression.

A somber meta-memoir, rich in ideas but set at an emotional low boil.
These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

- **FRED GETS DRESSED** by Peter Brown ............................................. 97
- **INDELIBLE ANN** by Meghan P. Brown; illus. by Caralynn Whitt.... 97
- **WHAT THE KITE SAW** by Anne Laurel Carter; illus. by Akin Düzakin ............................................. 99
- **ARU SHAH AND THE CITY OF GOLD** by Roshani Chokshi ........... 100
- **ISLAND BOOK** by Evan Dahm ......................................................... 101
- **FORCE OF FIRE** by Sayantani DasGupta ........................................ 102
- **BUBBLES...UP!** by Jacqueline Davies; illus. by Sonia Sánchez ...... 102
- **HIKING AND CAMPING** by Jennifer Pharr Davis & Haley Blevins; illus. by Aliki Karkoulia ............................................. 102
- **THE WORM FAMILY HAS ITS PICTURE TAKEN** by Jennifer Frank; illus. by David Ezra Stein ............................................. 106
- **IS WAS** by Deborah Freedman ......................................................... 106
- **NO MORE PLASTIC** by Alma Fullerton ........................................... 106
- **NOOK** by Sally Anne Garland .......................................................... 107
- **FUNGARIUM** by Ester Gaya; illus. by Katie Scott ......................... 107
- **THE FROGGIES DO NOT WANT TO SLEEP** by Adam Gustafson .......................................................... 110
- **NOW THAT NIGHT IS NEAR** by Astrid Lindgren; illus. by Marit Tornqvist; trans. by Polly Lawson .......................................................... 117
- **RUN, LITTLE CHASKI!** by Mariana Llanos; illus. by Mariana Ruiz Johnson .......................................................... 117
- **HELLO, RAIN!** by Kyo Maclear; illus. by Chris Turnham ............ 118
- **BRANCHES OF HOPE** by Ann Magee; illus. by Nicole Wong ....... 118
- **ATTICUS CATICUS** by Sarah Maizes; illus. by Kara Kramer ........ 118
- **LET’S PLAY!** by Amanda McCord; illus. by Colleen Larmour ...... 119
- **ESCAPE** by Ming & Wab; illus. by Carmen Vela .................. 120
- **HAIR TWINS** by Raakhee Mirchandani; illus. by Holly Hatam .... 121
- **DA VINCI’S CAT** by Catherine Gilbert Murdock; illus. by Paul O. Zelinsky .......................................................... 122
- **CHARLIE Chooses** by Lou Peacock; illus. by Nicola Slater .......... 124
- **THE MUSEUM OF EVERYTHING** by Lynne Rae Perkins ......... 124
- **PABLO** by Rascal; trans. by Antony Shugaar .................................. 125
- **IT DOESN’T TAKE A GENIUS** by Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich ...................................................................... 127
- **THIS VERY TREE** by Sean Rubin ..................................................... 128
- **OUT OF THE BLUE** by Elizabeth Shreve; illus. by Frann Preston-Gannon .......................................................... 132
- **ETTY DARWIN AND THE FOUR PEBBLE PROBLEM** by Lauren Soloy .......................................................... 133
- **OSCAR’S TOWER OF FLOWERS** by Lauren Tobias ................... 134
- **WISHES** by Muon Thi Văn; illus. by Victo Ngai ......................... 135
- **LINE AND SCRIBBLE** by Debora Vogrig; illus. by Pia Valentinei ... 135
- **DO ANIMALS FALL IN LOVE?** by Katharina von der Gatten; illus. by Anke Kubl; trans. by Shelley Tanaka .......................................................... 136
- **WAYS TO GROW LOVE** by Renée Watson; illus. by Nina Mata .... 136
- **ALL WE NEED** by Kathy Wolff; illus. by Margaux Moganek .... 138
- **THE SECRETS OF PTEROSAURS** by Yang Yang; trans. by Mo Chen; illus. by Chuang Zhong .......................................................... 138
- **OUR SHED** by Robert Broder; illus. by Carrie O’Neill .......... 139
- **YOUR MAMA** by NoNieqa Ramos; illus. by Jacqueline Alcantara ...................................................................... 141
- **STROLLERCOASTER** by Matt Ringler; illus. by Razúl the Third & Elaine Bay .......................................................... 142
- **I SANG YOU DOWN FROM THE STARS** by Tosha Spillett-Summer; illus. by Michaela Goade .......................................................... 142
- **I’LL MEET YOU IN YOUR DREAMS** by Jessica Young; illus. by Rafael López .......................................................... 143
I’ve got some time off coming up this month, and with no exciting travel in the offering, I’m planning on spending it catching up on some reading. But it's still time off, so I’m lining up books that feel as little like work as possible: middle-grade fantasy. Those are the stories that made me a reader, and they are still the ones that can recharge my reading soul. This spring has a bundle, ranging from magical adventure in the real world to wholly built-world fantasy, satisfying lots of different fantasy itches.

In Marie Arnold’s *The Year I Flew Away* (Versify/HMH, Feb. 2), Gabrielle Marie Jean must leave Haiti and her parents behind and go alone to live with her uncle, aunt, and cousins in New York. Acutely aware of the difference between her and her classmates, she makes a terrible bargain with the witch Lady Lydia in hopes of instantly fitting in. Of course, it does not go well, but with the help of friends—one a human, the other a talking rat—maybe she can repair the damage. “A fantastical take on immigrant narratives” (as our review said) and a talking rat? Count me in.

Kate Milford takes readers back to an earlier version of the world of *Greenglass House* (2014) and its companions with *The Raconteur’s Commonplace Book* (Clarion, Feb. 23). I’m a series fan, so I’m not surprised to learn that Milford gives her readers “rich complex language [that] hints of magic and connection, of interwoven fates and tragedies.” This is not a straight novel but rather a framed collection of stories along the lines of *The Decameron*, with a diverse assemblage of travelers trapped by weather in the inn that will become the Greenglass House, exchanging tales that come together like a puzzle. I can’t wait.

Girl power is at the heart of Australian trilogy opener *Ottilie Colter and the Narroway Hunt* (Little Hare/Trafalgar, March 1) by Rhiannon Williams. It’s got a classic setup: two children living in poverty in the Swamp Hol lows. When Ottilie’s younger brother goes missing in a rash of boys being abducted, she disguises herself as a boy in order to find him. It turns out they’ve been taken to participate in the titular hunt, guarding the kingdom’s borders from monsters—a necessary task, Ottilie learns, but one girls cannot take part in. (Ottilie’s pale; her brother is darker.) Our review concludes: “a must-read for fans of the genre.” Nuff said.

In Amanda Foody’s *The Accidental Apprentice* (McElderry, March 30), set in the aptly named town of Dullshire, an apprentice mushroom farmer named Barclay toils, orphaned years earlier by a Beast attack. When he accidentally bonds with another Beast, his place in Dullshire is threatened, as locals revile the Beasts and the human Lore Keepers who befriend them. Pale-skinned Barclay’s world is a naturally diverse one. According to our review, “the worldbuilding calls forth the atmosphere of classic fantasy worlds while invoking fun and whimsy every step of the way.” Exactly what I need.

Feared creatures—or, rather, criaturas—also figure in *Cece Rios and the Desert of Souls* (Harper/HarperCollins, April 13) by Kaela Rivera. They are feared by the inhabitants of Tierra del Sol, but when she was 7, Cece befriended a kindly one. Five years later, however, an evil one steals her sister, and Cece sets her sights on rescuing her when everyone else gives up. To do so, though, she’ll have to enter the Bruja Fights. “With strong ties to Mesoamerican lore and culture,” writes our reviewer, “the story hits the sweet spot between dark and light.” Sounds great, doesn’t it?

It’ll be a fabulous week.

Vicky Smith is a young readers’ editor.
“Sprightly illustrations and book design will hold young readers’ attention.”

HOME SWEET FOREVER HOME

Alpine, Rachelle
Illus. by Sonda, Addy Rivera
Aladdin (160 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
Series: The Invincible Girls Club, 1

Four friends plan an adoption day for shelter dogs.

Lauren loves dogs but can’t own one due to her stepfather’s allergies, so she volunteers at the local shelter and encourages other grade friends to join her. Their supervisor tells them it’s difficult to find homes for older dogs, and, indeed, Rhett, her favorite, is still there after weeks. The girls decide to make a project of finding homes for older dogs. Their teacher can’t take one, and neither can Lauren’s uncle Patrick—he and Uncle Imad travel too much. The girls decide to hold an event at Uncle Patrick’s cupcake shop, luring people with cupcakes to showcase the dogs up for adoption. The girls work hard, but when disaster strikes, the plan must change. But these girls are invincible, right? The book concludes with short, inspiring bios of international girls and women who work with animals and tips for helping shelter dogs.

The text reads quickly, and the sprightly illustrations and book design will hold young readers’ attention. Adults may groan, but some kids will find the punny chapter titles (“TEAMWORK IS PAW-SOME”) amusing. The cover of this first series entry shows Lauren and Ruby (who is chubby) as White, Emelyn with light brown skin and straight black hair, and Myka as Black. Sadly, Myka’s large family is described as especially loud, reflecting two common stereotypes.

Girl power, dogs, and cupcakes provide a good mix for an easy chapter book. (Fiction. 7-9)

FREE TO BE ELEPHANT ME

Andreae, Giles
Illus. by Parker-Rees, Guy
Orchard/Scholastic (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 1, 2021

What will Num-Num’s Elephant Name be?

Elephant tradition demands that every young elephant perform for Elephant Mighty to show they are best at something. Elephant Mighty, depicted in the illustrations as a tusked, enthroned bull with crown and ermine-trimmed robe, will then reward them with an Elephant Name. When Nina pulls a tree from the ground with her trunk, Elephant Mighty says, “Your trunk is so splendid and long! / I never imagined that tree would come loose. / I’m calling you ELEPHANT STRONG!” But Num-Num doesn’t have a talent. Though he tries a few tricks when forced to, the elephants laugh at him, and Elephant Mighty dubbs him Elephant Nothing. Num-Num moves far away to his own watering hole, where, because he is such a sweet elephant, he makes a lot of new friends of many different species. When they hear his story, they’re shocked. The group treks back to tell Elephant Mighty how wrong he was. Num-Num tells a skeptical ruler that he wants to be Elephant Me. “I may not be noisy or tough, / But the hardest thing sometimes is just to be YOU, / And to know being YOU is ENOUGH.” Elephant Mighty has a surprising response, and everything ends with a dance. Andreae’s signature perky, rhymed verse (here set in abcb quatrains) pairs nicely with Parker-Rees’ sunny cartoon illustrations.

A bit too straightforward with its lesson, but this British import has both a heart and a spirited lead. (Picture book: 3-8)

THE GRUMBLETROLL

aprilkind & van den Speulhof, Barbara
Illus. by Pricken, Stephan
Schiffer (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 28, 2021

When he’s frustrated, hungry, and stubborn, even the nicest troll can turn into a grumbletroll.

“Right behind the forest, first a few steps straight ahead, then once to the left and twice to the right, there lies a little troll.” He’s clearly enjoying a marvelous life— until he decides to build himself a cottage retreat. When his construction collapses, the furry, bright blue troll stomps off in an escalating tantrum described and depicted with both humor and insight. When apples won’t fall from the tree, he shouts “so angrily” that the worms in the apples get hiccups. Every little thing makes him rage harder. “It’s as if there is a thunderstorm living inside him. With lightning shooting out of the sky. With thunder rumbling tremendously.” Now the grumbletroll emerges, complete with two scraggly tusks marring his once-cuddly face. That night, his animal friends encourage the grumbletroll to settle down and let them sleep, but he defiantly insists on sleeping sitting up. The next morning, when the grumbletroll roars with complaints, his fed-up friends leave. Soon lonely and bored, the grumbletroll floats an apology to his friends, who are, perhaps unrealistically, quick to accept, and troll’s marvelous life resumes, his cottage retreat now complete. At more than 800 words, this book is recommended for practiced listeners who are also ready to think about managing their own anger. This German import is a companion title for a plush toy developed by creative team aprilkind.

Even tantrum-prone readers will love seeing how the grumbletroll works through rage and restores friendships. (Picture book: 5-7)
“This portrait of a family and community that takes joy and pride in their identity and traditions is refreshing.”

HALAL HOT DOGS

Aziz, Susannah
Illus. by Singh, Parizinder
Little Bee (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-4998-1157-5

Musa loves Fridays, when Jummah prayer at the masjid is followed by a family Jummah treat at home.

Each member of this Muslim family takes turns choosing the treat. Lately, though, the Jummah treat has been “...interesting.” Like Baba’s kufte kebabs that are hard as rocks or little Maryam’s jelly-bean collection from under her bed. Musa’s turn is coming up, and he can’t wait to treat the family to halal hot dogs from the best stand, the one on the street near the masjid. But first he has to walk to the masjid with his family—dancing the dabke along the way—get through Jummah prayer with a rumbling stomach, wait for his family to be ready to leave the masjid, pass all sorts of other food stands, wait in line, and get all the way home to enjoy their treat. Musa’s enthusiasm for halal hot dogs is infectious, and this portrait of a family and community that takes joy and pride in their identity and traditions is refreshing. Singh’s colorful illustrations use animation-style effects to bring out the humor of the scenes and accessibility of the characters. Both textual and visual details point to this family’s Middle Eastern origins. An informative note at the end of the book defines halal food law for readers unfamiliar with it. This is a fast-paced read, with a vigorously multicultural urban setting that will feel familiar to some and intriguing to others. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9.8-by-16.6-inch double-page spreads viewed at 76.2% of actual size.)

A joyful celebration of street food and Muslim American culture. (author’s note, glossary of Arabic terms) (Picture book. 3-9)
SPARKLE MAGIC
Bardhan-Quallen, Sudipta
Illus. by Wu, Vivien
Random House (96 pp.)
$5.99 paper | $12.99 PLB | May 4, 2021
978-0-593-30873-8 paper
978-0-593-30874-5 PLB
Series: Mermicorns, 1

From the author of the Purrmaids series comes a new series about mer-unicorns.

It’s the big day when young mermicorns of Seadragon Bay who are ready to learn magic are invited to attend Mermicorn Magic Academy, and Sirena hopes she’ll be included. After meeting Lily, who has just received her letter, Sirena rushes home to find her own acceptance. Soon, Sirena and Lily aren’t just classmates, but also assigned to be partners at their new magic school. While Sirena’s excited to have a new friend, she quickly finds herself growing insecure about her abilities, as magic seems to come easily for Lily. Sirena ends up in a cycle of self-defeat—the more she worries about magic, the more the negativity affects her ability to perform it. After school, Sirena wants to go practice without an audience, but Lily wants to join her, resulting in a confrontation between the two, a revelation that Lily’s not as confident as she has seemed, and a chance for Sirena to shine in both magic and friendship.

Though many aspects of the plot are common to the genre, the heavy emphasis on feelings and the open acknowledgment that contradictory feelings can be experienced simultaneously give validation and reassurance to its audience. Though the mermicorns don’t have races per se and all have wildly colored manes and tails, Sirena is depicted with a white hide while Lily is a chestnut. In Book 2, A Friendship Problem, publishing simultaneously, Lily takes center stage.

A safe bet for magic-loving young readers. (Fantasy. 6-9)
(A Friendship Problem: 978-0-593-30876-9 paper, 978-0-593-30877-6 PLB)

OUR COUNTRY’S PRESIDENTS
A Complete Encyclopedia of the U.S. Presidency
Bausum, Ann
National Geographic Kids (224 pp.)
$24.99 | Jan. 12, 2021
978-1-4263-7199-8

From George Washington to Joe Biden, the stories of all the presidents of the United States, in words and pictures.

This newest edition of a regularly revised title is all one could hope for in a family reference book, offering many avenues into learning and thinking about those who have served as U.S. president. As might be expected in works from National Geographic, the illustrations are plentiful and well displayed, and the information solid. Each entry includes a full-page official portrait, a sidebar of fast facts, and a smoothly written essay introducing the man and some of his important history, enveloped with art, photographs, and political cartoons in colorful borders. The organization is chronological. Thematic spreads interrupt the march of biographies with essays on larger topics, from the White House and its traditions to presidential security and the most recent elections. Other subjects include vice presidents, the two-party system, voting rights, impeachments (to be updated with the next printing), the Electoral College, White House children, and more. The short biographies are notable for pointing out how many early presidents and their families enslaved people or directly benefited from slavery, from Washington to Ulysses S. Grant. The treatment of Native Americans and various civil rights struggles are addressed, helping readers understand both societal changes and commonalities across different movements.

An attractive and informative resource. (election results, further resources, bibliography, illustration credits, index) (Nonfiction. 10-14)
RAYS OF THE BUFFALO
Beauchamps, Lou
Illus. by Chappell, Kate
Trans. by Ouriou, Susan & Morelli, Christelle
Orca (48 pp.)
$19.95 | May 11, 2021
978-1-4598-2617-5

Two friends experience a prolonged separation in this import from Québec.

Gilbert, a quiet White boy, and Raymond, a “brave, strong and hairy” buffalo who “live[s] in the pages of a book” called Raymond the Buffalo, are “inseparable”—until Gilbert becomes obsessed with dinosaurs and abandons his pal. When Gilbert’s mom accidentally picks up Raymond the Buffalo and mistakenly returns it to the library along with a stack of dinosaur books, the librarian tells her to “just throw [the books] down the chute.” Terrified, Raymond survives the chute but emerges outside his book. Upon realizing his mother’s terrible mistake, Gilbert rushes to the library and becomes “inconsolable” when he learns the librarian has not seen Raymond the Buffalo. Later the librarian discovers Raymond but doesn’t know Gilbert’s name to reunite them. She advises Raymond he may stay in the library until Gilbert returns, but, months later, Raymond learns Gilbert’s moved away. Raymond likes living in the library and, as years pass, becomes friends with the librarian (a White woman named Nicole), but he never forgets Gilbert, hoping they’ll meet again. The large, easy-to-read text and detailed, amusing, perky illustrations track Raymond through his friendship with Gilbert, his harrowing arrival at the library, the painful separation, and his eventual adjustment to a new life. With his wily eyes and endearing grin, plucky Raymond offers a lesson in enduring friendships, old and new.

An unusual, touching adventure involving a book, a library, and a friend. (Picture book 6-8)

BOOKS BY HORSEBACK
A Librarian’s Brave Journey To Deliver Books to Children
Berne, Emma Carlson
Illus. by Urbani, Ilaria
Little Bee (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-4998-1173-5

This story of a dedicated Kentucky librarian pays tribute to the Works Progress Administration Pack Horse Library Project of Depression-era Appalachia.

Edith is a packhorse librarian and travels on a daily basis to deliver books to the people who live deep in the hollers of eastern Kentucky. She sets out to deliver a book to 8-year-old William Caudill, who loves tales of derring-do. The trip is a dramatic and challenging one: Edith and her horse brave thunder, lightning, and hard wind and rain, complete with falling trees; slippery mud and steep mountain slopes; rushing creek waters; high mountain ridges a-bristle with thorny branches; and sliding rocks. But Edith’s determination is fierce, and she successfully delivers books to the Caudill family, even staying to dry off, warm up, and visit with the family. Capturing one librarian’s breathtaking fictional journey is a riveting way to showcase and honor the risky work of these real librarians, and the text communicates a deep reverence for their mission—and their tremendous fortitude. Illustrations depict a pale, red-haired librarian, nearly always smiling despite the obstacles that nature puts in her path. Light and shadow are used effectively to convey Mother Earth’s shifting moods. An author’s note and bibliography provide further details about the work of these resilient packhorse librarians of the Great Depression: “In the winter…librarians’ feet were often frozen to the stirrups.” All characters present White. (This book was reviewed digitally with 8.5-by-22-inch double-page spreads viewed at actual size.)

Educational and inspiring. (Picture book 4-10)

TOP SECRET
Boyer, Crispin
National Geographic Kids (192 pp.)
$19.99 | $29.9 PLB | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-4263-3912-7
978-1-4263-3913-4 PLB

A wide-ranging skulk down hidden byways of spycraft, history, nature, food, archaeology, and more.

The title reflects only the general drift of the contents. Along with quick introductions to codes and ciphers, ninjas, secret agents, tiny cameras, and the like, the authors chuck in spreads on the U.S. president’s armored car, the infrastructure of Rome’s Colosseum, great white sharks, the Rosetta Stone, Krispy Kreme doughnuts and other foods with secret formulas, women who “dressed as dudes” to disguise themselves, and dozens of other tangential, if crowd-pleasing, topics. Readers eager for mentions of, say, Gitmo, QA, or the deep state will be disappointed, but there is an interview with an actual CIA agent as well as some lesser-known spy stuff headed by an entertaining account of a “psychic arms race” between the Cold War rivals. The illustrations, a strong point as usual, mix sharply reproduced photos of people, places, and gear with close-ups of children playing spy—the last an invitation to follow the directions for several “tradecraft”-related projects like making invisible ink or setting up a network of secret informants (all in fun, of course). Human figures in the pictures are diverse of age, sex, and race. Each chapter presents readers with an encoded riddle, answers to which are revealed at the end.

Really just a jumble—but expertly designed as browser bait. (index) (Nonfiction 8-13)
“Offbeat and upbeat.”

THE ROAD TO WHEREVER

Bradley, John Ed
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (272 pp.)
$16.99 | May 11, 2021
978-0-374-31405-7

A road trip with two quirky cousins helps a boy understand his father, a troubled veteran.

Summer sees 11-year-old June set off to travel around the country with Larry and Cornell, his adult first cousins once removed. June, short for Henry Junior, lives in Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, with his Mama. Daddy, who drinks and suffers from PTSD, served in Iraq and Afghanistan and has left home. Larry and Cornell spend their summers driving a truck around the U.S. to restore old Fords—and only Fords. They are 100% Ford men who take good care of June and share their passion for and devotion to vintage models. While working on the cars, they also interact with the owners, learning about their stories and offering them as much attention as they lavish on the autos. June gradually learns the business and about his family. He is, after all, named for Henry Ford (whose biased views are named). June gets life lessons in forgiveness and gains a better understanding of his father’s problems. As they motor through Illinois, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Mississippi, and Louisiana, among other places, June not only learns about oil filters, but also listens to the owners’ treasured and sometimes painful memories. Along the way he even makes a friend. Car fanciers will relish the details while the family issues will resonate with many readers. Main characters read as White.

Offbeat and upbeat. (author’s note) (Fiction. 10-12)

Always remember, you are loved just as you are.

Turns out being different made Ack the luckiest duck of all!

Ack Ack Ack!

“A sweet tale with a strong moral about appreciating differences.”

—Kirkus Reviews

ISBN: 978-1-7340101-0-7

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An author combines her childhood immigrant experience with myths from the Philippines to create a unique tale about belonging

BY VICKY SMITH

In *We Belong* (Dial Books, March 30), Cookie Hiponia Everman's moving debut novel in verse, readers meet Elsie, the mother of two young biracial (Pilipino/White) daughters. They clamor for bedtime stories, and she tells them two intertwined tales. One, springing from Tagalog cosmology, is about Mayari and her siblings, Apolaki and Tala, all children of a mortal woman and a god who ascend to the celestial realm after the death of their mother. The other is about Elsie herself and how she left the Marcos-era Philippines as a child and came to the United States with her family. Elsie's and Mayari's stories echo each other, reinforcing themes of loss, longing, and the need to belong. We spoke to Everman via Zoom from her home in the Seattle area. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

When did you realize that this story was a children’s book?

I was inspired to write this book because of my kids. They're 12 and 10. For the first six years of my first daughter's life, I was a full-time stay-at-home mom and hausfrau. When I took them to the library, we would always look for books that [they could see themselves in]. The Bellevue Public Library is great in that they have a lot of different books in different languages: Tagalog, Vietnamese, Urdu. But they never found a book that they resonated with because they really saw themselves in it. Part of it is because they are hapa—you know, they’re half White and half Pilipino. They felt like the books were either in Tagalog, and so talking about just the Pilipino experience, or they were talking about a [strictly] Pilipino American experience. So I heeded Toni Morrison's adage: If there's a book that you want to read, and you haven't found it yet, then you have to write it yourself.

I knew it had to incorporate mythology in some way. Our younger Pilipino American generation doesn't know that much about the mythology of the Philippines—all the pre-colonial religious beliefs. I knew that I wanted to explore the mythology but also basically tell the kids our own mythology, our family's mythology.

And around the time when I first started writing the book was when we first started having these conversations: "Hey, you know, I was only 9 when I came to the States, just as old as you are. Can you imagine if I told you right now, let's go, you're gonna move to a different country, where you kind of know the language but not that well. And you kind of know the culture, but only from TV and movies. And you’re going to be expected to act a certain way and to speak a certain way, and really to look a certain way to belong to this place." The book grew from there.

I started just writing those conversations down and thinking about the connections between mythology and creating our own mythology as immigrants. It's tough to move to a different country and be expected to assimilate...
in a way that asks you to deny a very significant part of who you are. I wanted to preserve that by telling the two narratives at the same time: of the myth and of the immigration story.

The first character readers meet is an adult. How did you find a voice that would be authentic to an adult character and accessible to child readers?

There’s a reason why that old saw about how writers “write what they know” is so true. Elsie is me; I am Elsie. This book is semiautobiographical. I used to work in public relations, and my big joke was, “PR actually stands for perceived reality.” What I was trying to get at with this story is, in all of that perceived reality, what is the truth? And the truth is, this is how I speak to my kids. I don’t sugarcoat anything for them. I might use their vernacular, right? [But] I’m not going to shy away from saying, “Yeah, bad stuff happened to mama.” I always want to speak to my kids with a voice that is true, so I carry that over to Elsie.

I’d like to talk about how you chose the Mayari story and how you researched it.

I’ve always been fascinated with the creation mythology and the celestial siblings mythology, because I’d heard bits and pieces of it growing up: how Mayari and Apolaki fight for the right to be the sun. Apolaki strikes her, and she loses an eye. And I wanted to upend that a little bit, for the fight to be more equal. Bless his little heart, but I’m more fierce than my brother. I brought my own experience of being a middle child into the Mayari, Apolaki, and Tala story, because I was always competing with my brother. I tapped into that: The only way Apolaki could beat Mayari was to take her eye out.

There’s an excellent resource called the Aswang Project. It’s a website [that collects] stories—not just Tagalog mythology, but also all the different regions in the Philippines. They served as my starting point, besides the stories that I heard as a kid. When I was 21, I went to the Philippines on a solo trip, because I needed to reconnect with my roots. I literally came home with a box of books that I [wouldn’t be able to] find here. It was great to really [read in] my old language, my own mother tongue, and relearn those deep Tagalog words, because some of those words were used to tell really old myths.

I didn’t limit my research to just Pilipino references either. I am really fascinated with Anastasia Romanov and her story. What if Anastasia all this time had been living as an orphan in exile? And I thought, OK, what if Mayari and Apolaki and Tala had no idea that they were celestial royalty. I brought aspects of that [into my story].

I took a little editorial privilege. There’s a little bit of daylight here, between this part of the story and that part of the story. What if my story takes place within this little sliver of daylight?

Do you have any last words about your book?

As a person on the margins of so many different groups, I wake up every day with five strikes against me. I’m an older, queer, brown, immigrant woman. So I am very well practiced in finding my own family and figuring out where I belong now. Where you fit in isn’t necessarily where you belong. I can fit in in all kinds of different situations. I can code-switch with the best of them. But I don’t necessarily belong there. And I wanted to tell a story of people who are trying to belong, because immigrants in this country still are trying to belong.

I didn’t come over on a boat. I didn’t come across the border with only the clothes on my back. I had a whole different experience. It was all very bureaucratic. But there still is that universal trauma of leaving somewhere where you’ve felt you belonged and going somewhere else to try to belong there, because this place where you once belonged can no longer keep you safe, can no longer provide the opportunities that you need to survive and to thrive. But what’s the price of leaving that place?

We Belong received a starred review in the Jan. 1, 2021, issue.
Space adventure meets murder mystery meets video game meets puzzler.

After the reader chooses “yes” in answer to the question “Do you want to play Pemberton’s game?” the second-person protagonist is pulled into a book and wakes as a video game lizard named Dr. Iz. (Choosing “no” lands them on the final page of an Amish romance called The Cheesemaker’s Daughter.) Most people on the titular spaceship, apparently, are professional gamer, the 6-year-old (whose dialogue would better match someone older). Male players are all male aliens in-game, with a variety of skin colors, and the second-person protagonist is male. The mystery is a branching narrative with story choices and puzzles to solve, but most choices lack interesting consequences. Many simply lead the protagonist into another room where he’s able to see a clue before the story branches rejoin, seemingly without consequence. In the climactic reveal, however, long after those apparently arbitrary choices, a summation of a solved mystery involves clues that were only revealed in some of the possible forks. Puzzles are mostly simple spot-the-differences brainteasers while a more complex puzzle does not work, presenting myriad functional answers.

Some well-paced geeky humor is marred by broken or dull puzzles and inconsequential story choices. (Science fiction. 8-11)
“The text-free close-up of Mom’s and Dad’s reactions sends just the right message of parental acceptance, support, and love.”

**FRED GETS DRESSED**

*Brown, Peter  
Illus. by the author  
Little, Brown (48 pp.)  
$18.99 | May 4, 2021  
978-0-316-20064-6*

Deciding what to wear becomes an adventure for a small boy. Fred likes to “[romp] through the house naked and wild and free.” His romping takes him into his parents’ bedroom closet, where Fred initially checks out Dad’s clothing. Thinking it would be fun to dress like Dad, Fred selects a shirt, tie, and shoes, but he struggles with them. Moving onto Mom’s side of the closet, Fred opts for a blouse, scarf, and shoes, all of which easily slip on. Dressed in Mom’s clothes and huge shoes, Fred explores her jewelry box and makeup drawer, adding a necklace to his ensemble, but his attempt to apply lipstick ends in a smear. When Mom and Dad see Fred in his chosen apparel, they smile, and soon Mom shows Fred how to apply makeup and style his hair while Dad and the dog join the fun. Rendered in strong, black outlines, simple shapes, and complementary pinks and greens, the memorable illustrations portray Fred as a rosy, free-spirited tot unabashedly streaking through the house as his parents calmly read. Fred’s unsuccessful experiment with Dad’s drab male wardrobe and subsequent exploration of Mom’s more exciting female attire, jewelry, and makeup are presented as an unremarkable occurrence for young Fred. The text-free close-up of Mom’s and Dad’s reactions to Fred in Mom’s clothing sends just the right message of parental acceptance, support, and love. All three have pale skin and straight hair, Fred’s and Dad’s darker than Mom’s.

**Indelible Ann**

*The Larger-Than-Life Story of Governor Ann Richards*  
*Browne, Meghan P.  
Illus. by Whitt, Carlynn  
Random House (44 pp.)  
978-0-593-17327-5  
978-0-593-17328-2 PLB*

If folks in the small Texas town where Gov. Ann Richards spent her childhood thought little Dorothy Ann Willis was good at climbing trees and baiting a trotline, and if her high school classmates in Waco thought she was a “speech and debate team marvel”—well, “...JUST WAIT, you’ll see.”

This quirky biography with a homespun voice takes a look at the life and career of the 45th governor of the Lone Star State. As a teenager, she traveled to Washington, D.C., and came back understanding “the importance of civic duty.” She couldn’t be stopped. “There were people to meet and problems that needed fixing.” As a county commissioner, she “built a bridge between the predictable past and the limitless future.” When elected state treasurer, she hired “staff that reflected the folks around her.” With her booming voice and her “high-cotton” hair, Richards had big ideas for herself and her state. When people thought she should be a candidate to run for president, she said there was “still work to be done in Texas”—and did it. Well-organized and colorfully written, the book presents Richards at her highest and lowest, taking care to show how its subject became the formidable progressive and inclusive politician she was. Bright, bold illustrations chock-full of period detail underscore this with depictions of the vigorously multicultural staff and state this White woman helmed. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-17-inch double-page spreads viewed at 32.4% of actual size.)

An undeniably indelible woman inspiring readers to reach their own heights. (Biographical note, bibliography) (Picture book/biography. 7-10)
“The story is told with a beautifully rendered realism, every illustration giving the tale a strong sense of place.”

BRACE AS A MOUSE

A goldfish in danger is the subject of action-packed, mouse-hatched rescue plans.

In a very quiet house, a fish (known only as “the fish”) accepts an invitation from Mouse to play. The fish splashes about as Mouse uses a straw to blow bubbles. The fun is interrupted by a trio of black cats, ready to make the fish their feast. The white and brown mouse, who turns out to be the resourceful ringleader of a small group of mice, gets an idea. “It was a wild idea. It was a bold idea. But was it a good idea?” The idea involves leading the cats into a pantry well-stocked with kibble, then collecting the fish in a teacup in order to transport it to a nearby river for release. For a story with so much action, it all feels remarkably restrained, with a minimum of small-font text and no embellishments like wild sound-effect wording or exaggerated action. Aside from the rescue itself (mice delicately balancing a fish in a teacup), the story is told with a beautifully rendered realism, every illustration using subtle shadows and muted pastels to give the tale a strong sense of place, even when the action goes outdoors. For some readers, it may be a little too muted, but it’s hard to quibble with such gorgeous visuals. Plus, the ending wraps up definitively and wordlessly without overstaying its welcome (or adding any cautions about the inadvisability or illegality of releasing goldfish into nearby waterways). It’s all very efficient. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at actual size.)

A contained action story, told more through realistic visuals than unnecessary text and adornments. (Picture book 3-7)
WHAT THE KITE SAW
Carter, Anne Laurel
Illus. by Düzakin, Akin
Groundwood (32 pp.)
$18.95 | May 4, 2021
978-1-77306-243-3

The first-person account of a child living through military occupation.

Though an author’s note says the story was inspired by Palestinian children, neither text nor illustrations specify where or when it takes place. Instead, it recounts a young child’s experience when soldiers in tanks occupy their town, taking father and brother away, which leaves the child with mother and a younger sibling. (The narrator has pale skin and dark hair, as do other family members.) The illustrations employ a muted palette of somber grays and browns with limited, expressive color indicating at turns danger and hope. The town is under a strict curfew, with the ever looming threat of the occupying force, though the art keeps overt violence off the page. Powerful compositions make the menace clear, such as one that foregrounds uniformed soldiers holding assault rifles with an array of staring children in the background looking tiny by comparison. The titular kite emerges as a symbol of hope and freedom when the child leads friends in making kites to fly above their town. When soldiers shoot them down, the child cuts the string and imagines it sailing away. With that act, the child imagines seeing what the kite sees. An affecting final scene shows the winged child flying above a vision of two figures standing by the sea. They can be read as the lost father and brother or perhaps as their spirits, lending a poignant ambiguity to the story’s end. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-17-inch double-page spreads viewed at 17.5% of actual size.)

In a word, powerful. (Picture book: 5-8)

SPIN A SCARF OF SUNSHINE
Casey, Dawn
Illus. by Lim, Stila
Floris (32 pp.)
$17.95 | May 4, 2021
978-1-78250-658-4

A family embraces the Earth and its resources in this Scottish import.

In an appealing bucolic setting, a young girl named Nari feeds her lamb as they are surrounded by chicks, hens, and flowers. Her parents, mother holding a baby, are close by. As the year goes on, the lamb grows bigger, and the affection between girl and animal continues. When spring comes, Nari’s father shears the sheep, and the process of making wool begins. Step by step, Nari and her mother wash the wool, card it, spin it, dye it “yellow as summer sunshine,” and begin knitting. It’s not an easy task for the girl. A big hole appears in her work, but the scarf is completed in time for winter frolics in the snow. Time passes. Nari and her baby sibling have grown; the scarf goes into the compost, which goes into the soil, which enriches the grass, which feeds a lamb. Nari now knits a scarf with her little sister watching attentively under the spreading leaves of a big tree. A penultimate double-page spread details the steps involved in making wool, with helpful numbering and arrows. The text is straightforward, with occasional lyrical repetition. Display text highlights actions and/or onomatopoeia; when Nari digs the compost into the earth, for instance, large italicized letters emphasize the action: “Dig—dig.” Delicate, colorful illustrations fill each page with pretty people, cute animals, and idyllic scenes. Nari and her sister are biracial, with an East Asian mom and White dad.

An informative, easy-to-follow, pleasing lesson in readying wool for knitting. (Picture book: 4-6)
MAXY SOBREVIVE EL HURACÁN / MAXY SURVIVES THE HURRICANE
Chansky, Ricia Anne & Acevedo, Yarelis Marcial
Illus. by Barinova, Olga
Trans. by Acevedo, Yarelis Marcial & Nieves-Ferrer, Sharon Marie & Garcia, Francheska Morales
Piñata Books/Arte Público (32 pp.)
$18.95 | May 31, 2021
978-1-55885-918-0

A canine perspective on weathering a hurricane.
Maxy is a happy dog who lives in Puerto Rico with Clarita, her parents, and her abuelos. His idyllic life of playing catch under the flamboyant tree and taking naps with his toy bat is threatened one day in September, when Clarita and her family begin preparing their house and laying in supplies for Hurricane Maria. As the storm makes landfall, Maxy shakes with fear, but Clarita is there to comfort her puppy. When the rain stops, Maxy is relieved! Will this ever happen again? When the rain starts falling again, Maxy starts to tremble, and his owner, quick to comfort him, shows Maxy all the reasons why rain is a good thing. Barinova’s illustrations endear the puppy’s plight to readers. But Clarita also survives the hurricane. And although it’s important to remember pets during natural disasters, Chansky and Acevedo’s bilingual story seems like a missed opportunity to center a human child of color’s experience and their survival and recovery—tales that are badly needed.

There are so many human stories to tell of Hurricane Maria that this dog’s version feels slight. (Picture book. 3-6)

ARU SHAH AND THE CITY OF GOLD
Chokshi, Roshani
Rick Riordan Presents/Disney (400 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-368-01386-4
Series: Pandava Quintet, 4

A soul and a story all in one.
Aru Shah wakes up in the immediate aftermath of Aru Shah and the Tree of Wishes (2020) to find herself imprisoned in the Sleeper’s lair, staring at his other daughter, Kara, a half sister she didn’t know about until this moment. Needing to escape and get back to her other Pandava sisters, Aru agrees to bring Kara with her. Two months have passed and much has happened since she last saw her companions: Travel to the Otherworld has ended, their mentors are missing in the city of gold, and its ruler, Lord Kubera, has summoned the Pandavas to compete in his trials three days hence. If they win, Kubera will give them command of the only army that can defeat the Sleeper’s troops, who are marching to Lanka to find a certain weapon capable of destroying all godly defenses and rendering his enemies powerless. Aru, Mini, Brynne, Aiden, and Kara must look inside themselves and find freedom in letting go, as distrust, jealousy, and betrayal could upend everything. Chokshi’s ability to craft stories of adventure, humorous dialogue, strong South Asian female characters, and Hindu cosmology is pure magic. With each entry, the series expands into deeper and richer experiences, delving into more complex themes of friendship and family without sacrificing any of the clever banter.

Beautifully written and a joy to read. (Fantasy. 9-14)

HOMER ON THE CASE
Cole, Henry
Illus. by the author
Peachtree (144 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 1, 2021
978-1-68263-254-3

Homer the homing pigeon and Lulu, an Amazon parrot, collaborate to defeat a wily, sewer-dwelling alligator with a taste for bling.
The engaging conceit is that Homer long ago taught himself to read. Channeling his favorite cartoon detective, Dick Tracy, he’s determined to discover why rats and cats are stealing valuables from people in the park. With the help of his wild pigeon friends, he observes that the shiny stash is being taken into the storm sewers. Since he’s a pigeon of some talent, he’s convinced and Lulu can explore the tunnels, solve the mystery of where the stolen items are being taken, and safely get away. They discover a huge, bejeweled alligator being served by a cast of minions. But how to relate this remarkable story to Otto, Homer’s owner, and Charlotte, Lulu’s human friend? Homer uses his ability to read words and Lulu, her skill in speaking them to communicate the necessary information. Each chapter begins with a panel of attractive pencil illustrations that record the highlights to follow. In them, Otto presents White, and Charlotte has darker skin. The birds’ exploits are surprisingly believable and enjoyable to follow in Homer’s first-person narration. The humans are appropriately less developed. Why Snaps the alligator loves jewels and how the rats and cats came to serve her are barely explored, leaving this potential adversary rather flat.

Who doesn’t love smart, friendly birds on a secret mission? (Fantasy. 8-11)
The concise dialogue telegraphs deeper meanings while leaving much to the imagination.

**ISLAND BOOK**

**DOWN TO EARTH**

*Culley, Betty*

Crown (224 pp.)

$16.99 | $16.99 PLB | May 25, 2021

978-0-593-17573-6

978-0-593-17574-3 PLB

After 10-year-old Henry witnesses the fall of a meteorite, disaster finds his Maine home. Henry Bower, of Bower Hill Road, comes from a family of water dowsers, but he hasn’t yet shown any talent in this area—his current skills include reading the most books at the library and writing questions about the world in his home-schooling notebook. Henry has a passion for rocks and minerals and is thrilled when he and his little sister find a meteorite to rival the 31-ton Ahnighito in Greenland. An author’s note describes, among other things, the controversy over its fate and the “sad and disturbing history of the Inughuit people brought to New York City, along with the meteorite.” Henry tries to keep it a secret to protect it from similar theft. A paeon to science, the text can be laudably earnest (“I learn that no matter how big or special a meteorite is, someone always wants to take it or chip it”) but the dialogue is occasionally stilted. Brief quotes, mostly from nonfiction science resources, open each chapter, intriguing readers who might otherwise wonder where Henry’s narrative is going and why.

The flood that overtakes Henry’s house traumatizes his family, especially when some people in the town blame them for it, but Henry shows impressive kindness and resilience. The main cast reads as White; a visiting scientist who mentors Henry is Black.

A meandering, idealistic tale for budding scientists. (author’s note) (Fiction. 8-12)

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**ISLAND BOOK**

**The Infinite Land**

*Dahm, Evan*

Illus. by the author

First Second (288 pp.)

$24.99 | May 18, 2021

978-1-250-23629-6

978-0-593-17573-6

Series: Island Book, 2

Sola’s ocean world grows larger even as she encounters an existential threat to her islands’ way of life.

In this sequel to Island Book (2019), the young sea captain returns to her friend Chief Hunder’s Fortress Island with a cargo of lenses. There, Capt. Alef has just arrived with his own find—a set of long-lost objects that form a nautical map to a continent, an infinite land. Alef persuades Hunder to join the voyage of discovery aboard his ship, the *Wak*. Sola, at odds with Capt. Alef’s obsession, sets out to follow and must be rescued from a storm by a ghost ship. The “ghosts”—sailors who make decisions democratically—remember a past of aggressive conquering and believe that the continent must be kept safe. They vote to stop Alef, but Sola’s fate is left in doubt by the cliffhanger ending. Sola’s green-skinned people stand out among a multihued cast of humanoids with rounded, marine-life features. She encounters some old companions during the voyage and shares a poignant moment of deep connection and a chaste kiss in a brief reunion with her friend Esha. Bright, well-defined panels feature action set against backdrops of sea and sky that are stunning in their visual impact. The concise dialogue telegraphs deeper meanings while leaving much about the characters’ relationships and motivations to imagination and individual interpretation.

A dazzling mix of excitement and philosophical adventure. (Graphic fantasy. 9-12)

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**MY STORY FRIEND**

*Dakos, Kalli*

Illus. by Chen, Dream

Magination/American Psychological Association (32 pp.)

$16.99 | May 25, 2021

978-1-4338-3688-6

Telling someone your story is a little like describing a dream.

“When I was a child, / my own story / made me very sad,” the narrator says, early in this picture book. At first, he has trouble finding anyone to listen to him; he keeps warning people, “I might cry when I tell it.” But the old woman who tells stories in his village turns out to be a very good listener. His story is both very sad and very simple: He is short. “I don’t like ME!” he explains, and adds, “I can’t tell my mother or father or anyone in my family because they don’t mind being short.” His story feels, like many dreams, both a little anticlimactic and like the most important thing in the world. The climax may affect readers not when they first read it but later, when they’ve had time to think about it. The narrator comes to realize, movingly, that, “The most important thing in the world features. She encounters some old companions during the voyage and shares a poignant moment of deep connection and a chaste kiss in a brief reunion with her friend Esha. Bright, well-defined panels feature action set against backdrops of sea and sky that are stunning in their visual impact. The concise dialogue telegraphs deeper meanings while leaving much about the characters’ relationships and motivations to imagination and individual interpretation.

A dazzling mix of excitement and philosophical adventure. (Graphic fantasy. 9-12)
FORCE OF FIRE
DasGupta, Sayantani
Scholastic (368 pp.)
$17.99 | May 18, 2021
978-1-338-63664-2
Series: Kingdom Beyond, 2

In a world where serpents have colonizationists and demon rakkhoshi alike, fire rakkoshi Pinki goes on a quest for belonging and freedom.

This follow-up to The Serpent’s Secret (2018) returns readers to the fantastical land of the Kingdom Beyond Seven Oceans and Thirteen Rivers. Despite being the daughter of legendary freedom fighters, Pinki is not sure she can identify with the rakkhosh resistance. She also doesn’t have any friends, something made worse by the fact that she cannot control her powers, sometimes wreaking havoc. When she accidentally sets fire to her school, a humiliated Pinki is persuaded by the evil serpent prince Sesha to steal moonbeams from the Moon Mother that he claims will power a superweapon and defeat the resistance. In exchange for this treachery, Sesha offers Pinki control over her powers. Pinki’s quest to help Sesha control her own fire leads her to befriend several interesting people, including Moon Maiden Chandni. Ultimately, the reluctant heroine must decide where she belongs in her people’s fight for independence from the snakes. DasGupta’s carefully crafted characters are convincing, and the fast-paced narrative will keep readers thoroughly engaged. The novel draws inspiration from Bengali folktales, Hindu epics, and India’s fight for independence from the British; most importantly, it highlights the innate power of linguistic and cultural diversity and heritage.

Passionate, thought-provoking, and riotously funny. (author’s note) (Fantasy. 8-12)

HIKING AND CAMPING
The Definitive Interactive Nature Guide
Davis, Jennifer Pharr & Blevins, Haley
Illus. by Karkoulia, Aliki
Odd Dot (448 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Apr. 27, 2021
978-1-250-23084-3
Series: Outdoor School

The subtitle of this book presents a hard challenge to live up to, but this guide manages it. Divided into five main sections—“Planning and Preparation,” “Hiking,” “Set Up Camp,” “Flora and Fauna,” and “Survival”—each subject area contains chapters that impart the specific skills and knowledge needed for readers to feel comfortable and confident in the outdoors. Skills such as firebuilding, finding your direction with the sun and stars, using a compass, knowing what to pack, first aid, birding, identifying plants, recognizing animal tracks, understanding geology, and many others are presented in short, engaging snippets. These extensively color-illustrated informational segments covering the geographic regions of the U.S. are followed by activities labeled “Try It,” “Track It,” and “Take It to the Next Level” that present readers with hands-on opportunities to practice their newly learned skills as well as space to write down notes. With its metal-bound cover corners, a sewn rather than glued binding, and printed rulers—in both inches and centimeters—on the back cover, this is a book designed to be taken into the outdoors and used. The writing is engagingly informative and accurate without being overwhelming. Backmatter includes a list of 101 achievements to track that will help give a concrete sense of accomplishment, boosting confidence.

A thorough, detailed compendium of most everything readers will want and need to know about being in the outdoors. (Nonfiction. 10-adult)
Indian, Spanish, French, and others. This is the reason people
Teresa with “milk-chocolate skin,” and the rest, ranged along
the next.

The sibling narrators describe the family as “mestizo,” with
a makeup of “the different people and cultures in Mexico:
Indian, Spanish, French, and others. This is the reason people
in our family look different in many ways. But we are still one
family.” Readers meet fair-skinned Elena, dark-skinned Enrique,
Teresa with “milk-chocolate skin,” and the rest, ranged along
a wide, colorful spectrum. One has Down syndrome; another
is typical in many Latinx cultures, Spanish terms that describe
talents, and ages as well. There is an aspiring Olympic runner,
baseball players, a gymnast, a college student, a drummer, and
a dancer. Readers who don’t pay attention to the title page may
be surprised to discover the identities of the dual narrators,
revealed to be grade schoolers Alejandro and Sofia at the end of
the book. Muñoz’s clean illustrations present the cousins in set-
tings that reflect their interests, but they do not interact until
a final group portrait with Baby Cristina, the 22nd cousin. As
readers meet fair-skinned Elena, dark-skinned Enrique,
Teresa with “milk-chocolate skin,” and the rest, ranged along
a wide, colorful spectrum. One has Down syndrome; another
is typical in many Latinx cultures, Spanish terms that describe
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the book. Muñoz’s clean illustrations present the cousins in set-
tings that reflect their interests, but they do not interact until
a final group portrait with Baby Cristina, the 22nd cousin. As
is typical in many Latinx cultures, Spanish terms that describe
cousins’ physical attributes—güera, morena, chata—are used as
terms of endearment, familiarity, and identification. It must be
noted that those terms today are occasionally met with some
resistance, as they often point back to origins in colorism and
racism.

Latinx readers with diverse families will appreciate seeing
themselves within these pages. (Picture book. 3-8) (21 Primos: 978-
1-59572-923-1 paper)

East High into a Fame level program. A breezy and fun read, the
book contains chapters that offer pithy first-person accounts
from each character, including quirky Miss Jenn; Carlos and his
boyfriend, Seb; recently reunited couple Nini and Ricky and
their BFFs, Kourtney and Big Red; popular senior E.J. and his
songwriter cousin, Ashlyn; and talented triple threat Gina. The
plot includes references to the series and themes straight from
the musical: nurturing your talent, showing others how much
they matter, and acknowledging the importance of teamwork.
Although race isn’t mentioned overtly, the characters are cued
as racially diverse, following the casting of the TV show. Fans
will appreciate the inside jokes, but explanations in the text
make it accessible even to those unfamiliar with the program.
A lighthearted and charming read. (Fiction. 10-14)

Who is shrieking so early?
DeLange, Ellen
Illus. by Yamamoto, Zafouko
Clavis (32 pp.)
$17.95 | May 11, 2021
978-1-60537-591-5

Waking up early to a loud noise, Sam
is quite indignant.

The alarm clock reads 6:30, and the
White boy wearing a hat with a pompom and his small brown
dog sporting a scarf are both startled from sleep by “SHRIEK
SHRIEK” (printed in a scratchy, faux handprinted display
type). He spots a blue, white, and black bird in a tree. The bird
plagues the boy each day. Sam shoots water from the hose at
the bothersome bird, clangs the metal garbage can, and posts a
picture of a predator owl. No parent appears, but a friendly man
(who also White) offers some advice from over the hedge: “Have
you tried to make friends with the bird?…Magpies can be very
smart, you know.” Sam gets an idea from his dog. Maybe he can
teach the bird to let him sleep. He sets up a chalkboard with
stick figure drawings and lectures the bird. Kids will want to
interpret the drawings and point out the magpie watching care-
fully from a tree stump nearby; the dog, a squirrel, and other
birds all pay close attention too. Finally Sam’s hard work pays
off. The “smart” magpie surprises Sam, as the bird learns some
human words (as magpies can) and one morning cheerily substi-
tutes “WAKE UP WAKE UP”—albeit still at sunrise. Pleas-
ingly naïve illustrations of a rural town accompany the smooth
translation in this Dutch and Flemish import. (This book was
reviewed digitally with 11.4 by-16.6-inch double-page spreads viewed
at 35.2% of actual size.)

Persistence makes a difference in this understated
charmer. (Picture book. 4-6)
ANNA ANALYST
Edgar, Patti
Yellow Dog (112 pp.)
$11.95 paper | May 10, 2021
978-1-77337-056-9
A kid on the cusp of middle school attempts to solve her problems using handwriting analysis.
Lately, Anna’s best friend, Lana, has been hanging out with Harlow and planning a Japanese anime marathon for the summer. Anna, no fan of either Harlow or anime, fears Lana might be replacing her. Anna’s own summer plans revolve around active, outdoor activities like minigolf. Her friend Evan has no interest in minigolf; his passion is gaming. Lana, who’s lined up a dogsitting gig, probably won’t help Anna care for her pet tortoises, Nachos and Salsa. No, Lana will be earning money to buy a phone and clothes for her “whole new look.” Money’s tight at Anna’s house since her overprotective mom lost her job. And that’s not all. Anna keeps forgetting to clean the tortoises’ habitat; the tiny crack on Nachos’ shell is growing. Hoping The Guide to Graphology, found abandoned in a classroom cupboard on the last day of fifth grade, can help her assess Lana’s intentions, Anna soon applies it to her other goals, too. She collects handwriting samples from friends and family, then supplements (or substitutes) the book’s analysis with her own pithy critiques. Few agree to pay for her services, though; meanwhile, Lana’s still friends with Harlow, and Nachos’ shell looks worse. Bossy, inventive Anna is authentic and endearing. Her dilemmas and struggles—especially when her creative solutions breed new problems—are convincing, at once familiar and fresh. Characters default to White.
A droll, deftly executed debut. (Fiction. 8-12)

ALL OF US
Erskine, Kathryn
Illus. by Boiger, Alexandra
Philomel (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 18, 2021
978-0-593-20469-6
A lyrical celebration of unity and diversity.
Though Erskine’s text doesn’t specify details about the cast of characters, Boiger depicts a multiracial ensemble of children for readers to follow from page to page. The first few pages read: “Me… // can be we. / You… // can come, too. / They… // can be ‘Hey!’ / It’s all of us.” Such lines are representative of the text as a whole, which never evolves into a clear verbal story, instead offering a broad affirmation of diversity, inclusion, and community. Boiger’s illustrations imagine that community as a global one of diverse children (all are first included in the cover art), with visual cues that mark one child as Jewish, another Muslim, and another with a mobility disability. They set sail together on a ship, which can be read as a metaphorical journey through life, peaceably and joyfully taking in the wonders of the world. The text also describes ways they (and we all) can contribute to the world in which we live: “Some build things up, some create art / Some help the earth, some heal the heart.” This isn’t a book that addresses why the earth and hearts need helping and healing, perhaps glossing over hardships and struggle in its efforts to deliver a wholly positive, gentle vision of the world as it might be. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 19.4% of actual size.)
Purely sweet. (Picture book. 3-6)

THE CROW AND THE PEACOCK
Fernihough, Jo
Illus. by the author
Eerdmans (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-0-8028-5568-8
A crow sees the error of his ways and is reminded what true happiness is in this contemporary fable.
Crow lives a life of contentment until he spots a dove high up in a tree. While admiring her beauty and lovely cooing, his self-esteem plummets. He suddenly dislikes his “dull” feathers and loud cawing. “You must be the happiest bird alive,” he tells Dove. But he’s surprised to learn that she envies Nightingale’s singing, which “makes my cooing sound plain.” Crow seeks Nightingale to confirm that it is the happiest bird in the world, but Nightingale is jealous of Rooster’s life. And so it goes as Crow visits Rooster, Swan, and Peacock—discovering along the way that each is jealous of another bird’s attributes. The textured, full-bleed illustrations offer plenty of visual variety with a pleasing palette that is filled with bright colors, including sunny yellows, pinks, and lavenders; spring greens; and warm shades of blue. All of this boosts the story’s cheery subtext. (At one point, the sun is depicted with a smiling face, and the peacock is imagined sitting in a circle of literal jewels to which his feathers are compared in the text.) When the caged Peacock reveals he envies the freedom enjoyed by crows, Crow once again feels content. Readers may even be prompted to ponder their own special traits.
A bright affirmation of self-love and a potent reminder that comparison is the thief of joy. (Picture book. 4-9)
Join a merchild as she swims through lush underwater scenes in an attempted bedtime escape.

In the newest title in Fielding’s Ten Minutes to Bed series, a mer-grandpa begins the bedtime countdown only to find little Splash missing. Like many children, mer and human, she doesn’t feel like sleeping yet. In the ensuing rhyming adventure, Splash leaps with dolphins, bravely dives deep beneath a wave, and joins a school of rainbow fish while sea creatures continue the countdown. “Seven minutes!” called the crabs, / as they clacked their claws and feet.” When her tail tires, Splash bobs around the bay to rest until a shark’s looming shadow sends her hurrying to a peaceful beach. With only three minutes before bedtime, will Splash make it home in time? Luckily, a passing whale offers a ride. Splash careers through the ocean and swims into bed just as her grandpa calls the last warning. Finally, the Demon of Fear filled the sky with darkness, killing the queen and everyone in the castle—and leaving behind a mysterious prophecy. Prewitt discovers not only that the Lost Princess survived that terrible night, but that their destinies are tied together through a mysterious prophecy. Prewitt realizes she is the Lost Princess, something she had not known herself until recently, they embark on a dangerous quest to find the Firebird’s Feather and Song and save Lyrica. Their journey is a fast-paced adventure full of monsters and magic. Told in the third person, the book focuses on Calliope and Prewitt, but secondary characters’ stories are neatly woven in. Finding hope, true friendship, and bravery lies at the heart of their journey. A fantastical adventure full of hope. (Fantasy. 8-12)
“Stein’s expressive, sly, wobbly-lined art enhances the humor of Frank’s text with details that will delight readers.”

THE WORM FAMILY HAS ITS PICTURE TAKEN

Frank, Jennifer
Illus. by Stein, David Ezra
Anne Schwartz/Random (40 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | May 11, 2021
978-0-593-12478-9
978-0-593-12479-6 PLB

A warm, witty, wonderful worm tale.

When Mrs. Worm has the bright idea of taking a family portrait, her eldest daughter, Emma, is very excited. That feeling fades, however, when Emma worries that their picture won’t be special like those of her friends’ families. They can’t smile like the beavers since they don’t have teeth. They can’t style their hair to be fluffy like a cat’s since they don’t have hair. They can’t be colorful like a family of butterflies. Or can they? Emma comes up with a plan to deck her family out in wigs, clothes, and fake teeth, but then they just don’t look like themselves—as the muskrat photographer comically points out when he doesn’t even recognize them. Throughout, Stein’s expressive, sly, wobbly-lined art enhances the humor of Frank’s text with details that will delight readers.

Sure to worm its way into readers’ hearts. (Picture book. 4-7)

NO MORE PLASTIC

Fullerton, Alma
Illus. by the author
Pajama Press (32 pp.)
$17.95 | May 18, 2021
978-1-77278-113-7

Angered by the death of a whale, beached on the ocean shore she loves, Isley finds a constructive response.

When Isley learns that the dead right whale had starved from filling its stomach with plastic trash instead of whale food, she is devastated. Her first reaction is believably childlike—a tantrum. She stomps, she kicks, she screams: “NO MORE PLASTIC.” But she channels her distress into action, refusing plastic in all its forms and encouraging her neighbors to do the same. Although they forget about the whale eventually, returning to old habits, Isley continues to pick up plastic trash on the beach. With the mountain she’s collected, she builds a full-sized sculpture, an unavoidable reminder that changes behaviors in her community. Like Isley with her construction, author/illustrator Fullerton has created her illustrations from “repurposed plastic, sand, and moss.” Among the best of the recent books about ocean plastic thanks to its positive approach and practical suggestions included at the end, this title would work well as a group read-aloud. The narrative is full of sounds: lapping wave sounds begin and end the story, but there are also sea gulls’ squawks, whales’ songs, and a quiet nighthawk’s call. The target audience will be slightly younger than that for Susan Hood’s The Last Straw (2021), which has more substantive back-matter. The setting is Prince Edward Island; the protagonist presents White.

A gentle, effective presentation of an environmental disaster. (author’s note) (Picture book. 5-8)

IS WAS

Freedman, Deborah
Illus. by the author
Atheneum (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-5344-7510-6

This meditation on the fleeting nature of time explores themes of impermanence in nature.

The story opens with a glimpse of a sky “that was blue, / but now is // spilling down.” Readers then see rain falling, with the words is is is in a fluid blue display type mingling with the raindrops, followed by a spread with three puddles, each accompanied by a similar was, and a thirsty chipmunk and bird eager for a drink. Now that “rain that was drips / is for sips / and song.” As the story continues, the spare text flowing like poetry and the illustrations extending the lyrical musings in concrete ways, readers spend their time with creatures in nature—including a human family (presenting White) that appears at the end—and with a breathtaking instance of blithe, vividly colored sunflowers on display. In one particularly effective spread featuring a vast and sunny pale blue sky, a child swings, the arc of the movement shifting from is to was repeatedly. The tone briefly shifts from wondrous and meditative to exhilarating when a chipmunk manages to escape the talons of a hungry owl. (“A shadow is” but, fortunately for the chipmunk, becomes past tense.) The narrative, infused with a tenderness that avoids preciousness, is a contemplative, thought-provoking one and will prompt children to think about the here and the now—and how quickly such a thing becomes memory. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at actual size.)

An experience that is, and always will be, memorable. (Picture book. 4-10)
Can two be too many? Too few? Or just right? A young shrew playing alone on the beach decides one isn’t fun and seeks companionship, but an elephant sitting nearby points out it doesn’t need to be in a twosome, citing the activities—sailing, surfing, and singing—it enjoys doing solo. The shrew, however, demonstrates why two’s more fun. Before long, an otter appears on the scene, explaining that its presence now makes them a group of three and opining that number’s even better. Adults reading this to kids won’t be surprised when yet another animal, this one an alligator, shows up, adding up to a total of four beachgoers. The shrew, depicted as small and unprepossessing, still maintains the superiority of two and eventually meets a bird that’s in total agreement; at the end, the pair contentedly build sand castles together. This sweet, light-hearted story, expressed in lilting rhyme conveyed entirely in dialogue bubbles, reassures quieter youngsters who might feel overwhelmed with too many people around them that their preference for a twosome is OK. It also permits very young kids to practice some basic counting skills. The lively pencil-and-ink illustrations give winsome expressions and personalities to the main animal characters; various animals feature throughout as background frolickers enjoying a day at the beach. *(This book was reviewed digitally with 8-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 40.3% of actual size.)*

Though there’s not much new here, this is an enjoyable tale about finding friends. *(Picture book. 2-5)*

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The interloper won’t be moved, Nook’s friends lead her away to be with them in the middle of the playground...and that turns out to be OK, because now that she understands that they will always have her back she no longer needs the refuge. Garland uses vigorous strokes of brush and colored pencil to give her figures a plushy surface, and though she depicts them as animals, so human are their understated expressions and gestures (and clothes) that young readers may not notice. Both Nook’s gentle nature and the kindness and loyalty of her friends positively shine.

A sensitive character study with feelings that run deep. *(Picture book. 6-8)*

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Led by Gaya, a team of mycologists from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, offers an irresistible, oversized introduction to fungi.

Dedicated to the “next generation of mycologists,” this well-designed handbook approximates a tour of a museum, or “fungarium,” complete with foil ticket for entry and four galleries—“Fungal Biology,” “Fungal Diversity,” “Fungal Interactions,” and “Fungi and Humans.” Stop-you-in-your-tracks biological illustrations colorfully depict spores, yeasts, molds, and mushrooms. Specific delights include a chanterelle, with its sunny yellow curves and false gills; a tendrilled jellyspot fungus; and a stark white, poisonous destroying angel. Even the monochromatic endpapers are frameworthy. Gaya and her co-authors allay mycophobia in young naturalists (“fungi...represent some of the world’s finest delicacies”) but, smartly, not entirely (“remember that some of them may kill you”). The book revels in and conveys the magic of fungi, which are not only necessary to make beer, bread, most cheeses, chocolate, and wine (more than enough reason to inspire fungiphilia), but are also key to the survival of 90% of plants as well as our own survival via penicillin and other medicines. Kid-pleasing macabre facts abound: The zombie ant fungus “grows in the body of the ant,” forcing the insect to disseminate its spores. The backmatter “library” (list of curators, index, additional resources) is helpful; sadly, there is no glossary. While the prose is clear enough for older readers, this book relies heavily on Latin and scientific terms that aren’t always defined.

An immersive, exquisitely illustrated trip to the fungal kingdom. *(Nonfiction. 8-adult)*
**TAKING UP SPACE**

Gerber, Alyson
Scholastic (272 pp.)
$17.99 | May 18, 2021
978-1-338-18600-0

Navigating adolescence isn't a piece of cake. Dorito-loving seventh grader Sarah Weber is a standout basketball player on her team even though she's had some bad practices lately. Thanks to puberty, her body keeps changing, and, on top of recent awkwardness in her relationships, she feels overwhelmed by this. Another thing she doesn't have control over is her household food situation: Sarah's mom is controlling about food, sometimes forgets to feed her dinner, and what little there is to eat in their kitchen is restricted to things she deems acceptable. Sarah's dad works long hours and doesn't seem to notice what's going on. In an effort to help her game and gain back some control, Sarah begins to obsessively monitor her food intake. Thankfully, her friends and coach advocate for healthy, intuitive ways of eating, and they help Sarah address her disordered eating. The book surrounds the protagonist with a determined support system and does not place blame in a simplistic way. Gerber constructs a straightforward structure: A health problem becomes known, a solution is proposed, and then it works. Although real life is rarely so neat and tidy, the book supplies a positive representation of constructive approaches to an often misunderstood condition. Authentic basketball scenes and Sarah's developing crush on Benny, her health class partner who later becomes her teammate in a cooking competition, round out the story. Sarah is presumed White; Benny is Persian.

Pragmatic and valuable. (Fiction. 9-13)

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**SOME CREATURES HAVE ALL THE LUCK!**

Vivaldi, Antonio
Gerhard, Ana
Illus. by Lafrance, Marie
The Secret Mountain (36 pp.)
$16.95 | May 1, 2021
978-2-924774-84-7
Series: Little Stories of Great Composers

Minim, a mouse who loves both cheese and music, encounters the Italian composer Antonio Vivaldi.

In 19th-century Venice, Minim has a narrow escape in Vivaldi’s music school, where he has been sent to exchange a coin for a child’s baby tooth. Even without knowing that in Italy the tooth fairy employs a small mouse, young U.S. readers will be charmed. The night of this story is dark and cold, and Minim (the British term for a half-note) has more errands to do, but this mouse does love music. Lingering to read the child’s thank-you note imperils him when he is noticed by the cat. But fortunately, when the orchestra suddenly strikes up, the cat is more interested in the music than the mouse. Lafrance’s drawings accentuate the gray of the night and the institution and the small size of the mouse compared to its surroundings. (He is depicted with near-human proportions on the cover but is considerably smaller in interior illustrations.) All humans are shown as White. An accompanying CD includes the story, ably narrated by Colm Feore, and, curiously, only two of the three movements of Vivaldi’s “Winter,” from The Four Seasons. The backmatter includes the entire text of the winter sonnet and reveals that Vivaldi was choirmaster and concertmaster at a girls orphanage. He composed much of his music for his pupils and the orchestra of that institution (though not the selections accompanying this title). This is the third in a music-appreciation series which includes visits to Mozart and Tchaikovsky as well.

Slight and frustratingly incomplete. (Picture book. 4-8)

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**A POEM IS A FIREFLY**

Ghigna, Charles
Illus. by Hyde, Michelle Hazelwood
Schiffer (32 pp.)
$16.99 | May 28, 2021
978-0-7643-6108-1

A poem defined in poetry. A group of woodland creatures crowds around a book asking a question that many wonder: “What’s a poem?” One rabbit’s answer, that “a poem can be anything,” doesn’t add much clarity. A bewildered bear asks, “What? / What can a poem be?” Each animal offers possibilities. Wise owl believes that “a poem is a whisper. / Whooooooo.” But a playful wolf thinks the opposite: “A poem is a shout. / Hoooowllllll.” A prickly hedgehog explains (as it performs a swan dive that ends with it curled into a ball), “A poem is a thought … / … turned inside out.” The smooth sway of each animal’s answer lets readers begin to feel what poetry is. The musical language dips and crescendos. A tiny spider offers, “A poem is a spiderweb / spun with words of wonder... / ... like woven lace held in place / by whispers made of thunder.” With backgrounds rendered in a palette dominated by greens and yellows of the daytime, then modulating to the deep blues of the forest night, Hyde’s stylized, stuffed-toy–like depictions of the animals add whimsy to their deep thoughts. Poetry is not easily defined, but it echoes long after it’s been read: “Follow it and trust your way / with mind and heart as one. / And when the journey’s over, / you’ll find you’ve just begun.”

A charming ode for beginning young bards. (Picture book. 3-8)
“Ideal for reluctant readers with its short chapters, energetic illustrations, plentiful action, and ‘pawsome’ puns.”

**DOG SQUAD**

Fred the dog becomes the star of a popular dog adventure television show in this series opener. His adventures are often filled with action dogs in daring escapades, and its canine leading star, Duke. Since Fred’s original owner dumped him at an animal shelter, he’s been living in New York City with Big Tony, who usually has light brown skin; Sam presents Black. An unlikely dog becomes the star of a popular dog adventure television show in this series opener.

Fred the dog is a “bitzer. A little bit of this, a little bit of that.” He idolizes Dog Squad, a television show featuring live-action dogs in daring escapades, and its canine leading star, Duke. Since Fred’s original owner dumped him at an animal shelter, he’s been living in New York City with Big Tony, who hopes to turn him into a ferocious guard dog and sell him for a big profit. An alley confrontation lands Fred back in the animal shelter, but this time he’s rescued by entertainment industry animal trainer Jenny Yen and her young niece (and self-proclaimed pet psychic), Abby. Ideal for reluctant readers with its short chapters, energetic illustrations, plentiful action, and “pawsome” puns, this light fantasy follows Fred, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Duke, as he adopts the starring role in Dog Squad when Duke becomes injured. But does this unassuming dog have what it takes to be a hero both on and off the camera when a natural disaster, a dognapper, and more disasters strike? Teamwork from Abby and co-stars help guide the way and set the scene for more installments. An author’s note touchingly describes the Mr. Lemoncello’s Library series creator’s source of inspiration: his own Fred, a formerly stray, retired Broadway canine star.

**MOON CAMP**

A reluctant young summer camper expects to have a lousy time on the moon, where there are “no video games or oxygen or ANYTHING fun.” Of course, in the end Lucas has the opposite experience—but not before some in-flight humiliation (“Zero-G makes me feel barfy”), having to sleep suspended from a wall hook because the bunk beds are all taken, getting lost on a nature hike, seeing the vacuum toilet, and like horrors. But then the arrival of equally unwilling Sam with a new group of campers results in an instant friendship that makes every part of camping, even the food, exponentially more awesome. Even having to suck “imitation hot dog substitute” through straws doesn’t keep anyone around the final, rocket-fueled campfire from agreeing in chorus that Moon Camp is “a gigantic ton of…FUN!!” In the end, back in his bedroom and bathed in moonlight streaming in through the window, Lucas dreamily looks forward to next summer. Both in the all-genders camp and back on Earth, grown-ups, Lucas, and the rest of the bubble-helmeted young campers in Gott’s cartoon illustrations display a subtle range of skin tones. Lucas himself is green at barfy moments but more usually has light brown skin; Sam presents Black. (This book was reviewed digitally with a 11-by-18-inch double-page spread viewed at 77% of actual size.)

This pre-summer camp anxiety-soother has the advantage of an awesome setting. (Picture book. 6-8)
Pete and Dell are sweet-toothed brothers who learn strategies to help them delay gratification in this rhyming picture book.

The brown-skinned twin boys with kinky-curly brown hair are given what amounts to Dr. Walter Mischel’s famous 1960s-era “Marshmallow Test” when their mom says they can have a marshmallow now or ice cream later, after the T-ball game. Pete eats the treat immediately while Dell decides to wait until after the game for the ice cream, which both boys prefer to marshmallows. In moments of temptation, the scale of the enticing treat is emphasized to show its overpowering effect. The brothers are tested the following week when a friend comes over with a jar of gummy worms. Like the marshmallow, the jar of gummy worms takes up the double-page spread. Again, Pete cannot resist the temptation of the treat (his arm takes on gargantuan proportions as he reaches in), but Dell is able once again to wait for the higher-value ice cream treat. Pete asks Dell how he’s able to resist, and Dell shares some strategies that hopefully will equip both Pete and young readers with some research-backed tools that help children delay gratification. The aftermatter further explains the history of the Marshmallow Test, expands on the strategies touched on in the narrative, and provides additional strategies for caregivers to use with kids. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-inch double-page spreads viewed at 67% of actual size.)

A solid conversation starter on topics of self-control. (Picture book. 6-9)

Eschewing sleep, the froggies engage in bizarre nighttime capers.

This unusual bedtime book alerts readers with the bold opening message that “the froggies do NOT want to sleep.” Indeed! Instead, the froggies want to hop. Reasonable. They also want to practice the accordion, ride unicycles, and play dress up! Hmmm? They want to go on long country drives and “joust like knights.” OK. And they want to perform underwater ballet and “tame ferocious beasties!” Really? Pushing the envelope totally, the froggies want to sing opera while being shot from a cannon, fly spaceships, and engage in burping contests with ETs. But they absolutely do not want to sleep...maybe. Beginning with the froggies’ surreptitious exit from bed on the front endpapers, the realistically executed, fantastically conceived illustrations track the froggies’ nocturnal activities from the sublime to the ridiculous in a series of increasingly dramatic double-page spreads. Early images show leggy amphibians tip-toeing across the page before exuberantly hopping frogs jampack the spread. Hilarious scenes of frogs playing accordions, spinning on unicycles, dressing up in period costumes, speeding like Mr. Toad in a flashy red roadster, aerially jousting with toilet plungers, performing ballet lifts underwater, riding a submerged alligator (backward), operatically exploding from a cannon, and zipping through galaxies in a spaceship appropriately culminate on the rear endpapers with the exhausted froggies finally crashing into bed.

A zany, rib-tickling bedtime tour de force. (Picture book. 3-6)
A young urbanite romps through floral fields and deep into a flower’s anatomy, exploring humanity’s connection to nature.

A solo car travels away from the dense, gray cityscape. Mountains rise up, full of pattern and light, before revealing a fluorescent field of flowers. A child bursts from the car across the page, neon-rainbow hair streaming in the wind, as both child and place radiate joy and life. The brown-skinned, blue-eyed youngster breathes in the meadow and begins an adventure—part Jamberry, part “Thumbelina,” and part existential journey as the child realizes the life force running through the veins of the flower is the same that runs through all of us, from the water that sustains to the sun that grows. Harris’ colored-pencil illustrations are full of energy and spontaneity. His use of patterning and graphic symbology evoke Oaxacan design, yet the style is all his own. The text is equally enthusiastic. “Have you ever seen / a flower so deep / you had to shout / HELLO / and listen for an echo / just to know / how deep it goes?” The text shifts abruptly from metaphor to metaphor, in one spread the flower likened to a palace and a few pages later, to human anatomy. Nevertheless, like the protagonist and the natural environment, readers will feel themselves stretch and bloom.

A thoughtful tale for engineers young and old. (Picture book 4-7)
Despite a single chapter on marine animals and lots of marine flora and fauna in the art, this title is largely focused on human figures there and between chapters nearly all look like light-skinned Soviets, figures in the illustrations are almost all light-skinned Soviets, and some of the drawings are vivid enough to look nearly alive. The historical figures in the illustrations are almost all light-skinned Soviets, Israelis, and Americans.

This biography sometimes feels like a great song, so sad it can leave you joyous. (timeline, glossary, reading list, historical notes) (Graphic biography. 8-11)

A young TheSaurus experiences difficulty communicating with his new fellow pupils following a move. The first few days at his new school leave Theo feeling discommoded, as his friendly salutations, offers to share crackers at midday repast, and commence a game of “conceal-and-search” on the playground are met with mute incomprehension. Not even a general invitation to his hatching-day festivities seems to ignite much enthusiasm, as party time comes and goes with nary a sign of guests. Plainly feeling that a happy ending obviates the need for internal logic, Johannes has Theo’s parents comfort him with a hug—whereupon the doorbell rings and the agent followed him into a taxi, he asked if they’d split the cab fare, and after years of constant surveillance, he said, “It’s like I have two shadows: one that is mine, and the other the KGB’s.”

The text in the panels’ narrative boxes is less engaging, often coming across as boilerplate, but the pictures help to capture Sharansky’s personality. Though the likenesses—especially the pictures of presidents—aren’t always convincing, some of the drawings are vivid enough to look nearly alive. The saddest part is that, for many people, his goals would never have made sense of the ending) but day and place as well as time (which big vocabulary = nerd, right?) and leaving not just time (which might have made sense of the ending) but day and place as well off the party invitation Theo writes on the class blackboard. Stories about heroes are almost always a little sad.

Like many activists, Natan Sharansky was punished nearly every time he fought for the goals he believed in. He was accused publicly of espionage by the Soviet authorities and spent years in prison and in labor camps, separated from his wife. The saddest part is that, for many people, his goals would have qualified as ordinary life: He wanted to live in Israel and practice his religion in the open. He eventually won those rights for himself and other Soviet Jews. Even after being locked up for close to a decade and completing several hunger strikes, he still had a remarkable sense of humor. While the dialogue captures emotional tenors well throughout, the most memorable lines in this graphic biography are often jokes he made. When KGB agents followed him into a taxi, he asked if they’d split the cab fare, and after years of constant surveillance, he said, “It’s like I have two shadows: one that is mine, and the other the KGB’s.”

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“An expression of daily life and feelings that many children will find familiar.”

MAYBE MAYBE MARISOL RAINLEY

THESAURUS HAS A SECRET (2020). (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 75% of actual size.)

A pleasant but, at best, superficial bit of sesquipedalian gallimaufry. (glossary) (Picture book. 6-8)

THAT THING ABOUT BOLLYWOOD
Kelkar, Supriya
Simon & Schuster (352 pp.)
$17.99 | May 18, 2021
978-1-534-46673-9

Sixth grader Sonali learns a dramatic lesson about emotional honesty.

The Southern California tween has long shouldered the burden of her parents’ nonstop arguing—distracting her little brother when it makes him cry; stuffing her own feelings; and obeying her father’s code of secrecy and stoicism. Ironically, Indian American Sonali and her best friend, Pakistani American Zara, adore Bollywood movies and all their emoting. Sonali’s Gujarati family even has a weekly Hindi movie night, reveling in the high emotions on the screen while keeping their own trapped firmly behind closed doors. But her parents’ trial separation, combined with Zara’s growing friendship with a new girl at school, pushes Sonali beyond her limit. She is stricken with “filmi magic,” waking up in an alternate, Bollywood-enhanced world in which personal soundtracks express your true mood and intense feelings lead to song-and-dance numbers. Hair, clothing, and decor even get the Technicolor Bollywood treatment. Losing control leads Sonali to explore possible solutions to her “Bollywooditis”—and the inevitable realization that she must find the courage to open up to those who love her, which in turn fosters family and friendship growth. Sonali’s distress is painfully real, showing the isolating ripple effects of parental conflict on relationships and school performance. As much of the novel centers Sonali’s inner turmoil as goes the imagined superhero cape, and as he poses, he gains color: brown hair, pale skin, blue sneakers, and tighty whites. Off he goes to show the still—black-and-white parental figure relaxing in a chair with a tablet. But not only can he not discover the superpower that goes with his cape, but he can’t even get his parent’s positive attention, either; “Please don’t jump on the couch.” “Did you brush your teeth today?” “No running in the house.” When his disappointment at his utter lack of superpowers becomes apparent, the parent finally puts down the digital device and declares the boy has a “super powerful imagination.” The parent finally gains coloring (to match the child’s) when the boy (literally) pushes him to join him in superhero play…and like the child, loses clothing save for socks, yellow boxers with hearts, and a baby-blue cape. Kelley’s masterful use of color in the sparse illustrations makes the messaging plain for both young and old: Use your imagination, and interact with people, not devices. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-18-inch double-page spreads viewed at 22.5% of actual size.)

Here’s to many kids (and parents) finding their own superpowers. (Picture book. 3-8)

A CAPE!
Kelley, Marty
Illus. by the author
Sleeping Bear Press (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 15, 2021
978-1-534-41111-0

A young boy searches for his superpower and finds just what he wanted all along.

Serendipity leads a young boy to open the linen closet, where he makes a discovery that changes the course of his day: In an otherwise black-and-white scene, he finds a neatly folded, bright red piece of fabric. Off come his shorts and T-shirt. On goes the imagined superhero cape, and as he poses, he gains color: brown hair, pale skin, blue sneakers, and tighty whites. Off he goes to show the still—black-and-white parental figure relaxing in a chair with a tablet. But not only can he not discover the superpower that goes with his cape, but he can’t even get his parent’s positive attention, either; “Please don’t jump on the couch.” “Did you brush your teeth today?” “No running in the house.” When his disappointment at his utter lack of superpowers becomes apparent, the parent finally puts down the digital device and declares the boy has a “super powerful imagination.” The parent finally gains coloring (to match the child’s) when the boy (literally) pushes him to join him in superhero play…and like the child, loses clothing save for socks, yellow boxers with hearts, and a baby-blue cape. Kelley’s masterful use of color in the sparse illustrations makes the messaging plain for both young and old: Use your imagination, and interact with people, not devices. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-18-inch double-page spreads viewed at 22.5% of actual size.)

Here’s to many kids (and parents) finding their own superpowers. (Picture book. 3-8)

MAYBE MAYBE MARISOL RAINLEY
Kelley, Erin Entrada
Illus. by the author
Greenwillow Books (160 pp.)
$16.99 | May 4, 2021
978-0-06-297042-8
Series: Maybe Marisol

Marisol spends her summer mulling over climbing a tree.

In Marisol Rainey’s Louisiana backyard stands a magnolia tree that she has named Peppina. (Believing that “all important things…should have their own names,” she’s given names to appliances, furniture, and the family car, too.) The tree is perfect for climbing, and everyone loves Peppina. Everyone except Marisol, that is, who is afraid of falling. She has a big imagination, which often causes her to get lost in the what ifs. Marisol spends the summer days with her best friend, Jada, playing and making movies. Jada loves to climb Peppina, and maybe, just maybe, this will be the summer Marisol finds the courage to climb Peppina too. Narrated in third person, present tense, this is a sweet story of a girl trying to overcome her fears and anxieties. Marisol’s story also touches on friendship, bullies, siblings, having a parent who lives away from home (her dad works on an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico), and having a parent from another country. Her story is an expression of daily life and feelings that many children will find familiar. The short chapters help move the quiet story along, as do the amusing black-and-white illustrations sprinkled throughout. Fans of Ivy + Bean will enjoy Marisol’s story. Marisol is biracial, with her Filipina mom’s dark hair and eyes; her dad presents White. Jada presents Black.

There’s no maybe about it; readers will enjoy this charming story. (Fiction. 6-9)
A quirky and affectionate introduction to a typically South Asian rite of passage.

HOW TO WEAR A SARI

Khiami, Darshana
Illus. by Lew-Vriethoff, Joanne
Versify/HMH (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-0-593-11575-6 paper

Are you a kid who is ready to be a grown-up?
If so, this book is for you! According to the book's narrator, the best way to be treated like an adult is to dress like one—and no outfit is more grown-up than a sari. In the following pages, the narrator instructs the protagonist—a plucky, dark-skinned kid with two short pigtails and an impish smile—on everything that must be done to successfully wear this traditional South Asian garment. First, the protagonist chooses the perfect piece of fabric: not too plain, not too fancy, and just sparkly enough. Next, the narrator leads the protagonist through the process of wearing a blouse and petticoat, wrapping the sari, pleating the skirt, and—perhaps most importantly—accessorizing with jewelry. Finally, the protagonist is dressed and ready to show the family this new grown-up persona. Unfortunately, while putting on a sari is a clear process, walking in a sari is not, and the protagonist's grand entrance is not quite what was imagined. Told in second-person address, this cheerily illustrated picture book is a quirky and affectionate introduction to a typically South Asian rite of passage. The tongue-in-cheek text expertly balances humor with sincerity, and the protagonist's antics—which are communicated mostly through the expertly paced illustrations—are hilarious. In addition to appealing to young readers, this book will ring true with South Asian adults who tried to fashion their own saris as children. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 300% of actual size.)

A delightful picture book about dressing—and acting—like a grown-up before your time. (Picture book 3-7)

NELLIE BLY

Knudsen, Michelle
Illus. by Flint, Gillian
Philomel (80 pp.)
$14.99 | $5.99 paper | May 4, 2021
978-0-593-11574-9
978-0-593-11575-6 paper
Series: She Persisted

In the latest installment in the She Persisted chapter-biography series, Knudsen and Flint bring to life a woman with whom many have some familiarity. However, young readers—as well as not-so-young—will delight in discovering the many tiny details of Nellie Bly's life. For example, her nickname was Pink because she loved the color so much. But her real name wasn't Nellie; it was Elizabeth Jane Cochran. When her father died without a will, his estate was divided among Bly's birth family and her 10 older half siblings, leaving Bly's mother in straitened circumstances that led to her marriage to a violent second husband. Bly persevered possibly because of the hardships of her young life. Seeing her mother struggle fueled her determination to be self-sufficient. The book shines the most when it outlines how Elizabeth Jane transformed into Nellie Bly—women journalists were not allowed to use their proper names in print—and defied the norms of fashion journalism and society writing usually set aside for women. Bly became an internationally celebrated journalist based on her courageous, daring investigative journalism. This is a fast read, sure to engage transitioning independent readers or older reluctant readers. However, the information included will certainly hold the attention of more sophisticated readers. Flint's delicate illustrations depict her White protagonist with confident, eager expressions. Per series formula, tips on how readers can persist close the title.

A likable, meaningful addition to the She Persisted collection. (Biography. 6-9)

37 DAYS AT SEA

Aboard the M.S. St. Louis, 1939

Krasner, Barbara
Kar-Ben (168 pp.)
$17.99 | $7.99 paper | May 1, 2021
978-1-5415-7912-5
978-1-5415-7913-2 paper

An 11-year-old refugee just wants to start fresh in the United States after her flight from Nazi Germany on the St. Louis.

Ruthie Arons misses her dog, her grandmother, and her home in Breslau. But her family's been ordered to leave Germany, so Ruthie and her parents are America-bound. On the St. Louis, all passengers are European Jewish refugees, and the crew are White Germans. Although it's 1939, many of the crew are not Nazis, and the captain tries to make things as decent for the passengers as he can. The free-verse chapters recounting Ruthie's journey vary in quality; many read like prose broken into short lines, filler between more artfully crafted poems. They're most successful when they focus tightly on Ruthie: the pranks she and her friend play on the passengers and crew or the surreal vision of refugees fleeing on a cruise liner complete with a pool, shuffleboard, and movies. Less successful are the poems peppered with true details from the tragic voyage of the real St. Louis—a ship that the United States, disgracefully, turned back to Europe, where nearly a third of the passengers were murdered by Nazis. Ruthie is not very interested with these adult events and thus describes them without context, background, or emotional punch.

Uneven verse and thin explanation don't carry this telling of a recent, relevant historical outrage. (Historical note, timeline, reading list) (Historical fiction. 9-11)
TUESDAY IS DADDY’S DAY
Kreloff, Elliot
Illus. by the author
Holiday House (48 pp.)  
$18.99  |  May 11, 2021  
978-0-8234-4891-3

Initially upset about a broken routine, a child gets a special surprise. A long-haired, brown-skinned child thinks they’re “lucky” because having split parents means two rooms: a pink room at Daddy’s and a blue room at Mommy’s. As the endpapers’ sticker-decorated calendar reveals, the child’s schedule gets a little complicated as they shuffle back and forth among households and school. But wherever they go, they bring Daisy, their blue stuffed dog, with them. Whether with Mommy or with Daddy and his partner Harry, there’s no shortage of fun (and a little yucky broccoli). One Tuesday, the child is supposed to be with Daddy but Mommy shows up at school instead. Mommy says “Daddy had something special to do today.” That makes the child—and Daisy—mad. Where could Daddy be? And what is the special surprise? Using different solid-color backgrounds, Kreloff effectively compares and contrasts the child’s routines at their two homes. The childlike cartoon drawings combine thick pencil lines with collage, making the human figures pop on the page. Taking place after a separation has already occurred, the story delightfully normalizes and affirms co-parenting. Still, the child’s first-person narration and illustrations do tilt a bit in Daddy’s favor. Both Mommy and Daddy have brown skin; Harry presents White.

PAWCASTRO
Lai, Remy
Illus. by the author
Henry Holt (240 pp.)  
$14.99 paper  |  May 11, 2021  
978-1-250-77449-1

Jo’s little lie of omission becomes a serendipitous opportunity for new friendships. Already lonely on the first day of summer break, Jo Lin spots a dog walking alone while carrying a basket in its mouth. Intrigued by this scene, Jo follows the dog and is amazed when he visits different stores and is given items from a shopping list. At his last stop, Jo is recognized by some children taking an art class and, eventually, by Jo’s art teacher. Jo and the dog, who introduces himself as Pawcasso, quickly become fast friends. Jo allows Pawcasso to be her model for the art class, and Pawcasso soon becomes their school mascot, even being given a place in their art class. Jo’s teacher is surprised by Jo’s new friend and asks her about Pawcasso. Jo explains that Pawcasso is a shopping dog and that he brings joy and companionship to the children. Pawcasso’s increasing notoriety as the shopping dog stirs up attention and prompts a divisive communitywide debate around dog leashing. With each passing day Jo struggles with being honest and potentially losing the new friendships she’s come to value. The bright colors and cartoonlike style reflect the lighthearted tone and whimsical elements of the story. Exaggerated facial expressions and dramatic eyes heighten the humor and add quirky charm. Pawcasso is drawn with warm, expressive features that give him an endearing quality. Details of their home life cue light-skinned, black-haired Jo and her family as Asian; her community is populated with a diverse mix of people.

Pawcassically charming. (Ice cream recipe) (Graphic fiction. 8-12)

D-39: A Robodog’s Journey
Latham, Irene
Charlesbridge (448 pp.)  
$17.99  |  May 18, 2021  
978-1-62354-181-1

Twelve-year-old Klynt Tovis enjoys tinkering with and restoring gadgets. She lives with her father on their family farm in a war-torn country where the greedy, violent, and unjust actions of warring factions have resulted in a time of scarcity and fear. Klynt’s only company when school is out is her father and, occasionally, her neighbor’s young son, Jopa. That is, until the day when a D-39 robodog—a realistic dog robot—turns up on her farm. Klynt and D-39 soon become inseparable. After a bomb forces them into their underground bunker for 21 days, Klynt and her father emerge to discover a world destroyed by violence. They head out for rations but end up separating when Klynt decides to stay back with Jopa, whom they discover all alone. After three days without word from her father, Klynt realizes that something must be wrong and that she must take charge. She sets out with D-39 and Jopa on a journey to find their families and, hopefully, salvation. Latham uses an invented lexicon of delightfully creative and expressive hybrid words—jinglesnap, boomblasts, itchglitchy—to tell this tale of a girl and her dog sticking together through illness, pain, and near-death experiences. This is an appealing story for animal-loving readers seeking a slow-paced, atmospheric adventure story. Human characters read as White by default.

A girl-meets-dog story of hope, perseverance, and survival. (glossary) (Dystopian. 8-12)
WE MOVE THE WORLD
Lavelle, Kari
Illus. by Ali, Nabi H.
Harper/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-0-06-291685-3

Small children learning and playing are juxtaposed with adults changing history.

Children say first words, take first steps, stack blocks, and write the alphabet. Older people walk on the moon, build historic landmarks like the Statue of Liberty, and write letters to the president to effect change. Children jump and leap and sing, adults record “We Are the World” to benefit world hunger, and Misty Copeland becomes the American Ballet Theater’s first African American principal ballerina. The children’s activities are narrated in a simple first-person-plural voice, easy to read aloud with little ones. The corresponding historical events and profiles are written in a more expository style better suited for older readers. While both storylines are worth reading, the combination makes the read-aloud experience less than smooth, although creative work-arounds (like having children read the children’s parts and adults read the nonfiction parts) are possible. The adult achievements celebrated are progressive and diverse: Colin Kaepernick’s protest, Brazil’s Pride parade, Native American Code Talkers, and the AIDS Memorial Quilt are included, along with the Wright brothers, female Supreme Court justices, Mister Rogers, and the moon landing. Ali’s joyful illustrations successfully convey community between the children’s activities and the actions that changed history, infusing the narrative with an energy the text sorely needs to carry readers through. Endnotes provide further details about the events and individuals mentioned in the text. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-17-inch double-page spreads viewed at 69.4% of actual size.)

A moderate success. (timeline, notes, bibliography, resources) (Informational picture book. 4-8)

FEARLESS WORLD TRAVELER
Adventures of Marianne North, Botanical Artist
Lavelle, Laurie
Illus. by Stadtlander, Becca
Holiday House (40 pp.)
$18.99 | May 11, 2021
978-0-8234-3959-1

An introduction to a prolific painter with a love for all species.

Marianne North was dissuaded by her family from playing music, cultivating her artistic talent, and pursuing an education; her main job was to find a wealthy husband—someone like her father. But from her teens, Pop, as she was nicknamed, devoted her life to painting the flora and fauna of our world. North spent the majority of her adult life traveling to far-off places. When she finally ran out of room for her paintings in her own home in London, she opened a museum: the Marianne North Gallery at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, which was an instant success and is still open today—one of the oldest exhibitions by a woman artist in the world. Stadtlander’s artwork is intricate and full of detail. She includes almost every shade of green imaginable in her illustrations, which are lush and rich with life both extant and extinct. They depict the White protagonist alone during her travels. A double-page spread of North riding an elephant is exquisite and serene. The small print could pose difficulties for young readers reading this book alone, so it’s good that the illustrations’ colors are bright and bold enough for a group read-aloud. Plenty of backmatter makes this book an excellent starting point both for further research and to teach children how much work goes into creating a nonfiction book. North’s own paintings appear on the endpapers, fully attesting to her talent.

A life full of adventure with a lasting legacy. (biographical note, sources, source notes, character list) (Picture book/biography. 9-12)

WREN
Lehman, Katrina
Illus. by Beer, Sophie
Scribble (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-950354-66-5

A cacophony of chaotic sound brings a new brother and sister together.

Wren can’t catch a break. Life in his household has been noisy to begin with, what with his four other siblings, mom, and dad (the whole family presents White) always making a ruckus. But not even their racket can compete with Wren’s new baby sister. She’s “louder than a train and wails[es] for longer than a fire engine.” Worse, nothing seems to quiet her down! Fed up, Wren moves in with his grandparents in the countryside. There, life is quiet and calm, but all too soon Wren starts missing home. And when he returns, he finds that perhaps he has more in common with his sister than anyone ever realized. An emphatic palette of oranges, blues, and yellows brings Wren’s plight to anarchic life. In fact, Wren’s craving for calm paints the oasis at his grandpar-ents’ house as so pleasant that children may have a hard time believing anyone would ever want to leave. Yet the heart of the story lies in its sibling love. Wren’s eventual relationship with his new baby sister will be a welcome addition to the ranks of such new-baby standouts as One Special Day, by Lola M. Schaefer and illustrated by Jessica Reserve (2012).

Sensory overload is no match for the lure of tranquility—until it is, in this effortlessly charming tale. (Picture book. 3-6)
“Törnqvist’s hazy, mostly earth-toned illustrations appropriately reflect the muted colors of dusk.”

NOW THAT NIGHT IS NEAR

A Swedish Goodnight Moon.

As shadows lengthen and day concludes, a dark-skinned child falls asleep while the narrator takes readers from the bedroom to the yard of this rural farmhouse, then to the woods, to a nearby lake, and finally to a nocturnal, moonlit sky view of the whole area. The rhythmic text features a rhyming refrain: “Everyone is going to sleep, now that night is near. / Even cats are going to sleep, as bedtime’s nearly here.” Most of that rings true, but the part about the cats will keep readers guessing since the black cat that first appears on the title page and then perched in the child’s windowsill roams all the places the narrator mentions—not sleeping at all. Along the cat’s path, readers see cows, horses, pigs, and sheep, then wild animals including a fox family, two moose, a snake, and sleeping badgers. Notably, many of the outdoor animals have stuffed-toy duplicates in the child’s bedroom, a hint that the cat’s journey could be real or imagined. Young readers who enjoy the soporific spell of Goodnight Moon will appreciate this invitation to sleep, translated from the Swedish. Törnqvist’s hazy, mostly earth-toned illustrations appropriately reflect the muted colors of dusk, and her detailed attention to the flora and fauna of the area will give readers plenty to find, name, count, and discuss. The biracial family (the mom has brown skin, and the dad presents White) makes this an inclusive story that counters prevailing stereotypes of rural farm families.

A beautifully illustrated cat’s-eye view of a quiet bedtime on a farm. (Picture book. 3-7)

THE TREE TOLD ME

Lescault, Sophie
Illus. by Portal, Thanh
Reycraft Books (24 pp.)
$16.95 | May 28, 2021
978-1-4788-7374-7

An unidentified narrator imparts wisdom learned from a tree in this French import.

Each spread begins with “The tree told me,” as if the tree is sharing nuggets of wisdom that humans can consider for improving their own lives (“The tree told me / to learn to wait”) or, at the very least, to simply contemplate. The opening statement, “The tree told me in the beginning we are almost nothing,” is accompanied by an image of a green shoot springing forth from an underground seedling. Unfortunately, some of the tree’s tips are vague: A spread in which the tree says “there are many ways” depicts eight birds standing on branches, merely looking in various directions. And some are utterly baffling: “The tree told me / that some things are unacceptable” features animals running in fear while mammoth, pitch-black hands reach toward the ground. The text’s unvarying structure becomes dull, and the tree’s advice lacks any sort of unifying threadline. Birds are depicted with intriguing textures, feather patterns, and colors, but some spreads feature off-kilter perspectives that are visually perplexing: An early spread looking up from the ground is so disorienting that the bird standing next to a tree appears unrealistically huge. Changes in font color and size distract more than they enhance, and the ending (the final piece of wisdom)—“that it takes a lot of time to grow up”—is abrupt. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11.8- by 18.8-inch double-page spreads viewed at actual size.)

Disjointed and unremarkable. (Picture book. 4-8)

NOW THAT NIGHT IS NEAR

Lindgren, Astrid
Illus. by Törnqvist, Marit
Trans. by Lawson, Polly
Floris (24 pp.)
$17.95 | May 18, 2021
978-1-78250-675-1

A Swedish Goodnight Moon.

RUN, LITTLE CHASKI!
An Inka Trail Adventure
Llanos, Mariana
Illus. by Johnson, Mariana Ruiz
Barefoot (32 pp.)
$16.99 | $8.99 paper | May 1, 2021
978-1-64686-164-4
978-1-64686-165-1 paper

The Inka empire—the empire of the Tawantinsuyu—was the largest in pre-Columbian America. An ingenious relay system of messengers was used to connect the vast empire: the chaskis. This is the story of a young chaski on his first day of service.

Little Chaski wakes up before the sun. His first mission is to take a khipu to the King—the Inka—before the sun sets. (Khipus were knotted threads hanging from cords, used to keep records and communicate information.) Along the way, Little Chaski helps out a number of animals in trouble. Observant readers will notice Little Chaski dropped his khipu when helping the first animal. When he finally arrives just as the sun is setting, he realizes the precious khipu is missing. The day is saved, though, when the grateful animals arrive bearing the khipu, making this a charming tale that easily melds kindness and historical facts. Colorful, dynamic, and detail-filled illustrations complement and extend the story. The expressions on the sun’s face as it traverses the sky are delightful. The backmatter includes a glossary of the Quechua words sprinkled throughout the text, information on the Inka empire, and information on the animals depicted. Certainly an appealing introduction to an important culture largely overlooked in children’s literature in the United States.

A welcome addition, especially given the dearth of children’s books on the Inka empire. (Picture book. 5-7)
**HELLO, RAIN!**

Maclear, Kyo  
Illus. by Turnham, Chris  
Chronicle Books (44 pp.)  
$16.99 | Apr. 13, 2021  
978-1-4521-3819-0

A child and pet dog relish a rainy day.  
Child and pet stare out the window as clouds gather. Excitedly, as the rain goes “plink, plunk, plonk” on the rooftop, the child dons a raincoat and boots and grabs an umbrella.  
(Even the dog gets a rain jacket.) The pair delight in the sensory adventure that is play in the rain: They ponder words for rain, the creatures who seek it, and the growing things nourished by it; jump in puddles; launch paper boats near a “curbside waterfall”; and find a quiet spot under a tree to sit for “whisper-talk.”  
When thunder and lightning fill the sky, they run inside to get warm and dry. In text that begs to be shared aloud, evocative figurative language (“the air is full of waiting” and “umbrellas fall”; and find a quiet spot under a tree to sit for “whisper-talk.”) vividly animate the thrill of heading outside when “the sky is an adventure.” The illustrations themselves burst with life, movement, and mirth. Cerulean (for the rain) and yellow (for raincoats) hues enchant. One especially pleasing spread gives readers an aerial view of the artwork doesn’t dwell on devastation, instead focusing on bright, uplifting images of hope and recovery. An author’s note and information about the tree conclude the book.

Moving and poignant, a tender tribute in this 20th-anniversary commemoration of 9/11. (Informational picture book. 5-8)

**BRANCHES OF HOPE**

The 9/11 Survivor Tree  
Magee, Ann  
Illus. by Wong, Nicole  
Charlesbridge (32 pp.)  
$16.99 | May 18, 2021  
978-1-62354-132-3

Text and pictures attest to the resilience of New Yorkers and a remarkable tree following 9/11.  
A pear tree is discovered—scarred, burned, and buried—under mounds of rubble after the collapse of the Twin Towers and replanted in a nursery in the Bronx, where it eventually regrows and thrives. This deeply touching book equates the tree’s extraordinary renaissance with New Yorkers’ reawakened strength, spirit, and hope in the aftermath of the tragedy. One particular family—portrayed as an interracial couple (mom presents Black and dad, White) and their very young child—stand in for all New York’s and, indeed, America’s citizens and are depicted in opening scenes innocently enjoying daily life. Everything changes after they watch in bewildered horror as the awful events unfold on TV. Illustrations very ably accompany the simple, solemn text, using both double-page spreads and paneled insets; they highlight and interconnect the passing of time for tree and humans. The “Survivor Tree” is reborn, ultimately returned to its original site and replanted; first responders at ground zero work diligently; the child grows and gains a baby sibling; ordinary activities continue; seasons change; and a 9/11 memorial is built. At book’s end, the child has grown to adulthood and become a New York City firefighter. Several somber-colored illustrations capture the disaster, but the artwork doesn’t dwell on devastation, instead focusing on bright, uplifting images of hope and recovery. An author’s note and information about the tree conclude the book.

A joyous tribute to the wonders of a rainy day for the pluviophile in all of us. (Picture book. 3-7)

**ATTICUS CATICUS**  
Maizes, Sarah  
Illus. by Kramer, Kara  
Candlewick (40 pp.)  
$16.99 | May 4, 2021  
978-1-5362-0840-5

What a splendid cat(icus) is Atticus.  
A beige-skinned kid with dark hair plays a cardboard drum to wake the sleepy feline: “Rat-a-tat-tat-ticus.” After a stretch and a hunch, Atticus “yawns with his whole head.” As the day continues, the text unfolds in a pattern, an abcb-rhyming stanza and then an exclamation that plays with the sounds in _Atticus Caticus_. The rattle of his food box calls Atticus to the kitchen. “He gobbles his food / without any delay, / then drinks from my glass / while I’m looking away.” Atticus Caticus, / tummy so fat-ticus!” Then it’s time for lying in a sunbeam, when he becomes “Atticus Caticus, / flat-a-tat-tat-ticus.” Child and Atticus chat with a bird and play with a string, and Atticus stages a toe ambush. At the end of the day, “I get in the tub and / he comes to get clean. / He licks and he licks— / he’s a licking machine. / Atticus Caticus / bashes on a bath mat-ticus.” Then it’s to bed, where Atticus sleeps on his kid’s head (after some blanket kneading). Kramer’s energetic illustrations have the look of scribbly colored pencil over block-printed background patterns. Their bright and silly expressiveness is an excellent match for Maizes’ rollicking text, which should make for many enjoyable read-alouds.

Tongue-twister-y fun celebrating the joys of being owned by a cat. (Picture book. 2-7)
THE WOODEN TREASURE
Marais, Frédéric
Illus. by the author
Reycraft Books (32 pp.)
$17.95 | May 28, 2021
978-1-4788-7035-7

This French import is inspired by the biography of Mir Sultan Khan, once known as the most talented chess master from Asia.

One day a child who is begging for food is surprised with an unusual gift from a mysterious, turbaned, bearded man: a wooden chess set. The nameless old man explains to the boy how to move the pieces and tells him stories as he plays with the figurines. “The boy found himself on a great adventure” in those stories—“defender and conqueror…victor and vanquished.” As the boy becomes more skilled at the game, a maharajah becomes his patron and sends him to play in tournaments overseas. Marais reimagines Khan’s story using Orientalist textual and graphic tropes. The book’s first sentences are “A long time ago, in a country far away, there lived a boy who had nothing”; the boy’s bare feet are in the foreground, and onion domes clutter the background. In real life, Khan grew up in a landed family and learned chess from his father; he went to London as an adult with the encouragement of an elected member of India’s national legislative body—there was no maharajah. Still, Marais’ limited color palette of black, white, blue, and orange is striking, and the spreads when the boy falls into the game and its characters are energetic and original. (This book was reviewed digitally with 12.6-by-8.8-inch double-page spreads viewed at 11.1% of actual size.)

An uneven picture book about a popular game that exploits familiar South Asian iconography. (Picture book. 4-8)

PRINCESSES CAN FIX IT!
Marchini, Tracy
Illus. by Christians, Julia
Page Street (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-64567-214-2

A princess picture book fixed on smashing gender stereotypes.

Despite his pastel pink coiffure, the King in this story subscribes to rigid gender roles when it comes to his son and three daughters. (Like her father, one princess appears White while the other two have brown skin and dark hair; the prince is cued East Asian.) When the castle is overrun by alligators, the King rejects the notion that the princesses might be able to get them back into the moat, declaring, “Alligator problems are a job for the King.” Christians’ energetic cartoon art humorously depicts the havoc the alligators create in the castle while also hinting at the princesses’ clandestine efforts to build something to deal with the animals. Meanwhile, Prince Edward is “tired of only doing Proper Princely things,” and he starts a sewing project to enable him to spy on his sisters’ plan. The King remains stubbornly oblivious to his children’s activities, even when Edward tries to clue him in, providing ample humor for readers to enjoy. The text makes use of a humorous refrain that punctuates the goings-on: “At breakfast, Margaret washed pencil lines from her face. Harriet brushed sawdust from her clothes. Lila fell asleep in her oatmeal. And Edward hurried to the King…” A slapstick resolution cements the princesses’ ingenuity while obliterating any perception of them as stereotypical ingénues.

A fix for tired gender roles. (Picture book. 3-7)

LETS PLAY!
A Book About Making Friends
McCardie, Amanda
Illus. by Larmour, Colleen
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$16.99 | May 11, 2021
978-1-5362-1765-0

A friendship primer for the primary set.

While this picture book isn’t necessarily set in a post-pandemic world, its overt social-emotional lessons will doubtless prove useful and relevant for many children coming out of varying degrees of social isolation. The writing style verges on the expository with narration that reads like a voice-over in a documentary that records the experiences of a red-haired White girl named Sukie as she enters a new school. Her class has 15 other pupils, some of whom also appear to be White while others seem to be children of color, including one child who wears a hijab. Larmour’s art style has shades of Quentin Blake, Bob Graham, Amy Schwartz, and Aliki, with lots of bright colors, expressive linework, and emphasis on character over setting. Themes of sameness and difference, loyalty, and sharing along with a range of emotions are explored in small moments that follow Sukie and her classmates as they form friendships and build community. An author’s note acknowledges that “this book doesn’t show things going wrong between friends, even though sometimes they do. Instead, I wanted to focus on what it can look like when friendship goes right.” Honestly, it looks great, and this affirming, practical, engaging picture book will be a terrific resource for young readers to befriend.

Let’s read this one. (Picture book. 4-7)

OH LOOK, A CAKE!
McKee, J.C.
Illus. by the author
Clarion (40 pp.)
$18.99 | May 11, 2021
978-0-358-38030-6

A fractured fable about sharing.

A sloth and a lemur find a gorgeous cake: three-tiered, pink-frosted, topped by a single orange-and-black-striped candle. The two decide...
to throw a party, but whom to invite? Sloth tries making suggestions, but Lemur shoots them all down. They’re afraid that Tiger will eat the cake and then them; it’s too much work to serve tiny pieces to an entire anthill; Chameleon is nowhere to be found; and “Sugar does things” to Tortoise, shown singing into a microphone clad in a top hat and with an inflatable pool toy around his waist. The two animals decide that their only choice is to eat the entire cake themselves. When the rightful baker and birthday-cat, Tiger, sees what they’ve done, she ominously tells them that she “can still get it back.” There’s shades of Jon Klassen’s Hat trilogy here as well as Lucy Ruth Cummins’ A Hungry Lion (2016), and this is a worthy addition to the trend of picture books showing the more ominous consequences of one’s actions in an anthropomorphized animal kingdom. The effective use of background color, subtle expressions, gravity, and pacing make this a winning choice for storytime, so long as the audience can handle the implications of the ending. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-18-inch double-page spreads viewed at 19.6% of actual size.)

Dark and delicious. (Picture book. 4-7)

INcredible Rescue MiSSion
Mian, Zanib
Illus. by Mafaridik, Nasaya
Putnam (256 pp.)
$13.99 | May 11, 2021
978-0-593-10927-4
Series: Planet Omar, 3

When their beloved teacher is suddenly replaced by the aptly named substitute Mrs. Crankshaw, it’s up to Omar and his friends to find out what really happened to Mrs. Hutchinson. Omar, Daniel, and Charlie try in vain to figure out where Mrs. Hutchinson has gone, but the adults are keeping mum. The trio launches a search mission to find her, poking around the staff room, searching outside her house, putting up posters, and reaching out to Mrs. Hutchinson’s uncle—who also cannot disclose her whereabouts. Clues from fragments of an overheard conversation lead Omar to the only logical conclusion his vivid imagination can come up with: Aliens have abducted his teacher. Meanwhile, Omar’s parents are preparing for a trip to Pakistan for a family wedding, and Omar wonders if he’ll be able to solve the mystery before they leave or if he should keep looking toward the stars. Mian’s narrative of British Pakistani Muslim Omar and his family, friends, and neighbors continues to be delightfully charming with laugh-out-loud humor. The family’s trip to Pakistan allows readers to explore Pakistani culture alongside the family. Omar’s nuanced observations about poverty and class in the country his grandparents emigrated from highlight elements that are often ignored or accepted as normal to adults.

A solid addition to the series. (Fiction. 8-12)

PARENTS HERE AND THERE
A Kid’s Guide to Deployment
Miller, Marie Therese
Lerner (32 pp.)
$8.99 paper | $27.99 PLB | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-72842-386-9 paper
978-1-72840-343-4 PLB

Separation from a parent is difficult. This photographic guide uses short text and familiar vocabulary to explain deployment. The book speaks directly to child readers, acknowledging their feelings and letting them know their feelings are OK. It reassures them that friends and family will be around to help, and they will be able to send pictures, write letters, and talk to their parent on the phone or even video chat. It gives them ideas on how to count the days until their parent is home and even to think about how they will welcome the parent home: making a welcome-home banner or fixing their parent’s favorite food. The pages feature bright photographs of diverse families; these include both military moms and dads and display the full range of emotions involved during this difficult time. One especially touching photo shows a mom whose face is tight with emotion bidding goodbye to a weeping child, critically emphasizing that deployment is hard on everybody involved. Also critical is straightforward text reassurance “that your parent loves you and cares about you.” The book ends with the parent still deployed, assuring children that “the love you share keeps your hearts close.” Miller’s book is a welcome addition to this rarely published topic. Between 2001 and 2010, 1.75 million children in the U.S. had at least one parent in the military, yet books about deployment of a parent or loved one are difficult to find.

Essential reading for many, many families. (glossary, further reading, index) (Informational picture book. 4-8)

ESCAPE
Ming & Wab
Illus. by Vela, Carmen
Lantana (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-911373-81-0

This book gracefully brings to life stories of escape from many places across the globe. Chan Hak-chi and Li Kit-hing, a couple, tie themselves to each other with a rope and swim for six hours across a shark-ridden bay to reach Hong Kong and escape famine and systemic state persecution in mainland China. Joachim Neumann and his friends dig a tunnel under the Berlin Wall in the 1960s and facilitate the escape of 57 people to West Germany, including Joachim’s girlfriend. Harriet Tubman, once enslaved herself, risks torture and death to help an estimated 70 others escape slavery. Other stories recount escapes related to climate change in Kiribati, violence and poverty in Mexico, war in Syria, and more. Each spread features one case with real-life, named heroes either from the recent past or who are craftily connected
“Hatam’s illustrations are both child friendly and clever, incorporating symbolism from the text into fanciful pictures that burst with pride and joy.”

HAIR TWINS
Mirchandani, Raakhee Illus. by Hatam, Holly Little, Brown (40 pp.) $17.99 | May 4, 2021 978-0-316-49530-1

In this book, an unnamed Sikh girl describes the way she and her father take care of their hair.

In accordance with Sikh tradition, the narrator and her father both wear their dark hair long. The narrator describes how her father helps her comb her hair, using coconut oil to detangle it. Some days, she says, he plaits her hair into two long braids just like her grandmother’s. Other days, he twists it into a bun that matches his own, and the two become the titular “hair twins.” When the protagonist comes home from school, she lets her hair out and dances with her father, enjoying her long, free tresses. Afterward, the father ties the child’s hair into one long braid while he ties a turban on his head. The story ends with the girl and her father going to the park to meet the girl’s friends, all of whom have their own varied hairstyles and family structures—a conclusion that reinforces the book’s celebration of all types of hair, bodies, and people. Hatam’s illustrations are both child friendly and clever, incorporating symbolism from the text into fanciful pictures that burst with pride and joy. The lyrical text has a sincerity and enthusiasm that make it a delight to read. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9-by-18-inch double-page spreads viewed at 42.6% of actual size.)

A feel-good picture book about diversity, family relationships, and self-love. (Picture book 3-8)
“Detailed writing brings the past to life in this delightful time-slip story.”

-da vinci’s cat-

back to backward be kind to everyone who might be the anonymous emaier, lvy realizes it possible that there is a cost to too much kindness, including negative effects on one’s own health, development, and relationships. Readers might squirm as they watch lvy continually sublimate her own negative, uncomfortable, sad, or angry feelings into the drive to help others, but with help from those who love her, she learns to unpack some of this as the story moves toward its conclusion and the resolution of the mystery. lvy is white and Jewish on her mother’s side.

feelings, life, and people are allowed to be complicated in beautiful ways in this page-turner. (fiction. 10-14)

**flip! how the frisbee took flight**

muirhead, margaret

ill. by gustavson, adam

charlesbridge (32 pp.)

$17.99 | apr. 27, 2021

978-1-58089-880-5

where do new ideas come from?

No one knows exactly who created the flying disc. Was it cavemen who flung round rocks? Ancient Greeks who threw the first discus? 1920s New England college students who flew empty pie plates made by a baker named frisbie? Or was it high school football player fred morrison, who started tossing the lids of popcorn tins in 1937? One thing is certain: fred morrison became entranced with the idea of a flying disc and was convinced that it could succeed. zippy, well-paced text teeming with consonance and energetic, engaging retro-style illustrations trace morrison’s development of the toy. After pursuing several prototypes, bouncing back from failure, partnering with his wife, and blending the idea with the space craze of the late ’40s and ’50s, morrison was eventually able to sell his design—called the Pluto Platter—to Wham-O, a toy company that learned of the pie plates in New England, tweaked the name, and began to distribute the Frisbee we know today. A great choice for illustrating social-emotional skills, particularly resilience, as well as steps of the STEM process, this lighthearted, entertaining selection is full of kid appeal and is sure to provide inspiration and encourage inventive thinking. Period illustrations feature an all-white cast, with people of color appearing in a contemporary park scene.

An appealing true tale of innovation and perseverance. (author’s note, sources) (picture book/biography. 6-10)

**the dance of the bees**

Naño, fran

ill. by Celej, Zuzanna

trans. by Brokenbrow, jon

cuento de luz (32 pp.)

$16.95 | apr. 15, 2021

978-84-18302-27-5

Honeybees (and a little light magic) unite three generations through poetry.

As a young unnamed girl and her grandmother walk through the Japanese countryside, the older woman shares her knowledge of these and other pollinators and their role in the world’s food web. The lessons continue but then are lost to time until the girl returns to the area many years later, causing her memories of that summer to return. Walking with her own child, they follow a bee that leads them to a cairn, beneath which they find her grandmother’s notebook with haiku from that last visit. The story, soft and methodical, is mirrored in the pale collage illustrations made from cut paper and watercolors. Each illustration includes one of the haiku poems printed vertically, perhaps conceived by the grandmother in that moment and written shortly after. Readers will learn a few rudimentary facts about bees, but caregivers and educators should be ready to research questions...
that the story raises. The illustrations may be too subtle for large storytimes, but the text flows nicely aloud for lap reads. The backmatter discusses the history and creative process of writing a haiku, which may inspire proactive caregivers to plan a weekend poetry project. The grandmother and protagonist have pale skin and straight black hair, and the protagonist’s son is depicted with straight red hair.

**Soft and sweet.** *(Picture book. 6-10)*

**PAPER HEART**
*Patrick, Cat*
Putnam (288 pp.)
$17.99 | May 11, 2021
978-1-984815-34-7

Tess, whose BFF, Colette, died accidentally in *Tornado Brain* (2020), is severely afflicted with grief and guilt. The 13-year-old has returned with her cousins’ family to a cabin in Wyoming where she, her twin sister, and Colette spent an idyllic summer the previous year. But with her friend gone just two and a half months, her pain is palpable. Complicating matters is the fact that her loving mother provides far more attention to Tess’ twin, Frankie, who is on the autism spectrum. Tess, a talented artist, has enrolled in a summer art camp where she is befriended by a boy called Izzy. At first he has no idea what’s causing her intense suffering, but he’s both supportive and kind. That’s far less true of fellow camper Jackie, who’s had a crush on Izzy for years and will do anything to undermine Tess. The mostly White cast is richly depicted, but it’s Tess’ believability, disabling grief that is the focus: Convinced that an angry grandmother and protagonist retain their watery hues while floating past musicians and dancers, up to the stars and back again, until landing, *Wizard of Oz*-style, gently back in their original palette. The violin, abandoned by the riverside, is picked up by an elderly man—possibly the original boy—whereupon he meets and embraces a friendly fish. Emotive, exactly rendered watercolors inspire quiet contemplation and will be welcoming for all ages, encouraging appreciation for the many ways different art forms can transport a viewer or listener. The main figure, though described as a boy in the title, appears almost genderless and is pale and light-haired. Other humans are depicted with a wide range of ages and gender presentations and a variety of realistic and fantastical skin colors and hair textures. *(This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-16-inch double-page spreads viewed at 65% of actual size.)*

**A loving ode to art forms that transcends language.** *(Picture book. 4-8)*

**CLUCKY AND THE STARS**
*Pavón, Mar*
Illus. by Carretero, Monica
Putnam (288 pp.)
$16.95 | Apr. 1, 2021
978-1-984815-34-7

Will someone in the farmyard become a star when Howard the owl talent scout makes his visit? The animals on the farm are all aflutter. “Howard is world famous for seeking near and far, / Discovering new talents and making them big stars.” No stranger to TV himself, he’s discovered a bunny magician and a roller-skating panda who plays the flute. In Clucky’s farmyard, Mona the goat is attempting to sing; George the horse is practicing his dancing; and Bert the turkey “is dressed up as old King Lear.” Even Clucky’s chicks practice their juggling with grapefruit. When Howard arrives in his limo, he steps out—only to trip on a stray grapefruit. Everyone wants to blame the chicks, who flee. Clucky takes the fall and says she was making juice. She cleans Howard up, then gives him an heirloom magnifying glass. Surprisingly, he decides he has found his star in Clucky, saying, “Today has been a special day, / my dear hen, now I know. / I’ve learned that it’s within our / hearts where all new talents grow.” Originally published in Spain, Pavón’s story is as weak on logic as Clucky is on any demonstrated talent. Carretero’s busy, often confusingly composed illustrations, full of google-eyed animals with strangely oversized noses, don’t help, nor does the forced verse in Brokenbrow’s translation.

**Clucky lays a rotten egg.** *(Picture book. 3-5)*

**SONATA FOR FISH AND BOY**
*Pavlović, Milan*
Groundwood (32 pp.)
$18.95 | May 4, 2021
978-1-77306-161-0

Exhausted by his practicing, the boy falls asleep, awakening swimming through the air with his new scaly friend through an increasingly saturated dreamscape. The nameless boy and his companion retain their watery hues while floating past musicians and dancers, up to the stars and back again, until landing, *Wizard of Oz*-style, gently back in their original palette. The violin, abandoned by the riverside, is picked up by an elderly man—possibly the original boy—whereupon he meets and embraces a friendly fish. Emotive, exactly rendered watercolors inspire quiet contemplation and will be welcoming for all ages, encouraging appreciation for the many ways different art forms can transport a viewer or listener. The main figure, though described as a boy in the title, appears almost genderless and is pale and light-haired. Other humans are depicted with a wide range of ages and gender presentations and a variety of realistic and fantastical skin colors and hair textures. *(This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-16-inch double-page spreads viewed at 65% of actual size.)*

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**Clucky lays a rotten egg.** *(Picture book. 3-5)*
CHARLIE CHOOSES
Peacock, Lou
Illus. by Slater, Nicola
Nosy Crow/Candlewick (32 pp.)
$16.99 | May 18, 2021
978-1-5362-1727-8

An indecisive child is chosen. Poor Charlie is an anxious little boy. He can't make even small decisions about things like ice cream and underwear, never mind choosing the present he wants for his birthday. Peacock’s text humorously conveys Charlie’s worries about making the wrong choices without ever stooping to poke fun while Slater’s cartoon art adopts a retro style that makes the picture book feel somehow familiar. A sleepless, wide-eyed Charlie lying in bed uncertain whether finally does decide that a pet dog would be the perfect birthday present, he confronts his biggest conundrum yet: which pup to pick at the animal shelter? This is where Slater’s illustrations truly shine, with depictions of a range of dog breeds that seem like a mashup of Sandra Boynton’s and Christian Robinson’s styles. In a pitch-perfect ending, the perfect pup chooses Charlie, relieving him of the need to make a decision and giving him a companion who helps ease his worries from that point on. Charlie has light-brown skin and a shock of brown hair; neither he nor any of the other racially diverse children who populate this book seem to have any parents, nor any need of them—a whimsical detail that adds appeal.

Choose this one, for sure. (Picture book. 3-7)

THE MUSEUM OF EVERYTHING
Perkins, Lynne Rae
Illus. by the author
Greenwillow Books (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 11, 2021
978-0-06-298830-6

What would you put in your own museum exhibits? Perkins’ great gifts for observation and connections are on display here as her narrator—a young White person—serves as curator and tour guide for several “museum exhibits” of concrete objects and abstract phenomena. “When the world gets too big, I like to look at little pieces of it, one at a time,” the narrator says. The result is a small, idiosyncratic catalog of possibilities and a lens for seeing parts of the world in relation to one another. Anything might belong in an exhibit: skirts made from flowering shrubs, all the hiding places in a room, shadows, the sky. One exhibit is a meditation on islands, perspective, and scale: An island could be a stone in a pool on a rock in a pond on an island in the ocean. Perkins uses a palette of rich bright colors in these dioramas and collages. Found items become foliage for bushes, shadow-box items, sandy shorelines. A realistic-looking book dissolves into clouds. Because the text is conversational, quietly speculative, and low-key, there is plenty of room for readers to think about and celebrate their own ways of seeing, collecting, and cataloging the world—and to celebrate an endless variety of possible museum exhibits around them. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9.3 by 22.6-inch double-page spreads viewed at 23.6% of actual size.)

Poetic, intriguing, and charming. (Picture book. 3-8)

BIKER BANDITS
Perrault, Guillaume
Illus. by the author
Trans. by Bui, Françoise
Holiday House (160 pp.)
$22.99 | $12.99 paper | May 18, 2021
978-0-8234-4520-2
978-0-8234-4963-7 paper
Series: The Postman From Space

A day in the life of an interplanetary postman becomes a comic, galactic romp. Bob has ascended the Planetary Post ranks after his first, successful adventure (The Postman From Space, 2020). But today he’s given just one measly letter to deliver, and he’s forced to train a new postal carrier, Marcelle. The delivery should be simple, but a series of mishaps sends the duo to the other side of the galaxy. On the way, they pick up a musical hitchhiker and visit several delightful unusual planets, all while being pursued by the Biker Bandits, a gang of thieving outlaws. So much for a routine day as a space postman! Originally published in French, this interplanetary adventure follows a familiar reluctant-hero arc. The action is propelled by well-paced panels and humorous dialogue. Whimsical planets populated by quirky characters are created with pastel and earth tones delineated by rounded linework. Fanciful and fun, the story is brought to an abrupt end by the eleventh-hour arrival of the bumbling Planetary Police. There are missteps: Bob’s weight is lampooned by others, and Bob blames Marcelle’s appetite for getting them into trouble. Additionally, multiple illustrations show chopsticks stuck vertically in a bowl of food, an impropriety in many Asian cultures. Most humanoid characters, including Bob and Marcelle, have light beige or pink skin. One police officer has brown skin. The nonhumanoid ETs vary in appearance.

A visually captivating (if a bit culturally backward) outer-space escape from France. (Graphic science fiction. 8-12)

I REALLY WANT TO WIN
Philip, Simon
Illus. by Gaggiotti, Lucia
Orchard/Scholastic (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-338-68051-5

It’s not about whether you win or lose; it’s whether you find your passion. On Sports Day, the same girl who earlier starred in I Really Want the Cake (2020) is convinced of victory in every event. In the first race, the narrator is way ahead with "so
“Though the images may be black and white, Pablo is no black-and-white character.”

PABLO

much speed, / my victory is guaranteed...” until a stone sends her sprawling while another girl crosses the finish line. And although the narrator tugs until her skin turns green, the same opponent also wins the tug of war. Moving on from sports, this hypercompetitive kid loses the school spelling bee thanks to ventrilquist. Both frustration and desire to win grow as the protagonist proceeds to lose other contests to the same girl who won on Sports Day. Just when the protagonist despairs, she witnesses her nemesis lose and graciously congratulate the winner. The good loser’s philosophy? “You cannot always be ahead. / Enjoy the things you love, instead!” Together, the two girls explore the protagonist’s love for baking—but, in a rather mixed message, the protagonist enters her magnificently decorated cake in a bake-off and wins. Charming illustrations in a bold color palette capture the protagonist’s emotional roller coaster and the energy of the rhyming text. The protagonist has pale skin and straight, black hair while her nemesis has brown skin and a pouf of red hair.

A great conversation starter about the frustrations of competition and the search for a personal passion. (Picture book: 6-8)

LUCAS MAKES A COMEBACK

Plohl, Igor
Illus. by Sonc, Urška Stropnik
Trans. by Walter, Kristina Alice
Holiday House (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-0-8234-4766-4

An anthropomorphic adult lion adjusts to using a wheelchair. After Lucas falls from a ladder, injuring his spine, his doctors explain that he’ll never walk again. Lucas, who loves cycling, driving, and teaching, fears he can no longer enjoy such activities in a wheelchair. Furthermore, he’s sad to move in with his parents, who do all his cooking, cleaning, and grooming. Fortunately, friends from many species come to the rescue, cheering him up and raising funds for an adapted car, and Lucas gradually learns to do housework and self-care from his chair. Finding wheelchair-accessible housing is difficult, but Lucas eventually “[gets] lucky” and finds an apartment building with a ramp, an elevator, and new friends who are “happy to help.” The final illustration finds Lucas holding paws with his mother, who “doesn’t have to worry [about him] anymore!” Plohl’s matter-of-fact treatment of barriers feels simultaneously refreshingy honest and somewhat rushed; highlighting the scarcity of such basic needs as accessible shelter without further exploration risks casting inaccessibility as a norm rather than a product of human decisions and designs that exclude disabled people. However, along with Sonc’s sunny cartoon illustrations, Plohl’s simple declarative sentences will reassure newly disabled readers in particular that independence is possible. The Slovenian author’s biography explains that, like Lucas, he became paraplegic after a ladder accident; color photos show him performing everyday activities.

A gently encouraging tale of navigating disability. (Picture book: 4-8)

FEARLESS

Porter, Kenny
Illus. by Wilson, Zach
Graphix/Scholastic (192 pp.)
$24.99 | $12.99 paper | May 4, 2021
978-1-338-35588-8
978-1-338-35587-1 paper

Fandom and friendship collide when middle school BFFs are tested.

In this middle-grade graphic stand-alone, Kara Dawson absolutely loves the TV show Shinpi Rider, about a masked cyclist who always perseveres to save the day. Kara’s life is pretty great, basking in Shinpi fandom with her best friend, Alice, and trusty ferret, Gidget. When Alice’s family suddenly moves two towns over, Kara’s world is thrown into upheaval. She decides to skip her first day of school to ride her bike to Alice’s new house and surprise her. Predictably, her journey does not go as expected, but she meets new friends along the way: Joe, a boy struggling to lift a heavy burden; Elaine, whose bike has been stolen by a bully; and Simon, whose older brother is tormenting him. When Kara’s finally makes it to Alice’s new home, she finds her friend changed. The girls have a falling-out; is their friendship over? Kara subsequent self-realization, though clearly spelled out, is approachable and made with a light hand. Kara is flawed and engaging, capturing the adolescent dichotomy of both fearless-ness (in her altruism with strangers) and thoughtlessness (with those she cares about). Wilson’s full-color illustrations emphasize size characters’ faces and emotions. Shelf this among Shannon Hale and LeUyen Pham’s Best Friends series or Hope Larson’s All Summer Long (2018). Kara and Alice are White; supporting cast members are diverse.

Real and empathetic. (Graphic fiction: 8-11)

PABLO

Rascal
Illus. by the author
Trans. by Shugaar, Antony
Gecko Press (32 pp.)
$16.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-77673-24-0

Playing it safe, a chick decides to hatch bit by bit.

With stark black images—mainly a black egg in center stage—set against a white background, Belgian author/illustrator Rascal tells the story of Pablo, the chick, as he hatches. As the story opens, Pablo is spending his last night in his shell. When morning comes, Pablo must gather his strength for the hatching task ahead, and what better way than with a small croissant and hot chocolate? The tone is set: Though the images may be black and white, Pablo is no black-and-white character. There is an endearing complexity to this cute little chick. “A little bit scared” yet a little curious, “Pablo starts with a little tiny hole.” One eye contemplates the world outside, then two. Bit by bit, he makes a hole for each ear, his beak, and then his legs. Now
Pablo can see, hear, smell, and wander around. With an eighth and ninth hole his wings are freed, and he flies. “He’s not scared now!” Tempering bravery with caution, after emerging, Pablo saves a small piece of his shell, just in case. And what a good thing he does, as the last illustration shows a yellow chick sheltering from the rain under his shell/umbrella. Indeed, bravery is not a one-dimensional trait.

Delightful—will surely bring smiles to readers’ faces. (Picture book. 4-6)

**SAINT SPOTTING**

*Or, How To Read a Church*

Raschka, Chris  
Illus. by the author  
Eerdmans (44 pp.)  
$17.99 | Apr. 20, 2021  
978-0-8028-5521-3

Two-time Caldecott winner Raschka shares his mother’s special way to visit a church: “saint spotting.”

“A church is a weighty thing, isn’t it?” With heavy doors, high ceilings, and stone walls, a church can be an intimidating place for a child. Raschka invites readers to think differently by joining a school-age version of himself and his mother on a personal tour—complete with a painted map. Saint spotting is just what it sounds like: a sort of religious scavenger hunt in which one spots saints by their associated symbols inside a church. Through Raschka’s brief introductions, readers learn about 36 saints and their symbols, including the most important figures of Christianity: Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, and the Evangelists. Illustrations in broadly stroked watercolor primarily of golden hues boost the book’s warmth and welcoming tone. Beautiful endpapers depict rows of animals, such as doves and lambs, that underscore the book’s biblical nature. The book begins and ends with an illustration of Raschka and his mother, hand in hand, at the entrance of a huge Gothic church with a beautiful stained-glass rose window, the book’s exceptionally narrow trim echoing the verticality of the building. Clearly this was a special shared mother-son childhood experience, and readers will leave feeling like they were just let in on a cherished secret game. Most characters depicted, including the protagonist and his mother, present White, but there are some saints of color.

A charming, light, and personal introduction to saints and their symbolism. (Informational picture book. 4-8)

**BEAR’S BICYCLE**

Renauld, Laura  
Illus. by Poh, Jennie  
Beaming Books (32 pp.)  
$17.99 | Apr. 20, 2021  
978-1-5064-6569-2  
Series: Woodland Friends

Bear is eager to prepare for the Summer Scoot but realizes learning to ride a bicycle from a book is harder than it appears.

Sure that his bicycle is in good shape and ready, Bear attempts his first ride by applying the instructions he has reviewed in *Learn To Ride in Five Easy Steps*. First he straddles the bike, next he grips the handlebars, then he begins to pedal by pushing off—but his attempts to balance result in a “Pedal-wibble. Pedal-wobble. Crash!” Complaining that it was not easy at all, Bear walks his bike to the library to find a different instruction book. Along the way he meets three friends: Porcupine, Doe, and Squirrel, each one at a different stage of mastery. In exchanges that are equal parts commiseration and encouragement, Bear learns that a new book is not the answer when he can keep trying and practicing with the support of his friends as Summer Scoot draws near. The message of perseverance is augmented with fine-lined cartoon drawings offering depth and color to a kind, purposeful narrative. All animals wear helmets with tightly buckled chin straps, the massive Bear looking particularly comical. A two-page addendum outlines ways to care for and responsibly ride a two-wheeler courtesy of Bear and his riding buddies.

This story of determination and friendship is simply and consistently told. (Picture book. 5-7)

**NARWHAL I’M AROUND**

Reynolds, Aaron  
Little, Brown (224 pp.)  
$13.99 | May 4, 2021  
978-0-7595-5523-5  
Series: The Incredibly Dead Pets of Rex Dexter, 2

An animal ghost seeks closure after enduring aquatic atrocities. In this sequel to *The Incredibly Dead Pets of Rex Dexter* (2020), sixth grader Rex is determined to once again use his ability to communicate with dead animals for the greater good. A ghost narwhal’s visit gives Rex his next opportunity in the form of the clue “bad water.” Rex enlists Darvish—his Pakistani American human best friend—and Drumstick—his “faithful (dead) chicken”—to help crack the case. But the mystery is only one of Rex’s many roadblocks. For starters, Sami Muplepper hugged him at a dance, and now she’s his “accidental girlfriend.” Even worse, Darvish develops one of what Rex calls “Game Preoccupation Disorders” over role-playing game Monsters & Mayhem that may well threaten the pair’s friendship. Will Rex become “a Sherlock
without a Watson," or can the two make amends in time to solve the mystery? This second outing effectively carries the "ghost-mist" torch from its predecessor without feeling too much like a formulaic carbon copy. Spouting terms like plausible deniability and in flagrante delicto, Rex makes for a hilariously bombastic (if unlikely) first-person narrator. The over-the-top style is contagious, and black-and-white illustrations throughout add cartoony punchlines to various scenes. Unfortunately, scenes in which humor comes at the expense of those with less status are downright cringeworthy, as when Rex, who reads as White, riffs dissuade Luke by reminding him how many horror movies are free of his little brother while E is desperate to maintain their connection. The cast of characters is fully realized, distinct, and exceptional—and they all seem to be better versed in Black lives matter than the feather. This is an old story that has been told many times before. The setting may change, the characters may change, the intruding object may change, but the underlying story arc remains the same. What is truly special here is the beauty of the soft artwork, which has the feel of watercolor. In this translation from German (Die Fleckenfeder), debut author/illustrator Ries plays with color and perspective to great effect. Yellows and flecks of gold evoke the heat of the savanna. Close-ups make the squabbling feel immediate. And two double-page spreads in which a wild dog attacks the birds are outright gripping.

**A visual delight.** (Picture book. 4-8)

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**THE SPECKLED FEATHER**

Ries, Johanna

Illus. by the author

Trans. by Wilson, David Henry

NorthSouth (40 pp.)

$17.95 | May 4, 2021

978-0-7358-4447-6

Three birds living on the back of an elephant find their lives disrupted when they come across a speckled feather.

Beginning her story with "Once upon a time," Ries introduces three birds named Ade, Emem, and Nuru that live on the back of an elephant on the African savanna. Theirs is a tranquil, symbiotic relationship. Sitting high up, the birds are safe from predators, and in return they feed off the insects on the elephant’s skin. One day, a gust of wind blows in a bright, speckled feather that ends their peaceful existence. The birds squabble, as each one wants the feather for itself. Upset, the elephant demands the bickering end before they are allowed back on his back. Only when their lives are in danger do they finally understand their friendship is more valuable than the feather.

An exceptional novel with broad appeal. (Fiction. 10-14)
will be moving on his own, and he is crushed. This is a story of friendship and growing self-awareness: Harrison makes new connections in Muse and discovers an inner vein of self-reliance. Comforting to those who are struggling with loss, it will also appeal to sensitive readers as it explores the depths of grief and the search for meaning in a world that no longer makes sense. Harrison and his family are White; there is ethnic diversity in the supporting cast.

* A sweet, touching, easy read. (Fiction. 8-12)

**VEGGIE POWER**  
*Roeder, Annette*  
Illus. by Hajek, Olaf  
Trans. by Kelly, Paul  
Prestel (40 pp.)  
$19.95 | Apr. 27, 2021  
978-3-7913-7478-9

In this companion book to Flower Power (with text by Christine Paxmann, translated by Jane Michael, 2020), the renowned illustrator’s favorite veggies pair with text that offers history, scientific facts, and cultural anecdotes.

Hajek’s stylized art—revealing, among other traditions, Renaissance and folkloric influences—never fails to attract the eye and keep it there for a while. The introduction’s conversational text claims that each picture “tells you a fairy tale,” which might mislead readers into racking their brains for associated traditional tales. (The endnotes contain a better explanation of how to parse the artwork.) The text begins with a lighthearted lesson in distinguishing fruits from vegetables according to some overall design.

**JUAN HORMIGA**  
*Roldán, Gustavo*  
Illus. by the author  
Trans. by Croll, Robert  
Elsewhere Editions (64 pp.)  
$22.00 | May 4, 2021  
978-1-939810-82-3

Juan, a red denizen of a colony of busy black ants, offsets his extreme indolence by enthralling his mates with picturesque tales of his grandfather’s derring-do.

Capable of 10 daily naps, Juan one day surprises everyone by appearing with “a stick between his feet with a little cloth bundle full of food.” He’s off to trace his grandfather’s paths, to “see the world” and return with “heaps of new stories to tell.” As hours pass, the ants speculate on Juan’s adventures, thereby imbuing him with increasing quantities of strength and bravery. A flash flood during Juan’s absence triggers ever greater heights of cogitation, as the ants envisage their newly crowned hero drowned. After the flood recedes, the ants decide to memorialize Juan by planting a flower at the base of a large willow tree. En route, a passing mosquito reports that Juan is actually asleep in that very tree, high up in a knothole. Indeed, the champion napper has slept through the flood, bedding down at the first white space. Dialogue is keyed in red type, enhancing the handsome overall design.

Roldán celebrates the social currency of cracking-good storytelling—and the expediency of a well-placed nap. (Picture book 3-7)

**THIS VERY TREE**  
*A Story of 9/11, Resilience, and Regrowth*  
*Rubin, Sean*  
Illus. by the author  
Henry Holt (48 pp.)  
$18.99 | May 4, 2021  
978-1-250-78850-4

The inspiring true story of a tree’s regrowth literally from ashes.

Dubbed the “Survivor Tree,” a Callery pear tree that once stood in the plaza of the World Trade Center narrates, in first person, present tense, this moving tale of life before and after the horrors of 9/11. The tree was proud of its “job”—offering shade and a nesting spot for birds and serving as an early harbinger of spring. Then the unimaginable occurred. The tree was eventually discovered, seemingly lifeless, beneath mounds of rubble and removed to Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx for...
rehabilitation. Miraculously, it flourished, and, after nine years, was returned to a newly rebuilt plaza, where it stands today, a beacon of renewed hope. The simple, quietly touching text focuses on the tree as a symbol of regeneration rather than devastation. The splendid illustrations include several spreads that depict, in a stark yet nonfrightening manner, scenes of chaotic destruction. Many also highlight vertical lines and aerial perspectives, prompting viewers to focus attention upward, aptly symbolizing soaring architecture and the tree's growth and also helping readers understand the rise of hope and spirits in the wake of tragedy. Additionally, the illustrations' delicate lines and muted palette have a freshness and airiness that suits the theme of life's rebirth, echoed in the tree's final reassurance that "spring will come." People are portrayed diverse in gender, race, ethnicity, and physical ability. A heartfelt author's note and historical material conclude the book. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-18-mcb double-page spreads viewed at 77.8% of actual size.)

A resonant, beautifully rendered testament to life and renewal. (Informational picture book. 4-8)

WHAT HAPPENS WHILE YOU SLEEP
Russelmann, Anna & Buchner, Judith
Illus. by Russelmann, Anna
Trans. by Wilson, David Henry
NorthSouth (48 pp.)
$17.95 | May 4, 2021
978-0-7358-4446-9

When Consus lowers the eyelids, it's time for Hippo and Campus to spring into action.

Reflecting what goes on—in part, sort of—in little Malu's brain once she snoozes off, Russelmann envisions two busy figures in stocking caps bustling about, sorting the day's many sounds, bottles of smells, and envelopes of images into variously labeled storage boxes such as "Danger" and "Foods I Like." At the same time, they add strings of letters and numbers (more every day) to a "tree of knowledge" with great, spreading branches. An "L" that is facing the right way replaces one that's backward on the tree while a special picture of Malu with Mom and Dad and elephants at the zoo goes into a treasure chest for quick access. Less-valuable ones, like the umpteenth view of daisies, go into a big trash can. Racing to finish, Hippo delivers a picture of Teddy Bear in the bathroom to supervisor Consus in her tower just as Malu wakes, stretches...and remembers just where she left her bear! Though Malu, her parents, and all three figures inside her head are light-skinned, her name, at least, hints at a non-European origin. Although this German import doesn't tell anything like the whole sleep story, it does at least offer a conceptual framework for broader first introductions like Elaine Scott's All About Sleep From A to ZZZZ (illustrated by John O'Brien, 2008).

A strange fancy—but, from a certain angle, not a brainless one. (Informational picture book. 6-8)

COME, READ WITH ME
Ruurs, Margriet
Illus. by Wei, Christine
Orca (32 pp.)
$19.95 | May 11, 2021
978-1-4598-1787-6

A fast flight through the settings of famous children's stories.

This title begins with the happy faces of two young children—one with dark-brown skin and curly black hair and the other with lighter-brown skin and straight black hair. As the pages go by, the children explore the imaginary lands of famous fairy tales and stories. Full of smiles, the two friends travel through sea and air, pass castles and candy houses, and have tea in Wonderland. While the illustrations are double-page spreads pleasingly full of color and detail, it is the syncopation (or lack thereof) that makes the story awkward. "And a jungle of wild things who march to their very own beat. / Oh, the places we'll go, the things you will meet." With an uneven meter, the verses defy easy scansion. The literary references scale from short nursery rhymes, like "Humpty Dumpty" for the very young, to complex stories for older readers, like Charlotte's Web and The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. The two characters just observe these places while the references whiz by; with up to five stories mentioned on a page; when copyrighted characters are depicted, they (appropriately) often look nothing like what children familiar with them will expect. Despite the potential for confusion, this title does pay homage to the wonderful world of imagination found in children's books.

This bird's-eye view of famous fictional settings is not without its turbulent moments. (Picture book: 3-5)

DIANA AND THE UNDERWORLD ODYSSEY
Saeed, Aisha
Random House (352 pp.)
$16.99 | May 25, 2021
978-0-593-17837-9
Series: Wonder Woman Adventures, 2

The continued adventures of Diana, princess of the Amazons.

Soon after the events of Diana and the Island of No Return (2020), in which she defeated a plot to conquer the Amazons, Diana is keen to start training as a warrior, but she fears that things are not quite right yet with their mysterious enemy still out there. After a new attack on Themyscira—during which her best friend, Sakina, is kidnapped—the Amazons are told by the goddess Artemis that the Targuni are taking children who have unusual powers. Only Diana and one other young person have been able to evade them. Diana does not want to hide and will do anything to rescue her friend, including dealing with capricious Greek gods, terrifying aliens, a hatchling dragon, and a trip to the Underworld itself. Diana battles external enemies as well...
as her own internal demons in this fun, fast-paced sequel that mixes Greek mythology with science-fiction elements. Diana’s concerns over being dismissed due to her youth and lack of special powers are heartfelt, and the novel does a good job of foretelling the wondrous heroine she will grow up to become: loyal, smart, courageous, and sympathetic to a fault. A cliffhanger ending signals more to come. The ethnic diversity of the world is subtly cued through names. 

An entertaining read for Wonder Woman fans new and old. (Adventure. 8-12)

AND THEN CAME HOPE
Savage, Stephen
Illus. by the author
Neal Porter/Holiday House (40 pp.)
$18.99 | May 4, 2021
978-0-8234-4518-9

A humanitarian hospital ship figures in a tale of ailing boats and gentle aid.

When the ships are sick, nobody’s happy. Not Barge, who “got bonked,” or Submarine, who has the shakes. Neither are feverish Ferry, coughing Aircraft Carrier, and sniffly, drippy Dory. Who takes care of these ill boats? Why, hospital ship Hope, of course! In a jiffy she treats, comforts, and cares for anyone under the weather. By the time everyone is “shipshape” again, they can rest assured that in the event of another emergency, they’ll always be able to rely on Hope. Backmatter includes a note on the real SS Hope, America’s first peacetime hospital ship, which spent 14 years traveling the world bringing care and training to other countries. Children fearing hospital visits, doctors, or nurses may find comfort in the book’s measured tone. This is reflected not merely in the spare text with its gentle wordplay, but also in the simplicity and style of the digital art. Shapes are cleanly delineated, colors and planes flat. The composition in which Barge suffers her injury is so stylized as to resemble an exercise in the play between positive and negative space. Both text and visuals are so restrained that while the ship-obsessed will love it, it is unlikely that the book will stand up to much rereading among other audiences.

A very real ship inspires a very slight story, coasting on some serious sweetness. (Picture book. 3-6)

WHAT ADULTS DON’T KNOW ABOUT ART
Inspiring Young Minds To Love and Enjoy Art
School of Life
School of Life (160 pp.)
$19.99 | May 11, 2021
978-1-912891-29-0

A treatise on why art matters. Claiming no author more specific than the publisher itself, this teaching manual opens with a presumptuously intimate tone and preposterous assertions. The narrator tells readers that they (“you”) have probably been interested in art for a long time without knowing it: When “you” made drawings as a (younger) child or saw illustrations in picture books, you didn’t recognize it as art because “probably no one told you these were art.” Adults are oblivious too—asked why art matters, they say only, “Because it’s very old” or “Because it costs a lot.” This isn’t textual humor or playfulness; the tone seems to be serious. Like adults, art books are useless; galleries and museums are boring and dry. So who can explain why art matters? Only this book, brazenly, conjuring straw man after straw man: Straw adults, straw books, straw museums and galleries, straw upper-class readers. Repeatedly correcting nonexistent myths and assumptions nobody ever made, the text labels art a “tool” to use for six specific things: “Remembering, Appreciation, Hope, Sadness, Balance, and Making Sense of Money.” Some truths appear—art, indeed, inspires emotion and new viewpoints; art, indeed, helps people cope with life—but the book’s categorizations are non-parallel and bizarre. The fine-art reproductions are mediocre, their interpretations narrow or, sadly, off-base. Perhaps saddest of all is the absence of any notion that art matters, also, for aesthetic reasons—like beauty.

Ill-informed and bafflingly arrogant. (image references) (Nonfiction. 8-12)

WHEN MY COUSINS COME TO TOWN
Shanté, Angela
Illus. by Morris, Keisha
West Margin Press (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-5132-6722-7

The cardinal rule of nicknames is that you cannot name yourself. Knowing this, a little girl is hopeful that this is the summer her cousins finally choose a nickname for her.

The main character, an African American girl with her hair in Fulani braids and gold beads, can count on three things every summer: Her seven cousins will arrive in the city when school lets out, they will watch The Wiz together, and before they leave they will give her an “amazing” birthday present. This summer, more than anything, she wants that present to be a nickname...
of her very own. She takes on the characteristics of each of her cousins in turn to see if their nicknames will fit her, and when they don’t, she worries that there may not be a name for her. On the last day of the visit, when her birthday present seems in danger of being lost, she finds a way to help and finally earns her nickname. Shanté effectively communicates the young narrator’s increasing anxiety as her birthday approaches, concluding statement after statement with worry. Morris’ illustrations complement this, the narrator’s expressive face and posture the visual embodiments of worry. Overall, they capture the closeness of this family, rendering their skin in many shades of brown and giving the cousins different hairstyles.

An adorable book about being true to yourself and the joys of family, especially cousins. (Picture book. 4-8)

**CAROL AND THE PICKLE-TOAD**

Shapiro, Esmé  
Illus. by the author  
Tundra (48 pp.)  
$18.99  |  May 11, 2021  
978-0-7352-6398-7

Don’t let the pigeon snatch the hat! Alas, it seems young Carol is doomed to go bareheaded—for not only does a pigeon get the rude, demanding live toad that habitually rides atop her billowing brown locks as she rides her bicycle around town, but the ersatz replacement she concocts out of a pickle and two halves of a hard-boiled egg too! Carol’s subsequent discovery that losing the bossy voice in (OK, on) her head leaves her free to go where she wants, say what she wants, and eat what and with whom she wants adds a message about the rewards of cultivating a voice of one’s own…but if the toads are supposed to be metaphors they’re obscure ones, and younger audiences at least will likely be satisfied just enjoying the silly bits. Large red eyeglasses make this White urbanite easy to spot as she wheels or paces through busy streets and crowded shops, past fellow city dwellers who are not only thoroughly diverse of race, age, and dress, but sport a wild profusion of headgear. Sharp-eyed viewers will also find plenty of business going on in the backgrounds and visible through nearly every window in the low-rise buildings. Shapiro may be channeling Mo Willems with the pigeon (and maybe Maira Kalman with the art), but this luxuriant, chapeau-centric appreciation of city living exudes a free-wheeling spirit of its own. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-inch double-page spreads viewed at 77% of actual size.)

A tip of the cap to this droll tribute to the freedom that comes from getting out from under the toad. (Picture book. 6-8)

**SAVING COSMO**

Sheinmel, Courtney & Venable, Colleen AF  
Illus. by Kurilla, Renée  
Andrews McMeel Publishing (84 pp.)  
$12.99  |  Apr. 13, 2021  
978-1-5248-6473-6  
Series: My Pet Slime, 3

An adorable craft project come to life must be protected from evil scientists. This third book in the My Pet Slime series opens with Piper and friends already in danger, kidnapped and held in the MaLa labs after the cliffhanger ending of *Cosmo to the Rescue* (2020). Piper, an artist, is protecting her friend Cosmo, who’s “made out of normal slime, plus paint.” Piper had made a slime just like any brightly colored crafts project, but when some of her astronaut grandmother’s space dust landed on Cosmo, he’d come alive. Now Piper, her school friend, and Grandma Sadie must escape the wicked scientists of MaLa using only intrepid cleverness, secret passages, and glitter. Sadie is not just a scientist, she’s also a T-shirt-wearing, motorcycle-driving, useful grandmother. The frequent, brightly colored illustrations accentuate the big-eyed adorableness of Cosmo. All the characters lack physical descriptions, but most of the characters are illustrated as light-skinned except for Grandma Sadie’s friend Eric, who has dark brown skin. The exciting escape moves zippily enough to drown out some mild inconsistencies as well as the silliness of both heroes’ and villains’ schemes, and Piper’s affection for her alien pet is charmingly accessible. Several pages of backmatter offer a couple of extension activities and notes on Sally Ride (identified as LGBTQ+) and SpaceX.

Who hasn’t wished they could save the day with their origami or glitter skills? (Science fiction. 6-9)

**CLASS CLOWN FISH**

Sherry, Kevin  
Illus. by the author  
Graphix/Scholastic (96 pp.)  
$7.99 paper  |  May 18, 2021  
978-1-338-63670-3  
Series: Squidding Around, 2

Deep under the sea, a tempestuous squid must contend with his temper. Following the events of *Fish Feud* (2020), Squizzard Silvershell, a hot-headed, tomato-red squid, is mad. After submitting his comics to a magazine contest, he learns he has lost, and his anger is fester ing. Deciding mischief will cheer him up, he pulls a prank on his teacher, Mr. Caker. He is immediately sent to Principal Kraken and put in detention for a week, which causes him to miss the Coral Carnival. In detention, he and sea urchin Annie, a fellow student under punishment, help crossing guard Mr. Jaleel, an eel, clean the basement. Squizzard eventually comes to understand why his behavior was inappropriate, coming to a
simply reasoned contrition. Sherry’s oceanic graphic offering is high on pep and alluring, vibrantly colored art, threading information about marine life throughout the narrative. This second volume in the series loses a bit of momentum, though; those who enjoyed Squizzard’s previous benign naughtiness may find his rapid repentance a bit hurried. Multiple plot threads are easy enough to follow but seem a bit cramped. Sherry’s illustrations are bright and expressive, with more flashy colors than a well-stocked aquarium carrying the short chapters; economically worded panels keep the pages moving along swimmingly. Quibbles aside, with its buoyant pacing and intriguing facts, it offers much to appreciate. Further facts on coral and instructions on making a newsletter follow the story.

A fun, quick dip. (Graphic fantasy 7-10)

OUT OF THE BLUE
Shreve, Elizabeth
Illus. by Preston-Gannon, Frann
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 11, 2021
978-1-5362-1410-9

From a world of single-celled microbes to the age of mammals, 4 billion years of evolution.

Shreve anchors this chronicle of the development of life on Earth with an opening question: Among hippos, dolphins, and sharks, which two are the closest relatives? The book begins to answer with an image of an empty ocean, shown lit by a fiery orange sun and exploding volcano and a description of this alien world. Increasingly complex creatures fill subsequent pages. Along the bottom margin runs a general time framework beginning with the Archaeon Eon and moving quickly through time. In the Devonian and Carboniferous periods, separate spreads show land and water creatures, culminating in fish. Here, with words and pictures, the book explains how human body features developed from those of these prehistoric fish. After the Permian Extinction come dinosaurs and then, finally the Age of Mammals. A penultimate spread explains the surprising answer to that opening question, and the final spread serves as summary, showing the grand variety of life evolving over time “from out of the blue... / and back again.” Along the way, the smooth, accessible text breaks from time to time with midSENTENCE ellipses at page turns to keep readers moving. Other page turns answer questions previously raised. Preston-Gannon’s cheerful, colorful illustrations show an astonishing variety of creatures, all with circular, white-outlined black eyes. The total package is simple and effective.

A sweeping story thoughtfully summarized for the target age group. (selected sources, further reading, acknowledgments) (Informational picture book. 7-10)

DEAR TREEFROG
Sidman, Joyce
Illus. by Sudyka, Diana
HMH Books (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-0-358-06476-3

Sometimes all it takes is finding an unexpected friend, waiting and still, ready for play.

A young child with pale skin, short black hair, and (literally) almond-shaped eyes has just moved to a new home. Unsure of this big change, the child holds a cat stuffie and looks askance at the movers. Then a little frog catches the child’s eye. Spread by spread, season by season, lyrical poems tell the story of this budding friendship, in which the child learns to be still and see small details in this world, as an artist or scientist does. These deceptively simple poems contain a multitude of poetic devices. Short, expressive facts about tree frogs also accompany the poems. In playing with the frog, the child mimics its movements, and on one spread, they are both depicted with the same speckles and black outline. This oneness helps the child feel less lonely and eventually find a friend in a brown-skinned classmate who is equally still and observant. Sudyka’s bold lines and vivid watercolor palette paint an immersive, verdant world, with occasional color pops. Whimsical flourishes often blur the child’s real and imaginary worlds while concealed in the illustrations are names of birds, bugs, flowers, and more for young scientists to discover. Backmatter provides additional information about tree frogs, perfect for STEAM lessons. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11 by 18-inch double-page spreads viewed at actual size.)

A child, a tree frog, and a poignant, poetic journey to find a sense of home. (Picture book/poetry. 4-7)

TOW TRUCK JOE MAKES A SPLASH
Sobel, June
Illus. by Corrigan, Patrick
HMH Books (40 pp.)
$12.99 | May 18, 2021
978-0-358-06366-7

Summer blues are washed clean away in this cheery, bubbly, truck-filled adventure.

Tow Truck Joe’s a busy vehicle when summer comes around. With the aid of his trusty pal Patch the Pup, he sets about fixing busted bells on ice cream trucks, flat tires on campers, and stalled beach buses. After a grueling series of jump-starts, it’s time to cool off in the carwash. But what’s this? An 18-wheeler’s gotten stuck in the carwash, and even Tow Truck Joe’s not strong enough to pull it out. Whatever can be done? Children with a penchant for anthropomorphized trucks and cars (with nary a human in sight) may not find this book too different from similar titles out there, but they’ll hardly care. Gentle rhymes convey an even gentler storyline, with a happy ending for one and
A flight of scientific fancy.

As the daughter of world-renowned scientist Charles Darwin, young Henrietta “Etty” Darwin learned to question the world around her even as she wrote fairy stories on the backs of his manuscripts. This distinctive selection, presented in a modified graphic-panel format, shows the daughter and father (and their dog) as they embark on a “thinking path” called The Sandwalk—a well-trod trail that Darwin and his family wandered while pondering ideas—and the two have a discussion (imagined by the author) about the existence of fairies and the problem of evidence. Dialogue bubbles furnish the questions and answers while poetic, descriptive narrative sentences provide just the right amount of context, and together they offer up a pair of believable, inquisitive characters, warm and sweet without the faintest whiff of sentimentality. Lush, layered illustrations give a sense of the Victorian era while they capture a realistic natural landscape with forays into fantasy. Etty always at its center; a spread featuring yellow butterflies is particularly dazzling. Etty’s heavy brows and quizzical expressions show a fascination young readers and listeners. The two White characters are joined by Polly the dog, a detail sure to appeal. An excellent introduction to the natural sciences, Darwin, fairies, and inquiry, sure to inspire and fascinate young readers and listeners. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-19-inch double-page spreads viewed at 32.6% of actual size.)

Unchallenging, easygoing summertime fun guaranteed to please young truck aficionados. (Picture book. 2-4)
but Reynolds’ accompaniment to the stanza that begins “Now, come and join the living” simply frames it in a close-up of symbolic smoke. In visual answer to “Why must we go on hating? Why can’t we live in bliss?” the guitar player lays musical notes over a scary hole in the tracks that represents “the world as it is.” The train safely passes, but it all seems awfully easy. Musically inclined caregivers who feel confident belting out the lyrics may find this a useful title for peace-themed storytimes, but the overall depictions of peace and unity feel superficial at best. Not exactly first-class travel. (Picture book. 4-8)

FITZ AND CLEO
Stutzman, Jonathan
Illus. by Fox, Heather
Henry Holt (64 pp.)
$12.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-250-23944-0
Series: Fitz and Cleo, 1

Ghost siblings ghoul it up in a new graphic-novel series. A “THUMP” from the attic sends siblings Fitz and Cleo up to investigate. The spooky vibes delight Cleo, so she improvises “The Spooky Attic Song.” Fitz tries to shush his sister so they can maintain “the element of surprise” as they approach the sound’s source. The mystery is solved: It’s a cat! Cleo promptly scoops the (seemingly mortal) cat up and names him Mister Boo. Fitz has reservations but relents when Mister Boo sits on his head. Ten subsequent chapters, varying between four and seven pages in length, chronicle the trio’s further shenanigans. Husband-and-wife team Stutzman and Fox create an entertaining early graphic novel in the vein of Ben Clanton’s Narwhal and Jelly series. Though there are occasional speech bubbles, dialogue is most often connected to the speaker by a solid black line. Sentences are short, and there are at most two speakers per panel. Additionally, with no more than six panels per page and simple backgrounds, the story provides adequate support to emerging readers. Fox’s expressive illustrations and clever use of panel layouts effectively build up the humor in Stutzman’s text. Cleo is depicted with a purple bow; Fitz with a baseball cap and glasses. Unfortunately, their personalities as well as their appearances play into gender stereotypes.

Cute as a boo-ton—if a tad stereotypical. (Graphic fantasy. 6-10)

THE BOY WHO KNEW NOTHING
Thor, James
Illus. by MacKinnon, Angus
Templar/Candlewick (48 pp.)
$17.99 | May 11, 2021
978-1-5362-1713-1

After his clueless dad identifies it as a “sleepy giraffe,” a boy quests to discover the name of an object found in the family dress-up box. He queries the sea witch and “clumsy Miss Susan, the ex-astronaut”; each authoritatively delivers an absurdly incorrect pronunciation. In fact, all three adults disingenuously assign the creature a quality they themselves embody. With each encounter, the boy learns, through a combination of intuition and deduction, that the neon-pink “thingy” is not a sleepy giraffe, “whispery owl,” or “clumsy old gnu.” Arriving home late, with all of the people and creatures he’s encountered in tow, the boy retrospectively recounts the rest of his quest for his parents. “I went on a magic / adventure!” He smiled. “And spoke to some thingies / that live in the wild.” MacKinnon’s suitably wacky illustrations, in a palette of pink, purple, teal, and sienna, present a patently alternative “wild,” with a gamer gnu, a singing owl (complete with mic), and a leotard-wearing dancer giraffe. It’s the “thingy” itself that speaks its own name—FLAMINGO—prompting a back-to-reality wrap in a classroom show-and-tell, where the text sanctimoniously sums up the experience—kind of: “If ever there’s something / you don’t understand, / don’t be too frightened / to put up your hand.” Sure, but the kid’s own asked questions led to a pile of inaccurate nonsense while the flamingo, unasked, provides its own reveal.

Pop-art–meets–art-nouveau-in-an-acid-trip pictures conspire with Seussian doggerel to abet a faulty internal logic. (Picture book. 3-7)

OSCAR’S TOWER OF FLOWERS
Tobia, Lauren
Illus. by the author
Candlewick (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 11, 2021
978-1-5362-1777-3

A very young boy finds joy in a difficult situation. When Oscar’s mom brings him to live with his grandmother for a while, he is frightened and lonely. After his painful, emotional goodbye to his mom, Nana hugs him and reassures him. That first tearful night is so very difficult, despite the companionship of his toy monkey; the photo of mom and him next to him on the pillow, and a comforting thumb to suck. The next morning there’s a lovely breakfast, a jigsaw puzzle, and drawing with Nana and the cat. When Oscar carefully helps to water a drooping plant, Nana takes notice and

“The story is told entirely without words in a series of fully detailed, beautifully crafted, colorful vignettes.”

OSCAR’S TOWER OF FLOWERS
brings him to a special store to purchase seeds, soil, containers, and tools. With lots of patience and Oscar’s careful tending, Nana’s apartment and terrace fill up with greenery, vines, and flowers. So many, in fact, that they gift all the neighbors with the lovely plants, making lots of new friends. The story is told entirely without words in a series of fully detailed, beautifully crafted, colorful vignettes of varying sizes. In them readers see and understand mom’s, Nana’s, and, of course, Oscar’s emotions in their faces and body language, Oscar and his family present White, with beige skin tones; Nana is refreshingly youthful looking. There are lovely surprises in the views of the apartments and their very diverse occupants before and after Oscar’s triumph. A lovely, joyful reunion with mom is comforting for young readers cuddled with their grown-ups.

Warm and wonderful. (Picture book. 3-6)

SARAH AND THE BIG WAVE
The True Story of the First Woman To Surf Mavericks
Tsiu, Bonnie
Illus. by Diao, Sophie
Henry Holt (34 pp.)
$18.99 | May 11, 2021
978-1-250-23948-8

Sarah Gerhardt is not afraid of heights or speed.
Sarah, whose surname is not provided until the end, began surfing at a young age in Hawaii and quickly learned that she loved surfing big waves most of all, waves as high as 50 feet tall! She learned how to calmly hold her breath when she fell and to be patient finding surfing companions at a time when surfing was a male-dominated sport. Like many girls and women across sports, she had to wear gear and use equipment designed for boys and men. When she moved to California as an adult, she was determined to conquer the Mavericks surf break, and in 1999, she became the first woman to do so, demonstrating that victories can happen every day, not just at major competitions.

Diao’s illustrations are extraordinary. Emphasizing the breathtaking landscapes, they treat readers to mostly double-page spreads that allow them to feel like they are in the middle of the ocean with Sarah, who presents White. A stormy scene evokes Hokusai’s Great Wave print. Tsiu’s present-tense text effectively conveys Sarah’s determination as well as the excitement of the sport, occasionally ranging to provide needed context, such as the atmospheric conditions that make big waves. A concluding timeline of surfing provides tidbits of Hawaii’s history and indicates that professional surfing is way behind in its quest for equality. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-17-inch double-page spreads viewed at 41.2% of actual size.)

A sunny surf vacation from start to finish. (timeline) (Picture book/biography. 5-9)

WISHES
Vân, Muon Thi
Illus. by Ngat, Victor
Orchard/Scholastic (40 pp.)
$18.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-338-30589-0

The story of a young refugee’s flight from home is told through a series of wishes made by inanimate objects.

“The night wished it was quieter,” reads the first of 12 wishes that tell the story of a family’s journey across the sea to a better life. A somber palette and perfectly chosen scenes illustrate each object’s wish, giving shape to the story that unfolds. The bag that family members pack with rice packets “wished it was deeper.” The clock, at departure time, “wished it was slower,” and the boat that they boarded, packed with passengers, “wished it was bigger.” Each simple statement, accompanied by its heart-rending visual element, takes readers along on this harrowing journey. When the final wish arrives, (the only to employ the first person), the one sentence spans four double-page spreads of visual storytelling that evoke the joy and release of so many heightened emotions. Details in every illustration convey an Asian setting, though readers in the know will recognize distinctly Vietnamese particulars. Backmatter explains how the author’s own family escaped from Vietnam in the 1980s.

A superb, beautifully moving collaboration of text and illustration. (author’s note, artist’s note) (Picture book. 4-7)

LINE AND SCRIBBLE
Vogrig, Debora
Illus. by Valentinis, Pia
Chronicle Books (64 pp.)
$18.99 | May 11, 2021
978-1-7972-0187-0

Can opposites coexist? This picture book presents its refreshing take.
Line is straight, Scribble is not. Line makes straight drops of rain; Scribble makes lightning and whirlwinds. Line has elegantly straight fur, Scribble is fluffy. They spar (in a friendly way) back and forth, each presenting its own take on things. Line “tightens the electrical wires,” and then Scribble “bursts into fireworks.” Line “draws with a ruler” while Scribble “zigzags” and “dreams.” And eventually, in this inventive story, readers begin to realize how Line and Scribble complement, enrich, and ultimately define each other. Author Vogrig’s taut, spare narrative leaves ample space for readers to see their own personalities in the story while Valentinis’ illustrations of simple black lines accented with details of red on rich white paper do a superb job of presenting just enough and not too much, encouraging the engagement of readers’ imaginations. The
clean sans-serif typeface is also red, visually tying the book’s design together. As the tension of the story escalates, the font size increases—a highly effective (and fun to read aloud) design aspect. Beyond enjoying the straightforward accomplishments of Line and the spontaneous creativity of Scribble, readers may arrive at a deeper understanding of their own unique qualities and how difference contributes to the richness and variety of friendships and diversity.

Lovely to look at; profound to ponder. (Picture book: 3-7)

DO ANIMALS FALL IN LOVE?
Katharina von der Gathen, Katharina
Illus. by Kabl, Anke
Trans. by Tanaka, Shelley
Gecko Press (144 pp.)
$18.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-776572-91-5

Courtship, mating, birth, and child rearing are common across the animal world, but the details can be surprising.

The German creators of To Know About Bodies, Sex, and Emotions (2020) return with this collection of intriguing facts about animal reproduction, which might be termed a book of carnal knowledge for middle-grade and middle school readers. Sex-educator von der Gathen organizes her material into three major subjects: courting, mating, and babies. Subdivisions within each section group examples of the wide array of techniques adopted by different species. For example, seduction includes showy appearances, dances, attractive smells, songs, and battles with rivals. Each example describes the activities of a single species in a paragraph or two of exposition, delivered in a cheerful, informal tone, smoothly translated, and illustrated with an amusing cartoon of the animals described. Each section also includes pages of illustrated comparisons, with helpful labels. One set shows a variety of mating positions; another spotlights “ingenious genitalia”; there are animal babies. Examples include both vertebrates and invertebrates. Readers can make human connections, but the writer doesn’t. What she does do is to demonstrate the wonder of species reproduction as well as her respect for her audience with frankness and good humor. They will find it irresistible in tone and content.

Full of fascinating answers to the question “How do animals do it?” (Nonfiction: 8-15)

SUNAKALI
The “Messi of the Himalayas”
Verms-Le Morvan, Jennifer
Illus. by Wild, Nicolas
Reycraft Books (32 pp.)
$17.95 | May 28, 2021
978-1-4788-7377-8

In the village of Mugu in Nepal, Sunakali Budha’s poor family holds traditional views about gender.

At home, Sunakali and her girlfriends are required to cook, clean, and do laundry. In fact, they have so many responsibilities that none of them are in school any longer. While they graze the family goats—another one of their duties—the girls play soccer with a ball donated to their village. Suddenly, a male coach arrives in Mugu and offers to form the girls into a soccer team. The girls’ parents are unsure at first, but the village chief convinces them to give the coach a chance. Eventually, the girls compete in tournaments across Nepal, winning game after game. Sunakali becomes so famous that she moves to Kathmandu, where she enrolls in a training school for soccer players. Her father, initially wary of Sunakali’s talents, begins to support her dream to go pro. The book’s text can be difficult to follow, particularly in the first few pages, in which the perspective switches abruptly from first to third person and bobbles between past and present tense. The illustrations accurately portray rural and urban Nepal, but their cartoon quality at times detracts from the gravity of the story. Particularly in the first third of the story, the author emphasizes Mugu’s poverty and gender inequality rather than the girls’ athletic experiences and talents. Although this book is based on real events and people, there is no backmatter or sourcing to provide additional context or authority. (This book was reviewed digitally with 12.6-by-18.8-inch double-page spreads viewed at 47.5% of actual size.)

Falters in both writing and perspective. (Picture book: 5-8)

WAYS TO GROW LOVE
Watson, Renée
Illus. by Mata, Nina
Bloomsbury (192 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-1-5476-0058-8
Series: Ryan Hart, 2

A new baby coming means Ryan has lots of opportunities to grow love.

Ryan has so much to look forward to this summer—she is going to be a big sister, and she finally gets to go to church camp! But new adventures bring challenges, too. Ryan feels like the baby is taking forever to arrive, and with Mom on bed rest, she isn’t able to participate in the family’s typical summer activities. Ryan’s Dad is still working the late shift, which means he gets home and goes to bed when she and her older brother, Ray, are waking up, so their quality daddy-daughter time is limited to one day
a week. When the time for camp finally arrives, Ryan is so worried about bugs, ghosts, and sharing a cabin that she wonders if she should go at all. Watson’s heroine is smart and courageous, bringing her optimistic attitude to any challenge she faces. Hard topics like family finances and complex relationships with friends are discussed in an age-appropriate way. Watson continues to excel at crafting a sense of place; she transports readers to Portland, Oregon, with an attention to detail that can only come from someone who has loved that city. Ryan, her family, and friends are Black, and occasional illustrations by Mata spotlight their joy and make this book shine. The second installment in this spirited series is a hit. (Fiction, 8-10)

**LONG LOST**

West, Jacqueline

Greenwillow Books (288 pp.)

$16.99 | May 11, 2021

978-0-06-269175-0

A mysterious book leads a girl into a century-old supernatural mystery.

When Fiona’s family moves across Massachusetts to Lost Lake, a small town that’s far closer to her older sister Arden’s figure skating club, Fiona resents both being uprooted and the constant focus on her accomplished sibling. To avoid spending hours sitting at one of Arden’s practices, knowledge-loving Fiona opts for a morning at the library, where she discovers a book called The Lost One that begins, “Once there were two sisters who did everything together. But only one of them disappeared.” Reading this book within a book, Fiona learns about characters Hazel and Pearl—relating heavily to younger Pearl, especially when she starts getting left behind, and knowing their story won’t have a happy ending. Fiona better endures slights from her family because she has the book to look forward to, but when she finally gets a library card, the book’s gone and isn’t even in the system. In response to a heartbreaking moment of being her family’s lowest priority, Fiona doubles down on solving the book’s mysteries—having determined its setting is Lost Lake—and finds increasingly spooky pieces of the puzzle. Although the two sets of sisters have different relationships and dynamics, the complexity of sisterhood links both storylines, resulting in nuanced relationships. The gore-free supernatural elements are more haunting than terrifying, foregrounding the characters’ journeys. Main characters default to White.

*Grab a flashlight and stay up late with this one.* (Paranormal mystery, 8-12)

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This appropriately titled picture book aims to encourage self-esteem in young Black readers.

From Afros to Zen, this book serves messages of radical Black love and healing. Each letter has its own spread, both capital and lowercase letters appearing on the verso along with a brief statement that expands on the featured word; opposite is a full-page picture that illustrates it, often expanding the affirmation with its visuals. The Afro picture, for instance, is illustrated by a picture of three Black kids, two in dresses and one in shorts, each wearing their Afros slightly differently—in puffs, with a bow, or unrestrained. They perch on the backs of classroom chairs in front of a chalkboard on which is written diagrams and mathematical equations: These kids take pride in their hair and their brains. Insider knowledge is assumed; “H is for HBCU,” for instance, with no explanation of the initialism deemed necessary. Also understood is the need for affirmation in an unjust world. The “[J] is for Justice” spread features an illustration of a child holding the scales of justice, the names of Black people who’ve died at the hands of police superimposed on their Afro. The painterly illustrations are sprightly and warm, with rich browns, golden yellows, and deep greens giving a hip, earthy feel that corresponds well with the text. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9-by-18-inch double-page spreads viewed at 52.2% of actual size.)

*Determined, joyous, and necessary.* (Picture book, 4-8)

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**DO YOU KNOW WHERE THE ANIMALS LIVE?**

**Discovering the Incredible Creatures All Around Us**

Wohlleben, Peter

Trans. by Tanaka, Shelley

Greystone Kids (84 pp.)

$19.95 | May 4, 2021

978-1-77164-659-8

Seven short chapters answer a wide range of questions about, in the renowned naturalist’s words, “the hidden, exciting, dangerous, and funny world of animals.” Each chapter, covering topics such as habitat, survival techniques, and emotions, is divided into two-page subsections, each headed by a question. Colorful photographs abound, as do sidebars exhorting readers to “Look!” or “Try this!” At least six suggested activities require a backyard, but many others are more broadly accessible. Scattered quizzes are enticing, but the tiny answers are barely legible. Otherwise, the layout is excellent for browsing through and stopping at whatever photograph
or question seems interesting. Some casual browsers may stop to read about great tits for prurient reasons, but they will come away with cutting-edge insights about bird personalities. Author Wohlleben’s enthusiasm for investigating all kinds of animals shines through, whether he is giving facts about common insects, anecdotes about his own pets, or stories gleaned from places far from the forest he tends in Germany. Who knew that a parrot in the rainforest can make comrades “screech with pleasure” by dropping down and pretending it cannot fly? The text is conversational and accessible, sometimes subtly and other times overtly encouraging readers both to respect and care for other species and to recognize themselves as part of the animal world. It contains more breadth and less depth than Wohlleben’s *Can You Hear the Trees Talking?* (2019).

**Science-based cheerleading, in the best possible sense.**

*Index* *(Nonfiction. 8-12)*

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**ALL WE NEED**

Wolff, Kathy
Illus. by Meganck, Margaux
Bloomsbury (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-1-61963-874-7

Diverse families consciously enjoy what and whom they depend upon.

In a series of spreads that move from natural, outdoor settings to indoor, shared spaces, adults and children appreciate one another as well as the resources that make their bodies, minds, and spirits grow. The first in each pair of spreads describes, without naming, a resource in four and a half lines of rhythmic, rhyming verse ending with “all we need…” The following spread fulfills the promise of the page turn with few, satisfying words (“…is air”). From water and a home to food and loved ones, each pair of spreads honors something precious that might be taken for granted. Children playing and learning in a public park and a parent and children biking home over quite a distance make this not only a facilitated meditation on mindfulness and gratitude, but also a love song to the Earth that supports life. The serene, colorful pictures turn the poetic text into a narrative, as the characters go home, make food, and come together again in a large community gathering once all needs are met, because “the only need left… / …is to share.” The lyrical text is a delight to read aloud, and the layout invites young readers to participate by guessing the word to be found on the next page—and, inevitably, memorizing them after the multiple reads that are bound to happen with this mesmerizing book.

*All we need...is to read (this book!).* *(Picture book. 3-8)*

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**THE SECRETS OF PTEROSAURS**

Yang, Yang
Illus. by Zhao, Chuang
Trans. by Chen, Ma
Brown Books Kids (192 pp.)
$24.99 | May 25, 2021
978-1-61254-518-9
Series: PNSO Encyclopedia for Children

In the castle of imagination, during the age of dinosaurs, pterosaurs ruled the skies. This entry in an ambitious scientific art project from China featuring the work of the creative duo Yang and Zhao brings pterosaurs, an extinct order of flying reptiles, back to life. Flourishing in the Mesozoic Era along with the dinosaurs, these intriguing creatures were the first flying vertebrates. The opening pages of this album are similar to others in the series: They include introductions to the series concept, an explanation of the helpful scales and timelines that appear throughout, and specifics about pterosaurs, including the first fossil discoveries. Photographs of several fossils give readers an idea of the kind of material the artist works from. The major content is organized in two sections—nonpterodactyloid fossils and pterodactyloid fossils—which are further subdivided into families. Each spread introduces a genus with a portrait or a dramatically life-like painting of the pterosaur in action in its habitat along with a short story and a memorable tag line. A text box includes body size, diet, period of existence, and locations where fossils were found. The stories often amplify these facts, suggesting how scientists might have determined them and imagining what was going on in the pterosaur’s life.

*Another remarkable work of scientifically based imagination. (index, references, list of scientific art projects)* *(Nonfiction. 8-12)*

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**THE DRAGON PATH**

Young, Ethan
Illus. by the author
Graphix/Scholastic (208 pp.)
$24.99 | $12.99 paper | May 18, 2021
978-1-338-36329-6 paper
978-1-338-36330-2

A family prophecy and long-kept secrets spell out a new destiny for a Chinese clan. Young throws readers right into the fray in his latest steampunk graphic novel. A motorized village, revealed to be the Wón Clan’s, is returning to their ancestral home, the Old Land. With the encouragement of his dubious adviser, Quan, Lord Wón believes that in returning they will fulfill a prophecy. Meanwhile Lord Wón’s willful young son, Prince Sing, has been seeing visions about his mother’s death and what initiated his ancestors’ exodus from their homeland. When the clan is attacked by the reptilian Dragon Tribe for
“O’Neill’s illustrations keep the focus on the pair and the work they do both building and bonding.”

**OUR SHED**

A father and daughter build a backyard shed—and their relationship.

Every step of the way, the father is teaching, guiding, and relating to his daughter in ways that affirm her desire to learn, to play, and to spend time with him. He explains why they need a shed; teaches her how to choose materials; shares a milkshake (with two straws); joins her in a dance on her own private dance floor. After measuring twice and cutting once, the two frame the walls and then take a break so she can battle “the nastiest dragon in the land” (depicted as a white chalk outline and described as “daddy-dragon” in the narration). In three days, the shed is ready to paint; she can’t choose just one color, so they get two…and father’s and daughter’s shed plans delightfully merge. Over four pages, the duo grab various tools from the shed to fuel their fun as they visually age and the seasons turn, the final of the four showing a new addition: the daughter’s son, who makes his own mark on the shed. O’Neill’s illustrations keep the focus on the pair and the work they do both building and bonding, the imaginative scenes just as colorful as reality but with the addition of white chalk-outlined figures. Dad has light skin and brown hair; his daughter has darker skin and short, straight black hair. Pair this with *Hammer and Nails* by Josh Bledsoe and illustrated by Jessica Warrick (2016).

This dad is a welcome role model for father figures everywhere. (Picture book. 4-8)

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**MOTHER’S DAY & FATHER’S DAY PICTURE BOOKS**

**DADDY & DADA**


Rumi wants you to meet her family.

Rumi is 4, and she has two dads (the Daddy and Dada of the title), a little brother named Xander, and a dog named Betty. Daddy sings with her. Dada reads to her. (Xander likes to pull her hair.) Her friends have families of different types—some with a mom and a dad and others with just one parent. One boy in her neighborhood lives with just his grandmother and her cat. Rumi sees families of all sizes and makeups when she walks down the street with hers. She has two sets of grandparents (both seem to be heterosexual pairings). Her family also includes Uncle TyTy and Uncle RyRy (she danced at their wedding) and Aunt Katie and Uncle Jeremy and their kids. One of her friends calls Rumi her sister, and Rumi’s dads think that is great because friends can be family too. Now Rumi wants to hear about your family.

Brockington and Webster, who head a two-dad family themselves, have laid out a beautifully kid-friendly introduction to an early-21st-century constellation of family shapes told in a believable kid voice. May’s simple, pleasant, smile-filled cartoon illustrations are colorful and show families that are not only varied by parent number (never more than two) and gender presentation, but also by race. One character uses a wheelchair; another wears a hijab. Rumi and her family all present White.

A straightforward and nonjudgmental validation of many LGBTQ+ and other family structures. (Picture book. 2-8)

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**THE MEANEST OF MEANIES**

A Book About Love


A monster enumerates all the ways her mother is mean.

While this blue-skinned child is completely serious in her criticisms of her green-skinned mother, hopefully readers will see similarities to their own moms: Mom wakes the narrator with tickles and coffee breath, waves goodbye at school dropoff, bribes her for conversation, and makes her read books at bedtime (four, not the desired 82). Weirdly, a school-picture-day thread is dropped abruptly in favor of a spelling bee (where Mom cheers). The creators of the podcast #IMOMSOHARD may have their tongues firmly in cheeks, but their child protagonist comes off as an entitled monster. Some adults may find the situations familiar, but few will want this parent-child duo as role models: The child is sassy (“Look, lady, my hands are all...
The illustrations are bright and friendly, packed with details that will especially reward lap readers.

**ADVENTURES WITH MY DADDIES**

A heartfelt celebration of family love.

A young pigtailed protagonist and their two fathers are the stars of this picture-book adventure. In the illustrations, the dads, one White and one Black, share bedtime duty as they wrangle their child through a few stories and tub time, then finally to bed. And in the narration, the child, who is depicted with tan skin and brown hair, explains why they love their dads. The child's remarks include a glimpse into their adoption scrapbook, memories of a costume party, and examples of the small things the dads do to show their love. Educators and library workers will enjoy the book's easy read-aloud prose while caregivers will value the important message of family bonds. The illustrations are bright and friendly, packed with details that will especially reward lap readers; the family dog that's included in every scene makes for a delightful seek-and-find element. One detail that's not so delightful is an imagined scene with Orientalist tropes, including a turban on the White dad (the Black

**DAY-OLD CHILD**

Pearson, Carol Lynn
Illus. by Egbert, Corey
Gibbs Smith (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Mar. 9, 2021
978-1-4236-5533-6

Pearson's popular poem gets complementary illustrations.

The short poem talks of a mother's wish that her day-old child could understand her words so she could tell them all about God. "My day-old child lay in my arms. / In a whisper, lips to ear—/ I said, 'Oh, dear one, how I wish—'/ 'I wish that you could hear.'" And as she whispers this wish to her child, she sees a light in the babe's eyes and has the thought that perhaps the child similarly wishes for language so that they could tell their mother, before they forget, all about God: "I left God just yesterday." Egbert's sweet art keeps the focus on four separate mother-baby pairs that repeat in turn throughout the book. Three of these mothers seem to have opposite-sex partners, and one of these pairings is an interracial one; the fourth could be interpreted as one part of an interracial same-sex couple. All four, along with the various family members, are racially diverse. Figures are outlined definitively but with a soft, smudgy line that welcomes readers in. The soft colors and clear love seen on every scene makes for a delightful seek-and-find element. One detail that's not so delightful is an imagined scene with Orientalist tropes, including a turban on the White dad (the Black

**DAD**

The Man, the Myth, the Legend
Lowe, Mifflin
Illus. by Torrent, Dani
Bushel & Peck Books (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 1, 2021
978-1-7336335-6-7

A child enumerates all the ways Dad is a superhero in his own right.

This dad clearly has an imagination to match his child's. Last week, the kiddo was getting squeezed by a python, the double-page spread depicting a jungle scene with Dad using a vine to swing across to rescue his child from a menacing (and gigantic) snake. This gives way with the page turn to a single page revealing the child tangled in a green garden hose, Dad armed with a garden spade, and Mom, unimpressed, holding the hose where, presumably, Dad has sliced it with a trowel in the rescue effort. This sets the pattern, Dad imagining things with his children and Mom injecting a bit of reality, especially when his humming of the children goes a little too far ("spaghetti with M&M's, chocolate sauce, and...potato chips," anyone?). This father seems to know just how to make everything right in his children's lives, from serving up ice cream to the losing baseball team and getting a matching terrible haircut to finding his daughter's lost doll. Torrent's illustrations of the redheaded White family play up body language and facial expressions so readers feel like they are there with them in each situation, no matter how outlandish. And their reactions to each other are priceless (kisses? Ewww!).

Like this child, readers will want to be like this dad: able to dream big and accomplish anything. (Picture book. 4-8)

**A sweet baby shower book for religious parents.** (Picture book. 3-6, adult)

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busy?), and the mom is sometimes a doormat (making three breakfasts). Some of the rhymes are rough, and the meter sometimes stumbles. Briggs' digital illustrations play up the humor in the text while smoothing the rougher edges a bit with a monster cast. Few characters have lifelike skin tones, and all have features that set them apart—varying numbers of appendages or eyes; horns, spines. The girl and her mother share blue hair, horns, and spotted skin; each has two legs and eyes, and the girl has two arms to her mother's four. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 15% of actual size.)

If “being mean...means... // I LOVE YOU!!” then this kid sure must love her mother. Wouldn't lots of moms prefer a hug? (Picture book. 4-8)
dad is dressed as a medieval European monarch). The story is simple and treads familiar ground, but it does so in such a tender way that readers will enjoy returning to it again and again. Those with pajama storytime programs and families looking for their next great bedtime read will find this book particularly useful.

A sweet adventure.  (Picture book. 4-8)

A MOTHER IS A HOUSE
Petit, Aurore
Illus. by the author
Trans. by Hahn, Daniel
Gecko Press (48 pp.)
$18.99  |  Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-776573-23-3

Petit uses metaphors to describe the different jobs mothers do.

This French import via New Zealand opens with the pregnant mother lying on the couch, her partner’s hand atop her belly: “A mother’s a house.” Across the gutter, “She’s a car in a rush” as the two stride down the sidewalk. With the page turn, she’s a “lullaby hush,” the baby in her arms. A “permanent fountain” shows her breastfeeding, and she’s a “wall” when she blocks the now-crawling tot from her toolbox and a ladder. She serves as an island when the two are soaking in the bathtub, the babe’s tush in the air, and readers see the mother’s bare bum and a side view of her breast (and nipple) when she’s compared to “a picture” in a pose that evokes impressionist art. While a changing rhyme scheme makes reading this aloud a bit of a challenge, the fact that the phrases are scattered across page turns makes this less of a drawback, especially since children may want to pause to see how a mom is a “kangaroo pouch” or a “roof in the street.”

The final metaphor says it all: “A mother’s a home.”  (Picture book. 3-7)

YOUR MAMA
Ramos, NoNieqa
Illus. by Alcántara, Jacqueline
Versify/HMH (32 pp.)
$17.99  |  Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-328-63188-6

A child and a mother—both with brown skin, long, wavy black hair, and long, bold limbs—spend their days baking and playing, picnicking and protesting, going to the library and taking road trips. It starts with a honeyed bang: “Your Mama So Sweet, She Could Be a Bakery,” spelled out on a ribbon that could adorn a sailor’s arm as narration in regular type expands on this. Each subsequent double-page spread echoes these words (“Your Mama...”), highlighting how this mom’s “so strong,” “so forgiving,” and “so woke.” Notably, readers see a mom that stands alone, strong and defiant, as she walks into her child’s Parent Night at school and strolls through a neighborhood full of friends and passersby. Ramos conjures jubilant scene after scene with deft language and sprinkles of Spanish, and this tale’s more sublime moments (“Your Mama a Brainiac—mo’ betta than any app”) simply shine. Similarly, Alcántara’s art represents motherhood as a model of ideals and mind spun for modern times, both indebted to and limited by the specific type of mother of color depicted here. Overall, it’s a celebration that’s invaluable and needed.  (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 74% of actual size.)

Perfectly dazzling.  (Picture book. 4-10)

CAVE DADA PICKY EATER
Reese, Brandon
Illus. by the author
Chronicle Books (44 pp.)
$16.99  |  Apr. 27, 2021
978-1-4521-7995-7

The Stone Age father and son of Cave Dada (2020) are back, and this time Dada must produce an egg for his child’s breakfast. Or else.

Unfortunately, once the heavy rectangular stone door is pulled aside (with great difficulty) by Dada, the ancient fridge shelves reveal no egg. And soon enough, a clumsy mammoth puts paid to the fridge door, the biggest piece coming to rest across the stones surrounding the fire (discovered in the previous book). Dada attempts to entice the tot to eat something else: cheese? “No! Has holes!” Onion? “Too stink!” Spinach? “It touch onion!” With each pronouncement, Baba tosses the foods away from his stone highchair, and they land atop the demolished door. Dada points to each item on the fridge shelves, to no avail. Although “Dad no want hunt gather. Dada day off…Dada want relax,” his tot’s temper tantrum forces him out to raid the nest of what appears to be a ginormous chicken. Just when breakfast is in his grasp…oops! The omelet has been out to raid the nest of what appears to be a ginormous chicken. Just when breakfast is in his grasp…oops! The omelet has been invented. Reese’s illustrations are just as hilarious as in the duo’s first outing, combining single- and double-page spreads with comic panels to trace the emotional roller coaster that parenting sometimes is, though one might wish that the father were portrayed in a less stereotypical light next time. Facial expressions are masterful; both have light skin and wear furs, the tyke as a diaper.

Wonder what these two will “invent” next?  (Picture book. 4-8)
STROLLERCOASTER

Ringler, Matt
Illus. by Raúl the Third &
Bay, Elaine
Little, Brown (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-0-316-49322-2

It’s that time—the hour of doom wedged between when a toddler first becomes overtired and finally blissfully naps.

Frustration crackles through la casa like a downed power line. Tyrannical tantrums terrorize. Parental paroxysms of panic provoke pandemonium. Quick—to the STROLLER-COASTER! Down the streets of their barrio, Papi and daughter Sam whoosh, clack, and dive. Past the sugar-blasting pastelería, up the hill of no return, down the viaduct of trepidation, along the psychedelic wall of paleta rapture, and through the scratch-board black of Morpheus’ tunnel. The cranky, exhausted toddler is finally overcome by the whirlwind outing and is soon cuddled on the comfy couch with her slumbering Papacito. Ringler’s energetic narrative perfectly mimics the staccato thrills of a roller coaster. From the snap of the buckle to the paternal admonition “Keep your hands and feet inside at all times,” the stroller transforms into a ride Batman would envy. Raúl the Third and Bay’s tongue-in-cheek bilingual commentary planted in illustration details follows the frantic pair everywhere. From the encouraging “Corre” painted on the building they’re whizzing past at the beginning of their adventure to graffiti messages of “Estoy cansada” and “Tired?” as the toddler finally starts winding down, the whole barrio urges the fun-loving father and his thrill-seeking daughter to greater feats of glory.

Kids everywhere will be honing their tantrum skills in hopes of riding their very own strollercoasters. (Picture book. 4-8)

I SANG YOU DOWN FROM THE STARS

Spillett-Sumner, Tasha
Illus. by Goade, Michaela
Little, Brown (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-316-49316-1

Anticipation, pregnancy, and the birth of a baby are celebrated in this story from Spillett-Sumner (Inniniwak) and Caldecott medalist Goade (Tlingit).

When a baby chooses its mother, special gatherings of family and community are held to prepare for the child’s arrival. Sacred items are collected and placed in a medicine bundle to be given to the baby at birth. These items will keep the growing child’s connection to their identity strong. Spillett-Sumner’s lyrical text begins as an Indigenous mother plans the journey with her unborn child. “Before I held you in my arms, I sang you down from the stars.” When she finds a white eagle plume, it becomes “the first gift in a bundle that will be yours.” The young mother finds more items for her child’s bundle: cedar, sage, a “star blanket,” and a special river stone “so that you always remember that you belong to this place.” The baby arrives in the spring, “with the waters that come when the ice breaks and the rivers flow again.” Goade uses a white “swoosh” of stars throughout the illustrations to intertwine traditional origin stories with a family’s experience of “love and joy” upon the arrival of the new baby, in scenes that pulse with both emotions. Author and illustrator each contribute a note describing how they drew upon their respective cultural traditions to inform their work, which will open the book up to a wide range of readers.

Gorgeous, shimmering, heartfelt. (Picture book. 3-7) (This review was first published in our March 1, 2021, issue. We reprint it here for our readers’ convenience.)

I LOVE YOU AS BIG AS A RAINBOW

Summers, Joan
Illus. by Torres, Alberta
Tiger Tales (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-68010-209-3

A caregiver bear helps their cub get creative in order to hold on to the beauty of a rainbow.

When it starts to rain on an otherwise sunny day, Small Bear is disappointed. But Big Bear is quick to point out a rainbow: “It’s not all bad.” When it fades, the duo collect things that will make their own rainbow, Big Bear pointing out how each is like their love for Small Bear. The red of the poppies is “strong and deep,” just like Big Bear’s love. The crunch of orange and yellow leaves reminds Big Bear that their love for Small Bear “fills my whole heart with laughter.” And boring green grass? “It will grow forever,” just like Big Bear’s love. But when their rainbow is complete, Small Bear is devastated at the bedraggled collection that fails to capture the rainbow’s wonder. On a beautiful spread highlighting each color, Big Bear points out that the two have a rainbow of love in their hearts that they can take anywhere. Torres’ cartoon scenes are full of small details to delight—an inchworm on a stem, a squirrel parasailing with a fall leaf, woodland creatures watching and joining in the fun—but most of all the very apparent love the bears have for one another.

Readers will likely want to gather their own natural rainbows, and caregivers should be ready with expressions of love. (Picture book. 3-6)
“Young and López weave a rich tapestry that honors the process of children’s self-determination over time.”

I’LL MEET YOU IN YOUR DREAMS

MY AMMA’S WHITE STONE MOOKUTHI

Little Bose loves his mother’s mookuthi, the Tamil word for an ornament that many Indian women wear in their noses.

The stone reminds Little Bose of beautiful things in his life, like morning dew or a star in the sky. Most importantly, though, the mookuthi reminds Little Bose of how much his mother loves him. Amma’s mookuthi sparkles all day long; when she wakes Little Bose up in the morning, when she drinks her filter coffee, when she comforts Little Bose during a nighttime thunderstorm. One winter day, however, for an unexplained reason, Amma stops wearing her mookuthi. Little Bose is heartbroken. That night, Amma takes him outside and shows him the moon, which, she says, is a mookuthi that shines on their family always.

The book’s text and illustrations cleverly incorporate aspects of middle-class South Indian life, including filter coffee, kanchivaram saris, and jackfruit trees. In the pictures, most of the characters are light skinned, which does not reflect the wide variety of dark skin tones typical of rural Tamil Nadu, where the family lives. The story does not have much of a plot, and the text is, at times, both overwritten and too sentimental. While the author’s note explains that the book is about grief, the only loss the protagonist obviously suffers is that of his mother’s mookuthi.

There are few enough U.S. picture books about South Indian families; it’s a shame this one is so weak. (cast of characters, glossary) (Picture book. 3-6)
PERFECTLY PARVIN
Abtahi, Olivia
Putnam (320 pp.)
$17.99  |  May 18, 2021
978-0-593-10942-7

Parvin Mohammadi is about to start high school with something she’s never had before: a boyfriend. After a summer of hijinks on the beach, Wesley finally asks Parvin out—after giving her a romantic first kiss. But a few days later, at freshman orientation, Wesley dumps Parvin for being “too much.” Determined to make Wesley jealous, the Iranian/White 14-year-old decides to get bisexual sophomore dreamboat Matty Fumero to ask her to homecoming. But she’s convinced that she’s going to have to change into the kind of girl she thinks boys like: someone quiet, shy, and the opposite of everything that makes Parvin herself. Parvin’s best friends—gay, Mexican American Fabian and pansexual, Korean American Ruth—don’t approve of her plan, but they stand by her nonetheless. Even better, despite the government ban on travelers from several majority-Muslim countries, Parvin’s aunt Sara is hoping to visit from Iran in a few months, and Parvin knows that she can do anything with her favorite relative by her side. In the process of trying to redo her personality, Parvin starts to realize who she really is, who she wants to be, and most importantly, whose love she can count on no matter who she might become. Parvin’s narratorial voice sparkles with wit and pathos, and her journey toward self-acceptance seamlessly incorporates political and emotional realities. Characters, including Parvin’s enemies, family, and friends, are fully developed and a pleasure to read about.

A diverse, fast-paced, feminist romance. (Romance. 13-18)

COOL FOR THE SUMMER
Adler, Dahlia
Wednesday Books (272 pp.)
$18.99  |  May 11, 2021
978-1-250-76582-6

A high schooler tries to keep her summer fling—and questions about her sexuality—a secret. After spending her summer in the Outer Banks thanks to her mom’s job, petite, blond-haired Lara is back in New York and ready to take on her senior year with a fresh haircut
and newfound confidence. She’s finally caught the eye of her longtime unrequited crush, Chase, and as they start dating, she knows she should feel that her dreams have come true. But Lara’s secret summer fling, Jasmine, has moved to town, and as Jasmine infiltrates Lara’s friend group, Lara feels increasingly unmoored. Lara had only ever been attracted to boys before, but now she can’t stop thinking about Jasmine and wondering what that means. If she’s always dreamed about dating Chase, who would she be without that dream? And was she just “cool for the summer,” or are her feelings about Jasmine something more?

While some readers will be frustrated that the plot hinges on Ali’s narrative of a Muslim teen navigating life, heartbreak, and family and community. This complicates her feelings about her profess, she discovers that her father doesn’t approve of Nuah knowing herself—and avoid labels for the time being—is sorely needed. Lara is a Jewish second-generation Russian American; Jasmine is a Jewish Syrian American, and supporting characters have a range of racial, ethnic, and sexual identities.

A welcome addition to the small but growing canon of questioning queer fiction. *(Fiction. 14-18)*

**MISFIT IN LOVE**

Ali, S.K.
Salaam Reads/Simon & Schuster
(320 pp.)
$19.99 | May 25, 2021
978-1-5344-4275-7

While helping with her brother Muhammad’s wedding, Egyptian and Indian American Janna Yusuf prepares her heart to confess to her crush in this sequel to *Saints and Misfits* (2017).

Though originally planned as a small, intimate nikah ceremony, Janna’s Indian father has turned Muhammad and Syrian American Sarah’s katb el-kitab into an elaborate affair. Also attending is Janna’s friend Nuah, with whom she recently realized she is in love. But while trying to find a moment to confess, she discovers that her father doesn’t approve of Nuah because he is Black. Disturbed and angered by her father’s racist views, Janna becomes increasingly aware of other instances of anti-Black discrimination and racism among Muslims in her family and community. This complicates her feelings about her relationships as her realization grows of how these views have affected other Muslims as well as her own budding romance. Ali’s narrative of a Muslim teen navigating life, heartbreak, and romance also explores larger issues with depth and texture.

Janna works through cognitive dissonance as she examines principles of justice, equity, and committing to everyday anti-racist action while also considering the degree to which boys have been life and depth at the center of her attention. The cast of the first book returns, and Zayneh and Adam from *Love From A to Z* (2019) make a cameo appearance, but new readers will find the story accessible.

A timely and necessary read for all communities to reflect upon. *(Fiction. 12-18)*

**NOT OUR SUMMER**

Bazaz, Catie
Running Press Teens (288 pp.)
$17.99 | May 11, 2021
978-0-7624-7229-1

Two estranged cousins are thrown together by their agoraphobic grandfather when he leaves detailed travel plans for them to carry out following his death. Following the example set by their respective mothers, 18-year-olds K.J. and Becka loathe one other. The same family secret that drove the sisters apart poisoned their daughters against one another, leaving them virtual strangers throughout their lives, though they’ve lived relatively nearby in Oklahoma and Arkansas. However, K.J. and Becka find themselves spending the summer together as a condition of receiving an unexpected inheritance. Alternating narration allows for introspective character development as they ride mules in the Grand Canyon, hike around Yellowstone National Park, go whitewater rafting in South Carolina, try diving in Key West, and compete in a rodeo event. K.J.’s adventurous, impulsive personality initially clashes with that of the more image-conscious Becka, but there’s never any real doubt they’ll find common ground. Still, this novel is an engaging example of the journey, not the destination, being the point. K.J. comes from a markedly less privileged background, and this raises the stakes for her in a way that Becka doesn’t have to face, but readers will easily empathize with both young women. Main characters are White.

A poignant family drama that realistically explores the growth of a complicated relationship. *(Fiction. 14-18)*

**INCREDIBLE DOOM**

Bogart, Matthew
Illus. by the author
HarperAlley (288 pp.)
$24.99 | May 11, 2021
978-0-06-306494-2

In the early days of public internet, teens escape small-town persecution using text-based chat. Allison’s father abuses her; Samir has never felt like he belonged; and Richard becomes the target of a violent bully. Their lives are frustrating, but a computer and a phone line make all the difference. Using bulletin boards, email, and internet relay chat, they forge new connections: “It’s like coming up for air, discovering some people out there don’t suck.” Faux screenshots of command-line email clients and ASCII art provide glittering nostalgia for anyone who used the internet in the 1990s but perhaps only niche historical interest for today’s teens. There are a few scenes of particularly vicious bullying and abuse; Allison’s father locks her in a box, and Richard’s tormentor pushes him down a flight of stairs. While the art is angular and somewhat
When Amanda Gorman, at age 22, became the youngest inaugural poet in U.S. history, many remarked on how her youth, talent, and magnetism put poetry firmly in the public eye. While poetry for adults is often perceived as a niche field, young readers delight in poems, as is evident from the tremendous popularity of authors such as Shel Silverstein, Michael Rosen, Jason Reynolds, and Elizabeth Acevedo. Teens have, for their part, done a lot to put Instagram poets on the map, most notably Rupi Kaur, who has over 4 million followers. Leaving aside the scorn from the literary establishment that is regularly heaped upon poets who achieve such widespread success—especially when it is due to strong support from young women—the fact remains that poetry clearly resonates strongly with youth, making Gorman’s meteoric rise fitting. This year is off to a very strong start with a number of YA novels in verse that will appeal to a broad range of tastes.

**Chlorine Sky** by Mahogany L. Browne (Crown, Jan. 12): A teenage girl wrestles with questions of self-worth and the respect she deserves from her former best friend as she grows into herself. She feels at home on the basketball court even though her winning bruises boys’ egos. This is a story of figuring out who you are rather than shrinking to become the version of yourself the world perceives.

**Thirty Talks Weird Love** by Alessandra Narváez Varela (Cinco Puntos Press, Jan. 19): Growing up in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, a 13-year-old girl encounters her 30-year-old self, who is concerned about her well-being and full of good, if unsolicited, advice. As a teen, she is juggling academic ambition, friendship stress, body image, and living in a town where femicides are rampant. Will she listen to the wisdom of her older counterpart who has not turned out as imagined?

**Muted** by Tami Charles (Scholastic, Feb. 2): Small-town friends—“three brown girls, / three heartbeats colliding”—have big musical talent and even bigger dreams that seem unattainable. “But as the sky grew darker, / the stars undressed themselves, / and the universe whispered ever-so-softly, / Some wishes are granted / only to the bold....” Their path to R&B stardom, however, becomes a fraught journey of self-reclamation.

**Home Is Not a Country** by Safia Elhillo (Make Me a World, March 2): Elements of magical realism punctuate this story of a lonely Muslim American girl; she’s curious about her late father, targeted by Islamophobic classmates, and estranged from the boy who is her best friend. A journey through time and space with a shadowy spirit girl she believes embodies everything her mother would have preferred in a daughter offers eye-opening perspectives and insights.

**The Seventh Raven** by David Elliott, illustrated by Rovina Cai (HMH Books, March 16): This adaptation of the fairy tale “The Seven Ravens” tells the story of a teenage girl, a much-longed-for daughter, who was born sickly and frail. When her seven older brothers anger their father, he curses them in a fit of rage and sorrow, turning them into birds. Years later, after discovering the truth, she is determined to set them free.

**Your Heart, My Sky: Love in a Time of Hunger** by Margarita Engle (Atheneum, March 23): A boy and a girl in 1990s Cuba fall in love and struggle side by side as they face starvation and government oppression with the passion of youth. It’s a time of secrecy and fear, and the need to focus on survival means risks are inevitable—but at what cost? Ultimately, where does young love fall in calculations of trust and loyalty? (Read an interview with Engle on p. 150.)

Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.
“Adventure, romance, and magic entwine in this fierce sequel.”

ILLUSIONARY

illa, Zoraida
Little, Brown (384 pp.)
$18.99 | May 11, 2021
978-0-7595-5603-4
Series: Hollow Crown, 2

“Hope is as slippery as memory.”

In the aftermath of a devastating betrayal by the rebellious Whispers, Renata Convida—a magic wielder with the power to steal memories—chooses to leave everything behind to travel alongside the infamous Prince Castian, her oldest friend and her greatest enemy. Together they go in search of the Knife of Memory, a mystical weapon they hope will be the answer to defeating Castian’s father, the tyrannical King Fernando, and bringing peace to their kingdom, which has been torn apart by the oppression of Renata’s people, the magical Moria. The more the duo traverse the world, over land and across seas, making enemies and friends along the way, the more they realize that the bonds between history and memory are intrinsically connected but hopelessly severed. As Renata’s mental clarity starts to fall apart under the weight of so many minds whose memories she has stolen, her turmoil increases: If she loses herself, can she accomplish what needs to be done to save her people? Adventure, romance, and magic entwine in this fierce sequel infused with assured writing, lovable characters, and a taut plot that merges multiple threads about accountability, surviving trauma, and building a new life as well as a new nation. A breathtakingly romantic plotline that speaks of survival, forgiveness, and friendship is the cherry on top of a story full of brown-skinned people in a world inspired by Spain.

A fantastic duology ender. (map) (Fantasy. 14-adult)

WHERE THE RHYTHM TAKES YOU

Dass, Sarah
Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins (352 pp.)
$18.99 | May 11, 2021
978-0-06-301852-5

Reyna still has feelings for the hometown boy who left to become a global pop phenom—but now he’s back staying at her family’s hotel and nothing will ever be the same.

When Reyna’s Mummy got sick more than two years ago and passed, the Plumeria Hotel became a lonely yet suffocating weight atop Reyna and her future. Now 17 and without much help from her relatively carefree father, Reyna essentially runs the hotel, leaving no time for her friends, her art, or boys. But Aiden isn’t just any boy; he’s the Grammy-winning songwriter for the soca EDM trio DJ Bacchanal, and he has only gotten cuter in the years since he left Reyna and Tobago for life in the States. When Aiden, his band mates, and their glamorous friends book the luxury villa at the Plumeria, Reyna’s relentless focus on work won’t be able to protect her from potentially being hurt again. Dass uses flashbacks to build dramatic tension in the story as readers see past relationships develop and present ones frayed by the sense that Reyna’s future is both limited and lonely. Jane Austen fans will enjoy this reimagining of Persuasion while some readers may be frustrated by the will-they-won’t-they element. Reyna communicates and narrates with an earnest and relatable amount of self-doubt and a propensity to deny obvious truths. Most main characters are Afro-Caribbean.

A love story with classic beats and a unique rhythm. (playlist) (Fiction. 13-18)

THE HOLLOW INSIDE

Davis, Brooke Lauren
Bloomsbury (352 pp.)
$17.99 | May 25, 2021
978-1-5476-0611-5

A grifter uses her 16-year-old daughter to exact revenge on the man who betrayed her.

Technically Phoenix isn’t Nina’s real daughter, but Phoenix isn’t her real name either. Her mother bailed when she was 2, and Nina has taken care of her since they fled Phoenix’s father’s house when she was 9. The two survive by separating unsuspecting folks from their belongings, but Phoenix is tired of living on the fringe, and Nina promises that they’ll finally have the perfect life they deserve. All she has to do is dig up dirt about Jasper Hollow, Ohio’s resident celebrity, Ellis Bowman, whose inspirational books put the town on the map. When the Bowmans catch Phoenix spying, she makes up a sob story on the fly. It works, and she’s invited to stay with the gregarious Ellis; his kind wife, Jill; and their teenage twins, Melody and Neil, until
As Phoenix gets to know the family and explores her undeniable chemistry with Melody, she wonders if Ellis is really the monster that Nina says he is and realizes that the price of revenge may be too high. The author evocatively captures the feel of small-town life, and Phoenix, whose longing for a family is palpable, inspires sympathy, as does Nina, whose own story is interspersed throughout. Much of the suspense comes from the dread over how Phoenix’s charade will end. Main characters are cued as White.

A page-turning debut. (Thriller. 12-18)

THE IVIES
Donne, Alexa
Crown (320 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | May 25, 2021
978-0-593-30370-2
978-0-593-30371-9 PLB

The Plastics meet the Heathers in this murder mystery about ruthless Ivy League ambition.

After scholarship student Olivia transferred to an elite boarding school in 10th grade, she knew intelligence and drive wouldn’t be enough to get her a full ride to an Ivy League school. So she jumped at the chance to become one of the Ivies, a supercompetitive clique of girls who use their cunning, social standing, family power, and skills to ensure they snag coveted spots at America’s top universities. They systematically target their classmates using the List, where they track competitors to sabotage. But when one of the Ivies turns up dead, Olivia finds herself questioning everything she thought she knew about her friends, classmates, and even her crush, biracial (Black and implied White) Canadian Ethan. Equal parts murder mystery and competitive college admissions satire, this dark story of an outsider struggling to survive in a cutthroat environment is a descendant of movies like Heathers and Mean Girls. The well-developed tension between Olivia’s shrewd detective work, her former trust in the corrupt Ivies, and her undeniable culpability creates a compelling page-turning pace. Although experienced readers of the genre may anticipate some plot twists, there are enough red herrings to make the final reveal and satirical ending satisfying.

Olivia reads as White, like the majority of her classmates; the other Ivies include one Black girl and one Korean American girl.

A complex and poignant queer romance. (Romance. 13-18)

SOME GIRLS DO
Dugan, Jennifer
Putnam (336 pp.)
$17.99 | May 18, 2021
978-0-593-11253-3

A reluctant pageant contestant falls for a newly out track star.

Ruby Thompson loves only two things—sleep and her car—but she relies on hookups with lacrosse star Tyler and working at her ex-stepfather Billy’s garage to keep her sane between the pageants her mother insists will be their ticket out of the trailer park. When new girl Morgan Matthews runs in front of Ruby’s car, leading to a near miss, they get off on the wrong footing—although Morgan is intrigued by how cute she is. Morgan joins Pride Club and navigates her lesbian identity after being forced out of her Catholic school due to her sexuality. Her Division I college scholarship could be at risk depending on the results of her parents’ discrimination lawsuit against St. Mary’s. Morgan’s annoyance with Ruby’s attitude soon becomes something more, despite warnings from her track teammates about Ruby’s reputation. The girls are from two different worlds—Morgan’s family is loving and supportive while Ruby’s mother fears her daughter may not be straight—and with so much to figure out on both sides, can they truly make it work? Dugan gives each protagonist a distinct voice and compelling point of view, and readers will sympathize with their challenges as they find their ways to love. Ruby and Morgan are White; secondary characters are people of color, and there is pansexual and trans visibility.

A thrilling boarding school story with a satirical edge. (Mystery. 14-18)

MAY THE BEST MAN WIN
Ellor, ZR
Roaring Brook (384 pp.)
$17.99 | May 18, 2021
978-1-250-62512-0

Ex-boyfriends Lukas and Jeremy will each do anything to become homecoming king.

Lukas, a White cisgender boy, and Jeremy, a White transgender boy, were the picture-perfect football player and cheerleader couple at their exclusive private school—until Jeremy began transitioning and broke up with Lukas. Now Lukas, who is autistic, wants to prove himself to his ableist family, and Jeremy seeks validation as a man. Both see winning homecoming king as the key to their dreams, which include admission to prestigious colleges. Jeremy’s confidence and strong gay identity make him an enjoyably unusual trans male character, and discussions of gender identity throughout are interesting and current. Though Jeremy’s desire to enter the world of rich White men may be understandable, the dynamics of these wealthy teenagers’ underlying privilege are underdeveloped.
The text acknowledges their socio-economic advantages, but Jeremy still bemoans being “stuffed full of privilege in every way but the one that matters most,” forcing readers to ponder which privilege “matters most,” a subject that could have been richly explored. The book also presents some stereotypes without irony, like the Asian best friend whose cultural texture does not extend beyond having harshly controlling and perfectionist parents and the college dropout with two jobs and criminal tendencies. Lukas is sympathetic, but Jeremy’s antisocial behaviors render him unlikeable, without enough growth for a satisfying redemption.

A fun premise that misses the mark a few too many times.  
(Fiction. 14-18)

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10 TRUTHS AND A DARE
Elston, Ashley
Disney-Hyperion (304 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-368-06238-1

Senior week isn’t all fun and games if you’re in danger of not graduating at all. Ask anyone and they’ll tell you Olivia Perkins has got it all. She’s class salutatorian and an accomplished AP student; she’s bagged an acceptance at Louisiana State University and has her majors and future career in international tax law planned to the last detail. So when she learns, shortly before the end of the school year, that she failed her off-campus golf PE class and is at risk of not being allowed to graduate, her entire world shatters. With her future and reputation at stake, Olivia, alongside her small circle of co-conspiring cousins and friends, must find a way to make up her PE hours without tipping off everyone in her highly involved extended Italian American family—while also putting in appearances at the graduation parties filling her week and navigating the shoals of nascent romance as she falls for Leo Perez, the son of old family friends who is possibly cued as Latinx by his name. This drama of errors puts along with a great deal of humor and heart. Elston beautifully depicts the warm, in-each-others’-pockets family atmosphere and creates for the cousins a refreshingly believable friendship. Overarching themes of integrity and the dangers of miscommunication avoid becoming heavy-handed.

Charming. (Fiction. 12-18)
A young Cuban couple is buoyed by love during desperate times in Engle’s latest verse novel

BY LAURA SIMEON

Your Heart, My Sky: Love in a Time of Hunger (Atheneum, March 23) is a work of historical fiction in verse from international-award-winning Cuban American poet Margarita Engle. In Cuba during the summer of 1991, Liana, 14, and Amado, 15, choose to stay home rather than go to work in the government’s farm labor program. They risk serious consequences: Amado’s brother is already in prison for avoiding military duty. Listless from hunger in a country where malnutrition is rampant, they nevertheless fall in love after their paths cross. Liana is accompanied by Paz, a stray singing dog she adopted, one lone survivor of an ancient breed known for its haunting vocalizations, who becomes the third narrator in the novel. As the situation in Cuba becomes more dire—something thrown into relief by the arrival in distant Havana of athletes for the Pan American Games and the increasing numbers of people fleeing by raft for Florida—Liana and Amado debate what to do: stay and try to make the best of things, even through illegal means, or attempt to cross the sea themselves? Engle spoke with us over Zoom from her home in Clovis, California; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Your author’s note describes how you visited Cuba during this time. Why write about it now?

I have been thinking about it for a long time; I wrote about this hunger while it was happening, for adults. I tried to get people in the U.S. to care—and, frankly, adults often didn’t believe me. A lot of people would argue with me. Many people still believe myths: They either demonize or idealize Cuba instead of seeing it as a real place with real people. My reason for starting to work on this particular version of the hunger of the ’90s as a love story came from hearing people reminisce about it during more recent trips to Cuba. The summer of 1991 was when I was finally able to return, after a 31-year absence, due to travel restrictions. As Cuba lost Soviet subsidies, the economy was in free fall, they were desperate for hard currency, and they let non–Eastern bloc travelers in for the first time during the Pan American Games. It was illegal for my relatives to talk to me—the Cuban people had been instructed not to speak to foreigners—so I visited them in secret. It was a very surrealistic experience, seeing their hunger. Food had been rationed since the ’60s. People who imagine paradise and equity don’t understand the complexity of the situation.

My hopes are that young readers will be compassionate and empathetic. I want to say that I love the cousins who stayed—and I love the cousins who left on rafts. I
want to be free to see Cuba as a real place rather than
an idealized or demonized place. I want family unity. I
want normal diplomatic relations, which four years ago
we seemed to be headed into, which would have helped
to ease hunger. I feel like it’s important, even so many
years later, for people in the U.S. to understand why the
rafters left and that that situation could be reversed: Peo-
ple could be leaving the U.S. on rafts. If there’s ever a year
when we can believe that anything can happen, it’s now—
and that’s why we need compassion.

I was fascinated to learn about the singing dogs—
wouldn’t it be wonderful if some of them really had sur-
vived! How did Paz come to have a voice in the novel?
Singing dogs were the indigenous dogs in the time of the
Tainos, and the Spanish priests who went with the con-
quistadores wrote about the dogs who sing instead of
barking. The voice of the dog was a way to portray history.
During the time of hunger in the ‘90s, cats and dogs were
very hard to feed—people didn’t have extra food for pets.
So, for there to be this dog in a story that the teenagers
want so badly, for me that was a reminder of hope. I want-
ed to have these two young people not be alone. Also, it
represents the senses that are used for survival—the dog
helps them find food by tracking. When we really need
food, people turn to their very basic instincts. None of
us can say, Oh, no, I wouldn’t buy illegal food. I wouldn’t just
swallow things out of the ocean without knowing what they are.
Yes, you would.

On top of the starvation, there is pain that comes from
the divisions that harsh government policies created
between people. Liana and Amado face ordinary teen-
age relationship difficulties as well as life-or-death
questions around trust and risk.
Whenever you have a national government that’s au-
thoritarian, there’s censorship, silencing, fear, and dis-
trust, even within families. The government wanted to
keep track of every single movement by every single per-
son. There are neighborhood committees to report [on]
this. It’s something that I hadn’t wanted to write about a
lot because I’m seeking unity—and yet, it’s part of real-
ity. The people who left on rafts left for both reasons, for
food and for freedom of expression.

You’ve been writing for young readers for some time.
Do you have any thoughts about where we are now
with young people’s literature?

I think there are some wonderful trends. I love the way
verse novels have been accepted. I love the success of so
many poets—Kwame Alexander, Jacqueline Woodson,
Jason Reynolds—so many people have skyrocketed to
fame and popularity, and nobody says anymore, Oh, kids
don’t like poetry. The Poet Slave of Cuba [Engle’s verse bio-
graphy of Juan Francisco Manzano] was published in 2006,
but verse novels were kind of a poor stepchild of the pub-
lishing industry.

When I was named Young People’s Poet Laureate in
2017, people would walk up to me and say, I don’t like po-
etry. Now you’re this evangelist for poetry, don’t make me read
it. These were adults; that’s not what the kids were doing.
The kids like an uncrowded page; that’s inviting. Teenagers
write poetry. A wonderful thing that I learned going
to schools was that if I read a poem, they’d pull one out
of their pocket and read one to me, too. And they weren’t
writing it because I was there, they were writing poetry
anyway. Seeing the young poet [Amanda Gorman] at the
Super Bowl? These kinds of things wouldn’t have been
likely to happen 10 or 15 years ago.

I love the way translations are being offered by the
publishers: Most of my newer books are published either
in simultaneous translations or a year later at the most.
I felt like [before] if you walked into a bookstore, the only
books in Spanish were translations of English bestsellers
written by non-Latino people, whereas now most Latinx
authors can get our books in both languages, and that
means so much for family literacy. That’s fantastic, that a
child and a grandparent could read the same book, each
in the language they’re most comfortable with, and dis-
cuss it.

Your Heart, My Sky received a starred review in the Jan. 15,
2021, issue.
“Suspense, warmth, and romantic pangs.”

WORDS COMPOSED OF SEA AND SKY
George, Erica
Running Press Teens (368 pp.)
$17.99 | May 25, 2021
978-0-7624-6820-1

Two young women in different centuries balance creativity and love.

Michaela Dunn hopes to attend Winslow College of Fine Arts, the same institution as her late father, an English professor who died when she was very young. A poetry workshop weekend at the college may be the foot in the door Michaela needs. When her stepfather balks at the workshop’s exorbitant enrollment fee, Michaela pins her hopes on winning a local poetry competition hosted by Winslow, one revolving around the town’s fabled whaler-poet Capt. Benjamin Churchill. In researching the captain’s life, Michaela discovers the journal of Leta Townsend, his would-be lover. The novel toggles between Leta in 1862 and Michaela in the present day as they balance their artistic ambitions against engaging love triangles. That’s right, there are two plucky heroines and four handsome hunks in this sweeping romance—and the author successfully juggles them all. The narrative effectively balances big, swoonworthy moments against smart character work, giving characters just enough shading and fleshing out the nooks and crannies of the sleepy Massachusetts town. The dual narratives bounce off each other well, handing off storylines at just the right moment to create suspense, warmth, and romantic pangs. Michaela, Leta, and their romantic suitors are all presumed White.

An effective two-for-one romance. (Romance. 12-18)
cultural differences, and a serious blunder at the Japanese prime minister’s wedding take their toll. While the action-packed plot keeps pages turning, inconsistencies in Izumi’s voice are distracting, and her character development lacks cohesion. More slow-building tension would have given her romantic encounters with Akio a bigger payoff. However, the novel hits its stride in the second half as Izumi returns to the States and focuses on her personal growth and evolving relationships with each of her parents, developments that are thoughtfully fleshed out.

This royal romp comes together for a strong finish. (Fiction. 14-18)

SIXTEEN SCANDALS
Jordan, Sophie
HMH Books (256 pp.)
$17.99 | May 25, 2021
978-0-358-20621-7

A young woman in Regency London finds her place in society through a chance encounter.

It’s 1821, and Primrose Ainsworth has just turned 16, but her prospects of improving her boring life are dim. As the youngest of four sisters in a modestly comfortable family, pale, freckled, redhead Prim is in turn reviled and ignored by her siblings and her ambitious mother, whose one desire is to marry off her daughters to rich suitors. Prim is abandoned at home on her birthday when her mother and sisters venture to Bond Street for an expensive shopping trip. One benefit of this situation is that Prim is left to her own devices—so when she chooses to join light-brown–skinned, black-haired Olympia
Zaher, her sophisticated, glamorous friend, on a nocturnal adventure to that den of iniquity Vauxhall Gardens, no one is watching. Prim's mother disapproves of the Zahers, mother and daughter, whom she regards with suspicion as foreigners from Andalusia. Armed with masks for disguise and adventurous attitudes, the two girls head for the forbidden playground. Exciting chases and near misses abound as Prim is dramatically rescued from several scrapes by a mysterious and exceedingly handsome stranger. Prim's feminist spirit and determination to rise above her station will resonate with modern readers who feel trapped in difficult family situations.

“Cinderella” meets Pride and Prejudice, and the result is a delight. (Historical romance. 14-18)

WHEN THE WORLD WAS OURS
Kessler, Liz
Aladdin (352 pp.)
$18.99 | May 18, 2021
978-1-5344-9965-2

Three Austrian children experience the ravages of World War II. On Leo Grunberg’s ninth birthday in 1936, he and his two best friends, Elsa and Max, celebrate by riding Vienna’s Ferris wheel. Leo collides with English tourists, leading to a friendly connection that later proves lifesaving when the couple sponsor visas for Leo and his mother, Mr. Grunberg is tragically sent to Dachau and then Auschwitz. Elsa, whose family, like Leo’s, is Jewish, moves to Prague to escape growing dangers in Austria, but their new lives are shortly upended: Elsa is unable to escape via the Kindertransport, and she is sent with her family to Auschwitz. Christian Max’s father joins the Nazi Party and forbids him to spend time with Jewish friends; initially resentful, Max ultimately joins the Hitler Youth. His father is assigned to work at Dachau and later Auschwitz—where Max becomes a guard—and Max crosses paths with Mr. Grunberg in both locations, each time shunning the man who treated him so kindly. He also meets Elsa in an unforgettable dramatic scene in which he must confront his own humanity. These coincidences may strain credibility, but this sometimes-horrific, sometimes-sentimental page-turner exposes readers to the entire arc of the Holocaust. A note explains how the author’s father’s family escaped the Nazis after meeting a British couple in a similar manner to that portrayed in the book.

Readers viscerally experience the Holocaust in this gripping novel. (resources, further reading) (Historical fiction. 12-18)

SWITCH
King, A.S.
Dutton (240 pp.)
$17.99 | May 11, 2021
978-0-525-55551-3

Printz Award winner King returns with another surrealist masterpiece. On June 23, 2020, the world became caught in “a fold in time and space.” For the past nine months, the United States has enacted Solution Time and been using N3WCLOCK to keep some semblance of normality. High school javelin star Truda Becker isn’t satisfied with these patched-together efforts, though, and she is determined to use psychology to find the “Real Solution.” While she puzzles over the irregularities of time and their grander meaning, Truda is also weighed down by irregularities in her home life. Her father, an immigrant from an unspecified country, spends his days obsessively building and rebuilding room-sized plywood boxes, making a disorienting warren of their family home. Her “clairvoyant” mother comes and goes, her brother is acting jumpy and suspicious, and the shadow of Truda’s abusive sister casts a pall over them all. Truda is determined: “By the end of the month, I will figure out how to make people give a shit about other people. I still have no idea how I’ll do this because I live in a house where emergencies are cubed like snack cheese and giving an actual shit has been put on hold.” Intentionally perplexing, the book carefully doles out clues to reveal story. For readers weighing with another surrealist masterpiece. On June 23, 2020, the world became caught in “a fold in time and space.” For the past nine months, the United States has enacted Solution Time and been using N3WCLOCK to keep some semblance of normality. High school javelin star Truda Becker isn’t satisfied with these patched-together efforts, though, and she is determined to use psychology to find the “Real Solution.” While she puzzles over the irregularities of time and their grander meaning, Truda is also weighed down by irregularities in her home life. Her father, an immigrant from an unspecified country, spends his days obsessively building and rebuilding room-sized plywood boxes, making a disorienting warren of their family home. Her “clairvoyant” mother comes and goes, her brother is acting jumpy and suspicious, and the shadow of Truda’s abusive sister casts a pall over them all. Truda is determined: “By the end of the month, I will figure out how to make people give a shit about other people. I still have no idea how I’ll do this because I live in a house where emergencies are cubed like snack cheese and giving an actual shit has been put on hold.” Intentionally perplexing, the book carefully doles out clues to reveal story.

Timely and timeless. (Speculative fiction. 14-18)

SHADOWS OVER LONDON
Klaver, Christian
CamCat Books (320 pp.)
$24.99 | May 25, 2021
978-0-7443-0376-6
Series: Empire of the House of Thorns, 1

A teen girl must save London from a Faerie invasion. In an alternate Victorian era-esque England lives 15-year-old Justice Kasric. Unlike her properly behaved older sister, Faith, Justice longs for the excitement of sea life, intrigued by her often absent merchant father, Rachek. One fateful night, the entire Kasric clan is swept up and taken to Stormholt, a remote and mysterious estate that is guarded by magical cats. Striving to understand what is happening, Justice begins to piece together the fact that her family harbors many secrets and that no one is exactly who they seem. She finds herself traversing worlds, from smog-laden London to the high seas, trying to stave off an impending Faerie war while also struggling
against the gender constraints of her time. Klaver’s worldbuilding is immersive and bursting with magic—including dragons, Goblins, ghosts, and zombie dogs, to name a few—but never feels overstuffed due to the thrilling pace. Those who appreciate period fantasies free of romantic intrigue will revel as deeply layered family secrets are revealed (although later in the book a flirtation is teased). With a decidedly Gothic feel of swirling fog and damp old estates, this first volume in a proposed series offers satisfying answers to some questions but leaves enough threads dangling to tantalize further adventures. Human characters default to White.

An enchanting and enthralling series opener. (Fantasy. 12-18)

FROM LITTLE TOKYO, WITH LOVE
Kuhn, Sarah
Viking (432 pp.)
$18.99 | May 11, 2021
978-0-593-32748-7

Rika sets out to find the truth about her mother. Rika Rakuyama has never felt like she wholly belonged anywhere. Being half Japanese and half White, Rika doesn’t feel completely accepted in Los Angeles’ Little Tokyo, where tradition is everything. Her mother’s sister took her in when her teenage mom died, and now Rika lives with Auntie Suzy and her wife, Auntie Och. Rika is not #TeamPrincess like her cousins; she feels full of rage like a nure-onna or mythological Japanese snake-woman...until she meets popular rom-com actress Grace Kimura in a bizarre encounter and becomes convinced that Grace is actually her long-lost mother. With the help of cute Chinese Filipino rising star Hank Chen, Rika sets off on a whirlwind adventure through Los Angeles, hoping to learn more about her mother; the book highlights the magic of various locations around the city. As she and Hank spend more time together and unravel the truth, Rika gets drawn into the life she could have, but she struggles to open up fully to her own happy ending. Rika and other characters struggle with who they are because people gossip about and comment on their race, sexuality (Rika’s cousin Belle is pansexual), and mental health and judge them according to ethnic stereotypes. Written like a modern fairy tale, this is a thoughtful exploration of finding one’s full identity and sense of place and community.

A beautiful and entertaining blend of family, romance, and self-discovery. (Fiction. 14-18)

THE LIFE AND DEATHS OF FRANKIE D.
Nelson, Colleen
Dundurn (264 pp.)
$12.99 paper | May 11, 2021
978-1-4597-4758-6

A teen’s troubled past links her to a freak show performer from the 1920s. Frankie Doe doesn’t remember anything about how she wound up in foster care, but she remembers her abusive foster homes all too well. Luckily, her current foster mother, Kris, is supportive, helping her to address her anger and encouraging her art. Friends are another story. To conceal lamellar ichthyosis, a genetic disorder that leaves her skin cracked and peeling, Frankie wears heavy goth makeup, which also conveniently keeps anyone from getting too close. When, in her dreams, she suddenly becomes Frances—aka Alligator Girl, a freak show performer who shared her disorder—she discovers that Frances’ past and her own share disturbing similarities. And when, to her horror, an eerily familiar man invites Frankie to join his circus, she’s plunged into a nightmare
“Daring escapes, taut twists and turns, and creepy tunnels.”

**THE BLOCK**

**TREMENDOUS THINGS**

Nielsen, Susin

Wendy Lamb/Random (272 pp.)

$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | May 25, 2021
978-1-5247-6839-3 PLB

A fat teen gains self-confidence in a quest to get the girl.

Fourteen-year-old Wilbur Alberto Nuñez-Knopf is still trying to recover from his “Number One Defining Moment.” Upon entering seventh grade after being home-schooled, Wil’s deeply embarrassing time-capsule letter was found and shared by a classmate on social media. Now dubbed “Wank” by peers, the straight, White Toronto teen is a social pariah. Wil’s luck starts to change when Charlie, a beautiful French exchange student, is placed at his house for the week. Wil’s feelings for Charlie come fast, but class bully Tyler (the “Chris Hemsworth” to Wil’s “Napoleon Dynamite”) hooks up with her instead. In an attempt to avoid being friend-zoned yet again when he visits Charlie in class, two-mom family is welcome, and the tone is mostly light and fun. However, many of the characters—unfortunately especially Charlie—lack sufficient depth to move beyond trope territory. Though body-shaming is often called out and at least one fat character is full of confidence and self-acceptance, the repeated use of “some pig” (from Charlotte’s Web) as an affirmation and the intense emphasis on size toe the line between reclamation and fatphobic objectification. There is some ethnic diversity in secondary characters.

Fills a need for representation—but not entirely successfully. (Fiction. 12-18)

**THE BLOCK**

Oliver, Ben

Chicken House/Scholastic (368 pp.)

$11.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-338-58933-7
Series: Loop Trilogy, 2

This second novel in the Loop Trilogy continues the saga of teens battling a controlling, corrupt world government in a dystopian future.

In the opening scenes of this second installment, Luka is again the first-person narrator, reminding readers of key events from the series starter. It’s not long, however, before readers are questioning reality along with him. Oliver carries on with what he did best in The Loop (2020)—writing about daring escapes, taut twists and turns, characters making tough decisions, and, of course, creepy tunnels with just as much intensity as before. First up is an escape from the Block, an energy-harvesting prison even worse than the Loop that leaves batteries like Luka in periods of paralysis. Regrouping with some of his ethnically diverse rebel friends, the brown-skinned teen continues his mission to take down Happy, the government’s operating system. Rescuing lost friends, avoiding Mosquito drones (reminiscent of The Hunger Games’ tracker jacker), and confronting the arch nemesis who’s still bent on killing him, Luka’s course is, once again, nonstop adventure. This time Oliver interjects light humor with an old children’s toy–turned–scrambler drone and offers another side of AI technology. While some second novels dip or stall, this volume aptly does its job, building background knowledge for the series, creating more tension, and setting up a riveting cliffhanger for the series conclusion.

Readers will be left begging for the final installment. (Dystopian. 14-18)

**ENDURING FREEDOM**

Reedy, Trent & Arash, Jerwad

Algonquin (352 pp.)

$17.95 | May 18, 2021
978-1-64375-040-8

A dual-perspective narrative detailing the events of Operation Enduring Freedom through the eyes of an Afghan teen and a young American soldier.

In the days leading up to 9/11, 16-year-old Baheer and his family lived in fear of the Taliban and their strict laws. Joe Killian, a high school senior and Iowa Army National Guard enlistee, is angered by the al-Qaeda attacks and eager for revenge. So he is disappointed to learn that his unit is in fact tasked with the rehabilitation of Afghanistan. Meanwhile, studious Baheer is optimistic as he approaches the U.S. soldiers in hopes of improving his English and bettering his country with these new allies. Their first encounter does not go well, but Baheer and Joe over time...
develop a friendship as they help each other learn and dismantle prejudices. Rather than attempting to be a sociopolitical history, this is an intensely personal story inspired by a real-life friendship: The authors, who met in the same way as the protagonists, blend their individual perspectives and ideologies into a cohesive narrative. Though there are some issues with pacing, the book overall does a solid job of showing the impact of their bond while acknowledging that others on both sides held differing views. The message of education as a vehicle for progress and dismantling hatred is one that will strike a chord with readers.

A touching tale of understanding and friendship. (authors’ notes) (Historical fiction. 13-18)

LAST CHANCE BOOKS

Rodkey, Kelsey
HarperTeen (368 pp.)
$17.99 | May 18, 2021
978-0-06-299446-2

This enemies-to-lovers romance includes a business rivalry, a deadbeat mom, and a last-gasp attempt to save a family store.

Recent high school graduate Madeline Moore has grown up working at Books & Moore, her family’s bookstore, and she would love nothing more than to take over running it after college. She and Benny, her half brother, have been raised in Pennsylvania by their maternal aunt, Astrid, and Benny’s father, Sterling, who lives in the area. Astrid manages the bookstore while the teens’ flaky mother is off trying to become an actress in California. The store’s livelihood is threatened when chain bookstore Prologue opens up across the street, quickly becoming Madeline’s nemesis. After an encounter with maddeningly attractive local boy Jasper Hamada leaves Madeline swooning, she discovers that his family owns Prologue, and he works there—which leads to a series of sabotaging pranks between the two. Madeline’s world collapses after her aunt announces that due to financial problems, the store is going to close at the end of the summer—and that her mom is moving back. The plot moves along briskly with romantic tension, sex-positive moments, comedic beats, and Madeline’s determination to save the store. Madeline has been bullied for her weight and expresses internalized fatphobia. She, her aunt, and her mother are cued as White; Benny has brown skin (he and Sterling are of indeterminate ethnicity) and Jasper is Japanese American.

A solid rom-com. (Romance. 14-18)

NOT MY PROBLEM

Smyth, Ciara
HarperTeen (368 pp.)
$17.99 | May 25, 2021
978-0-06-295714-6

Sixteen-year-old Irish student Aideen Cleary faces some big obstacles. After walking in on perfectionist classmate Meabh Kowalska, daughter of the school principal, crying in the toilets, Aideen gets roped into a drastic plan to help her fix her problems. Aided by Kavi Thakrar, a witness to Aideen’s pushing Meabh down the stairs—part of their harebrained scheme—Aideen soon finds herself running a favor-for-favor business for the student body. She silently struggles with her own home life while solving the issues of others to cope with her feelings of helplessness. Smyth paints a snapshot of someone who appears to have everything sorted but on the inside is falling apart at the seams. Aideen begins somewhat rough at the edges and soon becomes a character readers can easily root for: Between her mother’s drinking problem and her own failing grades, Aideen deals with issues faced by many young people. A spark of emotional authenticity runs throughout, making the narrative engaging and enjoyable. The language used is very Irish, featuring sentence structures and colloquialisms that set the cultural scene in a completely natural way. Aideen and Meabh are both lesbian, and while Aideen mentions experiencing some homophobia in the past, it is not the focus of the story; ethnic diversity is similarly part of the background texture.

A noteworthy take on vulnerability and seeking help that doesn’t offer platitudes. (Fiction. 13-18)

ON THE HOOK

Stork, Francisco X.
Scholastic (256 pp.)
$17.99 | May 18, 2021
978-1-338-69215-0

Sixteen-year-old Hector confronts notions of masculinity, violence, and revenge.

Mexican American Hector lives a quiet yet fulfilling life in El Paso, Texas. He’s the star of his high school’s chess team; enjoys spending free time with his best friend, Az; and just won an essay contest about the pursuit of happiness. But his circumstances begin to shift when Joey, the younger brother of a local gang member and drug dealer, singles Hector out with threats and an act of disturbing violence. Hector—in addition to a volatile situation involving an ex-girlfriend of Joey’s brother—eventually culminates in a violent collision that costs Hector tremendously. The latter two-thirds of the novel focus on Hector’s and Joey’s time at a reformatory school in San Antonio that they’re both mandated
to attend. There, Hector grapples with his chaotic mental state as he fantasizes about enacting revenge on those who wronged him and struggles to adapt to new challenges. Hector is an expertly crafted protagonist, roiling with guilt, grief, and a thirst for violence that threatens to consume him if he doesn't shift his perspective. What starts as a quiet drama quickly escalates to a potent, fiery story while remaining a deep meditation about cycles of violence.

A staggering and fearless book. (author's note) (Fiction. 14-18)

IN THE RAVENOUS DARK
Strickland, A.M.
Imprint (400 pp.)
$18.99 | May 18, 2021
978-1-250-77660-0

A tale of magic, revenge, and death.
Rovan lost her father, a user of blood magic, when she was 7, on the day that the king's bloodmages stormed her house. Twelve years later, she accidentally reveals her inherited magical power by saving her friend's life in the middle of the town center. Taken into custody for being unregistered, Rovan unwillingly suffers a ceremony that is deemed mandatory for all bloodmages—attachment to a shade, who acts more like a personal jailer than guardian. Rovan is valuable as a potential source of magic, so she's forced to associate with the royal family, soon to an intolerable degree. Between enduring one injury after another, she seeks to finish her father's work by breaking her bonds and exposing the king's unsavory secrets. Rovan is a tenacious spitfire who fights for freedom and vengeance by any means necessary. Strickland's worldbuilding is grand; ancient Greece inspires the city's culture, and the mechanics of blood magic parallel the diametrically opposed death magic in interesting ways. Plus, there's a new take on a supernatural creature that slides into the story toward the end. Characters in this fantasy world have a range of skin tones and appearances that include violet and silver eyes as well as green and dark blue hair. Several queer identities are represented, including nonbinary, asexual, and polyamorous. Rovan is light-skinned and attracted to multiple genders.

Dauntless and passionate. (family tree) (Fantasy. 15-adult)

MADE IN KOREA
Suk, Sarah
Simon & Schuster (336 pp.)
$19.99 | May 18, 2021
978-1-5344-7437-6

A rivalry between two entrepreneurial teens becomes a team effort that enables them to fulfill their aspirations.
Korean American high school senior Valerie Kwon runs a wildly popular K-beauty business at school with the help of her cousin, Charlie Song. But when new student Wes Jung enters the picture, he inadvertently becomes a rival when he brings to school K-pop–branded lip balm; he soon realizes that there's a market for the branded merchandise he has access to through his advertising executive mom. A wager ensues: Whoever makes the most money during the school year gets both businesses' earnings. Both Valerie and Wes feel unseen at home. Valerie's parents don't take her passion for business seriously, instead constantly negatively comparing her to her older sister, Samantha. Valerie dreams of earning enough to take her beloved grandmother to Paris. Wes, a dedicated jazz saxophonist, plans to use his earnings to attend music school despite his parents' disapproval of this seemingly impractical career plan. Over the course of the competition, the two fall for one another and also make progress in addressing their innermost dreams with their families. The alternating first-person narration moves skillfully between Valerie and Wes, and peripheral characters are well rounded and realistically portrayed. Details about contemporary Korean American life and culture ring true, adding texture to the story.

An engaging, fast-paced romance between two teens longing for acceptance. (Romance. 13-18)

SHIPPED
Tate, Meredith
Putnam (368 pp.)
$17.99 | May 18, 2021
978-1-984813-52-7

Stella Greene needs to be valedictorian. She's been working toward it for what seems like forever. The scholarship money that comes along with the title would allow her to be the first person in her family ever to attend college. Stella would have it in the bag already if it weren't for Wesley Clarke, her rich, insufferable classmate who, despite being terrible in AP Biology, seems to be neck and neck with her the whole way. When Stella isn't color-coding her to-do list, engaging in (many) extracurricular activities, or working at an ice cream parlor, she finds solace in rewatching her favorite TV show, Warship Seven, which was canceled after one season, and writing fan fiction. When user CERanger11 sends her a direct message on the Warship Seven forum, Stella, who has encountered her share of
sexist jerks in the fandom, hesitates but decides to give him the benefit of the doubt. Wesley Clarke is also a Warshipper. And when he DMs CaptainJillsBFF22, he has no idea that she's his real-life rival, Stella. Through their online conversations, with their true identities safely hidden, the two open up about personal challenges—Stella's family's grinding poverty and the toxic environment in Wesley's home. Full of pranks, intrigue, angst, and romance, this is a quick and delightful read that will have nerds across all fandoms turning pages—and shipping Wesley/Stella from the start. Main characters are White.

**A delicious and nerdy romance.** *(Romance. 13-18)*

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**THE OTHER SIDE OF PERFECT**

_Tork, Mariko_

Poppy/Little, Brown (336 pp.)

$17.99 | May 11, 2021

978-0-316-70340-6

An injured teenage ballerina falls in love while reexamining the cultural and racial context of her beloved art.

The decade Alina spent honing her ballet artistry is demolished in a split second when her leg is shattered in an accident. Struggling with depression, anxiety, and jealousy, she hides away from the world. When Alina is cast in the high school production of _Singin’ in the Rain_, she finds herself on a roller coaster of emotions as she navigates new friendships; a potential boyfriend in the charmingly tanned, black-haired star; and the prospect of dancing again. Can Alina find the internal strength and external support to confront the systemic racism of ballet and look to the future? Rom-com elements create a familiar framework for a fresh story exploring the tension between racist traditions and culturally authentic representation in the arts. Half Japanese and half White, Alina works through her complex feelings about being gaslit into dancing the problematic Chinese Tea solo in _The Nutcracker_ for so many years while her best friend, Colleen, who is Black, was repeatedly given the Arabian Coffee role—and less talented White dancers got better parts. Alina’s compelling, realistic journey focuses on strategies to manage trauma and mental health with the goal of moving forward even when there are setbacks. The writing is engaging, sentimental moments will please romance lovers, and the hopeful, yet realistic, ending is satisfying.

**A love story with a refreshing focus on confronting systemic racism.** *(Fiction. 12-18)*

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**DON’T BREATHE A WORD**

_Taylor, Jordyn_

HarperTeen (352 pp.)

$17.99 | May 18, 2021

978-0-06-303888-2

A decades-old secret comes to light at an elite boarding school.

In 1962, Hardwick Preparatory Academy “lifer” Connie Abbott is, like many Americans, worried about the bomb. The last thing she wants to do is pretend there has been a nuclear attack, but when her crush suggests she join five other students in an experiment to test the school’s fallout shelter, she can’t say no. Things go sideways when the participants discover the experiment has a hidden, sinister purpose (think McCarthyism meets Stanley Milgram’s famous psychological experiment). In the present, high school junior Eva Storm has been at Hardwick for a week and is eager to make friends. Her chance to fit in comes when she’s recruited to join the Fives, Hardwick’s secret society. As she goes through the trials (i.e., hazing), she finds out that only five of the six students who went into the shelter in 1962 came out alive and that students are still forbidden from talking about it. The story grows in intensity from there, as Eva’s and Connie’s first-person narratives collide, the events of 1962 come to a boil, and Eva makes an unsettling discovery about what transpired all those years ago. Personalitywise, the girls are opposites: Eva is an upbeat extrovert while Connie is an anxious introvert. Both are likable, though a bit misguided at times, but they each possess a strong sense of right and wrong. Eva and Connie are assumed White.

An _expertly plotted boarding school mystery._ *(Mystery. 14-18)*
A Tennessee whiskey distiller puts her sleuth hat on again in this third installment of a mystery series.

Notchey Creek has seen a lot of drama for a little Appalachian town, and 26-year-old whiskey distiller Harley Henrickson has been in the thick of it, investigating murders and solving mysteries while inventing cocktails. Now, with Valentine’s Day celebrations afoot, several kinds of trouble are stirring up. Harley discovers a burned-out car with a body inside; the sheriff thinks it’s an accidental death, but she’s not so sure. Other conflicts include blackmail, romantic rivalries, and a messy divorce between Ryan and Jessica Westlake, two of the town’s wealthiest residents. Then there’s Ryan’s rumored affair with Bethany Carmichael, 26, who writes devastating reviews of local establishments for the Notchey Creek Telephone, a newspaper owned by Ryan. Jane Merriman blames her husband’s fatal stroke on Bethany’s scathing column, which led to their restaurant’s failure. The latest victims of Bethany’s vitriol are Harley’s best friend, Tina Rizchek, also 26, and her bakery/cafe, Tina’s Treats. When Bethany dies from eating a poisoned cupcake, Tina is the chief suspect—but given the reviewer’s reputation, not the only one. Although it’s a tangled web, Harley is the woman to unravel it. In her latest series entry, Andrews again does a fine job of keeping the mystery’s solution in suspense until the end while offering a charmingly folksy setting and eccentric characters. Harley’s great-uncle and his friend, for example, hope to attract bidders at a bachelor auction by highlighting such skills as “Can pee the alphabet in snow.”

The more colorful aspects of Harley’s life (like her fashionista pet pig) are given depth by her intelligent, determined sleuthing as well as romantic yearnings complicated by self-doubts from a painful childhood.

Another twisty, entertaining entry in this cozy series featuring an appealing investigator.
A girl wonders what she should do with a dollar bill in this picture book.

After receiving her first dollar, Madison ponders her options. Should she save, spend, donate, or invest? The girl, who has brown eyes, dark skin, and dark hair, considers purchasing toys or candy and also contemplates investing or saving. She weighs giving “away 25 cents because she feels so blessed” and thinks about surprising a friend with a gift or donating to a neighbor. Ultimately, the story leaves Madison’s final decision open-ended. Beckford provides space for readers to offer their opinions (“Tell us how you would spend YOUR dollar!”) and implores them to treat money sensibly. Using an interactive format, the enjoyable book introduces ideas of financial responsibility in a simple, kid-friendly way. The bold, graphic, uncredited illustrations supplement Madison’s thoughts. Some show the girl as she ruminates about spending her money, including at a toy store. Many feature thematic elements, like an image depicting coin jars labeled “save, spend, invest, give.” Several provide information. For instance, Madison looks at a paper titled “Maddie’s Savings Plan” that lists: “Spend 50 cents”; “Save 25 cents”; “Give 25 cents.” Other images are fun and creative; when the text explains that Madison’s money gives her “major buying power,” she is dressed as a superhero. The work includes illustrations of bills and coins for readers to print out and color.

Emphasizing financial responsibility, this engaging tale will prompt useful discussions between parents and children.

In the Caymans, she’s involved in another car accident at night; a strange man at the scene tells her and her stepsister that their vehicle hit a dog that then ran away. The next day, though, Natalie finds that her bumper, which had been spotted with blood, is now mysteriously clean. The mystery deepens when, upon her return to her home in Boston, she receives an anonymous email that reads, “You were lied to about that night. Have you asked your sister about the blood on the car? The guy who was there knows.”

She soon meets Jeremy Sonnenberg, an investigative reporter writing a book about the happiness movement, and he helps her unravel a decades-old mystery. Bokat is an evocative wordsmith—as when she describes “sadness coating [Natalie] like oil”—and she has crafted a sympathetic heroine as her main character. Over the course of the novel, the author presents a psychologically nuanced portrait of a woman whose family regards her as “the sensitive one”; for example, when sparks fly between Natalie and Jeremy, she immediately wonders “if he was just another man who would disappoint her.” The book also reveals Natalie’s struggle not to be defined by her childhood trauma. Readers follow the protagonist as she works to untangle a constrictor knot of lies and wonders if she can have faith in people she’s always trusted.

A compulsively readable mystery and character study.
INDIE | David Rapp

A Doc’s Life

Readers are endlessly fascinated by the memoirs of medical professionals, which often tell high-stakes tales of life and death. They also illuminate the lives of the doctors themselves, which can take compelling twists and turns. Here are three intriguing examples reviewed by Kirkus Indie:

A Rural Surgeon (2020) is the third memoir by English-born physician John Case. In it, he tells of how he and his family immigrated to Alberta, where he soon had a thriving surgical practice, “largely due to heavy industry and icy roads,” as Kirkus’ reviewer notes; this results in some graphic passages, as one might expect in a surgeon’s story. But our review also describes it as an “amusing and genuine account” that portrays Case’s Canadian home as “a serene, snowy place with good people.”

Kyle Ver Steeg’s The Making of a Cowboy Doctor (2020) relates the distinctly American tale of an Iowa surgeon in private practice who wears “cowboy attire” as a symbol of the fact that he’s his own boss. His success came after lots of work as a medical student in Illinois, a surgery intern in Iowa, and a medical resident in Texas. Along with his recollections, Ver Steeg presents readers with a “laconic yet admirably forthright dissection of the health care system,” as Kirkus’ review puts it.

In Life Through the Lens of a Doctor Birder (2019), John H. Fitchen writes about his path to a career in academic medicine, which he describes as a “demanding profession comprised of teaching, research, and clinical activities.” Along the way, he was an Air Force flight surgeon and a hematology/oncology fellow at UCLA. Fitchen also relates how he became an avid, world-traveling bird-watcher. Kirkus’ review calls the book an “informative, unusual, occasionally challenging, and generally amiable account by a physician and nature lover.”

David Rapp is the senior Indie editor.

trees: “They have stretch marks and still, here they are standing tall and breathing.” The craft of poetry, too, offers a power beyond the limitations of cultural expectations, as in the optimistic final piece, “Second Tongue”: “It is good, the sun kept saying / until the poem put on her sunglasses / and went to work.”

A thoughtful and bracing collection reflective of hard-won insights.

VICARIOUS
Bruno, Rhett C.
Aethon Books (416 pp.)
978-1-949890-72-3

Bruno’s SF novel follows the struggling inhabitants of a dilapidated space ark who are unwitting players in a cruel, hidden-camera reality show.

In the year 2450, the Ignis is an aging, ramshackle spaceship fashioned from an asteroid and presumably carrying approximately 10,000 refugees from a destroyed Earth to a colony world in the Tau Ceti star system. Every fragile resource, including birth, is highly regulated, so it’s impressive that a girl called Mission, conceived outside regulations and genetic assignments, survives to adulthood and blends in. There’s a bigger secret, however: Humankind, back on Earth, is still around. Although beset by floods, millions on 25th-century “High Earth” enjoy an idyllic lifestyle featuring robots, virtual-reality technology, and other media entertainment. The Ignis, it turns out, is still in orbit around Earth, providing a continuous hidden-camera feed for Ignis: Live, a 50-year-old reality TV show transmitting the real-time lives (and deaths) of the ship’s desperate inhabitants, including Mission. Asher Reinhart, chief director of content for the show, has watched Mission’s struggles and developed a strong emotional attachment to her. When he learns that a disaster is planned for the ship to boost sagging viewership, he intervenes to protect Mission from harm. This transgression backfires, putting Mission in even more danger and sending Asher into the anarchic Outskirts zone. Bruno is not the first, nor will he be the last, SF author to address reality television, but he mines rich veins of meaning in this stand-alone work. He also doesn’t skimp on the action, which includes grotesque cyborgs, but he also instills deep thought into his premise. There are familiar themes regarding the greed and ego of media elite and the fickle flukiness of celebrity, but the heart of the tale is an exploration of the contrast between the tech-saturated lifestyles of High Earth’s people and the hardscrabble ordeals that the Ignis’ courageous inhabitants encounter. The author also scores points for not aping the landmark twist of Daniel F. Galouye’s 1964 virtual-reality novel Simulacron-3, which also involved puppet masters monitoring a synthetic society.

This perceptive take on the reality TV-in-the-future premise deserves boffo ratings.
“This informative introduction to tai chi combines extensive discussions of principles with hands-on techniques.”

TAI CHI CONCEPTS AND EXPERIMENTS

Search for Love
Chelsea, Lydia
Self (48 pp.)
$12.99 paper | $2.99 e-book
Dec. 12, 2020
979-8-58-249427-0

A young woman struggles to open herself up to love in this contemporary romance.

Melody Holm enjoyed hiking until her fiance, Scott Grainger, fell to his death on a climb. Four years later, she’s finally ready to get back on the trail. Although she fears the idea of falling for another climber, fate, of course, drops a handsome hiker in her path. Parker owns a search-and-rescue business and saves Melody during a SAR exercise. He’s dealing with his own relationship baggage, but something about Melody pulls at him. At first, he uses her work as a photographer to keep them connected. But the attraction is mutual, and the professional relationship morphs into a sexual one. Melody wants to keep it casual, fixating on all the reasons they just won’t work for the long haul. Parker’s big, close-knit family is a challenge for Melody, who absolutely does not want children, something she’s not sure Parker would ever accept. While Melody tries to keep him at arm’s length, Parker is just as determined to continue building connections. But life throws Melody a few curveballs, including a chance to fix things with Claudia and finally heal some old wounds. Claudia does well with character development; both Parker and Melody feel very real: flawed, complicated, and relatable. Melody’s journey is intriguing to watch, particularly her realization that she must heal the wounds of the past to build a future. As an added bonus, there are some excellent, steamy sex scenes. The biggest problem with the narrative is its length. The on-again, off-again dynamic between Parker and Melody drags on too long, and her avoidance of dealing with some rather serious issues just becomes a frustration.

An engaging look at an appealing couple who must close the book on the past.

Bad Medicine
Cooper, Geoffrey M.
Maine Authors Publishing (249 pp.)
$15.95 paper | $2.99 e-book
Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-63381-248-2

An academic scientist, assigned to resolve a research dispute, instead uncovers conspiracies and murder in Cooper’s third medical thriller in a series.

As the story opens, Brad Parker, the chair of Boston Technological Institute’s department of integrated life sciences, has been coerced by a colleague into arbitrating a tenure case at the Maine Translational Research Institute. Carolyn Gelman, who’s almost universally despised by that institution’s faculty, claims that Mark Heller, a faculty favorite with ties to the pharmaceutical industry, is attempting to undermine her work. Both candidates do research into contradictory teachings of the masters of this martial art, like the admonition to use “no strength” in practicing it, and interprets them in light of Western physics and biology: His main idea is the concept of “expansive strength,” a kind of “hydraulic pressure” in which “bodily tissues can actively expand under the action of bioelectrical stimulation.” Expansive strength, he contends, is better than ordinary strength through muscle contractions because it doesn’t create metabolic waste products or telegraph one’s intentions to attackers. He goes on to apply more physics—explained in plain English, with the math tucked away in the appendix—to tai chi problems, like the niceties of maintaining one’s balance in a pushing match. (“If an opponent A exerts a force F on me, according to Newton’s third law, I automatically exert the same force F on A in the opposite direction...In order to remain in balance, A must arrange things so that the total frictional force of the floor on his feet exerts a force that is opposite to the force I am exerting on him.”) Much of the intricate book explores tai chi’s preoccupation with an exhaustive, even eye-glazing analysis of rudimentary bodily acts, such as taking a step—“As the knee k starts to arc forward, the lower leg lags behind, swinging backward relative to the upper leg; (b) the knee stops, and the lower leg swings forward past (c) to (d); (d) the lower leg has freely swung forward into a position with the heel just touching the ground”—or sitting down. (“True T’ai Chi practitioners lower themselves slowly and first contact the chair without any commitment. Then, they mindfully transfer weight until it is safe to commit it fully.”) Physiologists may scratch their heads at Chuckrow’s notion of expansive strength, but otherwise his explication of the fundamental laws of natural motion, complete with diagrams, are written in reasonably clear, if involved, prose. Tai chi students will gain from the author a deep theoretical grounding in the discipline’s basic approach to movement along with a wealth of useful exercises to help them practice it.

This informative introduction to tai chi combines extensive discussions of principles with hands-on techniques.

Tai Chi Concepts and Experiments
Chuckrow, Robert
Manuscript (224 pp.)
$24.95 paper | $11.99 e-book
Apr. 1, 2021
978-1-99439-741-7

The mysteries of the Chinese martial art tai chi are illuminated with the help of science in this primer.

Chuckrow—the author of Tai Chi Dynamics (2008), a physicist, and a tai chi instructor—addresses the seemingly
Richmond’s case involving Russian mobsters happens to match
Does the industrial waste created by his company have anything
Brad, “You’re better than I thought you’d be. Or your FBI girl-
Carlson, a senior faculty member and one of Heller’s support-
Cooper effectively guides readers through the hard science,
dirt on five wealthy men, one of whom she plans to marry. Mark
a moody backdrop for superpowered individuals to fight crime
or RTKs….” An unknown interlocutor attempts to destroy Gel-
order to keep readers engaged: “She focused on drugs that acted
they see clues where they don’t exist or if they’re closing in on
deeper intrigues. However, the novel sometimes falls short in
other areas, such as dialogue, which occasionally lapses into the
more dubious noir conventions, as when an adversary says to
Brad, “You’re better than I thought you’d be. Or your FBI girl-
friend is.” Still, the novel also offers quite a few swerves and red
herrings to maintain tension throughout.
A noteworthy whodunit with unexpected plot twists.

“Wouldn’t you like to touch me?” she asks, knowing he’s some-
how watching her undress. Duke is thoroughly villainous in
saying, “War will never be over.” A tentacled monstrosity grants
the narrative horror bona fides, and a rooftop tryst fulfills the
inevitable Batman homage. The author’s secondary characters
shine, including Frasier Robinson, Mark’s Black best friend. In
one scene, Eliza shakes his hand and causes an “audible gasp”
from White partygoers. But stealing the show is the sustained,
high-resolution carnality of the protagonists. Rabbits seem
delay compared to Mark and Eliza, giving this entertaining tale a
striking erotic polish.
A torrid, atmospheric fantasy that satisfies on all fronts.

**A Luxury Hotelier’s Guide to Career and Leadership Success**
Dietschi, Iwan
Dietschi Press (274 pp.)
Jan. 16, 2021
978-0-9894912-5-9
978-0-9894912-6-6 paper

How to succeed in the hospitality business, as told by an international hotelier.

Essentially a hands-on career guide for anyone seeking to excel in the hotel business, this debut could not have been written by a more experienced professional. Dietschi loved hotels from the moment he stepped foot in one at age 10 in his native Switzerland. That passion eventually led to attending the prestigious Lausanne Hotel School and rising through the ranks until he became general manager at Ritz-Carlton and ultimately general manager and vice president at Marriott International. Leveraging this experience, the author generously shares his counsel and wisdom in a very readable book divided into two parts. In the first section, Dietschi recounts his own path on the way to becoming a luxury hotelier, offers a history lesson about hotels, and puts forth a grounding philosophy that could be summed up in a single sentence: “It is about how guests are made to feel.” The author writes eloquently about how to create “memorable guest experiences,” from reservations through departures and post-stays. He also addresses such important areas as “dressing and acting the part of a hotelier,” managing emotions while interacting with guests and employees, and getting started in a hospitality career. Dietschi’s expert analysis of the characteristics of the hotelier, in which he describes four specific mindsets (“Proactive,” “Guest,” “Quality,” and “Business and Entrepreneurial”), is particularly insightful; it provides a deep dive into the thought process of the consummate hotel professional. Part 2 is a treasure trove of advice for the aspiring hotelier or, for that matter, anyone contemplating a career in a customer-centric business. Here, the author introduces “Eight Principles for Excellence” that represent a playbook for success in the hospitality business, beginning with “Become Your Own Personal Brand” and ending with “Expand Your Knowledge.
“Farrell crafts an array of familiar and unfamiliar genre elements into a genuinely gripping read.”

WAGEREASY

Farrell, Tom
Self (369 pp.)
978-1-73659-320-2

A debut thriller set in the shady world of gambling in Chicago.

Farrell's novel starts off in 2018 at the scene of a gruesome crime. In a cold, abandoned Chicago factory, a small-time gambler has been found dead, with his partially burnt body hanging from a web of ropes. Private investigator Eddie O'Connell is on the scene as a guest of his Uncle Mike, a retired homicide detective whose old partner, Liz, is in charge of the murder investigation. Liz invited the O'Connells to the crime scene because she respects Uncle Mike's experience and Eddie's instincts—even though Uncle Mike left the force after an "Internal Affairs inquiry had left a sour taste in his mouth" and Eddie is basically "a bartender with a start-up PI business and a gambling debt." (Both men also sometimes do occasional investigative jobs for a shady crime boss named Rosario Burrascano.) Eddie suspects that Liz asked them to visit this crime scene because she thinks it might have an organized crime connection; he finds out, however, that he has a personal connection to the case himself: He knows the dead man—or rather, he knew him. He and Jimmy “the Leech” Golding were old comrades at the track, where they spent a lot of time betting on horses. He soon realizes, however, how little he really knew about his pal Jimmy: “We were the kings of the racetrack, and I didn't learn his full name until last night when they zipped up the body bag.”

The author smoothly and confidently deepens the story, which involves a tangle of conflicting loyalties. As the violence of the so-called Blowtorch Murders increases, Liz comes under intense pressure from her department and the FBI to make faster progress—but because of Mike's murky connection to Burrascano, she's forced to keep him at arm's length from the official investigation. Mike has his own resources in his old department ("loyalties ran deep and Mike O'Connell had helped a lot of officers on the way up the ladder"), but it's Eddie's intensifying personal connection to the crimes that forms the true backbone of the book. This can be to the book's detriment, at times, because it results in no other character being as well developed as Eddie is. However, Farrell also beautifully realizes the setting of Chicago in winter, which helps to enhance the procedural elements of the story. He skillfully unfolds the complicated tale as Eddie delves deeper into the underworld and finds out how it intersects with the impending legalization of sports betting in Illinois. The novel presents a bleak landscape of rival gangs always looking to double-cross one another as well as a memorably startling characterization of the Chicago police and court system. Eddie is just the right kind of noble but flawed hero to travel between the two realms, and Farrell crafts an array of familiar and unfamiliar genre elements into a genuinely gripping read.

A smart and fast-paced crime drama that will leave readers wanting more from this author.

IN THE MIRROR

Ferguson, Fabian E.
Illus. by Aryutova, Alisa
F.Ferguson Books (26 pp.)
978-1-7361621-0-1

Two siblings embrace their own self-worth in this picture book.

Two brown-skinned, curly-haired siblings start their day looking in the mirror. In first-person narration, each says: “I just love what I see….” Beginning with that positive self-image—that their reflections are beautiful—the rhyming text continues describing how each part of the face shows an aspect of the child’s character. A wrinkled, sweaty brow represents both fun and hard work. Between the kids’ ears are always-working brains; their eyes are filled with visions of future dreams; and their noses smell “my greatness.” While they experience setbacks—an embarrassing grade, a scraped chin—the children know they have powerful voices and walk with pride. Ferguson's smooth, rhyming stanzas employ imaginative turns of phrase and use facial features to evoke more than just the common senses associated with eyes, ears, and noses. Instead, they showcase emotions, accomplishments, and creativity to excellent effect. A few words (embarrassed, defined) may help stretch the vocabularies of emerging readers. Aryutova's cartoon illustrations are at once realistic and whimsical, deftly capturing the emotional intent of the rhymes and creating two incredibly likable protagonists. Athletics, the sciences, the visual and performing arts, and innovative play are all portrayed as virtuous parts of the lives of the protagonists, showcasing well-rounded likes and dreams sure to appeal to a wide range of readers.

From the first page to the last, this inventive, beautifully illustrated tale affirms a child’s value.

HELEN’S ORPHANS

Fritsch, Ron
Asymmetric Worlds (161 pp.)
Dec. 17, 2020
978-0-9978829-9-5

A novel offers a revisionist version of the Trojan War alternatingly narrated by Helen and a teenager in the Sparta orphanage that the beautiful woman supports.
Almost all of the characters, conveniently identified upfront, in Fritsch’s novel can be found in Homer’s The Iliad, but this is not an adventurous war tale extolling the glory of great warriors. And whereas in the traditional story the jealousies and pettiness (“the face that launched a thousand ships”), on what was to be the day of her marriage to King Menelaus, sailed away from Sparta with the Trojan Prince Paris, precipitating the 10-year sacking of Troy. Most of the children in the Sparta orphanage lost their parents in that war. Only Timon is of totally unknown parentage. As a young child, he bonded with Lukas, another orphan his age: The two were “always side by side like a pair of young oxen.” Now, they are lovers and musical soul mates, committed to spending their lives together. Singers and eventually composers, they write ballads mourning the tragic aftermath of an unnecessary war. Their love story offers the most joyous, tender, and poignant sections of the tale. Fritsch quickly sets up the back-and-forth narrative pattern for the imaginative novel, immediately leaping 18 years into the past and handing narration over to Helen. She has just arrived in Troy with Paris and asserts that she does not want to be returned to Greece. Helen is convinced that the Greek kings would never be so foolhardy as to start a war over her. Readers witness the battles through the eyes of this young woman who has allegiances to both sides but is determined to help the Trojans defend their city. Late in the tale, the author offers readers a surprise. Proficient, modern prose and dialogue, enhanced by lifestyle details, make an ancient epic especially accessible.

An enjoyable, inventive Trojan War tale with an intriguing final twist and a serious message.

OFF THE CHARTS
What I Learned From My Almost Fabulous Life in Music
Goldman, Kat
Illus. by Berkson, Nina
Sutherland House (170 pp.)
$17.95 paper | $9.99 e-book | Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-989555-32-3

Successful Canadian singer/songwriter Goldman offers a behind-the-scenes look at her life in the music industry:

The author has four albums, three Nashville competition wins, and 12 song placements in TV shows and movies under her belt, so she knows the ups and downs of the music industry—and what’s required to be a true “lifer” in the business. Goldman traces her career from her modest beginnings as a teenage singer in a Grateful Dead cover band to her songwriting successes in Toronto and New York City. She also tells the story behind her most popular 2002 song, “Annabel,” which was inspired by the memory of her grandmother, who died in 1997. Goldman’s narrative serves as a lively and entertaining compendium of music industry wisdom, with chapters featuring Goldman’s guidance on relevant topics, such as “How to Schmooze,” “Be Prepared to Improvise,” and “How Do You Know When You’ve Made It?” The author draws upon her personal journey in a relatable and heartfelt manner, and her anecdotes will educate and entertain readers in equal measure. She grounds her triumphs and tragedies in real-world advice to help readers navigate the complexities of an often mysterious industry. Goldman also pulls no punches regarding career disappointments, the pressure to succeed, and sexism in the music industry. However, readers will find hope in the example of Goldman’s success, which she achieved, in part, by being true to herself. Although the work has moments of gravity, Goldman also offers plenty of lighthearted humor: “Never mock a member of your audience…don’t yell, ‘Nice hairdo!’ at someone, I learned.” Overall, this is an excellent read for anyone interested in the nuts and bolts of the music business, with advice on everything from songwriting to promotion, but it’s also an engaging narrative about self-definition and inner strength. Lively, music-themed black-and-white illustrations by Berkson are also included.

A wild and witty musical memoir.

THE LIFE OF A MAINE LOBSTERMAN
82 Years on the Water
Gove, Andrew
Penobscot Books (194 pp.)
Nov. 16, 2020
978-0-941238-31-1

A heartfelt, rustic memoir by a sea-faring New Englander.

Gove’s posthumous memoir, which presents a homespun account of Maine fishing life. The author was born in 1930 and raised on Eagle Island by his grandparents Laura and Earl; his parents were largely absent. He attended a local one-room schoolhouse, but he got his real education from his grandfather, who’s in the fishing business. His earliest games were lessons in that trade, such as setting up small lobster trap buoys with friends and pulling them back “to get the periwinkles.” By the age of 7, Gove had his lobstering license, and by the age of 10, he was hunting ducks. In high school, he met his lifelong love, Rose, and after they married, they moved to Stonington, where they raised two daughters. Gove continued to work as a lobsterman until his retirement at the age of 89. Gove comments on shifts in the industry—grumbling, for instance, about the fact that standard cotton twine was replaced with “nylon stuff” and about how he dislikes vacationing “summer people.” The author also tells of learning to fly a plane in middle age, going on air- and water-rescue missions, and winning boat races in “Maine’s version of NASCAR” in his beloved Uncle’s UFO vessel when he was well into his 80s. The stories in this memoir were recorded by Gove and then transcribed, organized, and edited by several others, but
WHERE, OH WHERE DID THE TOOTH FAIRY GO?
Grider, Rachel
Illus. by Morrison, Summer
Red Bow Books (24 pp.)
978-1-73215-681-4

A children's picture book with rhyming verse that explains how brushing and flossing help the Tooth Fairy's mission.

Kids around the country are expecting a visit from the Tooth Fairy, but they wake up to find no gifts beneath their pillows. Where could she have gone? No one seems to know; competing theories assert that she simply forgot to come, or ran out of money, or went on vacation. But the Tooth Fairy explains the reason for her absence in a letter asking kids to "Please try to remember / I'm only one fairy" and that "When teeth are not clean / they are harder to carry," because plaque, food, and "sugar bugs" make them heavy. In response, the children vow to brush and floss regularly. In her second dental-oriented picture book, hygienist Grider links healthy habits to rewards in a kid-friendly, nonscolding way. The Tooth Fairy's rationale for good dental care makes enough sense to make the lesson stick, and it's helped by enjoyably skilful rhyme and meter. An accompanying activity section includes a word search, a missing-tooth diagram, and a chart to track brushing and flossing. The charming acrylic-paint illustrations by Morrison depict adorable kids of various skin colors and a pale-skinned fairy with blue-white hair.

A humorous tale that pleasantly encourages good dental habits.

JACK STERLING & THE SPEAR OF DESTINY
Grigg, Ray
RG Entertainment (270 pp.)
Feb. 16, 2021
978-1-73484-890-8
978-1-73484-891-5 paper

In Griggs' debut thriller, a search for a religious relic endangers a salvage-company owner and his friends.

Jack Sterling runs a salvage and boat recovery service in Florida. While on a job, he discovers a 12400 coin with a Vatican-related inscription on one side and a swastika on the other. He connects his find to rumors that Pope Pius XII aided Hitler during WWII. The coin most likely came from a lost U-boat, which contains the Spear of Destiny. This relic has changed hands throughout history and reputedly harbors great power—obtained when it was used during Jesus' crucifixion. But someone evidently doesn't want Jack to have the spear and blows up his tugboat. It's not long before nefarious groups—wanting to obtain the spear and the accompanying treasure or to shut down pope-Hitler allegations—threaten Jack and his crew, which includes his girlfriend and his bestie. The search continues, though simply staying alive quickly takes precedence. Griggs, a film director and producer, writes a story that could easily be a Hollywood script. It races from scene to scene even while developing Jack's historically rich backstory. There are ample clashes, action sequences, and neo-Nazis. Griggs creates effervescent scenes, like this view from Jack's minisub: Orange jellyfish are "floating lamps…spreading in the vacant waters, encrusting with Gove as he told his tales.

A warm and authentic chronicle of living and fishing in Maine.

OUR AUTUMN YEARS
Not Golden but Interesting
Hartz, Arthur
Illus. by Jovic, Aleksandar & Wolfe, Michael & Ramos, Heroud
Self (116 pp.)
$6.95 paper | $3.95 e-book
Oct. 18, 2020

A generously illustrated look at old age. Hartz continues his series of books, including Convenient Truths About Relationships (2019), which provide readers with friendly, jovial ruminations on aspects of everyday life. This slim volume looks at the joys, frustrations, and puckish humor of growing old. The author uses the talents of returning artists Jovic, Wolfe, and Ramos to explore various facets of old age, such as "Life With an Old Brain," "Doctors and Illness," "Old Versus Young," and even "At the End." Hartz makes the wise decision to get out of the way of the art; his narration is appealingly minimal, although memorable. The many black-and-white line drawings are occasionally supplemented with that narration (presented on dramatic, stylized scrolls to underscore the book's ruling ethos of asking readers to lighten up a bit), and it ranges from the pointed ("We don't give credit to those skilled at dying. We don't even notice them") to the philosophical ("The waking state and the sleeping state fuse with age") to the wryly humorous ("The computer substitutes nonsense words for the ones I wrote"). The characters' one-liners in the cartoons are
“A familiar but smart fantasy with a feminist orientation.”

A MAIDEN IN THE FOXCOMBE

An Action Adventure Fantasy
Kennedy, Tanya S.M.
Bowker (269 pp.)
$15.99 paper | $2.99 e-book
Dec. 28, 2020
978-1-73408-962-2

A girl who bucks the system gets more than she bargained for in this YA fantasy.

In the walled city of Spiregarden, girls are required by law to enter a maidenhouse once they reach puberty. There, they learn the womanly arts of cooking, cleaning, and entertaining, awaiting the day they will be matched to husbands. For the fiercely independent Kardin, life in Bellaro Maidenhous e is like a prison sentence. She sneaks out whenever she can—a serious breach of the rules. It isn’t long before Kardin is in danger of being deemed “unmatchable,” a designation that means banishment to the Sisterhood in a remote Cell beyond the walls. Enter the similarly hardheaded Cmdr. Lef, an officer in the Foxcombe, an elite fighting force charged with protecting Spiregarden from the monsters that stalk the world beyond its walls.

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territory in many ways, combining tropes from dystopian YA with a heavy dash of *Game of Thrones*. That said, the author’s version is well crafted and more explicitly concerned with questioning traditional gender roles. The novel is a quick, satisfying read, and the audience will be excited to see what directions Kennedy pursues in future volumes.

A familiar but smart fantasy with a feminist orientation.

### NOW AND AT THE HOUR

*Kercher, Bess*

Warren Publishing (210 pp.)

$15.95 paper | $4.95 e-book

A tweven year-old Albie Davidson misses his dad, a soldier who died in Iraq. But he has a close relationship with his mother, Mary, who indulges his passion for skateboarding San Francisco’s hills with his buddies Flint and Jabari despite the scrapes and bruises he brings home. His world threatens to come apart when Mary is diagnosed with cancer, but he’s caught by a support system centered on Holy Hands, his Catholic school. Flint’s and Jabari’s parents step in to help Albie and Mary, and the tweven gets plenty of counseling from a sympathetic teacher and ex-nun he calls “Sister.” Social media also rallies to him when Flint tweets a video of Albie rescuing a baby shark on a beach, which goes viral and gets retweeted by Pope Francis himself. Albie’s celebrity provides a launching pad for a fundraising campaign called Save-the-Shark, which features challenges like skateboarding and rock-climbing feats to garner cash for cancer research. But when Mary’s chemo doesn’t take, Albie plunges into a crisis of faith and embarks with her on a pilgrimage to the Vatican. Kercher’s warmhearted yarn explores one of childhood’s most terrifying prospects—the loss of a parent—in a reassuring tone threaded with Catholic themes. The novel’s pedagogical impulses are sometimes obtrusive as it strives to wring overt life lessons from conflicts. (“Had I really planned to hit somebody? Even if it was Pat, and even if he deserved it, that was a terrible idea,” Albie reflects after a run-in with a bully) Much of the narrative, including a subplot in which Albie and his pals befriend a homeless man, doesn’t have much payoff beyond pat uplift, and Albie is so swaddled in caretaking that he can’t fire off a moody tweet without everyone from Mary to Sister rushing to salve his psyche. But when the author turns her empathy and limpid prose to probing Albie’s raw experience—“The sound of my mom puking in the toilet. The way she fell asleep even when it was the middle of the day and I was talking to her. The picture of her face crumpling. The hard way she wiped her tears”—the results are evocative and poignant.

A sometimes didactic, sometimes moving tale of a boy navigating scary waters.

### HOUSE OF BASTIION

*Kolarich, K.L.*

Rogue Kite Publishing (486 pp.)


Nov. 1, 2020

978-1-73546-062-8

A crown prince’s advisers struggle with mistrust while hunting a killer in this fantasy debut.

After the devastating Forgotten Wars, four territories united under the kingdom of Orynthia: the Houses of Bastiion, Pilar, Boreal, and Darakai. Twelve-year-old Luscia Darragh Tiergan, the newly Ascended al’Haidren, represents Boreal. She’s the final al’Haidren in Crown Prince Dmitri Thoarne’s Quadren of Advisory, comprising one representative per House. But when Dmitri convenes the “politically dormant” committee, unrest among the members is palpable. Like many others, Darakai’s al’Haidren, Zaethan Kasim, believes the Borealis are witches. Six years ago, after young Luscia’s “Glowing eyes” unnerved him, Zaethan pushed her off a railing. As it happens, Luscia has the gift of “Sight,” a psychilike ability she’s still mastering that connects her to a light energy. Meanwhile, the brutal murders of lower-class children are escalating. As Zaethan, a Darakai militia leader, officially investigates, Luscia searches for the killer as well since the victims have been primarily Boreali. Though they don’t hide their mutual animosity, Zaethan and Luscia agree to keep out of each other’s way during the hunt for the murderer. Much of Kolarich’s series opener delivers stellar worldbuilding. The author proficiently distinguishes the Houses and their representatives, such as Bastiion’s perpetually drunk al’Haidren. Readers may not easily warm up to the characters, who wield disrespect like weapons. This includes Zaethan and Luscia; even when they cooperate during the crime investigation, they continue to hurl insults. But the two formidable trackers are multitalented; along with her Sight, Luscia is a trained warrior skilled in Boreali weaponry. The murder mystery, though not the narrative’s focus, enthrallo and ultimately spawns some action. But dense backstories and characterizations carry the final act while several lingering questions, including a recurring “figure” watching everything unfold, gleefully tease the sequel.

A creative fantasy with a strange, supremely detailed world and an extraordinary cast.
DARE TO MAKE HISTORY
Chasing a Dream and Fighting for Equity
Lamoureux-Davidson, Jocelyne & Lamoureux-Morando, Monique
Radius Book Group (248 pp.)
Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-63576-727-8

Two twins recount their glass ceiling-shattering careers in women's hockey in this debut memoir.

Lamoureux-Davidson and Lamoureux-Morando started playing competitive hockey when they were 5 years old. They were something of a novelty: twin sisters competing with the boys because there were no girls teams, even in their hockey-obsessed hometown of Grand Forks, North Dakota. In the third grade, Lamoureux-Davidson turned in a school assignment that listed this among her dreams: “When I am seventeen years old, I want to be on the American or Canadian Olympic hockey team with my sister Monique.” The girls would indeed go on to play for the American Olympic team, winning silver medals in 2010 and 2014 and bringing home the gold in 2018. For all these accomplishments, it is their work off the ice that they chose to highlight in this memoir: not only their efforts to succeed in a male-dominated sport, but also to change hockey so that the girls who came after them would have an easier time than they did. The twins’ activism culminated in a battle with USA Hockey over equal rights for female athletes—a clash that almost led to a boycott of the 2017 World Championships. In between, their account covers the unlikely rise of not just one, but two world-class athletes and the colorful family that surrounded them. The authors split the storytelling duties, alternating between sections narrated from Lamoureux-Davidson’s or Lamoureux-Morando’s perspectives. The prose is a bit stilted, but the content is often thought-provoking. Here Lamoureux-Davidson remembers a meeting with USA Hockey: “One of the USA Hockey representatives talked about a USAH staff member’s daughter and said because of her influence, he was passionate about ‘the other side,’ referring to us and women’s hockey. I interrupted him. ‘That is the problem right there,’ I said. ‘There are no sides.’” The book works as a traditional achievement memoir, but the advocacy of the authors—based in practical issues like a living wage and maternity leave—makes this a more pointedly feminist narrative than is normal for the genre. It is also the story of a remarkable friendship in which two sisters challenged and motivated each other to reach the top of their field.

An inspiring sports account about doing your best while improving the game.

ALMOST DAMNED
Leibig Christopher
Koehler Books (222 pp.)
$29.95 | $16.95 paper | $7.99 e-book
Apr. 1, 2021
978-1-64663-295-4
978-1-64663-293-0 paper

In this thriller sequel, a criminal defense lawyer’s newest case involves fallen angels and their human/demon offspring.

Virginia attorney Samson Young’s life has gotten more complicated lately. A woman connected to a case he defended and an anonymous call to his office both mention a ski trip that Sam knows nothing about. This ties to his subsequent summons to appear on Mount Hermon at the Israel-Syria border. His apparent clients in a lawsuit are Azazel and the fallen angels, who, having served a sentence of 70 generations in fire, wish to return to heaven. Sam will also make an appeal for these angels’ immortal hybrid children to become full, mortal humans. Meanwhile, he and his law partner, Amelia Griffin, continue working on cases in Bennet County. They defend a man accused of killing his wife who supposedly confessed his crime to a cellmate. Unexpectedly, Sam realizes this client and others are somehow connected to the Mount Hermon trial. Specifics on this case or those named in the summons aren’t easy to come by, as Sam’s questions generate cryptic responses. Still, it’s clear that some don’t want this particular dispute resolved; unknown individuals threaten or attack the attorney and his friends. Sam may also have a personal link to the fallen angels’ lineage. He has a telepathic ability that he uses in moderation, and his somewhat obscure family history features a relative who seems to have survived death. Soon, the protagonist will appear in front of a panel of archangel judges, with reputedly untrustworthy Samael as his opponent.

Leibig’s cross-genre novel, like the preceding installment, is first and foremost a legal thriller. For example, the counselors’ arguments propel the supernatural trial despite the presence of angels and discussions of immortality. This lawsuit teems with familiar courtroom sights, such as the calling and examining of witnesses, attorney objections, and closing statements. In the same vein, the author grounds the fantasy side of the story by using in moderation, and his somewhat obscure family history features a relative who seems to have survived death. Soon, the protagonist will appear in front of a panel of archangel judges, with reputedly untrustworthy Samael as his opponent.

Leibig deftly weaves religious references into the defense of the hybrids (seemingly punished for their fathers’ deeds) and the fallen angels’ backstory. The engrossing novel retains mystery as well. Sam (and readers) may surmise his connection to the angels and the hybrids, but he doesn’t get clarification until later. The author handles this with tongue-in-cheek observations, frequently noting characters’ intentional vagueness: “When a member of Sam’s family ‘did answer, her words were often a response not to the question someone had asked, but rather to the question they should have asked.’” Humor also comes in the form of snappy one-liners by Sam or legal investigator Nguyen Jones: “You’re always stitching up their softballs”; “You thought Paulo was fixin’ to trim our hedges.” While Nguyen serves as comic relief, Amelia proves herself a competent lawyer.
who is just as capable as Sam. The strong cast also includes characters whose dubiousness makes them unnerving, particularly as Sam believes someone is responsible for more than one recent death. There’s resolution by the end and a good chance Sam’s bizarre adventures are far from over.

An unconventional, absorbing legal thriller with elements of fantasy and the supernatural.

MY MOTHERS WILDEST DREAMS
Light Jr., John
Illus. by Mikai, Monica
They Lived Happily Ever After (26 pp.)
$15.00 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-73472-634-3

A Black child reflects on the resilience, vision, and hope of women in this picture book that explores a family’s history.

A Black youngster studies sepia family photographs on a table. The text refers to the “wildest dreams” of the kid’s “Mothers.” On the next page, a Black mother and child in 19th-century clothing hold flowers as they load wood into a cabin’s cast-iron stove. “I am the wish Grandma Hanna made as she labored to make her home safe and warm in the Old Dominion,” the narrator says. “I am Mama Mamie’s desire for her children to always find their way back to each other.” Light tracks multiple lineages of mothers through farming, moves into cities, and family gatherings. Each woman is represented by a flower. The struggles of raising families during slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow are implicit. Wu Wà hopes that her children will pull down “pillars of hate” (a kid points to a Confederate monument). Explanations of historical details are left to adult readers’ discretion and children’s developmental readiness. Rather than focus on hardships, Mikai’s illustrations show seven mothers in moments of communion with their families. Beautiful digital paintings contrast the warm browns of skin, wood, and earth with the bright jewel tones of cloth, flowers, and food. Finally, the child from the first page appears again, thrown into the air by the kid’s own mother in a field of symbolic flowers.

A veneration of Black women’s work and a celebration of survival, determination, and joy.

MY MONSTER TRUCK GOES EVERYWHERE WITH ME
Illustrated in American Sign Language
Marcath, Kathleen
Illus. by Liang, Isaac & Mehra, Pardeep
ASL Picture Books (38 pp.)
Nov. 3, 2020
978-1-73475-171-0
978-1-73475-170-3 paper

A child spends time with a special toy in this debut picture book featuring illustrations in American Sign Language.

A blond, blue-eyed boy introduces a monster truck, spelling out the toy’s letters in ASL on the first page. “He goes EVERYWHERE with ME,” the kid announces. The boy describes the truck, adding a modifier that is also signed on each page: big, purple, fast, and loud. Readers can sign along with the child. One day, the boy gets up, eats breakfast, and heads to Grandma’s house, where more fun awaits: a monster truck rally with plenty of friends. The next day, the truck has vanished, and the boy signs his mixed emotions. Soon, Grandma arrives to return the toy, and all is well. Marcath uses simple language and repeating words, creating a narrative accessible to newly independent readers. Mehra and debut illustrator Liang’s digital cartoon images depict ASL clearly, delivering instructions and incorporating the signs into the narrative naturally and effectively. (The endmatter notes that Liang is deaf.) The kids in the cast are quite diverse in their skin tones, hair colors, and abilities. While new ASL learners may not be able to mimic the movements exactly without seeing them demonstrated, the team has provided a link to online videos that show the entire tale signed. Children who already use ASL will be thrilled to see their language skillfully represented in the story’s illustrations.

This bracing and illuminating bilingual tale deftly shows a kid’s love for a favorite truck.

MADRID AGAIN
Maura, Soledad
Arcade (192 pp.)
978-1-951627-12-6

A Spanish American professor uncovers her rich family history in Maura’s novel.

In the 1960s, Odilia falls for a man named Zimmerman after she attends one of his lectures in Madrid. She finds out that they were both raised in Spain, but the rest of Zimmerman’s background remains mysterious. Rumors suggest that he works for the CIA, partly because he spends considerable time in the United States. After a whirlwind courtship, he convinces Odilia to move with him to upstate New York, where she serves as his teaching assistant at a small college. They marry,
It’s a stunning sequence that effectively dramatizes her conflicted story. “I am exactly who I’m meant to be,” asserts one verse. “The England, where the adults “seem sad” and “have cottage cheese for lunch,” feels bleak, indeed. There’s a well-crafted moment when Lola is on a flight to Spain, during which she clutches motion sickness bags, chews Dramamine pills, and resents the smell of “American brewed coffee...that wafted out of the airborne kitchenette.” It’s a stunning sequence that effectively dramatizes her conflicted feelings about the two countries she calls home.

A compelling and poignant journey of self-discovery that spans continents and generations.

SERIOUSLY! ARE WE THERE YET?! 
Milana, Paolina & Edwards, Joe 
Illus. by Horton, Whitney & Horton, Andrew 
Madness To Magic (42 pp.) 
Oct. 1, 2020 
978-1-73543-640-1


In this brief, somewhat whimsical work, authors Milana and Edwards and illustrators Horton and Horton adapt the form and sentiment of a kids’ book—complete with colorful images and simple, read-aloud rhymes—and apply them to distinctly adult concerns. There’s no larger, coherent plot here; each page is a separate, quick meditation on some aspect of contemporary adult life, such as “I once tried new things, was fearless & fun, / Seems so long ago, when I was so young.” Another rhyme reads: “What if all that is left at the end of the day / are piles of regrets, bills and debts left to pay?” From such somber prompts, the book’s creators craft a series of sunny sentiments aimed at adults who feel overwhelmed by modern life or disappointed by how expectations turned out. The book shapes a larger message of optimism, with bright affirmations designed to raise the adult readers’ spirits: “What came before has made me this me. / I am exactly who I meant to be,” asserts one verse. “The secret’s inside (as you already know) / Only you can help you continue to grow,” reads another. The book’s larger goal is to allay adult fears (such as “What if this is it, the best I will see?”) and help harried readers to see the encouraging, even transformative potential in everyday worries, and its accentuation of the positive can be effective at times. The illustration style is whimsically cartoonish, with clean lines that match the simple, straightforward concepts. The prose also showcases a puckish, topical humor, as well: “I’ll climb a new mountain, start eating kale,” one line jokes, accompanied by an illustration of a TV remote control. “Change this old channel, it’s my fairy tale!”

A charming and sometimes-uplifting book about finding contentment.

THE LITTLE WITCH
Pellico, Michael
Illus. by Berry, Christina
Moonbow Publishing (24 pp.)
$11.99 | $5.00 paper | Dec. 15, 2020
978-1-73391-307-2

In Pellico’s children’s series starter, a young girl bravely befriends a young witch. As the sun begins to set on a splendid Halloween, 7-year-old Sabrina and her brother, Stephen, come across a truly spectacular sight. A frightened witch is sitting in a tree after colliding with it in flight; now, she’s dropped her broom, and a group of boys on the ground want to capture her, because, in their view, “Witches are bad” and not to be trusted. Plucky Sabrina climbs the tree with the witch’s broom in hand and introduces herself. Anna, the young witch, is also 7—or at least she thinks so, but because she has no friends, she’s never celebrated a birthday. The two girls hit it off and make plans to meet again and celebrate Anna turning 8. On her broom, the witch soars away, using magic to create a shower of candy for her new pal. Pellico’s book for early readers presents a tale of mystery and friendship with vibrant illustrations to swiftly relay a strong message. The mix of simple and complex vocabulary works well, introducing new terms while also providing plenty of familiar words for youngsters. Despite the short length, there’s adequate dialogue, description, and character development; however, there are a few instances when the sheer volume of text overwhelms the page. Berry’s illustrations offer vivid color and a sense of whimsy; for example, Sabrina is adorned in a tiara, cape, and cowboy boots, showcasing her offbeat, intriguing personality. The brisk plot leaves room for expansion, but its simplicity will resonate with young readers, and it delivers a powerful message about treating strangers with kindness.

A charming fantasy with a noble moral.
A comprehensive saga detailing the stories of several characters during the little-discussed Peninsular War.

In 1808, British journalist Samuel Kerr journeys to Corunna, Spain, to follow the British campaign in the country. While there, he meets the Wakefields, a Loyalist family who fled America after the Revolutionary War and who now run a newspaper printing press in the region of Galicia. Kerr quickly forms a bond with the family members, particularly Louisa Wakefield, a young woman whose desire to be a news correspondent matches his own drive to become an editor. Their acquaintance later leads to a charming romance. Fred, Louisa's brother, is a lieutenant in the British army, and his story as he journeys across the country adds historical depth to the novel. He's part of an effort to oust Napoleon from Spain, which allows Penttila, the author of An Untitled Lady (2013), to expertly weave in details about the fairly obscure Peninsular War. Over the course of the novel, he delivers a thorough historical saga with delightfully vivid characters. However, the prose only uses evocative language sparingly, which is a shame, as such moments are highlights. For example, when readers first meet Kerr, he's lamenting the fact that he was passed over for an editor job: “One would have thought a… flexible intellect rated more than a phlegm-hacking presumptive messiah.” Another notable element is the entertaining rapport between Kerr and Louisa, which showcases their sharp intellects and enjoyable senses of humor. Their exchanges add welcome levity to the story so that it never feels too bogged down in historical matters.

An ambitious and enlightening work of fiction that will satisfy lovers of history and romance alike.

A GOOD RUNNING AWAY
Pettway, Kevin
Cursed Dragon Ship Publishing (298 pp.)
978-1-91445-02-7

Pettway’s debut fantasy novel sees an odd couple of mercenaries flee their bloodthirsty fellows and take refuge by posing as royalty.

Keane and Sarah are members of Wallace’s Company, a band of mercenaries who engage in peripatetic looting, pillaging, and extortion throughout the Thirteen Kingdoms. Keane is a wisecracking rogue, and Sarah is the most formidable swordfighter among her 400-odd colleagues. The two have been inseparable since childhood. When Keane earns the ire of Harden Grayspring, the mercenaries’ lord marshal, he and Sarah take to their heels, pausing only to purloin the company’s wage box. Harden, a ruthless and unforgiving man, pursues them and brings the rest of the company along. While running for their lives, Keane and Sarah stumble upon an opportunity to do something foolish but hardy, to Keane, irresistible—to take the place of the recently deceased Prince Despin Swifthart of Tyranne, who had been traveling to the city of Treaty Hill and Forest Castle to meet and marry Princess Rance when he died. Unfortunately for Keane and Sarah, the deception leads them to be trapped in the royal household and held there by an unseen power. Also, King Rance despises Keane, as does the princess. Can he and Sarah survive to make their escape before their true identities are exposed—and before Harden brings the might of Wallace’s Company down upon the city? Pettway tells the tale in the third person from multiple viewpoints, devoting time not only to Keane and Sarah, but also to Harden and his right-hand man, Eli Whister. The antagonists are uncommonly complex characters, as a result, adding further realism to the convincing setting. The author sketches and hints at elaborate multiracial and multicultural societies without subjecting the reader to boundless exposition. The story moves at a good pace, helped along by characters’ banter, which can be a tad too glib at times but employs inventive (and vulgar) curses and insults. Readers’ enjoyment of this book will depend heavily on their appreciation of Keane as a lovable scoundrel, but it will likely appeal to connoisseurs of lighthearted fantasy.

A well-realized and lively caper.

DEL RIO
Rosenthal, Jane
She Writes Press (256 pp.)
$16.95 paper | $9.95 e-book
May 18, 2020
978-1-64742-055-0

In Rosenthal’s thriller, a California district attorney delves into a mystery involving her brother-in-law. Callie McCall gave up private practice in San Francisco to become district attorney in her hometown of Del Rio in California’s run-down Central Valley. Her plan was to establish herself in the region and then run for higher office. But when a severed body part of a teenage migrant worker is found in a local grove, Callie realizes that her plans will have to wait. The grove is owned by her brother-in-law, Jim Fletcher, who also holds the state Senate seat she seeks. The more she looks into his business practices, the dirtier he appears, so she secretly follows him to a resort in western Mexico, where she meets Nathan Bernstein, an innocent caught up in a dangerous racket. He’s a widower from a wealthy San Francisco family who’s been hired to lead a bird-watching tour at the resort that Callie’s investigating. She soon discovers that Jim is involved in the smuggling of children—a business that gets him killed and puts Callie and Nathan in danger as traffickers follow them north. The strength of Rosenthal’s novel is in how she lets her two main characters evolve. At the beginning of the story, Callie wonders how her new
post can aid her political ambitions, but by the end, she’s more concerned about how she can help others; meanwhile, Nathan gets beyond his debilitating grief and steps back into the world. Most of the characters that they encounter live in moral shades of gray, viewing the world through the lens of their own self-interest. Rosenthal also colorfully brings the Central Valley region to life as well as a criminal underground that Callie and, especially, Nathan are ill-equipped to comprehend. Overall, it’s a thought-provoking look at heinous crimes and their effects on larger society.

An intense tale of a self-involved attorney rediscovering her sense of compassion.

“Sharp provides a pleasing, well-told variation on classic fairy-tale motifs.”

THE CHALLAH GIRL

Sharp, Bracha K. Illus. by Tung, Anita

When a prince needs cheering up, a young baker works to bring him the perfect loaf of challah in this children’s picture book.

In a small Jewish village, a girl named Zlatah Leah makes “the best challahs in the land.” One day, a messenger from the palace arrives with a plea for help from the king and queen. Their son, Prince Isaac, used to be cheerful, but now he never smiles or laughs. Can the villagers help? Zlatah Leah hopes her challah will do the trick but encounters mishaps with her first two loaves. As she’s mixing her third batch, the girl weeps for the prince and prays for his happiness—and her challah is perfect. Tasting it, the prince smiles and laughs at last, and eventually he and Zlatah Leah wed. In her debut book, Sharp provides a pleasing, well-told variation on classic fairy-tale motifs: the unsmiling royal, three attempts at success, and a happy ending. Though Jewish children may especially like seeing their culture centered, any reader can enjoy it. Tung provides folk art–style illustrations in rich, earthy shades that feel as warmly inviting as the story itself. A challah recipe is included, although the measurements are inexact, braiding isn’t mentioned, and the spices included aren’t traditional.

A charming, well-illustrated fairy tale about nurturing happiness.

TARŌ

Spruell, Blue Illus. by Outlaw, Miya

A debut novel focuses on a mythical Japanese hero.

Taro is the young son of the samurai Lord Takeda. On his seventh birthday, an important day for samurai boys, Taro is given a sword by his father as part of the celebration, which includes a visit to the Fuji Hachimai Shrine. The sword will be presented to and blessed by Hachimaino Kami, the God of War. But Taro’s life is turned upside down when his family is ambushed at the temple by rival warlord Lord Monkey. The boy’s parents are killed, but Taro manages to escape and is eventually rescued by a witch, who becomes his surrogate mother. Taro’s idyllic life in the enchanted woods, spent in the company of talking animals, continues for years. He grows up to be a powerfully built young warrior with no memory of his previous existence. Then, Taro saves the life of the samurai warlord Lord Tokugawa from a sorcerous kappa. When Taro receives
FOOL’S ERRAND

Stephens, Jeffrey S.
Post Hill Press (256 pp.)
$28.00 | $9.99 e-book | Dec. 8, 2020
978-1-64293-738-1

A cryptic posthumous letter sends a New Yorker on a cross-country and trans-Atlantic treasure hunt.

Stephens’ latest mystery centers on a 27-year-old son’s discovering a secret his poetry-loving dad, who earned his living by occasionally breaking strangers’ arms for not paying their gambling debts, took to his grave. In the early 1960s, John “Blackie” Rinaldi’s son discovers at a young age that his dad works for the mob. Now, more than six years after Blackie met an early death, his widow calls their son to retrieve a box containing photographs and medals from when Blackie served in France in World War II. Also included is a letter he wrote to his son that hints about “something really big in the works” that only he, his buddy Benny, and an unnamed friend know about. Blackie’s son flies to Las Vegas to meet Benny, who doesn’t divulge the “big” deal but does reveal that the other friend mentioned in the letter is Frenchman Gilles de la Houssay. Benny suggests: “See if you can find Gilles, see if he’ll talk to you.” The scene shifts to France, but not before Blackie’s son meets beautiful, blue-eyed Donna on the plane from Vegas. The plus of meeting her is followed by the negative of discovering his apartment was broken into while he was away. Someone, possibly a relative who is a “certified scumbag of the first order,” was hellbent on finding Blackie’s letter. The culprit wanted a piece—or more—of what its contents would lead to. Told in the first person, this engaging mystery is both plot- and character-driven. Moving from past to present is deftly handled, and the mystery presented ultimately becomes embroiled in a political struggle for the throne, with the emperor’s life at stake. Spruell cleverly interweaves Tarō’s story with a tale of 16th-century feudal Japan and its three great fabled warlords. The addition of samurai Kamehime to the vibrant cast of characters is a bold move that pays off. Beautiful, stylized images by debut illustrator Outlaw enhance this enjoyable and inventive tale.

A smooth balance between mystery and history.

THE GREEN WOOLEN FEDORA

Stevenson, Deborah
Illus. by Mongodi, Stella
Frog Prince Books (32 pp.)
$19.95 | $12.95 paper | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-73482-422-3
978-1-73482-423-0 paper

A rat lays claim to a girl’s special hat until her pal steps in to help in this picture book.

Good friends Nora and Lenny, armed with allowance money they’ve saved, set out on a cool, breezy day for the movie theater. Lenny is fascinated by the green fedora Nora is wearing and asks to try it on. Before he can return it, the wind whisks it away and out of reach: “the hat whirled and twirled through the air like a top / out over the river, the wind let it drop.” A river rat grabs the waterborne hat and refuses to give it up, and the kids are surprised when they learn the reason for the refusal. However, the fedora means a lot to Nora—the author’s hint as to the reason why is subtle and touching—and Lenny takes unselfish action to help his friend, kindly negotiating with the cranky rodent for the hat’s return. Veteran children’s author Stevenson’s active, rhyming text tells a tale that’s sweet but never cloying, thanks in part to the inclusion of the comically acerbic rat. Artist Mongodi complements the book’s sentiment and humor with the soft, watercolor resonance of illustrations that are alive with detail, including repeat appearances by a certain sea gull that young readers will discover.

A genuinely tender and charmingly illustrated story of friendship, empathy, and memory.

REAL OR MAGIC?

Stokely, Kari
Frog Prince Books (218 pp.)
$7.99 paper | $2.99 e-book
Oct. 22, 2020
978-1-73557-850-7

An imaginative girl learns about her ancestors in this middle-grade fantasy.

Sixth grader Sky lives in Quebec City, Canada, with her parents. When her Papa, a policeman, loses his job, the family must move to her grandfather’s farmhouse. Sky hates the idea of leaving her friends and being home-schooled and refuses to go. Nevertheless, the family arrives at the farmhouse. Grandpa Doc helps her settle into her new room with her prized possessions, including Hoppy, her stuffed bunny. He promises to show Sky her great-grandma Stella’s observatory, perfect for stargazing in the country. He further cheers her up with a coin that spins to reveal “tiny galaxies made up of teeny-tiny stars
and planets.” He then asks: “Real or magic, Sky?” Before dinner, the girl explores the outdoors. She and Hoppy find a stone potting shed covered in thickets. The door says “Do Not Enter.” She imagines the shed is a castle, with an adjacent stream as the moat, guarded by a dragon. The magic word unlock allows Sky inside the shed, where she finds a candlestick telephone. Miraculously, a phone operator promises to connect her to someone named Lune. Lune is a girl living in the Pyrenees region of France 50,000 years in Sky’s past. Lune’s relatives are the Tainted Ones, who are subjugated by Loch, king of the Powerful Ones. Loch hears the Full Moon speak, and it wants him to punish the Tainted Ones, who have Tall Tribe ancestry. Will Loch sacrifice Lune’s family before a hero can intervene? Stokely aims to introduce middle-grade audiences to the Ice Age and narrative flexibility in this fantasy adventure series opener. The issue of whether something is real or magic—part of Sky’s reality or imagination—brings joy to the proceedings. Hoppy often talks to Sky, offering a unique perspective. For example, the rabbit says, “That was a huge dragon!”—though of Sky’s reality or imagination—brings joy to the proceedings. An impressively researched, cogently argued reinterpretation of World War II diplomatic relations.

A playful and educational time-travel adventure.

THE THIRD MAN
Churchill, Roosevelt, Mackenzie King, and the Untold Friendships That Won WWII
Thompson, Neville
Sutherland House (498 pp.)

A historical work examines World War II diplomacy through the lens of a Canadian prime minister’s diary.

As the leader of Canada’s governing Liberal Party for nearly three decades and as prime minister through the entirety of World War II, Mackenzie King was “a vital link” between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. King’s 30,000-page typed diary provides a unique perspective on the American president and the British prime minister, who was loath to admit he needed a mediator between himself and Roosevelt. The diary challenges the prevailing notions, largely crafted by Churchill himself, of American and British diplomacy during the war. As a professor emeritus of history at the University of Western Ontario, Thompson expertly parses the voluminous diary and convincingly demonstrates that King, who was present during closed-door conversations, knew Roosevelt and Churchill “better than they knew each other.” Indeed, while Roosevelt and Churchill put on public faces of unity, strengthened by their mutual talents for rhetorical eloquence, behind the scenes both men had different visions of the postwar world.

Whereas Churchill clung to past imagery of a benevolent yet dominant British Empire, Roosevelt saw the war as an opportunity to build a new world order. King’s accounts of conversations between the three range from lofty debates over the postwar landscape to more mundane discussions of “democratic management” of their respective cabinets and legislatures. They also deliver revealing personal details, such as King’s concerns over Churchill’s drinking habits that included half a bottle of brandy a day. By placing King as “The Third Man” alongside Roosevelt and Churchill, the book tells the Canadian leader’s own story as a man who felt “more at home in London, Washington, or New York” than he did in Toronto or Ottawa. Additional insights into Canada’s paradoxical history as both an American neighbor and member of the British Commonwealth receive keen analysis. But there is a noticeable absence in themes relating to racism, from Churchill’s views on the sustained colonization of Africa to Roosevelt’s internment of Japanese Americans.

An impressively researched, cogently argued reinterpretation of World War II diplomatic relations.
A thoughtful story that emphasizes kindness and self-esteem.

DAISY MOVES TO AMERICA
Trust, Elyssa Nicole
Illus. by Adhi, Alvin
Self (34 pp.)
Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-73635-452-0
978-1-73635-453-7 paper

A girl learns to embrace her accent in Trust’s debut picture book.

Daisy and her family move from England to the U.S. At her new school, kids tease her about her English accent. Although hurt, she tries to stay strong but often holds back tears. She also struggles to adjust to calling things by different names: “What I call trousers, they call pants.” After Daisy’s brother, Billy, sees Daisy cries and tells them about her struggles. Mum and Dad give their daughter a pep talk, saying she should be proud of where she comes from and embrace who she is. The next day at school, Daisy ignores the taunts. She says, “What makes us different, makes us great” and offers her classmates friendship. Now, they think her accent is “cool.” Daisy decides, “Though I say mate, and they say friend, it doesn’t matter in the end.” The book offers empathetic insight into what it’s like being a new student and includes a glossary featuring variations between British and American English, like mom and mum. Adhi’s cartoonish illustrations are bright and engaging. They also show details like thought bubbles and backdrops, such as a charming cityscape of Daisy in London. Daisy presents White; her schoolmates are Black, Asian, and White.

A thoughtful story that emphasizes kindness and self-esteem.

ENEMY COMBATANT
Winner, David
Tablo Publishing (240 pp.)
978-1-944853-75-4

An American man in turmoil pursues a disastrous plan to right the wrongs of extraordinary rendition in this novel.

When he was growing up, Peter Shipman saw his father—one a fiery activist for civil rights and against the Vietnam War—descend into an angry, liquor-fueled viewer of fight-the-system movies. Admiring his father’s principles, if not the man himself, Peter becomes determined to wage similar battles; “Jim Crow was dead, but there was Ronald Reagan to contend with.” Now, in 2005, 32-year-old Peter designs web pages and is married to Sarah, a prosecuting attorney expecting their first child. Learning that his mother, Alice, is failing after a botched emergency surgery, Peter rushes from Brooklyn to Phoenix. At his dying mother’s hospital bed, Peter boils over with rage at everyone he holds responsible, not just the heart surgeon, but also Arizona itself (full of Republicans), the George W. Bush administration, and its war crimes. Back home, Peter waits for Sarah to go to bed every night. He then gets wasted and doom-scrolls the internet: “He wasn’t normally what you’d call an angry drunk, but the words Bush, torture, Arizona, and Alice burned through his gut like savage heart burn.” When things come to a head, Sarah kicks him out for four months, their future reconciliation depending on whether he gains equilibrium. An invitation abroad from his similarly debauched college roommate, Leonard Kaufman, promises a welcome distraction until, on a trip through Georgia, Peter learns of secret CIA prisons there and in nearby Armenia. Peter conceives a desperate plan to find one of the prisons, photograph it, break in, and release the inmates with Leonard’s help. Though Peter and Leonard couldn’t be more unqualified, the misbegotten, sometimes comic mission has some unlikely success but inevitably is marred by an unforgettable and futile tragedy.

In his third novel, Winner constructs a train-wreck scenario that readers can’t look away from no matter how gruesome it becomes. While the two friends’ goals are laughably out of reach, the author makes each step of the journey plausible in itself as Peter and Leonard stumble through one misadventure after another, degenerating all the way. Winner also manages the feat of giving these escapades the taut excitement of a macho-patriotic action thriller—or rather, its warped, fun-house-mirror reflection. Many readers will sympathize with Peter’s fury at the government’s role in torturing prisoners held in black-op sites and understand his fantasy of doing something about it. But the author’s subtle, intelligent characterization makes clear that however well-earned Peter’s rage against the machine is, that machine is also a convenient target that allows him to displace intolerable emotions or avoid honest self-evaluation. Similarly, Peter deflects grappling with how he’s destroying his marriage by caricaturing Sarah as someone who’s always playing the prosecutor during their arguments: “She couldn’t say, ‘objection, your honor,’ because she wasn’t in the courtroom.” In the end, Peter remains rightly haunted by his actions and their poignant consequences.

A searingly insightful, tragicomic adventure that lays bare personal and political fault lines.
Without Remorse

BY DAVID RAPP

A new movie adaptation of Tom Clancy's bestselling 1993 thriller, Without Remorse, starring Michael B. Jordan, will premiere on Amazon Prime Video on April 30. It was originally scheduled for an October 2020 theatrical release.

The novel takes place in the same fictional universe as Clancy’s Jack Ryan techno-thrillers, which began with 1984’s The Hunt for Red October, and relates the origin of the CIA operative known as John Clark. When Without Remorse was published, Clark had already appeared as a supporting character in The Cardinal of the Kremlin, 1990’s Clear and Present Danger, and The Sum of All Fears, all of which received Kirkus Stars. He went on to be the protagonist of the 1998 bestseller Rainbow Six.

Without Remorse novel opens in 1969 and follows the exploits of Clark, whose pregnant wife has recently died. He picks up Pam, a hitchhiker, who turns out to be a sex worker on the run from Henry, a murderous, drug-dealing pimp. The pair eventually go after Henry and his crew, who kill Pam and send Clark to the hospital. When he gets out, he embarks on a personal revenge mission. In a parallel plot, the North Vietnamese government has put 20 downed American pilots in a prison, where they’re being interrogated by a Soviet colonel; Rear Adm. James Greer and CIA agent Robert Ritter want John to head to Vietnam on a rescue mission.

Judging from the trailer, the movie doesn’t seem to take place in the '60s and '70s. According to Amazon’s summary, Clark “uncovers an international conspiracy while seeking justice for the murder of his pregnant wife by Russian soldiers.” The summary also indicates that John “joins forces with fellow SEAL Karen Greer and shadowy CIA agent Robert Ritter”—played by Queen and Slim’s Jodie Turner-Smith and Turn: Washington’s Spies’ Jamie Bell, respectively—and “the mission unwittingly exposes a covert plot that threatens to engulf the U.S. and Russia in an all-out war.”

Jordan is the third actor to play Clark, after Willem Dafoe in the 1994 film Clear and Present Danger and Liev Schreiber in 2002’s The Sum of All Fears. A film version of Rainbow Six, again starring Jordan, is currently in development.

The Innocent

Netflix will premiere an eight-episode Spanish miniseries version of Harlan Coben’s Kirkus-starred 2005 thriller, The Innocent, on April 30. It’s the latest adaptation that Netflix has released as part of an ongoing development arrangement with the author. It stars Aura Garrido, one of the stars of the excellent Spanish time-travel TV show The Ministry of Time, and Mario Casas, who most recently starred in last year’s Spanish Netflix thriller The Paramedic.

In The Innocent, Matt Hunter has served time in prison for accidentally killing someone while trying to break up a fight. Five years after his release, he works as a paralegal and is happily married to Olivia, who just found out that she’s pregnant. All seems well until Matt receives a video on his phone showing Olivia in a blond wig with an unknown man, who taunts him with further phone calls, forcing him to investigate. Kirkus’ reviewer wrote, “As usual in Coben’s suburban thrillers...there’s a record number of jaw-dropping plot twists—this time, Coben surpasses Jeffery Deaver as the most generous plotter in the thriller racket—and as usual, more and more of them defy belief.” In the upcoming adaptation, Garrido portrays Olivia and Casas plays the lead, now named Mateo.

In 2018, Netflix signed a five-year deal with Coben to develop 14 of his novels as English-language and foreign-language films and series.
Lucille Ball, Amy Sedaris, Whoopi Goldberg, Sarah Silverman: These and many other women have left an estimable mark on comedy after fighting not just the fight that all comedians have to wage in order to get before an audience, but also an entertainment industry that imposes extra barriers for women.

One comic writer who refused to be daunted was among the funniest of all: Nora Ephron. She grew up in a Hollywood household surrounded by filmmakers and actors, instructed by her mother to make the best of whatever came along. “Everything is copy,” she told Nora, and Nora took the lesson. She went east to attend Wellesley College, which, though an all-women’s school, specialized in producing marriageable young women. As she told the graduating class of a generation later, “It was so long ago that among the things that I honestly cannot conceive of life without, that had not yet been invented: pantyhose, lattes, Advil, pasta (there was no pasta then, there was only spaghetti and macaroni)...well, you get the point, it was a long time ago.”

It was so long ago that when she graduated and went to New York to become a journalist, she landed a job at Newsweek—not as a writer, not then, for if you were a woman, she related, you went to work in the mailroom, whereas a male with exactly the same qualifications would be hired as a reporter. Ephron had a lifelong habit, though, of crashing through whatever glass ceiling lay above her, and after doing time as a fact checker, she chanced her way into the pages of the New York Post. With Victor Navasky, later to become publisher of the Nation, she had taken part in a lampoon of the paper published during a newspaper strike of 1962, and though the editors wanted to sue, the publisher of the Post, a formidable woman named Dorothy Schiff, said, “Don’t be ridiculous. If they can parody the Post they can write for it. Hire them.”

Thus followed a mountain of articles and commentary, funny, satirical, and very popular. Another lifelong habit of Ephron’s was to bite the hands that fed her, and not even Schiff was safe from her witty but seldom mean-spirited pen. (“Let them read schlock,” said Ephron of Schiff’s editorial method.) Magazine articles followed on favorite targets (then the Nixon girls; if she had seen Ivanka, she doubtless would have doubled down on the attack), then books, then screenplays and films, among them Heartburn, a brittle and barely disguised study of her unhappy marriage to journalist Carl Bernstein, and When Harry Met Sally..., with its famous fake-orgasm-in-a-restaurant scene.

Stricken by leukemia, Ephron barely acknowledged her illness, working on a pile of projects until just days before going into the hospital. She died in 2012. Had she lived, she would be closing in on 80 today. The chances are good that she’d still be making us laugh. For that we need to turn to Nora Ephron’s work in print and on film, reveling with her in how odd and flawed our kind is—and how lucky comedians are that that’s true.

Gregory McNamee is a contributing editor.
A new picture book from critically acclaimed author/illustrator Thao Lam

An honest #OwnVoices story about growing up with a name that is unfamiliar to the kids around you, told with humor and heart.

“A timely, resonant, exceptional model of visual storytelling.”
— Kirkus Reviews, STARRED REVIEW and a Best Picture Book of 2020

“A tender tribute to the author’s parents and to all refugees who survive and thrive despite enormous odds.”
— Booklist, STARRED REVIEW and a 2020 Editors’ Choice

“An important story told in an impeccable format.”
— School Library Journal, STARRED REVIEW and a Best Picture Book of 2020

“Sensitively rendered.”
— Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books, STARRED REVIEW and Blue Ribbon Honoree